

## ŞAHISLARARASI İHTİLÂFLAR VE SÜBJEKTİF MANA SİSTEMLERİ

### THE ROLE OF DIFFERENTIAL CONNOTATIONS IN INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT<sup>1</sup>

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Sübjektif ve objektif mâna sistemlerinin şahıslararası ihtilâflardaki nisbî ehemmiyetlerini ortaya çıkarmak üzere yapılan bu araştırmada, denekler bir kognitif vazifenin ihtiva ettiği ana mefhumlara ait tarif manalarını (denotative, objektif manalar) öğrenmek için bir talim devresinden geçirilmişlerdir. Aynı mefhumların her denek için ifade ettiği sübjektif (connotative) manalar bir Semantik Farklandırma testi vasıtasıyla tesbit edilmiştir. Denekler çiftler halinde bir ihtilâf tecrübesine sokulduktan sonra, her çifte mensup denekler arasındaki sübjektif ve objektif mâna benzerliklerine veya ayrılıklarına göre dört grup meydana getirilmiş ve bunlar arasında mukayeseler yapılmıştır. Alınan neticelere göre, 1) denekler arasında tarif manalarından doğan farklar kognitif ihtilâfın ana kaynağını teşkil etmektedir; 2) ihtilâfın miktarı aynı zamanda sübjektif mâna sistemleri arasındaki farkların bir fonksiyonudur. İhtilâfa yol açan bir meselenin ana mefhumları üzerindeki sübjektif mâna farkları, ihtilâflı tarafları birbirinden uzaklaştırmakta, buna karşılık sübjektif mana benzerlikleri de onları birbirlerine yaklaştırmaktadır.

In an effort to study the relative effects of subjective and objective meaning systems upon interpersonal conflict, subjects were trained to learn specific denotations with regard to the conceptual elements of a

*cognitive task. Connotative meanings of the same concepts for each subject were determined through use of a semantic differential. After being brought into a paired conflict situation, subjects were separated pairwise into four groups on the basis of similarity or difference both in their denotative and connotative meaning systems. The results indicate 1) that differences in denotative meanings are a primary determinant of the amount of cognitive conflict; 2) that differences in amount of conflict are also a function of differences in connotations. Connotative differences concerning the main conceptual elements of a conflicting issue serve to pull the disputants apart while the connotative similarities tend to draw them together.*

This study investigates the effect of language upon interpersonal conflict. The content of verbal communications between parties to a conflict was analyzed into its denotative and connotative meaning units; the relative effects of these different meaning systems on the course of interpersonal conflict were then compared.

The study was carried out within the research paradigm developed by Hammond (1965) for the study of interpersonal conflict, or more precisely, for the study of cognitive conflict between persons. Hammond's research paradigm is an extension of Brunswik's (1952, 1955) probabilistic functionalism. Within this theoretical framework, cognitive conflict is a disagreement that appears between persons as a result of different quasi-rational judgmental policies developed in the face of an uncertain environment.

The customary way of reducing cognitive differences between persons is, of course, through verbal communication. Indeed, language is virtually the only means of resolving cognitive differences which occur between two quasi-rational systems. But language itself is a quasirational system subject to the same uncertainties and ambiguities as quasi-rational cognitive systems. It is not surprising therefore that language has been found to be less than a wholly effective tool for reducing cognitive differences, and, in fact, may do as much to increase differences as decrease them. Despite the central, yet ambiguous, role of language in the reduction of cognitive differences between persons, the linguistic process in conflict reduction has hardly been studied.

The present effort focuses on one aspect of the linguistic meaning system - the denotative - connotative dimension. This dimension was

chosen for study because the results of previous studies of cognitive conflict between pairs of persons within the Hamond paradigm showed that conflict reduction was remarkably slow and inefficient (Hammond, Todd, Wilkins, and Mitchell, 1966; Rappoport, 1965, 1969; Summers, 1968; Todd, Hammond, and Wilkins, 1966). A cross-national study (Hammond, Bonaiuto, Faucheux, Moscovici, Fröhlich, Joyce, and Di Majo, 1968), in particular, showed not only ineffective reduction of cognitive differences, but an increase in differences under circumstances where language was employed to reduce such differences. The general result of the cross-national study is depicted in Fig. 1 and led directly to the specific hypothesis investigated in this study.

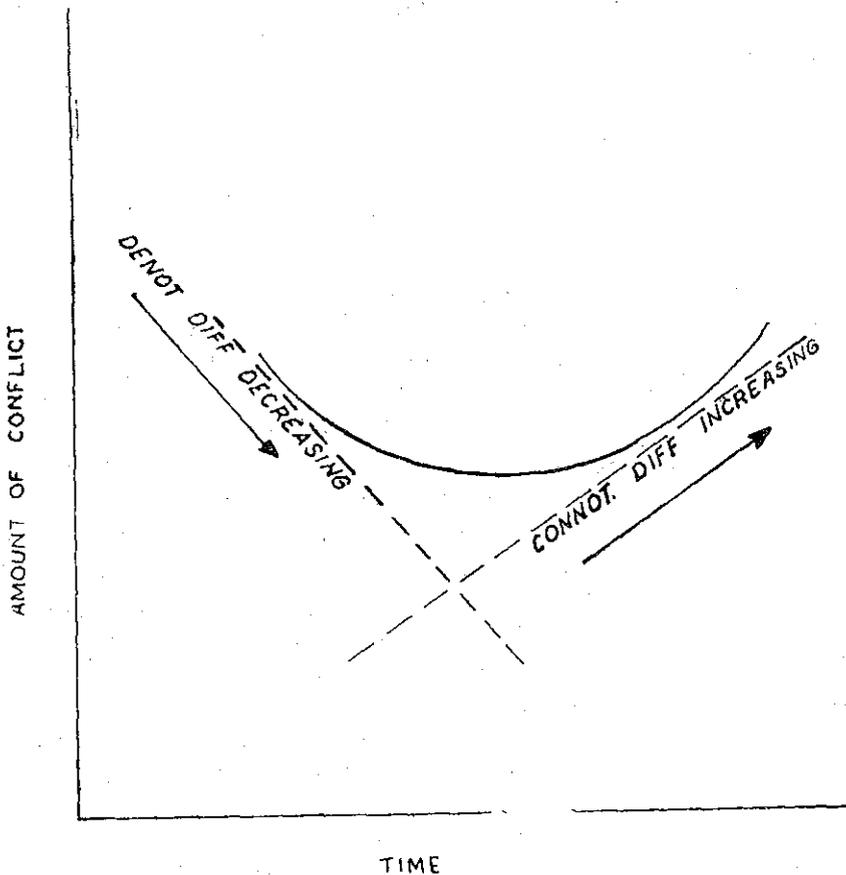


Fig. 1. General figure obtained from the cross-national study.

