What is conflict? What is aggression? Are these challenging questions?

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This paper takes up the question of definitions in general and definitions as related to research on language and conflict in particular. I anchor my discussion in the proceedings of the panel 'Researching and Understanding the Language of Aggression and Conflict' held at the recent IPrA conference (Antwerp, July 2015). However, I also refer to a selection of articles in the *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict (JLAC)* and books on language and conflict. I point to the fact that disagreements about what words such as 'conflict", 'aggression', and 'hate' mean often lead to unrewarding debates. I trace such disagreements to the philosophical commitments that researchers make (consciously or subliminally). Subsequently, I argue against the essentialist philosophical position, which encourages seeking one satisfactory definition of any concept/term/word. As an alternative, I try to promote a non-essentialist position that encourages us to proceed only with working definitions. Moreover, I advocate working definitions that relate to objects and activities that are as tangible as possible. This way we can avoid unrewarding disputes and contribute to making our research more meaningful and convincing.

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1.   Introduction

At the recent IPrA conference (Antwerp, July 2015), the editors of the *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* (*JLAC*) organized a panel called 'Researching and Understanding the Language of Aggression and Conflict'. I attended many of the papers presented in this panel as well as those in other panels and sessions. What follows in the present paper is an expression of my reaction to a number of contributions (including comments from the audience) made in the language and conflict panel and those made in some other sessions. The following discussion

also refers to some contributions made in the six issues of the journal published between 2013–2015 and to some other publications on language and conflict.

When thinking about all kinds of contributions to language, aggression and conflict research, I have been drawn to the lengthy discussions often expressing dissatisfaction and worries concerning the definitions of the central concepts such as conflict, aggression, hate speech and insult, and concerning the somewhat less central ones perhaps, such as impoliteness, politeness, trolling, heckling, irony, etc. What we often observe is that authors, speakers or discussants disagree about the definitions of terms and subsequently encourage more work on the issue (expressing the kind of 'we have to work further and harder to know what conflict really is' position) or plead that we agree on how the central terms should be used. During the conference in question participants often disagreed about how others used concepts ('no, I wouldn't call this trolling') or disclosed what I saw as a measure of confusion over the whole issue of definitions ('you say this is about definitions, and I think it's about naming'). As is often the case, the different parties seemed unhappy and the exchanges were inconclusive. Interestingly, during the final session of the language and conflict panel, one of the key discussants suggested that given the perennial terminological struggle, we (I understood this to be the researchers of language and conflict) should agree on how to use the key terms such as 'irony', 'conflict', 'aggression', and 'impoliteness'. The question of whether this is a realistic proposal was not taken up (see below for more on this point).

In the issues of *JLAC* published until 2015 there is some evidence for the concern that I express. For instance, Ardington (2013) stresses that "The concept of sociable argument continues to raise healthy debate" (172), and asks: "If we agree that sociability is constantly being negotiated, at what point does sociable argument become serious conflict?" (172) And she points out that "recognizing where play ends and when it becomes serious personal affront is a matter of continuing debate." (172)

Kádár (2014), Hardaker (2013) Kampf (2015), and Evans and Schuller (2015) are further examples of how much time and space researchers devote to the definitions of terms – 'heckling', 'trolling', 'insult', and 'terrorism', respectively. Meibauer (2014) appears to me to stick out. While the first four papers are concerned with definitions to a considerable degree, their main purpose seems to be to show that different analysts treat the relevant terms differently, which causes problems of course. Meibauer is more outspoken, however, about which views (definitions) of 'lies' and 'bald-faced lies' he considers correct or wrong. This holds true also for how he sees the relationship between the two. For instance, he states that he "will argue that the so-called bald-faced lie is not a lie at all" and "that so-called bald-faced lies are acts of verbal aggression, i.e., a special kind of insult." (2014, 128)

I contend that disagreement about the definitions of terms/concepts (no matter how they are expressed) appears to some authors to be a problem of its own. Deep concern over this problem is often expressed. Concepts are often seen as difficult to define, and the impression is given that only more work can lead us to alleviating the definitional pain. More or less this position was also expressed at the very end of the language and conflict panel during the IPrA conference.

