Agonism in academic discourse☆

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Abstract

The pervasiveness of agonism, that is, ritualized adversativeness, in contemporary western academic discourse is the source of both obfuscation of knowledge and personal suffering in academia. Framing academic discourse as a metaphorical battle leads to a variety of negative consequences, many of which have ethical as well as personal dimensions. Among these consequences is a widespread assumption that critical dialogue is synonymous with negative critique, at the expense of other types of 'critical thinking'. Another is the requirement that scholars search for weaknesses in others' work at the expense of seeking strengths, understanding the roots of theoretical differences, or integrating disparate but related ideas. Agonism also encourages the conceptualization of complex and subtle work as falling into two simplified warring camps. Finally, it leads to the exclusion or marginalization of those who lack a taste for agonistic interchange. Alternative approaches to intellectual interchange need not entirely replace agonistic ones but should be accommodated alongside them. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction and overview

In doing discourse analysis, we use discourse to do our analysis, yet we seldom examine the discourse we use. There are, of course, important exceptions, such as Tracy (1997) on departmental colloquia, Fleischman (1998) on the erasure of the personal in academic writing, Goffman (1981) on "The Lecture", Herring (1996) on e-mail lists, Chafe and Danielewicz (1987) who include "academic speaking" and "academic writing" in their comparison of spoken and written language, and Swales' (1990) study of academic writing as well as his recent examination of the physical and interactional contexts that give rise to it (1998). Perhaps most closely related to my topic is Hunston (1993), who examines oppositional argumentation in biology, history, and sociolinguistics articles (two each), and concludes that the less empirical disciplines are more 'argumentative'. Here I turn my attention to an aspect of academic discourse that, as far I know, has not previously been examined: what I call "agonism".

Ong (1981: 24), from whom I borrow the term, defines agonism as "programmed contentiousness", "ceremonial combat". I use the term to refer not to conflict, disagreement, or disputes per se, but rather to *ritualized* adversativeness. In academic discourse, this means conventionalized oppositional formats that result from an underlying ideology by which intellectual interchange is conceptualized as a metaphorical battle. In a recent book (Tannen, 1998), I explore the role and effects of agonism in three domains of public discourse: journalism, politics, and law. Here I turn to the discourse domain in which I first identified the phenomenon and began thinking about it: the academy.

My goal is to uncover agonistic elements in academic discourse and to examine their effects on our pursuit of knowledge and on the community of scholars engaged in that pursuit. In arguing that an ideology of agonism provides a usually unquestioned foundation for much of our oral and written interchange, I focus on exposing the destructive aspects of this ideology and its attendant practices. I do not, however, call for an end to agonism − a goal that would be unrealistic even if it were desirable, which I am not sure it is. Rather, I argue for a broadening of our modes of inquiry, so that agonism is, one might say, demoted from its place of ascendancy, and for a re-keying or 'toning down' of the more extreme incarnations of agonism in academic discourse.

In what follows, I begin by sketching my own early interest in agonism in conversational discourse. Then I briefly present some historical background, tracing the seeds of agonism in academic discourse to classical Greek philosophy and the medieval university. Against this backdrop, I move to examining agonistic elements as well as the cultural and ideological assumptions that underlie them in academic discourse: both spoken (at conferences, in classrooms, and in intellectual discussions) and written (in grant proposals, journal articles, books, and reviews of all of these). I demonstrate some unfortunate consequences of the agonistic character of these discourse types, both for the pursuit of knowledge and for the community of scholars and others who hope to gain from our knowledge. I then suggest that the existence and perpetuation of agonistic elements in academic discourse depends on

the ideological conviction that the pursuit of information, on one hand, and the people who pursue it, on the other, can be separated, whereas in reality—as we know and argue with respect to other domains of discourse—they cannot. Finally, I suggest alternative metaphors and conventions that might supplement those I have characterized as agonistic, and further suggest that moving away from the more extreme and destructive agonistic conventions would be part of a trend that Fleischman (1998) identifies as restoring "the person of the scholar" to the endeavor of scholarship.

2. Background: agonism in conversational discourse

My interest in ritualized opposition in conversation goes back to my earliest work (for example, Tannen, 1984) in which I identify and describe what I call "high-involvement" conversational style. One aspect of this style is the use of dynamic opposition, friendly contentiousness, as a cooperative rather than disruptive conversational strategy. A later co-authored article (Tannen and Kakavá, 1992) illustrates a similar phenomenon in Modern Greek conversation: family members and close friends use aggravated disagreement as a means to display and create intimacy. The use of verbal disagreement as a means of reflecting and creating intimacy in friendly conversation has been shown by many other researchers, including Schiffrin (1984) for East European Jewish speakers in Philadelphia, Blum-Kulka (1997), Blum-Kulka et al. (this issue) for Israelis, Kakavá (1993, this issue) for Greeks, and Corsaro and Rizzo (1990) for Italians.