As may be seen in Fig. 1, differences between persons first decrease and then increase. The general hypothesis offered to explain these results is that in the conflict reduction phase, denotative differences (differences in objective, definitional meanings) are being reduced, but as that process occurs, connotative differences (differences in affective, subjective meanings) between the parties to the dispute are being discovered by them and thus the increased conflict phase is produced.

The aim of the present research, then, is to investigate the role of connotative differences in an interpersonal conflict situation. It is hypothesized that while the verbal communication over the denotative, objective meanings of the words has a positive effect upon mutual understanding and, thereby, conflict reduction, connotative dissimilarities involving the same words between conflicting parties will have a negative effect, and will lead to an increase in conflict.

## METHOD

The general research paradigm employed for studying cognitive conflict is described in detail by Hammond (1965). The method involves two stages: a training stage in which two (or N) subjects are trained in such a way that each learns to think differently about a set of problems, and a conflict stage in which the two (or N) subjects are brought together and attempt to arrive at joint decisions concerning the problems. The training stage is employed in order to allow the experimenter to arrange the cognitive differences between the subjects to fit the requirements of the study. For example, the larger the differences in training the greater the subsequent cognitive conflict. (Since training means the establishment of denotative meanings for subjects, reference to denotative meaning systems will be made by using the term "training" in the rest of this paper.) After the Ss were trained to learn what the principal concepts in the task denote, connotative meanings of these concepts for each member of an experimental pair were determined by means of a Semantic Differential test. Ss were then grouped according to the difference or similarity between both their denotative and connotative meaning systems, and comparisons were made between groups for each of the response measures produced by the conflict paradigm.

PROCEDURE

The subjects appeared two at a time and were asked to participate in an experiment on political decision-making. They were told that the purpose of the study was to investigate how people put political facts together and how they reach a decision on the basis of these facts. The preconflict training task was to learn a specific foreign policy by using the information given. They were seperately trained to predict "the future level of democracy" in various countries on the basis of present (a) "level of state control exerted over an individual" and the present (b) "extent to which elections determine the government" (See. Fig. 2).

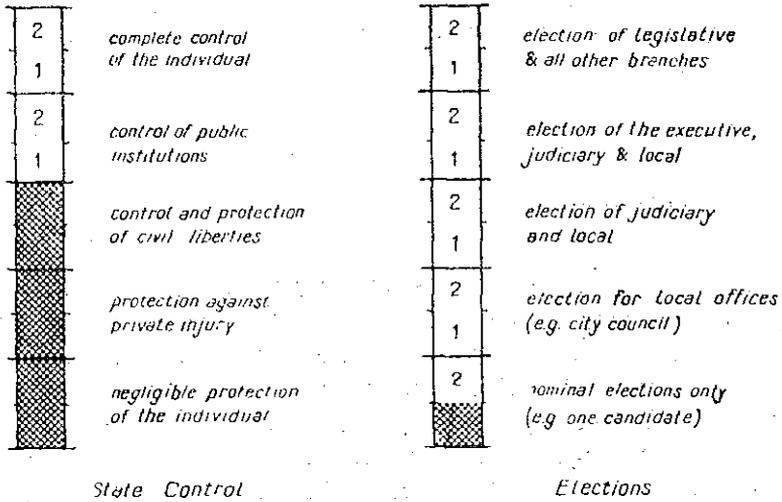


Fig. 2. An example of a card used in the training and conflict tasks.

The level of state control and the prevalence of elections in various fictitious countries were presented on scales printed on the face of each of a series of 60 cards. The variable to be predicted, level of democracy, was indicated on a scale on the back of each card. Both subjects were informed that the scale of state control was related in a curvilinear fashion to the criterion ("Neither too little state control nor too much is good"), while the scale of elections was related linearly to the criterion ("The more the electorate determines the government the better"). (See Fig. 3).

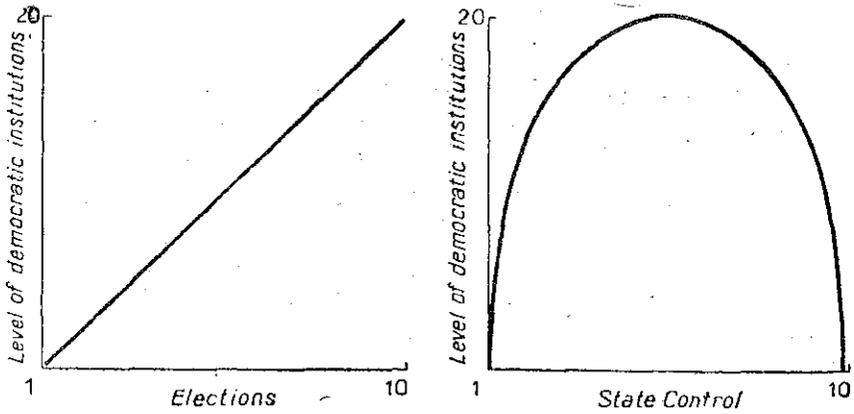


Fig. 3. Relations between each variable and the criterion

### Differential Training

For one subject the variable "state control" had a correlation of approximately .95 with "level of democratic institutions", while the correlation between the "election" variable and "level of democratic institutions" was zero. For the other subject the reverse was true. As a result, the subjects were trained in opposite ways, although they were not made aware of this. For both subjects the relation between the two information scales and the criterion was less than perfect. The multiple regression coefficient ( $R$ ) between the two scales and criterion was .95. Thus, it was impossible for the subjects to get the correct answer on every trial. The two prediction scales were statistically independent of one another. The subjects were trained to a criterion on 15 successive trials in which their judgments correlated at least .75 with the variable they were trained to depend on and not more than .25 with the variable they were trained to ignore. (For details, see Hammond, 1965.)

Differential training, therefore, produced different denotations for the concepts employed in the task. Each subject learned that various degrees of "elections" and "state control" denoted different levels of "democracy".

