

Psycho-Social Context Negotiation in Young Sheldon Family Conflict Discourse: An Adaptation Theory Analysis

Wen Li, Xiaoxiao Lv*

School of Foreign Languages, Shandong University of Science and Technology, Qingdao 266510, Shandong, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Conflict discourse is a common and complex linguistic phenomenon in interpersonal communication. As a typical type of conflict discourse, family conflict discourse not only has the general characteristics of conflict discourse but also presents unique interaction rules due to the particularity of kinship relations. Young Sheldon provides a high-quality corpus for the analysis of family conflict discourse with its diverse character identities and authentic daily interaction scenarios, making the relevant discourse analysis highly representative and referential. Existing studies mostly focus on the static description of strategies in family conflict discourse, yet they fail to further explore how family members dynamically adapt to each other's psychological and social worlds through discourse choices during conflict interactions, nor do they fully reveal the actual process of relational negotiation behind such discursive practices. Based on the psychological world and social world of contextual factors in Verschueren's Adaptation Theory, this paper conducts a micro-level dynamic analysis of family conflict discourse in Young Sheldon in four stages: triggering, escalation, intervention/transformation, and outcome. It attempts to break through the limitations of static analysis in previous studies, and also provides specific theoretical references and practical insights for understanding discursive interaction in daily family communication.

Keywords: Adaptation Theory; Family conflict discourse; Young Sheldon; Psychological world; Social world

Online publication: May 25, 2026

1. Introduction

Interpersonal communication has complex interactive attributes. Differences in ideas, personalities, and interests between subjects are likely to give rise to conflict discourse. As a typical linguistic phenomenon in interpersonal interaction, conflict discourse has long attracted academic attention. Relevant foreign studies originated from the investigation of children's verbal dispute phenomena, and early studies mostly focused on turn-taking and sequence structure analysis^[1]. Allen D. Grimshaw first clearly put forward the concept of

“conflict discourse”, defining it as a verbal event including arguments, quarrels, and other forms ^[2]; Honda further defined it from both narrow and broad senses, pointing out that conflict discourse in the broad sense is a dynamic process of verbal opposition involving occurrence, development and management ^[3]. Since the 1980s, the research has gradually shown an interdisciplinary trend. Scholars have incorporated contextual factors into the research scope by combining theoretical methods such as conversation analysis, focusing on the interactive relationship between conflict discourse and multiple factors such as culture and interpersonal relationships ^[4]. However, existing studies have not conducted an in-depth exploration of the dynamic game process of psychological and social contexts in family conflict discourse.

Systematic domestic research on conflict discourse began in the early 21st century. Chen Xiaochun was one of the earliest scholars in China to pay attention to this field, initially defining conflict discourse as “quarrelsome dialogue” ^[5]. Since then, most scholars have carried out explorations from the perspectives of conversation analysis and pragmatics. For example, Zhao Yingling (2004), Ran Yongping (2010), Yang Xiaoyong (2013), and others analyzed the structural characteristics and divergent orientation of conflict discourse ^[6-8]; Zhao Zhongde and Zhang Lin (2005) explained the generation mechanism of conflict discourse with the help of relevance theory ^[9]. With the continuous advancement of academic research in relevant fields, corpus sources for discourse analysis have been significantly expanded and enriched, and they now even cover the natural and vivid family dialogues extracted from well-known American TV dramas such as *Friends* and *Modern Family*, which boast rich daily conversational content and authentic linguistic expressions. Nevertheless, among the existing research results on family conflict discourse, the studies that specifically explore and analyze this type of discourse from the unique perspective of children are still relatively scarce and insufficient in both depth and breadth. Most of the current relevant studies merely carry out superficial static analyses on the linguistic strategies adopted in family conflicts, focusing only on the surface-level expression forms of conflict discourse while ignoring the complex psychological and social connotations behind it. What is more, these studies lack a systematic and comprehensive dynamic psychological-social analytical framework constructed on the basis of Verschueren’s Adaptation Theory, which could effectively interpret the dynamic adaptation process of language use in family conflict interactions. Therefore, against this research backdrop, there still exists a considerable and valuable research space for an in-depth study on family conflict discourse from the children’s perspective with the support of Verschueren’s Adaptation Theory.