More recently, I have drawn on these findings to develop a theoretical framework of the ambiguity and polysemy of power and solidarity (Tannen, 1994). I show that adversativeness, or the expression of conflict and verbal aggression (along with other linguistic strategies such as indirectness, interruption, silence vs. volubility, and topic raising), can be used in interaction to negotiate either power, or solidarity, or both at once. In other words, expressing dynamic disagreement can be a power play (a desire to one-up another), or a show of solidarity (where only family members or close friends can engage in such exchanges), or both (where a friendly competition to one-up each other is an activity in which intimates engage). I would now use the term "agonism" to characterize the use of dynamic opposition and verbal aggression as a means of reinforcing intimacy, because it is a ritual rather than literal attack.

In my work on conversational style, then, I demonstrated that oppositional moves in conversation, traditionally assumed to be destructive power plays, could also function constructively to create rapport.[1] With regard to academic discourse, my program is the reverse: to demonstrate that oppositional moves traditionally assumed to be constructive can have hitherto unexamined destructive consequences. As background to this analysis, I begin by tracing the roots of agonism in academic discourse to ancient Greek philosophy and the medieval university.

[1] In a similar spirit, I argued that 'interruption', usually seen as a violation of interlocutors' speaking rights, could function interactionally as 'cooperative overlap'—a display of enthusiastic listenership (Tannen, 1984).

3. The roots of agonism in ancient Greek and medieval Church discourse

3.1. Ancient Greek vs. Chinese philosophy

Ong (1981: 122) traces to the ancient Greeks a "fascination with the adversativeness of language and thought". He contrasts this with ancient China, which "came to look with disfavor on disputatious intellectual situations generally, regarding them as incompatible with the decorum and harmony cultivated by the true sage". Where classical Greek tradition sees polarized opposites in conflict—a conflict that is expressed in oral performance—Chinese tradition, as Young (1994) explains, sees a diverse universe in precarious balance which is maintained by everyday talk.

3.2. The medieval Christian academy

If the devotion to polarized dichotomies and the valorization of oral disputation are the source of our ideological assumptions, Ong traces to medieval universities the structures that remain at the heart of our academic discourse genres. The medieval university, he argues, provided a kind of male puberty rite: young men were snatched from their homes, gathered in an all-male, high-stress environment, terrorized by the threat of often brutal corporal punishment, and compelled to master a new and secret language, Latin. All knowledge was recycled through public oral disputation and evaluated through combative oral testing. The content of the curriculum also focused on military exploits. In Ong's words, "[t]he combined effect of physical threat from switching, agonistic methods of teaching and testing, and highly martial subject matter could often be an academic setting something like that of a present-day survival course..." (p. 132).

In this environment, students were taught not to search for knowledge and understanding but "to take a stand in favor of a thesis or to attack a thesis that someone else defended". In other words, "[t]hey learned subjects largely by fighting over them" (p. 122). Ong points out that the Latin term for school, *ludus*, "means not merely a school or training place but also play or games" and can be traced to "an original military use of the word to designate the training exercises for war..." (pp. 132–133).[2] I once outlined my thoughts on agonism to a colleague who commented:

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[2] There is a gender component to this story, which I will not develop here. For Ong, the all-male character of the medieval university and its agonistic character are inseparable. In a related argument, Noble (1992) explains that the exclusion of women from religious and educational institutions (they were one and the same) in western Europe was not an unavoidable consequence of age-old patriarchy, but rather an innovation of the middle ages, a strategic move of the Christian ascetics in their struggle to win power from the monastics who had dominated the first Christian millennium. During the monastic period, he points out, women and men lived side by side in "double monasteries" (usually under the administrative leadership of a woman, an abbess), and jointly aspired to an asexual or androgynous rather than masculine and misogynist ideal. When the Christian ascetics succeeded in solidifying their power, they imposed celibacy on priests and established the religious and educational institutions that were conceived not only in exclusion of women but in direct opposition to them. Ong points out that the agonistic conditions that characterized the all-male medieval and Renaissance universities began to abate when women were admitted to universities.

"It's innate in human nature to be combative". But Ong's point is that these tendencies were specifically encouraged by the medieval clerical establishment. Chinese intellectual tradition emphasized a different aspect of 'human nature'.

3.3. Cultural variation in modern academic discourse

If there are cultural traditions in which agonism is less associated with intellectual interchange, there are others in which it is more so. It is a commonplace among American academics that many British, German, and French counterparts are more given to vitriolic attacks and sarcastic innuendo than are American-trained scholars. Perhaps the paradigm model of agonistic academic exchange is what is associated with Oxford debating style. Nonetheless, although one can find more extreme examples of agonism in historical and non-American accounts of academic interchange, my goal in what follows is to show that such formats are pervasive in contemporary American academic discourse—and in ways more subtle than simply hurling vitriolic invective.

4. Agonism in US academic discourse

There are many aspects of academic discourse that can be described as agonistic. For example, a common framework for academic papers (one that I myself have implemented, as I suspect nearly all of us have at one time or another) prescribes that authors position their work in opposition to someone else's, which they then prove wrong. This is agonistic to the extent that it is conventionalized and prescribed. This standard framework creates a *need* to make others wrong which tempts—indeed, requires—scholars to (1) at best oversimplify, at worst distort or even misrepresent others' positions; (2) search for the most foolish statement and the weakest examples to make a generally reasonable treatise appear less so; and (3) ignore facts that support the opponent's views and cite only those that support theirs.