### Conflict Situation

After training the subjects were brought together and informed that they were to make the same kind of predictions they had made before. They were not told that they had received different training. They were told that whereas the training session had involved fictitious data, the new instances for which they were to make predictions were taken from the "real world of nations" and, therefore, the task would be a little more difficult. Because of this greater complexity, they might not always agree in their predictions, and whenever this occurred they were to discuss the matter with one another until they could arrive at a decision acceptable to both. The subjects were not informed of the fact that the conflict task was, in fact, different from the one they were trained on; that in the conflict situation the two information scales were **equally** correlated with the criterion scale ( $r = .67$ ). (See Fig. 4.)

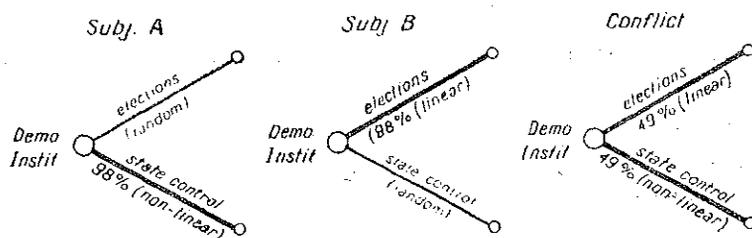


Fig. 4. Differences in differential training tasks and conflict tasks.

After observing a card and before communicating with one another, the subjects were told to record their individual predictions on the answer sheet provided; they were then to inform each other of their predictions, and then to arrive at a joint prediction. Following the joint decision, they were to indicate secretly what they now thought the correct judgment was. They were then told the "correct" answer. The subjects made predictions for twenty "nations" in the conflict situation.

Several measures provided by the research paradigm to describe the dynamics of conflict are shown in Fig. 5.

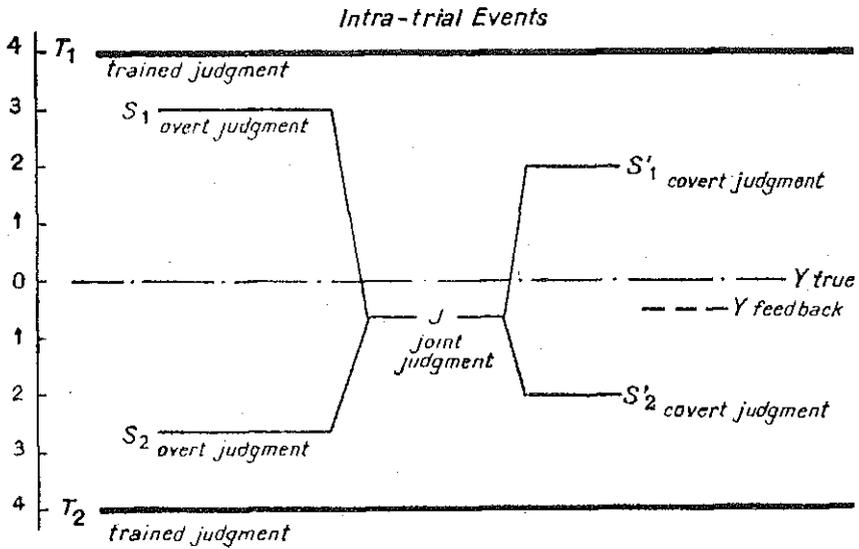


Fig. 5 Basic data obtained on a single trial in research paradigm.

### Similar Training

Subjects who were classified under the "Similar Training (Similar Denotation) group" underwent the same procedure as did the differently trained pairs except that each member of a pair in this group received the same training; they learned to depend on the same variable in predicting the value of the criterion. They were matched in such a way that half of the 16 pairs receiving similar training were trained to depend on "state control" variable while the other half were trained to depend on the "elections" variable.

### Measuring Connotative Differences

The experimenter recorded the principal concepts used by the subjects during their discussion to reach a joint decision in each conflict trial. The day after the conflict session, Ss were brought back for the measurement of connotative differences, and they rated individually the concepts they had used and argued about.

**General connotations.** The subjects rated an average of ten concepts on the four evaluative scales of Osgood's Semantic Differential test (Jacobovitz, 1966). These concepts came out of the discussions between each pair and were recorded regardless of their frequency of occurrence or the effect they each had on the joint answers.

**Specific connotations.** A separate analysis of the differential connotations of the concepts of "state control" and "free elections" were also made because of their critical role in the discussion.

### Grouping the Pairs

The average differences in connotative meanings (SD scores) between each member of a pair were calculated and rank-ordered. A median split between low and high connotative difference scores was made. Ss were then assigned to the following groups: (1) Similar Training-Similar Connotation group (ST/SC); (2) Similar Training - Different Connotation group (ST/DC); (3) Different Training - Different Connotation group (DT/DC); and (4) Different Training - Similar Connotation group (DT/SC). (See Table 1.)

Table 1  
Principal Design of the Experiment

	DENOTATIONS		
	Sim.	Diff.	
Diff.	8	8	16
CONNOTATIONS			
Sim.	8	8	16
Total pairs of subjects			32

This procedure was used to group the pairs separately both according to the general and the specific connotative differences. The range of general connotative differences was 1.61 out of the largest possible range of 6.00 with a median of 1.17, while the range and median for specific connotative differences were 2.00 and .94.

### Measuring Cognitive Conflict

One basic measure of conflict provided by the general research paradigm is the absolute difference between the public judgments made by each subject at the beginning of each conflict trial. Since each card presents different stimulus values and, therefore, evokes varying amount of potential conflict, ratio of this expressed conflict ( $|S_1 - S_2|$ ) to the amount of conflict which could be expected to occur at that particular trial as a result of differential training ( $|T_1 - T_2|$ ) was also employed. T values are calculated by developing a multiple regression equation from subject's responses on the last 15 trials of the training session. Thus, the derived measure of overt conflict,  $\left| \frac{S - S}{T - T} \right|$ , indicates the amount of conflict occurring at any trial in relation to the amount of conflict which would have occurred if each subject were to follow his training exactly.