2. Adaptation Theory

This study takes Verschueren’s Linguistic Adaptation Theory as the overall theoretical framework ^[10]. According to Verschueren’s Adaptation Theory, the use of language in communication is essentially a continuous process of linguistic selection, which is based on the three core properties of language: variability, negotiability, and adaptability. As the core of these three properties, adaptability empowers language users to flexibly select appropriate linguistic strategies to meet their specific communicative needs in given contexts, and such contexts are categorized into three interrelated dimensions: the psychological world, the social world, and the physical world. When it comes to the TV drama *Young Sheldon*, the physical world only acts as a stable and fixed setting for all verbal interactions, whereas the psychological and social worlds are the dominant factors that initiate and shape all discourse conflicts among family members. However, previous relevant studies have not yet fully and in-depth explained the dynamic game and interactive relationship

between individual psychological needs and social normative constraints reflected in such family conflict discourses. This study constructs a two-dimensional analytical framework centered on the psychological and social worlds as an extended application of Adaptation Theory in the analysis of family conflict discourse. This framework holds that family conflict discourse is not only a form of verbal confrontation but also a concrete reflection of the game between individual psychological motives of family members and various social constraints in the process of communication. On the basis of this two-dimensional framework, the study further combines the four developmental stages of family conflicts—conflict triggering, conflict escalation, conflict intervention, and conflict outcome—to conduct a systematic and dynamic analysis of the entire evolutionary process of family conflict discourses. Through such in-depth analysis, the study finally summarizes three typical resolution results of family conflicts presented in the discourses: psychological submission of one party, mutual consensus reached by all conflicting parties, and a temporary truce with the conflict unresolved for the time being.

3. Case analysis

3.1. Case 1: Father-son conflict over academic expectations (Season 3, Episode 2)

The core of the conflict between father and son lies in their obvious cognitive differences regarding the value of academic learning, which is directly triggered by Sheldon's deliberate decision to skip regular classes. Sheldon's inner psychological world is entirely centered on the exploration of advanced knowledge and in-depth academic research; he firmly holds the view that the ordinary courses taught in middle school are too simplistic and cannot meet his high cognitive needs, nor can they satisfy his strong desire for in-depth learning. Therefore, he chooses to skip classes for a whole week, hiding in the quiet school storage room to study independently, devoting all his energy to exploring professional knowledge that truly interests him and matches his intellectual level. In sharp contrast, George's social world is deeply rooted in traditional family concepts and social norms; he adheres to the traditional educational concept that children should strictly abide by school rules, attend classes on time, and complete basic education step by step. Sheldon's sudden and prolonged absence from class directly breaks George's inherent expectations and violates the social norms he has always upheld. Filled with anxiety, disappointment, and a sense of powerlessness, George finally finds Sheldon in the storage room and questions him sharply with a serious tone: "What do you think you're doing? You're going back to class." His words fully conform to the universal social norm that "parents should discipline their children well and ensure they receive a good education." In response, Sheldon defends his behavior firmly and confidently, showing no willingness to compromise: "I don't learn anything in class. But in here I've taught myself the applications of gravitational lensing, Faraday's law of magnetic induction." His words fully reflect his own extreme pursuit of knowledge and his disregard for conventional school rules. At this moment, neither party is willing to step back or try to understand the other's contextual demands and inner needs; both insist on their own viewpoints, and the long-hidden father-son conflict officially breaks out, leading to a fierce and unavoidable confrontation.

As the dispute between them gradually unfolds, the underlying conflict steadily escalates, evolving from a simple divergence over academic pursuits into a tense clash of family emotions and mutual shirking of parental responsibilities. Failing to reason with or convince Sheldon of his perspective, George quickly diverts the problem to Mary, saying impatiently: "Mary, I have football practice in ten minutes, and I don't have time to deal with this." This remark aligns with the traditional social division of labor that "fathers

ought to bear primary family economic responsibilities and center their energy on work”, while also subtly conveying his frustration at having his authority openly challenged. Mary immediately counters with a firm refusal: “Well, you’re gonna have to, ‘cause I’m busy.” Their heated quarrel effectively transforms Sheldon’s personal academic issue into a full-blown family relationship conflict. In an attempt to coerce Sheldon into compromise, George resorts to punitive measures, declaring sternly: “No more Professor Proton!” This parenting approach follows the common social strategy of “parents restricting children’s behavior by depriving them of beloved interest resources”, yet it completely overlooks Sheldon’s distinct academic-centered psychological traits and personality. As a result, it only intensifies his rebellious resistance, leaving both father and son trapped in a stubborn “self-context centered” dilemma where neither is willing to understand the other’s position.