I would use the term "agonistic" only to describe the sense in which it is conventionalized to position one's work in opposition to prior work. I would not use the term in instances in which a scholar reads another's work and spontaneously finds it limited or even wrongheaded. (Of course the distinction between these two conditions will never be completely clear; as with so many terms and concepts, we are dealing with a 'fuzzy set' or prototypical categories.) The agonistic or ritualized aspect of this tradition (as distinguished from disagreement that grows organically out of differing views) can be captured in the speech event of a formal, staged debate in which two parties take opposing positions on an issue, not because they believe in one or the other position, but because one or the other has been assigned to them. Each listens to the opponent's statements not in order to learn but in order to refute; the goal is not to better understand the other's position but to win the debate.

4.1. The automaticity and ease of attack

Elbow (1986) identifies the mode of thinking and arguing that predominates in academic intellectual life as the "doubting game". We are trained, he argues, to look

for what's wrong with others' claims, rather than what we can learn from them. Elbow points out that this is effective for sniffing out faults, but tends to blind us to insights we could learn from approaches different from our own. He recommends a complementary exercise he calls the "believing game"—not to replace the doubting game, but in addition to it; not as an end point but as a heuristic device. We need, he says, a disciplined method for sniffing out strengths. Without this, the doubting game—that is, the agonistic requirement that work be framed in opposition to prior work—results in less knowledge and insight rather than more.

One reason the search for weaknesses and faults is appealing is that it is relatively easy to do. Hewitt et al. (1993) observe that speakers with language disabilities who have trouble taking part in other types of verbal interaction are able to take part in arguments because of their predictable structure. Similarly, it is possible to ask attacking questions following a presentation without listening or thinking very carefully. For example, in order to study any phenomenon, a scholar must isolate the aspect to be studied and focus on it. This gives potential critics an obvious handle to grab onto: 'You ignored this; you left out that'. A critic can also predictably question the representativeness of the sample or other aspects of methodology, and so on. I recall an academic gathering at which one of the most talkative participants had not read the book under discussion; this would have prevented her from identifying the book's merits but did not hamper her contributing enthusiastically to a discussion of its faults by critiquing its genre (academic memoir).

4.2. The adversary paradigm in philosophy

What Elbow calls "the doubting game" is closely related to what Moulton (1983) identifies as "the Adversary Paradigm" in philosophy. In her words, "the philosophic enterprise is seen as an unimpassioned debate between *adversaries* who try to defend their own views against counterexamples and produce counterexamples to opposing views". According to the Adversary Paradigm, "the only, or at any rate, the best, way of evaluating work in philosophy is to subject it to the strongest or most extreme opposition". Furthermore, "it is assumed that the best way of presenting work in philosophy is to address it to an imagined opponent and muster all the evidence one can to support it" (p. 153).

Moulton exposes many weaknesses in the Adversary Paradigm. For example, it requires the refutation of claims and arguments as isolated entities, whereas in fact they are part of an interrelated system of ideas; systems of ideas are not amenable to examination within the Paradigm. For another, she notes, "we understand earlier philosophers as if they were addressing adversaries instead of trying to build a foundation for scientific reasoning or to explain human nature. Philosophers who cannot be recast into an adversarial mold are likely to be ignored" (p. 155). Furthermore, "The only problems recognized are those between opponents, and the only kind of reasoning considered is the certainty of deduction, directed to opposition. . . . Non-deductive reasoning is thought to be no reasoning at all" (p. 157). Of particular interest to linguists is Moulton's observation: "Semantic theory has detoured questions of meaning into questions of truth" (p. 157). Like Elbow,

Moulton does not deny all validity to the Adversary Method. What she objects to is the monopoly that this paradigm has on her field: the conviction that this is the only way to reason and argue.

Moulton further points out that we think of the Adversary Method as the Socratic Method, whereas the true Socratic method (use of counter-argument, *elenchus*; from the Greek, *elenchos*) is designed to convince the other person, not to show others that their views are wrong. She notes that "the justification of the *elenchus* is not that it subjects claims to the most extreme opposition, but that it shakes people up about their cherished convictions so they can begin philosophical inquiries with a more open mind. The aim of the Adversary Method, in contrast, is to show that the other party is wrong, challenging them on any possible point, regardless of whether the other person agrees" (p. 156).

In contrast to the true Socratic Method, Moulton shows, the Adversary Method is not likely to convince those who do not agree, because few people regard having lost a debate as a reason to give up their beliefs; they simply attribute their loss to their own poor performance or to the opponent's tactics, not to the inherent strength of their arguments. What struck me, however, in this important distinction, is that if the purpose of the Socratic Method is to convince, then one is actually talking to the person addressed – whom one is regarding as a person. But if the purpose is simply to demolish another's arguments, then the other person has been reduced to an opponent, an object of attack, not a person at all. This is a point I will return to below: what Fleischman (1998) calls the "erasure of the personal" in academic discourse (see Sections 6.2, 7).