Differences between Similar and Different Connotation groups were first measured in terms of  $\left| \frac{S_1 - S_2}{T_1 - T_2} \right|$  as described above. This measure of overt conflict, however, is not entirely appropriate when comparing differently and similarly trained pairs. For in the case of similarly trained pairs, the denominator is always a very small number (or zero) which has the effect of reducing the ratio into an absolute difference measure ( $|S_1 - S_2|$ ). What is needed here is a measure that enables us to hold the anticipated conflict ( $T - T$ ) constant over trials so as to evaluate the amount of departure from it. This was accomplished by subtracting  $S - S$  from the amount of predicted conflict ( $T - T$ ), thus providing  $|(T_1 - T_2) - (S_1 - S_2)|$ .

## RESULTS

### Establishment of Denotative Differences

Figure 6 shows the differences between four experimental groups with respect to conflict reduction over blocks of trials. Ss who had similar

denotative meanings about the concepts of the task engaged in less conflict than those who learned different denotations during the training. The large difference between Similar and Different Training groups indicates the power of the research paradigm in establishing specific cognitive structures in subjects. (See Table 2.)

Table 2

Analysis of variance of overt conflict | (T—T) — (S—S) |

Source	SS	df	MS	ET	F
Training (B)	488.28	1	488.281	1	109.2128*
Blocks (A)	21.19	3	7.062	2	5.0962**
A by B	54.46	3	18.152	2	13.0991*
Error Terms					
Subj. w. groups (1)	134.13	30	4.471		
A x sub. w. groups (2)	124.72	90	1.386		

\*  $p < .01$

\*\*  $p < .05$

### The effect of General and Specific Connotations

Group comparisons on the basis of general connotative differences did not result in significant differences with regard to conflict reduction. This finding led us to conclusion that a great many of the concepts used and rated by the subjects were not sufficiently relevant to the discussion to affect the course of conflict. The concepts "state control" and "elections" were, of course, specifically related to the task and it is the connotative differences with respect to these concepts that were most likely to effect the interaction between the Ss. Records of the discussions indicated that these two concepts were indeed the concepts most frequently used during the discussion (both within each pair and across groups).

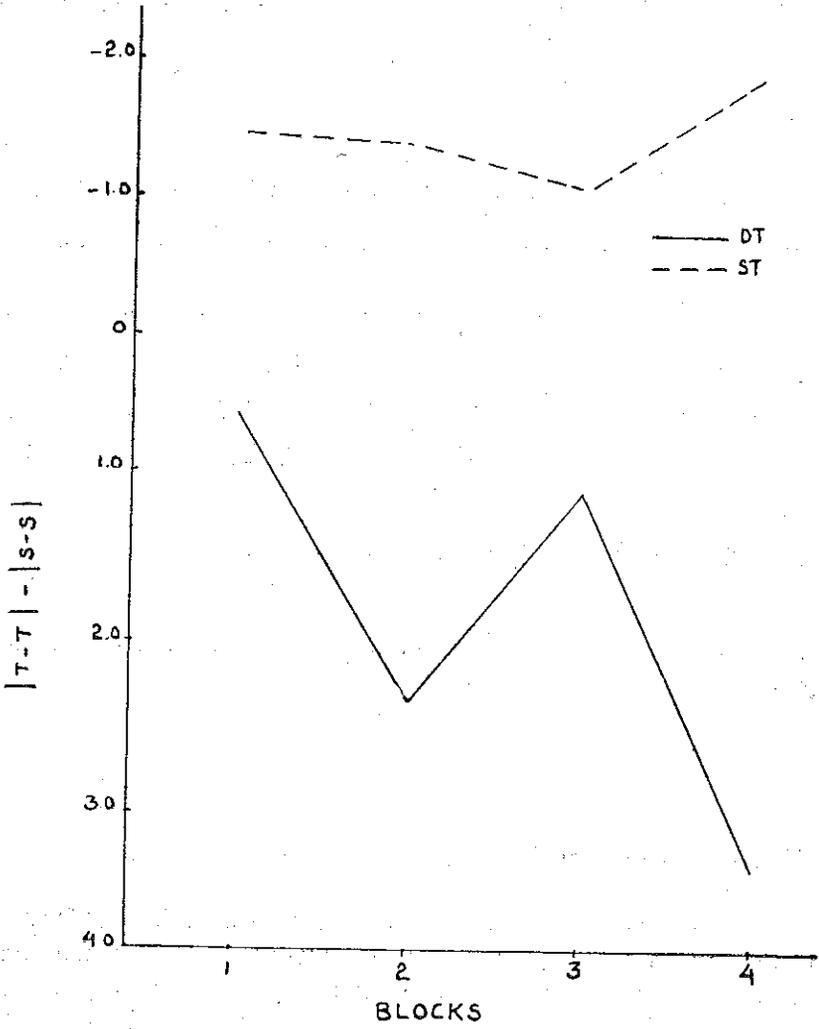


Fig. 6. Differences in overt conflict between Similar and Different Training groups.

The results reported here, therefore, will be based upon the comparisons between pairs of subjects that were assigned to four experimental groups according to their connotative differences with respect to the concepts of "state control" and "elections". Reducing the number of concepts to the most relevant ones also provided us with a firm basis to compare the relative effects of denotative and connotative differences, because these were also the concepts for which we had the measures of denotative meanings.

**Differences in the amount of overt conflict.** An analysis of variance (Table 3) showed a significant difference in conflict  $| (T-T) - (S-S) |$  between the two groups with similar training over blocks of trials; conflict slightly decreases in the ST/SC group whereas conflict in the ST/DC group increases after the first ten trials. (See Fig. 7.)

For the differently trained groups there is a significant block effect which indicates a considerable decrease in conflict over blocks both in DT/DC and DT/SC groups (See Table 4).

**Trends.** With the exception of ST/SC groups, all groups have trends significantly different from zero. As it can be seen in Fig. 7, the ST/SC group does not reduce conflict; it shows a zero trend over trials. Examination of the absolute level of conflict makes it clear that there is not much conflict to reduce when similar meaning systems involving similar denotations and connotations are involved.

ST/DC pairs, on the other hand, increase their conflict over the 20 conflict trials. The linear trend of the curve differs from zero ( $F = 26.97$ ,  $p < .01$ ). There is also a significant difference between linear trends of the ST SC groups ( $F = 27.70$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Conflict between differently trained Ss tends to decrease over blocks in both DT/DC and DT/SC groups. However, similarity in connotations causes a sharper decline in the conflict reduction curve in the DT/SC group with a significant linear trend from zero ( $F = 39.98$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The difference of the linear trend from zero in DT/DC group also is significant ( $F = 10.32$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

#### Co-variation between Connotative Differences and Conflict

In order to examine more closely the relation between amount of conflict and degree of connotative similarity, the co-variation between these variables within each of the four groups was examined.