When the speaker and listener hold different opinions, third-party active mediation can often ease conflicts ^[11]. Grandma Connie’s timely intervention emerges as the pivotal turning point in de-escalating the family conflict, as her carefully crafted discourse strategy aims to reconcile and balance the two conflicting contexts at play. Rather than directly dismissing or suppressing Sheldon’s strong desire for independent advanced study, Connie takes a constructive approach by reaching out to Dr. Linkletter and earnestly proposing: “I was hoping that my grandson could join in your physics class until John is back.” This thoughtful arrangement not only validates and satisfies Sheldon’s intense academic thirst and intellectual needs but also meets the whole family’s shared expectation for structured, systematic formal education through the means of “auditing formal university courses.” In doing so, it effectively resolves the disciplinary dilemma faced by George and Mary, encouraging the two parents to set aside their earlier disagreements and shift from mutual quarreling toward collaborative problem-solving. When Sheldon is informed that he has successfully obtained the auditing qualification, he calmly and politely responds: “Thank you”, demonstrating his willingness to make a moderate compromise and adapt to the family’s social norms.

The conflict ultimately ends with the dual satisfaction of academic demands and family rules, and father and son achieve dynamic adaptation of the two contexts through discourse adjustment. Sheldon obtains the qualification to audit university physics courses, and his psychological need for knowledge is met; George sees his child return to the track of formal education, his educational expectations are fulfilled, and power confrontation is transformed into mutual understanding. George extends an olive branch to Mary: “How’d you like to go out for dinner on Friday? Just you and me”, marking the return of family harmony. From the perspective of Adaptation Theory, the essence of negotiation in this conflict is the dynamic adaptation of discourse to the two contexts, as Li Ren (2025) emphasizes that adaptation is a dynamic process in real-time interaction, not the application of static rules ^[12]. Connie’s intermediary discourse builds a communication bridge; Sheldon moderately compromises to adapt to family social norms; George adjusts his educational method to fit Sheldon’s special talent, ultimately achieving the balance between individual needs and family order.

3.2. Case 2: Mother-son conflict over content control and autonomy (Season 1, Episode 18)

The direct trigger of the conflict is Missy’s snitching. Angry about her adult magazine being confiscated by Mary, Missy accuses Sheldon of reading “indecent books.” After finding Sheldon’s comics, Mary insists: “It’s filled with violence and nudity, and you are done looking at it.” This is based on her maternal belief that children should access healthy content and the social norm that parents control their children’s reading

materials. Sheldon, confident in his cognitive ability and insistent on intellectual freedom, expects equal rights and rejects being treated as a child. He argues: “But comics are a form of art. You wouldn’t forbid me from looking at Michelangelo’s David just because he’s nude.” The clash between their psychological cognition and social roles leads to the outbreak of the conflict.

Mary confiscates all of Sheldon’s comics and says: “Confiscating your comic books. You can have them back when you’re 18.” This reflects her absolute parental authority and protective mentality. Sheldon feels wronged for being ignored and protests: “You continue to treat me like a child.” Challenged by his resistance, Mary responds angrily: “From this moment on, I am done mommy-ing you.” To fight against control and prove his maturity, Sheldon tries to cook independently, only to fail, commenting: “Not bad. The dish soap gave it a nice lemony flavor.” He also insists on declaring: “I’m working on my application to Harvard.” The psychological and role confrontation between the two intensifies, leaving the conflict in a stalemate.

A sudden tornado warning serves as a crucial emotional turning point in their relationship. Sheldon, eager to prove his maturity, is busy weeding in his grandmother’s yard in an effort to act like a responsible adult, but Mary firmly insists that he return home at once, asserting authoritatively: “I don’t care if you think you’re an adult. I’m your mother, and you will do as I say.” This direct and uncompromising tone fully reveals her strong sense of maternal responsibility and deep-seated worry for his personal safety amid the impending weather danger. As the tornado rapidly draws near, overwhelming fear finally strips away Sheldon’s deliberate adult-like disguise, and he breaks down in tears, admitting vulnerably: “I am not all right anymore.” In this moment, he abandons his pretense of independence and reverts to his genuine childlike need for comfort and security. Mary immediately steps forward to hug and soothe him tenderly, transforming her role from a strict authority figure and controller into a warm and reassuring protector. The sincere emotional bond formed in the face of crisis effectively replaces the earlier tense power struggle between them.