4.3. The influence of agonism on academic discourse

If the task of academic inquiry is seen primarily (or exclusively) to be exposing weaknesses and faults in another's scholarship, then one result is odd assumptions about what belongs in a paper and what does not. Whereas pointing out others' weaknesses is regarded as a primary responsibility, acknowledging others' contributions is sometimes thought to be less important, even extraneous.[3] But in reality, authors' contributions are part of the historical significance and context of their work. Part of the reason it might not seem so is the agonistic framework underpinning academic discourse. In the same spirit, a colleague remarked that, when asked to

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[3] The case that first caught my attention was a 1983 review article in Language of two edited volumes on gender and language (McConnell-Ginet, 1983). In the text of the review, the author devotes significant space to criticizing the work of Robin Lakoff, author of one of the chapters of one of the volumes under review. Yet the reviewer ends her acknowledgments by writing,

Finally, although I have been quite critical of her approach, I want to thank Robin Tolmach Lakoff for interesting me and so many others in language/sex scholarship, and particularly for her attempts to relate questions about the interaction of language and gender to other issues in linguistic research (p. 373).

I was struck that the conventions of the discourse relegated appreciation of Lakoff's contribution to the acknowledgments rather than to the text itself.

comment on others' papers at an academic meeting, she finds herself searching for something to criticize, to avoid the impression of having read superficially or of not caring about the task assigned her. Underlying such a concern is the assumption that negative criticism reveals more thought than would, for example, highlighting contributions made or drawing parallels to other work.

One pervasive effect of agonism is that work which gets attention is immediately opposed. It's easy to see the strengths of this: Weaknesses will be exposed. But among the limits is that it makes it difficult for those outside the field (or inside, for that matter) to gauge the accuracy of published research. In the words of policy analysts David Greenberg and Philip Robins (1986: 350), "The process of scientific inquiry almost ensures that competing sets of results will be obtained... Once the first set of findings are published, other researchers eager to make a name for themselves must come up with different approaches and results to get their studies published...". Greenberg and Robins point out that, as a result, it is almost impossible for public policy to be influenced by academic research.

Greenberg and Robins indirectly offer an explanation for the requisite nature of disagreement in academic discourse. The ideology underlying this requirement is that 'critical thinking', which, in theory, includes many types of thinking other than criticizing, in practice is interpreted as synonymous with 'critique" (in itself a term that, in theory, refers to any kind of intellectual evaluation but in practice denotes exclusively negative criticism). This conviction means that many young scholars feel they must flex their attack muscles in order to advance their careers, rather like a puberty rite by which young men must slay their first lion. As one young scholar put it, he obviously could not get tenure by writing articles simply supporting someone else's work; he had to 'stake out a position' in opposition to the work of an established scholar.

5. The ideology of agonism: intellectual interchange as battle

The use of military imagery of having to stake out a position is not incidental. Military metaphors are pervasive in our conception of intellectual pursuits and discussions. Indeed, the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR is the first one introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 4) in Metaphors We Live By. Among the examples the authors give are:

Your claims are *indefensible*.
He *shot down* all of my arguments.
His criticisms were *right on target*.

This root metaphor surfaces frequently in conversation among academics. A colleague once commented to me, "In a way you honor someone by grappling with him", and "In order to play with the big boys you have to be willing to get into the ring and wrestle with them". Clearly, these assumptions reflect what Moulton describes as the Adversary Paradigm.

At an even more pernicious and deeper level, the conceptual metaphor INTEL-
LECTUAL ARGUMENT IS WAR leads to the framing of research as falling into
warring camps. These opposing camps become like procrustean beds (to borrow yet
another metaphor from Fadiman, 1999) into which research is squeezed, at the risk
of lopping off limbs of complexity and nuance.

Luhrmann (2000), in an ethnographic analysis of the professional world of psy-
chiatry, notes that psychiatrists' academic and clinical training takes for granted a
split into two separate and opposing camps: diagnosis and psychopharmacology on
one hand, and psychodynamic psychotherapy on the other. In reality, she argues,
the most effective treatment usually combines the two approaches, but psychiatrists
tend to take the dichotomy for granted, even though most would agree when asked
that it is a false one. Commenting on the same phenomenon, Parks (2000: 15) cites
Menninger Clinic professor, Glen Gabbard, who argues that recent research show-
ing that psychotherapy can alter brain chemistry should "finally erode the 'reduc-
tionism' that has divided the mental health world into two hostile camps, the
psychosocial and neuroscientific". For the present, however, "the conflict continues
as bitterly as ever".

A similar dichotomy surfaces in the area of language and gender. Throughout the
'90's, research was routinely represented as made up of two camps: those who regar-
ded gender patterning as reflecting 'cultural' differences between women and men,
and those who attributed gender differences to 'power' inequities between the sexes in
society. In reality, however, these two views are not mutually exclusive: there are
power inequities between the sexes, and boys and girls also tend to play in sex-
separate groups and to be socialized differently. More recently, the culture/power
dichotomy has been replaced by an 'essentialist'/'constructivist' split, reflecting cur-
rent trends in feminist theory. In this schema, 'essentialism' traces gender differences
to biologically- and genetically-based determinants, whereas 'constructivism' sees
them as culturally learned.