Table 3

Analysis of variance of overt conflict | (T—T) — (S—S) |  
in similar denotation groups

Source	SS	df	MS	ET	F
Groups (B)	.00	1	.003	1	.0003
Blocks (A)	4.66	2	1.552	2	2.5484
A by B	6.25	3	2.084	2	3.4230*
Error Terms					
Subj. w. groups (1)	132.07	14	9.433		
A x subj. w. groups (2)	25.57	42	.609		

\*\*  $p < .05$

Table 4

Analysis of variance of overt conflict | (T—T) — (S—S) |  
in different denotation groups

Source	SS	df	MS	ET	F
Groups (B)	6.63	1	6.631	1	2.1631
Blocks (A)	70.37	3	23.457	2	21.1004*
A by B	5.81	3	1.936	2	1.7411
Error Terms					
Sub. w. groups (1)	42.91	14	3.065		
A x subj. w. groups (2)	46.69	42	1.112		

\*  $p < .01$

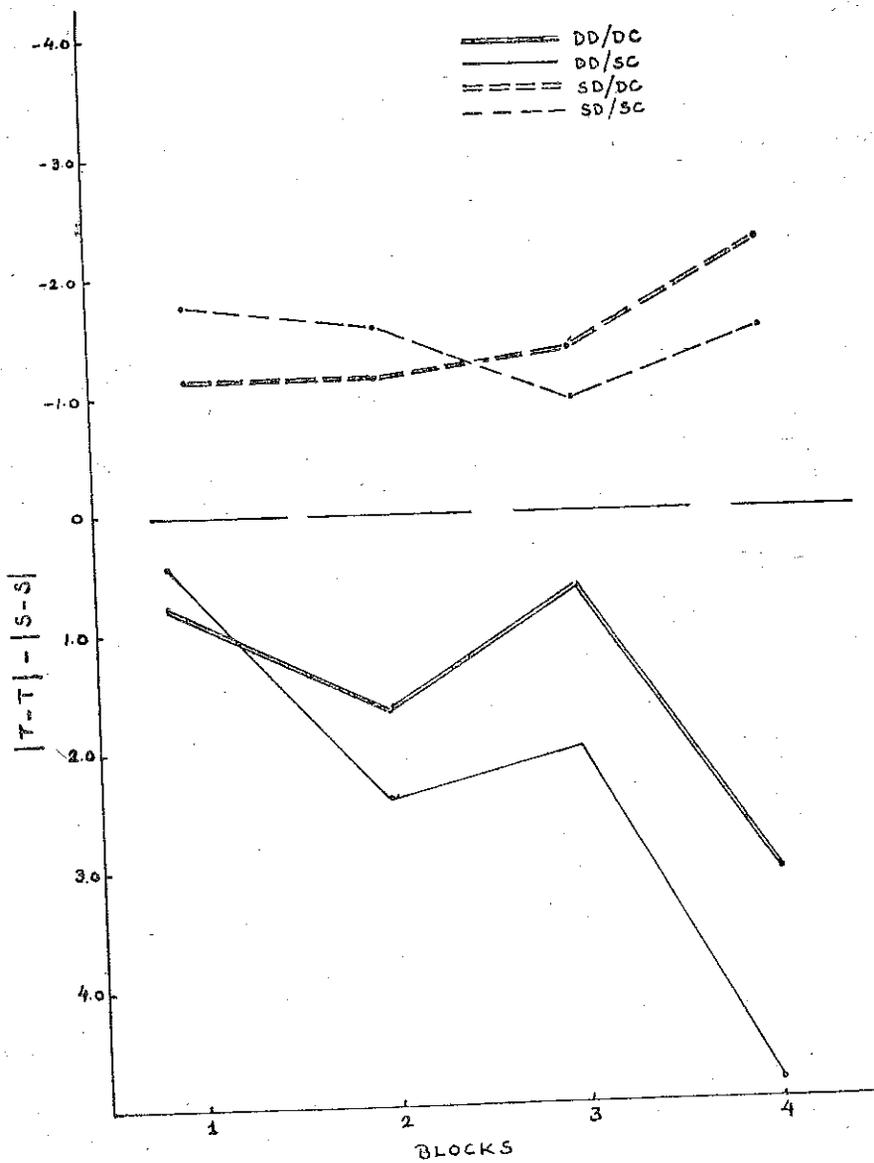


Fig. 7. Differences in overt conflict between Similar and Different Connotation groups.

Absolute difference scores  $|S-S|$  of every pair in both the similarly and differently trained groups were rank-ordered and split at the median into low and high conflict pairs. The same procedure was followed with respect to the connotative differences for each pair. All pairs were then assigned to the cells of  $2 \times 2$  contingency tables according to whether they were above or below the median on both variables. Results of Fisher's Exact Probability test and the phi coefficients for each case are shown in Table. 5.

Table 5

Relations Between the Amount of Overt Conflict  
and Connotative Differences

DIFFERENTLY TRAINED PAIRS				SIMILARLY TRAINED PAIRS			
CONNOTATIONS							
		Sim.	Diff.	Sim.	Diff.		
CONFLICT	Low	6	2	7	1		
	High	2	6	1	7		
p = .064 $\phi = .50$				p = .004 $\phi = .75$			
Nr. of pairs = 16				Nr. of pairs = 16			

The phi coefficient for the similarly trained pairs does not reach statistical significance, although there is an obvious positive correlation. The same measure obtained from differently trained pairs are significant at the  $p < .004$ .

Further analyses indicate the course of conflict over time. It will be remembered that examination of earlier results suggested that connotative

differences would lead to an increase in the latter (last 10 trials) part of the conflict sequence. In order to examine this question, relations between conflict and connotations in each group for the first and second halves of the conflict trials were analyzed. Results in Table 6 clearly support the hypothesis that differential connotations lead to an increase in conflict during the second half of the 20 trials.