Some of the contributions made during the panel on language and conflict in question brought to memory my earlier experience from numerous publications, conferences, panels, sessions, and lectures where concern, and sometimes lament, was voiced over the 'difficult question of the definitions of concepts/terms'. Authors handle the definitional problem differently; some just mention it, others lament, still others offer solutions such as the ones mentioned above, namely, that we work harder to find the satisfactory (true?) definition, or that we, within a discipline, simply agree on how we want to understand the concepts in question.

In some recent book publications on language and conflict, the problem in question comes up as well. For example, Waldron (2012, 35–36) stresses that "the phrase 'hate speech' can also bog us down in a futile attempt to define 'hatred'. It is certainly not an easy idea to define". Hamelink (2011, 135), in a Research Needed subsection of his book, poses a number of what he sees as important questions: "Which messages constitute incitement to genocide or violence against target groups? How can we differentiate from messages that may offend target groups but do not incite harm against them? What constitutes harm? A particularly challenging issue in this context is the definition of mental harm". Maitra and McGowan (2012, 13), referring to a discussion on pornography and harm, state, "This concern is perhaps exacerbated by the difficulty of finding an adequate definition of pornography, that distinguishes it from other sexually explicit material such as documentaries about survivors of rape."

The examples above show that defining terms remains for many researchers to be an important and difficult-to-solve problem. Incidentally, during the IPrA conference in Antwerp and others, I have heard several times that the terms 'pragmatics', 'politeness', and 'theory' are also difficult to define.

2.   What's the problem? Do we have a definitional problem?

My short answer is: I don't think so. To give a somewhat longer answer, let us consider the ways definitional divergences are often approached and mention some of the key issues in the definitional debate. First of all, the comments made both orally and in writing, in the area of language and conflict, as well as those in any other field, are not endemic to the field at all, as some researchers indicate. Throughout

the field of linguistics (and many others), there often develop lengthy discussions about the meanings of terms, the definitions of terms, about how one term differs from another, or how we should classify the phenomena these terms refer to (see examples in Janicki 2006, 2010). The tenor of the discussions often is that we, the linguists, are particularly unfortunate, to have to face terms which are so difficult to define. I do not share this concern.

In my view, complaints and perceived problems are independent of the discipline; they spring mainly from the authors' philosophical position, whether adopted consciously or subliminally. Roughly, this position translates into the definition-related standpoint that concepts/terms/words in principle have one ultimate meaning, and that a precise definition of these is possible. In other words, this standpoint is that we do indeed get bogged down in definitional quagmires, but if we take definitions seriously, if we work hard, if we read more books and articles, and if we go to more conferences, we can solve the problem and arrive at one, ultimate definition of whatever it is that we are trying to define. An example to illustrate this view, taken from the language and conflict panel during the IPrA conference, is 'we don't know *yet* what aggression is'. I interpret this statement as implying that we one day will know this; we probably need more time and perseverance to find out what 'aggression' is.

The philosophical position involved in statements like 'we don't know *yet* what aggression is' is often referred to as *essentialism,* and extensive treatments of this position have been offered by, for example, Popper (1945, 1979), Teller (1975), Bealer (1987), Hallett (1991), Fine (1994), La Porte (1997), and Escobar (1999). Essentialism has also been challenged by the later Wittgenstein (1958) and Rorty (1999), to add two well-known names. Part of the essentialist viewpoint involves posing questions such as 'what is aggression?', 'what is conflict?', 'what is hate speech?' and expecting to find one ultimate answer to them. Popper calls these 'what-is questions'. Others sometimes call them 'what is irritants'. I have tried to illustrate the presence of essentialist thinking in linguistics and beyond in, for example, Janicki (2006, 2010, 2015).