The conflict between Mary and Sheldon ultimately comes to an end with both mother and son making mutual adaptation and heartfelt compromises, marking a meaningful growth for both of them. Mary, through the series of conflicts and the critical moment of the tornado crisis, gradually realizes that although Sheldon is eager to pursue autonomy and show his maturity, he is still a child at heart who deeply needs the care and protection of his family. She begins to understand that his desire for independence does not mean he can fully let go of the sense of security that family brings. On the other hand, Sheldon, after experiencing the fear of the tornado and the warmth of his mother’s comfort, also openly admits his inherent dependence on family security. He comes to comprehend that adulthood is not about blind confrontation with his parents or stubbornly adhering to his own ideas regardless of the consequences, but rather about learning to balance his pursuit of independence with his need for family connection. In light of this mutual understanding, Mary softens her previously strict and rigid control over Sheldon, choosing to trust him more and give him appropriate space to explore his own path. Meanwhile, Sheldon voluntarily abandons his impulsive plan to immediately apply for Harvard University—a decision that was once a symbol of his stubborn pursuit of independence—and becomes more moderate and rational in his quest for autonomy, learning to consider his family’s feelings while chasing his dreams. This mutual adaptation not only resolves their long-standing conflicts but also deepens their mother-son bond, laying a warmer and more harmonious foundation for their future relationship. As Yang Liuna (2025) stresses, language use is a dynamic process in which speakers choose appropriate strategies to achieve communicative goals according to the context ^[13]. Their adjustments

in cognition and roles demonstrate such dynamic adaptation. The two consolidate their emotional bond and achieve family harmony while maintaining their core positions.

3.3. Case 3: Conflict between brothers over rule recognition

This conflict arises when George asks Sheldon to tutor his brother in math, reflecting an imbalance between family social norms and the brothers' psychological needs. Failing math will get the brother kicked off the football team, so their father demands: "Go help your brother study for his math test tomorrow." Family solidarity requires mutual help, and football is central to the brother's social identity. However, Sheldon considers himself intellectually superior and thinks tutoring is a waste of time, asking: "Is that really a good use of my time?" The brother also rejects help with pride, saying: "I don't need your help. Get lost." The conflict thus emerges.

The cognitive gap during tutoring and subsequent cheating intensifies their opposing views on rules and outcomes. Sheldon teaches according to his own standards and asks: "Do you understand solving and graphing linear inequalities?" He fails to adapt to his brother's level, leading the brother to give up: "I'm tired. I'm going to bed." After the brother surprisingly gets a B, Sheldon learns the truth: "He cheated. He had the answers written on the bottom of his shoe." Sheldon insists on honesty: "When you cheat in school, you only cheat yourself." But his brother only cares about staying on the team: "By passing that test, I get to play football, and you get to go to the train store. Everybody wins." Both only follow their own beliefs and ignore each other's expectations.

The restriction of family norms and verbal negotiation promotes the transformation of the conflict. The brother quotes the Bible: "The Bible also says honor thy father and thy mother. And if you open your mouth, you're gonna make them sad." This persuades Sheldon to compromise. Their grandmother uses Captain Kirk from Star Trek to explain that some people break rules, encouraging Sheldon to rethink rules and consequences. Sheldon later asks: "When you cheated on the math test, what was your strategy?" This shows his initial adaptation to his brother's psychology, shifting the conflict from confrontation to communication.

The conflict ends with dynamic negotiation and cognitive compatibility between the brothers. The brother shares his trick: "When you're telling a lie, it's important to throw in some details." Sheldon accepts a result-oriented mindset and later copies this logic to skip PE. From Adaptation Theory, Sheldon moves from absolute rule-following to partial acceptance of outcomes, while the brother changes from rejection to cooperation. Both compromise psychologically and conform to the family norm of brotherly harmony. The conflict results in compatible cognition, proving that family conflict is essentially a process of relational negotiation.