Table 6

Relations Between the Amount of Overt Conflict  
and Connotative Differences in the First 10 and  
Last 10 of the Conflict Trials

SIMILARLY TRAINED PAIRS		DIFFERENTLY TRAINED PAIRS	
First 10 Trials	Last 10 Trials	First 10 Trials	Last 10 Trials
$p = 30$ $\emptyset = 25$	$p = .064$ $\emptyset = .50$	$p = 0$ $\emptyset = 0$	$p = .004$ $\emptyset = .75$
Number of Pairs = 16		Number of Pairs = 16	

**Covert conflict.** The difference between subjects' second, private decisions which were made after reaching a joint decision and not revealed to the other person was taken as the measure of covert conflict. In order to get a measure comparable to the measure of overt conflict the absolute difference between two judgments  $|S' - S'|$  is subtracted from the amount of predicted conflict on that particular trial.

The amount of covert conflict, or disagreement remaining after negotiation, in each group is shown in Fig. 8. The significance of the difference between training groups (Table 7) indicates a decrease in covert conflict between differently trained subjects.

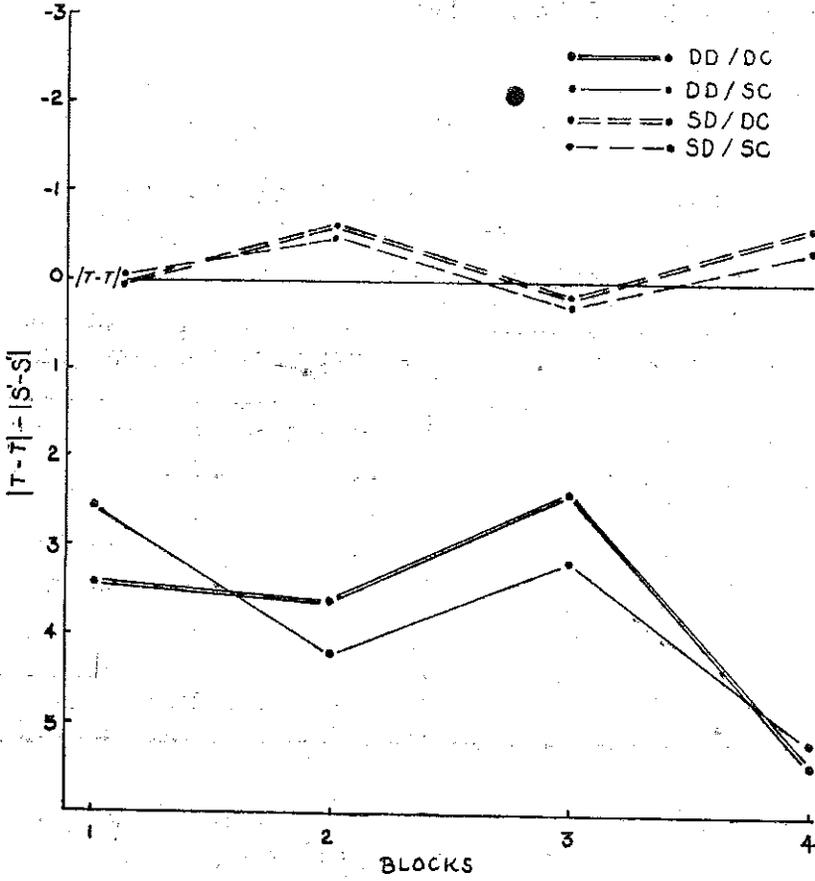


Fig. 8. Differences in covert conflict between groups.

**Table 7**

Analysis of variance of covert conflict | (T—T) — (S'—S') |

Source	SS	df	MS	ET	F
Training (B)	488.28	1	488.281	1	102.042*
Blocks (A)	21.19	3	7.062	2	5.171*
A by B	54.46	3	18.152	2	13.292*
Error Terms					
Subj. w. groups (1)	133.98	28	4.785		
A x subj. w. groups (2)	114.71	84	1.366		

\*  $p < .01$

The results obtained in the analysis of the relation between connotations and conflict at the covert level are approximately the same as are those at the overt level (Table 8) which indicates that differential connotations lead to an increase in conflict.

**Table 8**

Relations Between the Amount of Covert Conflict and Connotative Differences in the First 10 and Last 10 of the Conflict Trials

SIMILARLY TRAINED PAIRS		DIFFERENTLY TRAINED PAIRS	
First 10 Trials	Last 10 Trials	First 10 Trials	Last 10 Trials
$p = 0$	$p = .004$	$p = 0$	$P = .064$
$\emptyset = 0$	$\emptyset = .75$	$\emptyset = 0$	$\emptyset = .50$
Number of Pairs = 16		Number of Pairs = 16	

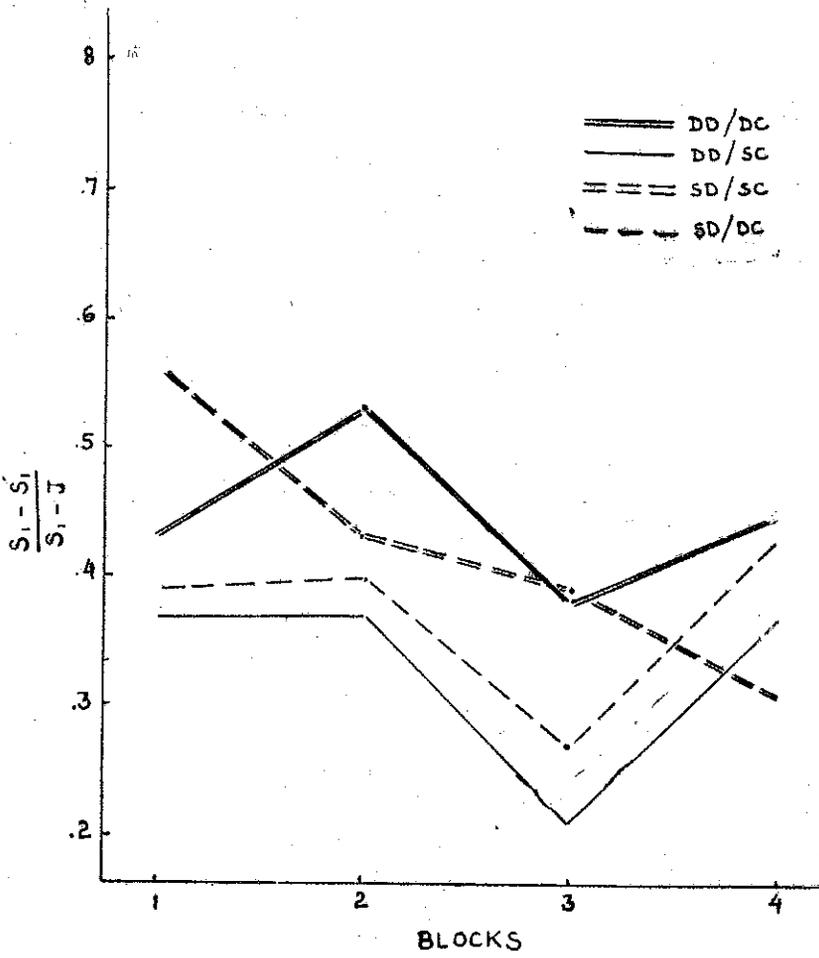


Fig. 9. Cognitive change in linear subjects.