As Popper (1945, 1979), Hallett (1991) and others show, the essentialist view of concepts is untenable and unrewarding. We will never know what 'aggression', 'hatred', 'insult', etc. are. One of the possible answers to the question 'what is aggression' is: 'It's a word'. Another one is 'it's some sounds coming out of our mouths', or 'a set of graphic symbols', trivial as these answers may sound. To give a more sophisticated answer, we may invoke Wittgenstein's concept of language games (Wittgenstein 1958) and consider the words 'conflict' or 'aggression' as referring to phenomena (behaviours, situations, etc.) which have some characteristics in common, but which, however, do not allow us to draw a clear boundary between, for instance, 'aggression' and 'non-aggression'. In other words, to stick to

the example of 'aggression', some acts of aggression (labelled by people as such), like all kinds of games, share some characteristics with some other acts of aggression, but, importantly, there is no one single characteristic that all the acts of aggression share. This makes it impossible to draw a clear line between 'aggression' and 'non-aggression'. Wittgenstein (1958, 33) states clearly: "For how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No".

As long as we remain in the sphere of words, trying to arrive at some ultimate definition of a term (so that we would all agree on it, at which stage no further questions would be asked) will always lead to an infinite regress of definitions (Popper 1945, 1979). We will keep defining endlessly the various words in the subsequent definitions, until, quite likely, we have used the word we originally wanted to define. This way we end up making a full definitional circle. In other words, if we want to find some sort of *essence* of, for instance, 'aggression', we are most likely to fail. There is no essence of any sort in aggression; we will never be able to define aggression once and for all grasping some sort of essence of it. 'Aggression' will always remain just a word, which refers to all kinds of things, activities, attitudes, etc. In Wittgensteinian terms, the various kinds of aggression resemble one another like members of the family "for the various resemblances between members of a family: Build, features, colour of the eyes, gait, temperament, etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: 'Games' form a family" (Wittgenstein 1958, 32). One might only want to add that so do acts of aggression, and so do conflicts, and so do insults, etc.

This brings us to the conventional and arbitrary characteristics of language, and back to the proposal that one of the key discussants in the language and conflict panel made, namely, that we agree on the use (definitions???) of the basic terms in the field. As is obvious to any linguist, the connection between 'aggression', as a word, and whatever it refers to is arbitrary and conventional. With this assumption, an invitation to agree on the use of this word (and many others relating to language and conflict) seems to be a non-essentialist plea; I paraphrase it the following way: Rather than argue about the meanings and definitions of the words that are crucial to our discussion in the field, let us make a list of these crucial words, propose working definitions of them, and then stick to these definitions when we leave the conference site, go home, and get back to thinking and writing about language and conflict. I see such a plea as non-essentialist, theoretically tenable, and potentially attractive to some researchers. In other words, it might seem welcome. I find it, however, practically unfeasible.

First of all, if several people sat together with a common goal of arriving at a definition of, say, the word 'conflict', the words in the definitions under scrutiny would probably instigate endless discussions and disagreements, and some sort

of unrewarding exercise of infinite regress of definitions would result. However, giving our hypothetical body of colleagues the benefit of the doubt, assuming they agreed on a set of definitions of the key words such as 'aggression', 'hate', and 'conflict', their agreement is not likely to last long, probably not even until a few minutes after the end of the meeting. This is because on a daily basis we use and are exposed to hundreds and thousands of words (both in everyday life and in our professional activities) that are used by different people (authors) in different (though often similar, of course) ways. This will affect us (mostly subliminally) whether we like it or not, as we read various materials and talk to people. In other words, an agreement about the use of some terms, reached at a conference is most likely to be broken almost immediately after it has been arrived at. Such an agreement seems to me to be unrealistic.