The spuriousness of this warring-camps dichotomy is exposed by Klein (1995). An
American woman who spent many years studying Tibetan Buddhism abroad, Klein
encountered this division in feminist theory when she joined a university program
devoted to women's studies in religion. To her, it exemplifies the Western tendency
to rigid dichotomies. Recalling how Buddhist philosophy tries to integrate disparate
forces, she shows that there is much to be gained from both feminist views—and, in
any case, both perspectives tend to co-exist within individuals. For example, she
points out, even though the social constructionist view of gender has won ascen-
dancy in academic theory, "feminists still struggle to recognize and name the com-
monalities among women that justify concern for women's lives around the world
and produce political and social alliances". Klein asks, "Why protest current con-
ditions unless the category 'women' is in some way a meaningful one?" (pp. 8–9).
She shows, too, that the very inclination to polarize varied views of women and
feminism into opposing camps is in itself essentialist, because it reduces complex and
varied perspectives to simplified, monolithic representations.[4]

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[4] These paragraphs are based on Tannen (1998: 274–275).

In the foregoing paragraphs, I placed quotation marks around the term "essentialist", because the word is routinely used by those who subscribe to the social constructivist view in order to discredit those they oppose. The term encapsulates the accusation of reducing women to an unrealistic representation of "essential" female nature. Moreover, at least in this academic domain, the term is used only in this stigmatizing way; I have never encountered a scholar in the field of gender who self-identifies as an "essentialist".

The term has also gained currency in a parallel conflict in the field of cross-cultural communication. On the one hand are scholars who seek to explain cross-cultural misunderstanding by identifying linguistic strategies associated with each cultural group; on the other are those who claim that individuals within any group are too varied to be thus characterized. The terms "essentialist", "essentialism", and "essentializing" are used by the latter group to discredit the former. In my view, the term (and many others like it) is an unfortunate byproduct of agonism, because it has devolved into a kind of academic name-calling. As sociolinguists and language philosophers have long demonstrated, the meaning of a word lies less in its dictionary definition than in the way it is used. The use to which the term "essentialist" has been put is captured by Nussbaum (1997: 24) who calls it "that generic gender studies *j'accuse*!"

The problem with words like "essentialist" is not that there is no legitimate reason to criticize some scholars for over-emphasizing patterns by which members of a given community, or individuals seen as belonging to an identifiable group, are homogeneous. The problem is that the term functions as an epithet, demonizing those to whom it is applied. More deeply, I would argue, it masks a fundamental paradox or tension in the human condition that will not be addressed so long as scholars working in the field are forced to choose one camp or the other. Individuals who grow up in a particular speech community develop ways of using language that are similar in some ways, as a large body of sociolinguistic research has attested. At the same time, any cultural construct that might gather individuals under a unified identity (for example, Americans, Chinese, Japanese), on closer inspection, is made up of innumerable regional, class, ethnic, generational, and other differences. Moreover, every individual also has a unique and idiosyncratic personality and way of speaking. As I argue in my work on conversational discourse, anything we say to honor the ways that we are different, potentially violates the ways that we are similar. And anything we say to honor ways that we are similar, potentially violates ways that we are different. This tension introduces inherent instability in all interaction. We would gain more if we confronted and addressed this paradox—and, by implication, the complex ways in which speakers are and are not accurately characterized by their membership in a speech community—rather than embracing one aspect and discrediting the other.

There is something so appealing about conceptualizing differing approaches as warring camps that such dichotomies are readily picked up and echoed by others. This happens precisely because warring-camps dichotomies appeal to our sense of how knowledge should be organized. It feels 'natural' and 'right'. It feels right because it reflects our agonistic ideology. But because it feels right does not mean it

is right. On the contrary, there is much wrong with the metaphorical assignment of research to warring camps. It obscures the aspects of disparate work that overlap and can learn from each other. It obscures the complexity of research. These dichotomies imply that only one framework can apply, when in the vast majority of instances, both can. I am reminded here of a comment attributed to Kenneth Pike, which I heard from A. L. Becker: Most scholars are wrong not in what they assert but in what they deny. In other words, scholars eager not only to make themselves right but also to make others wrong risk distorting and misrepresenting their opponents' views – and setting us all back in our common quest for understanding and knowledge.

6. The expense of time, spirit, and creativity

There is yet another way that framing academic discourse as a metaphorical battle results in less knowledge rather than more: It wastes scholars' time and talent. Critics spend large amounts of energy looking for faults in others' work that could better be spent building on it, or developing their own work in new directions. At the same time, those who are the object of agonistic attack are forced to expend energy dispelling misrepresentations of their work, energy that could better be spent doing new creative work or incorporating the insights of genuine critics—those who represent the work accurately but raise significant questions and offer competing research findings.