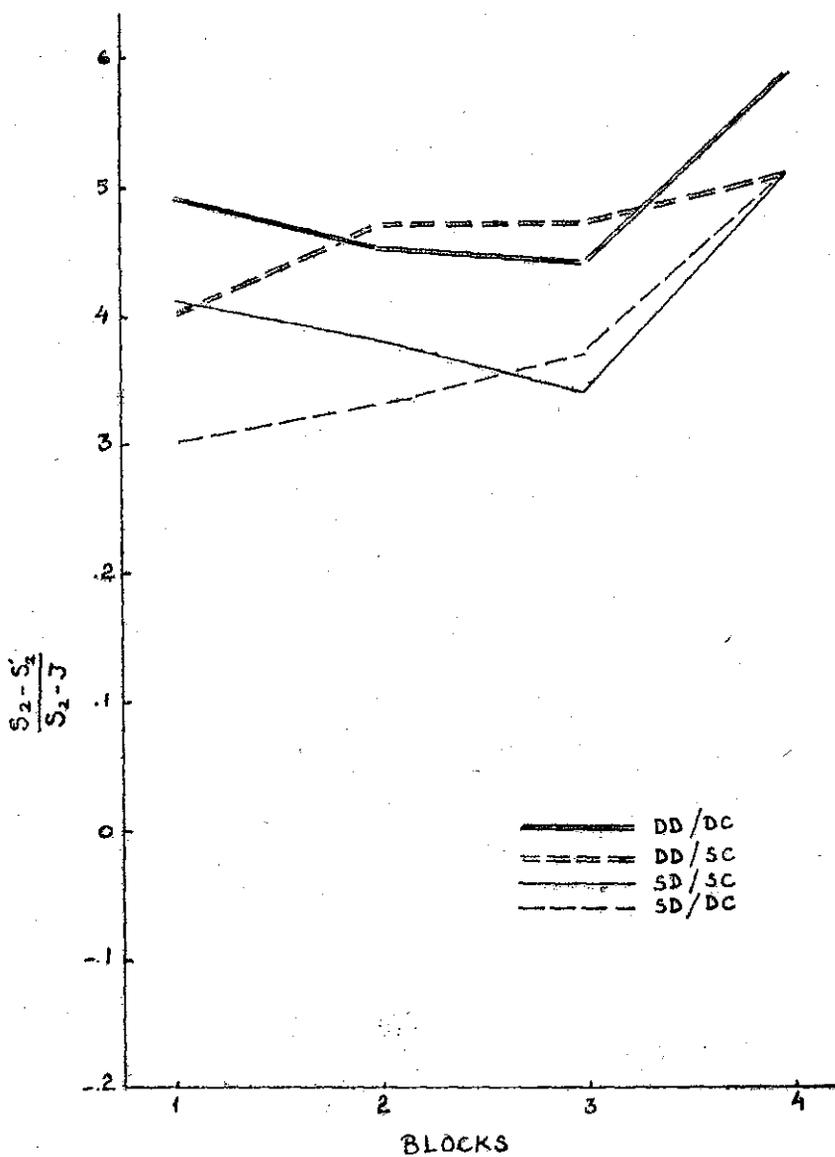


Fig. 10. Cognitive change in non-linear subjects.

**Cognitive change.** The difference between S's public decision and his second, private decision for a particular trial provides an index of his cognitive change during a given trial. Since the difference S—S' indicates the extent to which a subject's private decision is influenced between the subject's public decision and the joint answer (S—J) on that trial. In short, the change from public decision to private decision (S—S') is related to the pressure to change (S—J) on each trial.

The four experimental groups did not differ from one another on this measure. It is important to note, however, that differences in **type** of cognitive structures had an effect on the amount of cognitive change (See Figs. 9 & 10). Subjects who were trained to learn a linear relation between the relevant cue and the criterion (linear function-form) showed less change than those for whom the functional relation between the relevant cue and the criterion was curvilinear (non-linear function-form).

**Individual adaptation to the conflict task.** The distance between a subject's public judgment and the correct answer (S—Y) for a particular trial indicates his degree of adaptation to the conflict task in which the correct answer lies mid-way between two subjects' differential training. In order to see how far the subject moved from his training toward the correct answer in the joint task, the difference between his judgment (S) and the correct answer (Y) is expressed in terms of the difference between the judgment his training would lead him to make (T) and the correct answer Y, thus providing the ratio  $\frac{S-Y}{T-Y}$ .

Figs. 11 and 12 show the increasing adaptation of non-linear subjects over trials as compared to the curves obtained from the linear subjects.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the present study confirm our hypothesis: connotative differences concerning the main conceptual elements of a conflicting issue serve to pull the disputants apart while the connotative similarities tend to draw them together.