3.   Conclusion: What's the solution then?

First of all, let me note what I think we should not do; we shouldn't complain about being in a predicament. We, researchers in language and conflict, are not in any especially difficult situation having to struggle with the meanings and definitions of the central terms such as conflict, trolling, and aggression. Any researcher is in the same boat. We should not complain about the terms that we disagree about. Neither should we give others the impression that one day we will know what 'conflict' or 'aggression' really is. If you accept a non-essentialist philosophical stance, like I do, you will conclude that we never will. If you agree with me that a large-scale solid and long-lasting agreement among researchers on the use of a set of terms is not feasible, the question remains: What's a rewarding solution?

In my view, a rewarding solution involves two crucial requirements. The first one is that we propose (say, in a conference paper or in a journal article) a *working* definition of whatever it is that we want to deal with. For instance, 'aggression': 'An attacking action made without just cause'. We formulate a definition, accept it, and we stick to it throughout the paper, article, project, etc. As no definition is unquestionable and ultimately correct, importantly, the definition we adopt must be *useful* for our purposes. It should help us solve the problem that our research project takes up. If, for example, our project concerns the aggressive language of written comments appended to articles in the online edition of a newspaper, it might be a good idea to define 'aggression' in linguistic terms only. Aspects of aggression such as kinesic behaviour, otherwise very relevant of course, may be totally disregarded and left out of the definition of aggression. Including kinesic behaviour in the definition would not be useful or helpful. If someone does not like our definition, proposes another one, or, in the worst case scenario, claims

that our view of 'aggression' is misguided, that what we take to be aggression is not really aggression, we simply state that for a non-essentialist, formulating a working definition (with which others may agree or not) in the context of a project is a rewarding solution. We may also stress that our solution is not compatible with an essentialist view, which requires that some ultimate definition be sought.

For the non-essentialist readers of JLAC, my proposal may be obvious. However, I do believe that it is not obvious at all to the authors and readers who worry about definitions and tend to formulate their concerns in ways indicating their trust that one final ultimate and correct definition can be arrived at. I assume that the latter may want to consider the alternative philosophical approach that I am trying to promote here.

The second requirement is that the working definition that one proposes is as little abstract as possible. All language use involves abstracting, of course, but some uses involve a higher level of abstraction than others. Any working definition involves words, of course, but some words refer to more abstract objects and activities than others. The word 'compassion' obviously refers to something much more abstract than the word 'car'. The point I am trying to make is that the lower the level of abstraction the words in our definition involve, the easier it will be for us to know what we are talking about. And to know what we are doing, talking about, or writing about appears to me to be one of the basic requirements of sensible research. If we are not sure what it is we are talking about (in terms of more or less tangible referents of the words we use), much of the research we do and the discussions we hold may be vacuous and unrewarding. For instance, the definitions of *to insult* – (1) 'to speak to or treat with disrespect or scornful abuse', (2) 'to treat with insolence, indignity or contempt', and (3) 'to do something to offend, by speech or act' – all seem to me to be fairly abstract. Do we know what we are talking about when we mention, for example, 'treating people'? We might, however, for the purposes of a project, formulate a definition which will be much more restrictive and concrete, for instance, (4) 'to *say* something that offends'. The last definition is less abstract in the sense that it includes only 'saying' rather than 'saying ', 'doing', 'treating', and whatever else it might be; it includes *less* to investigate, and by this token is more tangible. I do admit, of course, that 'offend' in case number (4) still refers to something blurry and very abstract. However, restricting the definition to 'saying' makes it less abstract and thus more helpful. It should be added, of course, that what 'saying' means is not entirely clear either and can also be contested. Still, whatever the definition of 'saying' one might want to work with, concentrating only on 'saying' rather than on 'saying' and other forms of behaviour makes our definition of 'insult' less abstract. In case (4), we seem to know a bit better (but never down to the last drop) what we are talking about. In addition, a definition like (4) would need to be useful for our project, of course. If someone

doesn't like definition (4), we do not need to abandon it. We have the right to adopt a working definition like this no matter how much opposition we may have to face. We may still see the definition as serving our purposes.