Another way that the agonistic conventions of academe result in the loss of creative work is that many scholars are discouraged from presenting or publishing their work, or from contributing to oral interaction, by the agonistic tone of academic discourse. Herring (1996) examined the postings on the electronic 'linguist' list. At one point, a rancorous, polarized debate broke out. Herring sent a questionnaire to list subscribers, asking their views of the debate and why they did not contribute, if they didn't. She found that 73 percent of respondents who said they had not taken part in the debate gave "intimidation" as the reason.[5]

There is yet another way in which our agonistic conventions result in loss of knowledge and understanding. As an anonymous reviewer of this paper commented, American academic discourse can function "like a kind of bullying to conform to a norm/trend. It's when you have a different point of view than the trendy barbies that you get shot down, not if you're in the in group". I would add, however, that feeling

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[5] Herring also noted that men and women tended to give different accounts of their reactions, as captured in the following typical responses: A man who had not taken part commented, "Actually, the barbs and arrows were entertaining, because of course they weren't aimed at me", whereas a woman who similarly remained on the sidelines remarked, "I am dismayed that human beings treat each other this way. It makes the world a dangerous place to be. I dislike such people and I want to give them a WIDE berth".

Although gender patterning is not my concern in this essay, Ong argues that agonism—that is the ritual use of aggressive opposition, as distinguished from the literal kind—is more pervasive in boys' and men's lives than in women's. I believe there is ample evidence to support this view, and discuss such evidence elsewhere (Tannen, 1998).

safe within the confines of one group does not protect you from attack by an opposing group. Quite the contrary, when bullets are flying, nearly everyone feels vulnerable and edgy, even if they are temporarily protected by fortress walls.

6.1. Graduate school as battle training

Typically, established researchers do not leave the profession because of agonistic modes of academic discourse. But another problem with the agonistic model is that many of those who have no taste for contentiousness are dissuaded from entering the field in the first place, drop out of graduate school, or withdraw from the profession after completing their graduate education. This was the case with a woman who had been encouraged by her undergraduate professors in art history to seek a graduate degree. Happily, she was accepted into a highly competitive doctoral program. Unhappily, however, as she wrote to me in a letter,

> Grad school was the nightmare I never knew existed. . . . Into the den of wolves I go, like a lamb to slaughter. . . . when, at the end of my first year (Masters) I was offered a job as a curator for a private collection in California, I jumped at the chance. I wasn't cut out for academia—better try the "real world".

Further evidence for the 'den of wolves' culture of graduate school is found in the study by Tracy and Baratz (1993) of weekly colloquia attended by faculty and graduate students at a large university. When asked directly the purpose of the colloquia, faculty and students replied, to "trade ideas," "learning things" (p. 305). But interviews with faculty and students quickly revealed that the colloquia had many "unofficial purposes". As a faculty member put it, "One of the purposes it serves is to give different people, ah I think more faculty than graduate students, a chance to kind of show *they*'re smart, sometimes by showing that someone else isn't as smart as *they* are" (p. 307). The interviews revealed that students had deep concerns about being seen as intellectually competent—and that faculty were, indeed, judging students' competence based on their participation. It also emerged that to be seen as competent, one had to ask "tough and challenging questions".

When asked about active participants in the colloquia, one faculty member responded, "Among the graduate students, the people I think about are Jess, Tim, uh let's see, Felicia will ask a question but it'll be a nice little supportive question". It is clear that "a nice little supportive question" is not highly valued, and that, consequently, he thinks less of Felicia than he does of Jess and Tim. When one student complained of what she considered to be "vicious attacks" on her presentation, a faculty member assured her that this was, instead, a sign of respect. This is strikingly reminiscent of the observation made by journalists (for example Kenneth Walsh and Adam Gopnik)[6] that their fellow journalists feel they need to ask tough questions not to better serve viewers and readers but to prove their competence to their colleagues.

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[6] See Adam Gopnik, "Read all about it," > The New Yorker, December 12, 1994, pp. 84–102. Kenneth Walsh made this comment on the Diane Rehm Show WAMU-FM May 28, 1996.

Similarly, many in the legal profession (for example Yablon, 1996) point out that what's known as "Rambo" litigation tactics result from the desire to be seen as competent by colleagues rather than by any evidence that such tactics actually have beneficial results for clients.

6.2. Don't take it personally

In a sense, the colloquia described by Tracy and Baratz (1993) (and explored in more detail in Tracy, 1997) are a training ground for professional life—not only (or not so much) in the sense of intellectual rigor but in the sense of withstanding verbal attack. Friedlander (1996) describes what she calls "the ritual dressing down" that were "celebrated spectacles" during her graduate training in anthropology at the University of Chicago in the early 1960's:[7]

"Monday afternoons", she writes, "were sacred in the Department, a time for everyone to come together to listen to a colleague's work and to offer a response. After listening to the formal presentation, distinguished professors—who will remain nameless—performed acts of unimaginable academic aggression, usually on a visiting anthropologist from another institution, but sometimes on one of their own".

This brings us to a crucial aspect of agonism in the academy. Because agonism is *ritual* combat, attacks on colleagues' work are not supposed to be taken personally. We maintain this fiction even though everyone (at least everyone I have ever spoken to) is personally pained by having their work attacked (though not usually if their work is disagreed with in a respectful and reasoned way.) One reason scholars are certain to be hurt is that in writing about others' work (often in print, but especially in blind reviews), it is common to adopt a snide and sneering tone of the sort one uses when talking about someone who is not there: not just "Jones concludes" or even "Jones claims" but "Jones would have us believe..." or "Jones is unwilling to recognize". I suspect that everyone reading this could supply their own examples, so I will offer just one. It comes from the anonymous review of a book manuscript submitted to an academic press by a novice scholar. The discourse analyzed had been tape-recorded at a workplace at which the author was employed at the time of taping. The reviewer, who did not find such data appropriate, referred to it as "the audiotaped detritus from an old job".