4. Conclusion

Based on Adaptation Theory, this study establishes a "psychological-social world" two-dimensional game framework to systematically analyze family conflict discourse in the popular TV series *Young Sheldon*. Focusing on the dynamic interaction between family members, this research explores how they adapt to each other's psychological worlds (including emotions, cognitive habits, and inner needs) and social worlds (including family norms, values, and role obligations) through flexible discourse strategies, so as to negotiate interpersonal relationships and resolve conflicts properly.

This study finds that family conflict discourse is not simply emotional confrontation or one-sided power control, but a continuous, dynamic relational negotiation process with three typical patterns. Father-son authority conflicts center on the tension between traditional role authority and rational individual sovereignty, where both sides reach a compromise by redefining family rules and adjusting discourse strategies. Mother-son value conflicts, mainly between scientific rationality and religious belief, shift to behavioral respect and emotional bonding, achieving coexistence through respecting differences. Sibling equality conflicts involve struggles over fair resource distribution and speaking rights, usually resolved temporarily via parental arbitration or procedural means.

Discourse choices in conflicts reflect speakers' real-time trade-offs between personal psychological needs and social norms, and effective negotiation relies on mutually accepted discourse rules. Theoretically, this study refines the micro-application of Adaptation Theory and clarifies the negotiation logic of family conflict discourse. Practically, it provides valuable references for family communication, pragmatic teaching, and cross-cultural media analysis. Furthermore, conflict discourse is not merely negative but can serve as a chance for positive relational development, promoting mutual understanding and emotional connection among family members. When facing conflict discourse, if both parties handle it properly, they can effectively promote the progress of their relationship and achieve the expected communication goals^[14].

This study has certain limitations: its research conclusions are based on the fictional dialogue scenes in the TV series, which are somewhat different from the real family communication scenarios in daily life. In the future, this analytical framework can be further applied to the research of a real family discourse corpus and extended to different cultural backgrounds or diverse family structures, so as to further test and enrich the explanatory power and applicability of the framework.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] He J, Wang G, 2017, A Study on Doctor-Patient Conflict Discourse from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory. *Journal of Mudanjiang University*, 26(12): 13–15. <https://doi.org/10.15907/j.cnki.23-1450.2017.12.004>
- [2] Grimshaw AD, 1990, *Conflict Talk: Sociolinguistic Investigations of Arguments in Conversations*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- [3] Honda A, 2002, Conflict Management in Japanese Public Affairs Talk Shows. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 2002(5): 573–608.
- [4] Boxer D, 2002, Nagging: The Family Conflict Arena. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 2002(1): 118–122.
- [5] Chen XC, 2001, Coherence in Argumentative Dialogue. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, 24(4): 33–37.
- [6] Zhao YL, 2004, An Analysis of Conflict Discourse. *Foreign Language Research*, 2004(5): 37–42.
- [7] Ran YP, 2010, A Pragmatic Analysis of the Divergent Orientation of Conflict Discourse. *Modern Foreign Languages*, 2010(2): 150–157.
- [8] Yang XY, 2013, A Pragmatic Analysis of Interpersonal Conflict Discourse and Mitigation Strategies. *Foreign Language Teaching*, 2013(2): 39–43.
- [9] Zhao ZD, Zhang L, 2005, Conflict Discourse from the Perspective of Relevance Theory. *Foreign Language*

Teaching, 2005(1): 17–21.

- [10] Verschueren J, 2000, *Understanding Pragmatics*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing, 187.
- [11] Xu J, Li X, 2024, An Analysis of Pragmatic Mitigation Strategies for Parent-Child Conflicts under the Background of the Implementation of the Family Education Promotion Law. *Journal of Kaifeng Vocational College of Culture and Art*, 44(4): 121–128.
- [12] Li R, 2025, The Translation Loss of Metadiscourse in *A Dream of Red Mansions* from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory—Taking the Metadiscourse Marker “Que” as an Example. *Journal of Social Science of Jiamusi University*, 43(12): 91–94.
- [13] Yang NL, 2025, The Translation of Puns in English Advertisements from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory. *Overseas English*, 554(22): 44–46 + 49.
- [14] Liang M, Zhao HW, 2024, A Pragmatic Analysis of Conflict Discourse from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory. *Overseas English*, 516(8): 53–55.

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.