Note that definition (4) of 'to insult' – 'to *say* something that offends' has been discussed here only as an illustration of how definitions of concepts (in this case 'insult') may be less abstract, more tangible, easier to understand, and easier to work with. It is not my intention to encourage researchers to widely use this very definition in their studies. In fact, for some purposes in some studies, this definition might not be useful at all; it is up to the individual researcher to decide what definition best suits his or her individual project.

The key concepts pertaining to the language and conflict research may be difficult to define in terms of words referring to fairly tangible referents. There seems to be little tangible in the following definition of 'aggression' – 'hostile and violent behaviour or attitudes toward another, readiness to attack or confront' (*The New Oxford American Dictionary* 2005, 309). How should we understand 'hostile'?; when is behaviour 'violent'?; how does 'attitude' differ from 'feeling about something or someone'? Still, our attempt at proposing definitions that involve and invoke objects and activities as tangible as possible should in my view be our guiding principle. This is a demanding task in the humanities, but keeping the signpost 'tangible' in mind while formulating working definitions may be a rewarding way to keep us away from endless disagreements and terminological disputes.

As a note made in passing, I would like to stress that the approach to meaning and definitions that I try to promote is compatible with and partly builds on the philosophical foundations of Cognitive Linguistics (see, for instance, Rosch 1978, Lakoff 1982, 1987, Taylor 2003, Ungerer and Schmid 2006, Evans and Green 2006). One of the major ideas that surface very explicitly in cognitive linguistics is that of fuzziness. All concepts may be seen as fuzzy (in the sense that borderline examples can always be provided), and 'conflict', 'aggression', 'hate speech' are not exceptions. Some concepts are fuzzier than others, of course, and it is exactly the working definitions that involve tangible referents that can reduce the fuzziness in question. Cognitive linguists supply us with yet another crucial idea, namely, the prototype. If we subscribe to the prototype theory of the concept, 'conflict', 'aggression', 'hate speech' and all the other concepts/terms in conflict studies may be best tackled as typical and borderline (fuzzy) cases. We will tend to agree about the former and hesitate or disagree about the latter. We can thus talk about a typical conflict, or a typical aggressive act, a less typical one, a still less typical one, etc., finally arriving at the cases which we would definitely not label as 'conflict' or as 'an aggressive act' (for more details on this point, see Janicki 2006, 2010).

In this essay, I have tried to point to the futility of the essentialist quest for ultimate and correct definitions. As a more rewarding alternative to this position,

I promote a non-essentialist standpoint requiring that we abandon the chase after correct definitions (some call it 'a wild goose chase') and that we remain satisfied with working definitions, which will differ depending on the purposes in an individual project. The latter, 'working definition' alternative is much more rewarding, in my view, though not without shortcomings. One shortcoming is that it may, and perhaps most often will, mask unexamined underlying assumptions (about, for example, gender, class, race) and can lead to unintended results, including in the realm of conflict. This is something that we cannot avoid but should be ready to admit. We should also be prepared to face the consequences (such as a compromise in data interpretation) when the masking is disclosed.

Another shortcoming that some researchers might want to see in the 'working definition' alternative is that it leads to a long array of definitions which are not compatible; to use a metaphor, each researcher is encouraged to play his or her own game, and so comparing research results is thus made more difficult. While the incompatibility of definitions seems true, what researchers do in practice (whether they are dedicated essentialists or not) is exactly this anyway. We all work with different definitions (whether we formulate them more or less explicitly or not), even if the differences in question remain relatively minute. One of the ways to combat this unavoidable shortcoming is to stress triangulation, that is, applying different methods to study one and the same phenomenon. If the results recur, the differences in working definitions may appear to be negligible.

On balance, however, the above mentioned shortcomings as well as others, which critics of non-essentialism are likely to think of, the non-essentialist philosophical position that I try to promote does, in my view, more good than harm and allows researchers to move forward rather than spin their wheels at the very initial stage of trying to define the phenomena under study (in our case 'conflict', 'aggression', 'insult', etc.).

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