The author was caught here in a clash of disciplinary cultures: for those in the anthropologically-oriented branch of discourse analysis, participant observation is a time-honored method, crucial for understanding interaction. For those trained in psychologically-oriented branches of the field, a researcher's participation in the discourse analyzed is anathema, preventing 'objectivity'. Such methodological differences are common and unavoidable. But the words "detritus" and "old job"

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[7] I am told by colleagues that Chicago's Monday seminars are no longer characterized by vicious verbal attack, although the tradition of tough questioning continues. This raises a question of interest to me, though not directly germane to the topic of this essay. My research on public discourse (Tannen, 1998) revealed abundant evidence that agonism is on the rise in the fields of journalism, politics, and law. I have not, however, encountered evidence that this is the case in academia.

unfair to our academic heroes but, again, gets in the way of properly integrating prior work into future work. Making an 'opponent' into a 'villain" belies the claim of objectivity.

7. Restoring the person to scholarship

The agonistic model of academic discourse is posited not only on the dichotomizing of information but also on the illusory assumption that the personal has no place in scholarship. Yet a thread running through much current research in discourse analysis is that language must be understood in context; for academic discourse, this means one cannot separate the pursuit of knowledge from the community of scholars engaged in that pursuit. Sneering at or lambasting a colleague's work (as distinguished from questioning or disagreeing with it) becomes acceptable—indeed, venerable—only if the work is separable from the person who created it.

The agonistic framework, moreover, engenders a lack of respect for colleagues and for the cultural diversity of our disciplines. Unfair criticism often grows out of a failure to understand or appreciate the disciplinary context in which other researchers are working, and the methodologies they employ. This is especially true in interdisciplinary areas—and just about any study of language is interdisciplinary (or should be). Widdowson (1988: 185–186) notes that interdisciplinary efforts are sure to incur criticism because all scholarly work is done within a paradigm prescribed by a particular discipline:

> The conventions of the paradigm not only determine which topics are relevant. They determine too the approved manner of dealing with them: what counts as data, evidence, and the inference of fact; what can be allowed as axiomatic, what needs to be substantiated by argument or empirical proof. . . . So the way language is conceived by another discipline, informed by another set of beliefs and values (the culture of a different tribe of scholars) tends to be seen as irrelevant, inadmissible, or misconceived.

I will give an example from commentary on my own research. In discussing the reception that my work on gender and language has received, Cameron (1995: 35–36) notes that the position I take—that women's and men's styles are different but equally valid—grows directly out of the linguistic tradition of cultural relativity. She explains that "linguists have insisted it is wrong to label languages 'primitive' or dialects 'substandard'; it is wrong to force people to abandon their ways of speaking...". For linguists, this position of "linguistic and cultural relativism ... has always been an honorable position, and sometimes an outright radical one". Therefore, "[i]n applying it to the case of male-female differences, Deborah Tannen and her colleagues have only reasserted the historical logic of the discipline they were trained in". Cameron does not endorse this view; quite the contrary, she argues that the tradition of cultural relativity is inappropriate in the domain of language and gender. But by supplying the disciplinary context, she lays the groundwork for a more informed and enlightening

simply slander the data used—and, by implication, sneer at the researcher who used them. This example had a sad ending: the author decided not to revise the manuscript for publication, even though another reviewer had delivered a favorable review. Many of us find that words of criticism—especially nasty ones—continue to rankle long after words of praise have faded from memory.

In theory, this review was written for the publisher, not the author, to read. But reviews of books and articles submitted for publication are routinely sent to authors, so such slurs are read by the targeted person—making reading reviews of one's work and responses to it like being forced to stand invisibly and silently behind a curtain while a group of people you thought were your friends are talking against you. (And these barbs are slung by academics many of whom put off reading their student evaluations for fear of being hurt by critical remarks.) At the extreme are those who attack others in scornful, contemptuous, and sarcastic tones, claiming all the while that academic discourse is 'objective'. The claim of objectivity is a cloak attackers hide behind while sticking their knives out through it.

Tompkins (1988), a literary critic who has analyzed the genre of the western in fiction and film, captures the ritual aspect of framing academic discourse as a fight, and, in the process, exposes the fatuousness of claiming that such attacks are not to be taken personally. A scene at an academic conference in which a scholar is attacking another academic reminds her of the scene in a western when the villain's provocation has gone so far that "the hero *must* retaliate in kind" (p. 586). She describes the performance she witnessed as "a ritual execution of some sort, something halfway between a bullfight, where the crowd admires the skill of the matador and enjoys his triumph over the bull, and a public burning, where the crowd witnesses the just punishment of a criminal. For the academic experience combined the elements of admiration, bloodlust, and moral self-congratulation" (p. 588).

Tompkins recognizes this performance as an oral version of what regularly occurs in academic writing. She recalls "all the essays I had read where similar executions had occurred" (p. 588) and shows how almost anything authors write can be turned against them. "We feel justified in exposing these errors to view," she writes, "because we are right, so right, and they, like the villains in the western, are wrong, so wrong" (p. 588). Tompkins recalls, moreover, that her own career was launched by an essay she wrote that "began with a frontal assault on another woman scholar. When I wrote it I felt the way the hero does in a western. Not only had this critic argued *a*, *b*, and *c*, she had held *x*, *y*, and *z*! It was a clear case of outrageous provocation" (pp. 588–589). Tompkins notes that her target was, as is typical, an established and prominent predecessor, invoking the "David and Goliath situation" that made her feel she was "justified in hitting her with everything I had" (p. 589). (It's like what William Safire in the public sphere refers to as "kicking 'em when they're up".)[8] In other words, work that distinguishes itself is the most likely to be "demolished", and "heroes" are rapidly transformed into villains. This is not only

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[8] Safire is quoted in Howard Kurtz, "Safire Made No Secret of Dislike for Inman," The Washington Post, January 19, 1994, p. A6. Political columnist Safire made this remark in connection with his criticism of Admiral Bobby Ray Inman when Inman was nominated by President Clinton for secretary of defense.

debate. Cameron's perspective, however, is unusual, not typical. Few of us are motivated to explore the theoretical underpinnings of work in other disciplines because the agonistic models we have inherited dispose us to spend more time expressing our disapproval.

Fleischman (1998) identifies a paradigm shift taking place in academic writing by which "the person of the scholar" is being restored to scholarship. She traces to the Enlightenment the ideology that knowledge can (and should) be separated from the knower, so that in academic discourse, "the subject is banished, the author disappears, the experiencing self is sealed off from the experienced world" (p. 979). Among the many types of evidence of a shift toward restoring the person to scholarship are increasing use of the pronoun *I* and of personal experience in service of intellectual argumentation, plus decreasing use of the passive voice and nominalizations. (These trends can be seen in the present paper.) I believe that the agonistic ideology by which we attack others' work in snide and insulting ways is inseparable from the ideology of objectivity. Therefore, I see my questioning of agonism as part of what Fleischman (1998) calls the personalization of scholarship—that is, acknowledging that scholarly work is done by human beings. My hope is that, along with the other changes that Fleischman identifies, will come increasing avoidance of destructive agonistic elements such as those I have described.

8. Conclusion: looking ahead

We need new metaphors by which to conceptualize what we are about. In the realm of teaching, McCormick and Kahn (1982: 16), professors of organizational behavior, suggest that critical thinking can be better taught if we replace the metaphor of a boxing match with that of a barn-raising: "a group of builders constructing a building, or a group of artists fabricating a creation together". We could observe, moreover, that a group of builders will not always agree on which tool to use, or how to go about solving an engineering problem. But at least they are focused on a shared goal rather than on a result in which one must win while the other must lose.

In our research, how much more might be learned if we think of theory not as static structures to be demolished or assertions to be falsified, but a set of understandings to be questioned and shaped. In this spirit, we could replace the traditional battle and sports imagery with a metaphor from cooking. Daly (1996: xv), in an introduction to his study of families and time, suggests that "theories should be treated like bread dough that rises with a synergetic mix of ingredients only to be pounded down with the addition of new ingredients and human energy".

If the conventions of academic discourse are what I have described them to be, then many readers will have read this essay with an eye toward where they might disagree. So let me emphasize what I have not said. I have not claimed that no one should disagree or critique in the negative sense. After all, nearly everything I have written here is in disagreement with, and critical of, commonly held views. Scholars must feel free to voice disagreement when they encounter opinions or findings they

believe are wrong, misguided, or dangerous. Only through the open expression of disagreement can ideas be honed and mistakes corrected. In fact, a liability of agonism in academic discourse is that it squelches the open expression of disagreement: many are afraid to speak up for what they believe because they fear being stigmatized by association with a warring camp, or fear becoming the object of agonistic attack.

What I am suggesting is that we examine the effect of agonism on intellectual inquiry. I am suggesting that understanding, knowledge, and insight come not only from oppositional debate but also from exploring complexity, culling insight from disparate sources, seeking connections—and that these types of inquiry are discouraged by our agonistic ideology and conventions.

I am not calling for an end to oppositional debate. But if adversativeness and attack are the *only* or primary frameworks for intellectual interchange, if 'critique' becomes the overwhelming avenue of inquiry, a formula that *requires* scholars to frame their work in opposition to their predecessors', if a lust for opposition privileges extreme views and devalues conciliatory ones, if our eagerness to find weaknesses blinds us to what we can learn from others' work, if the atmosphere of animosity generated by the warring-camps mentality precludes respect and poisons our relations with each other, if it drives out of the field gifted minds who simply have no taste for contentiousness, then the spirit of agonism is not serving us well.

I am suggesting, in sum, that we who have made a vocation of understanding language in context should be attuned to how the agonistic conventions driving our own discourse are affecting both the scientific understanding that, I continue to believe, is our primary goal, and the human community of which we are a part.

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