Although the correlations between amount of conflict and degree of connotative similarity within groups support our main hypothesis, differences in conflict reduction between connotation groups were not statistically significant. It will be remembered that connotative similarity or dissimilarity between subjects was determined according to their positions

INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

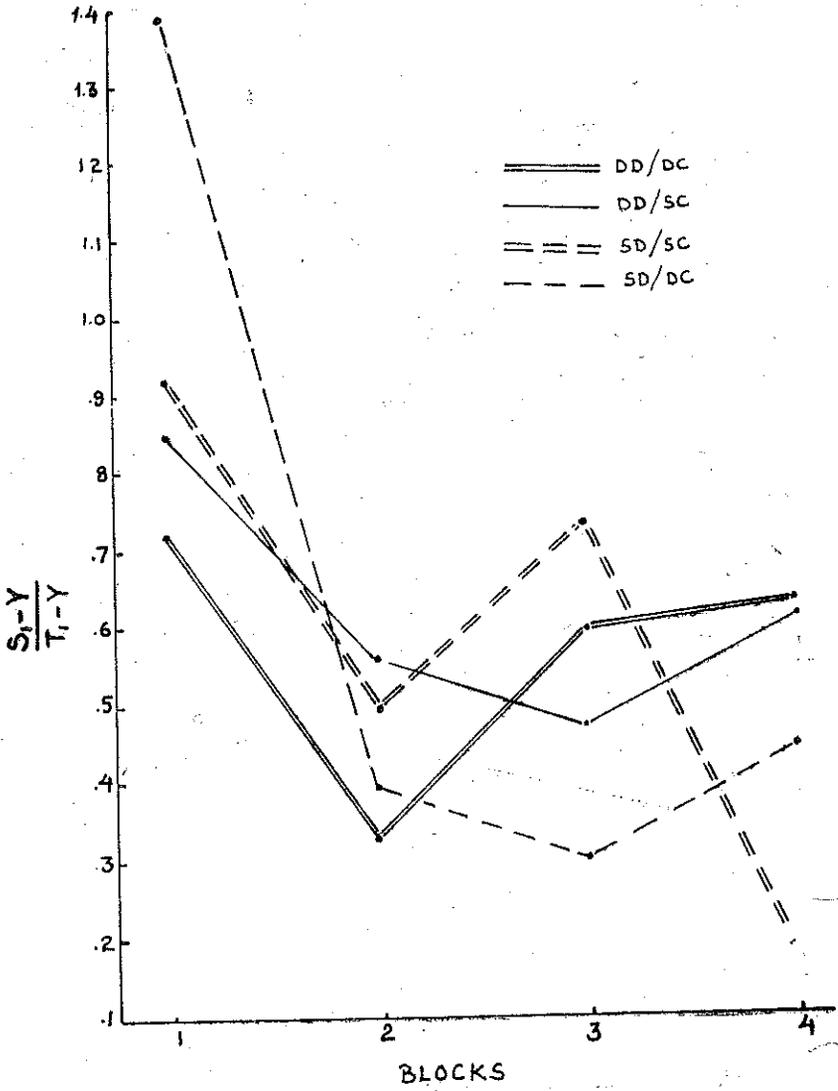


Fig. 11. Adaptation to the new task.

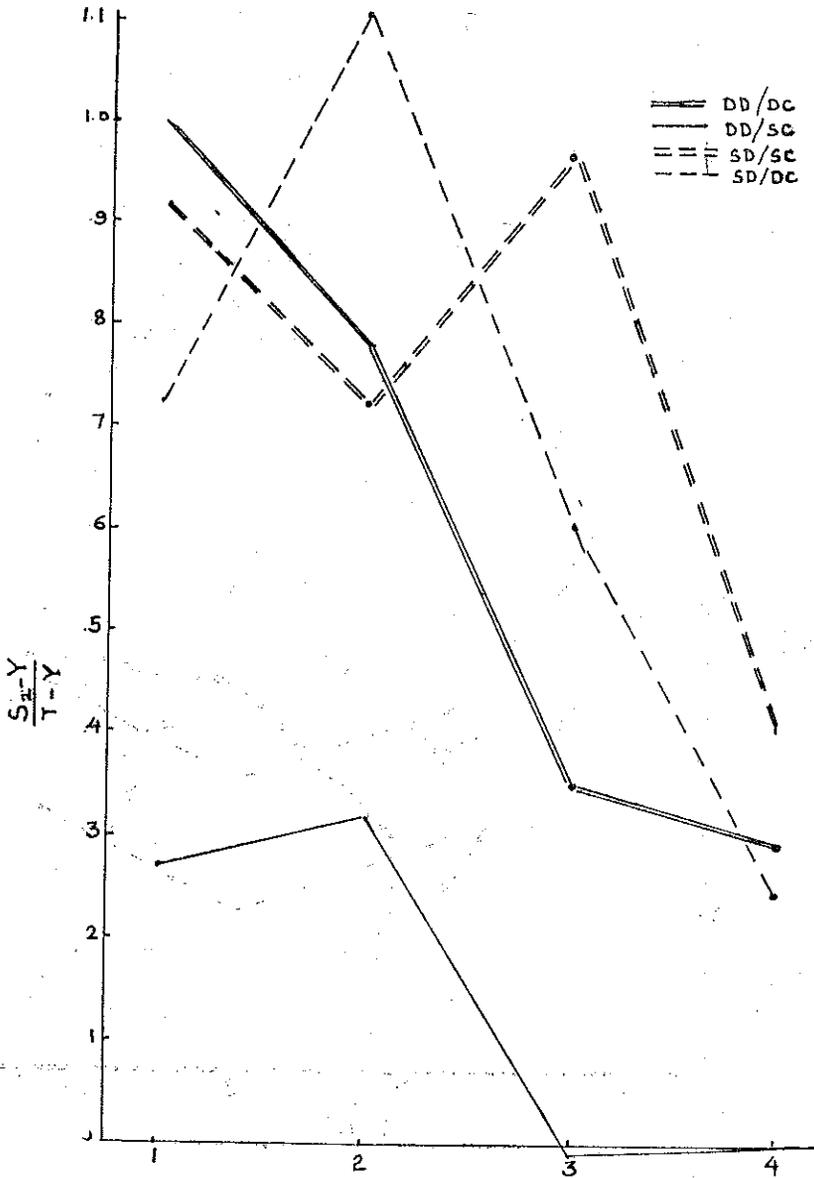


Fig. 12. Individual adaptation to the new task.

on a set of rank-ordered difference scores obtained from the Semantic Differential test. The range of actual difference scores varied from .38 to 2.38 out of a largest possible difference of 6 scale units. Hence, the overwhelming effect of denotative (training) differences across groups was such as to suppress the effect of small differences in connotative meanings. Experiments with more heterogeneous groups, particularly with subjects from two different cultures will be needed for further support of our findings.

One finding which confirms some results of the earlier studies (Hammond and Summers, 1965; Sheets, 1968) in cognitive conflict is the effect of function form on adaptation to new situations. Our linear subjects who were trained on a linear function-form between a cue and the criterion were less adaptive to the changing situation in conflict task than non-linear subjects. Since a curvilinear function-form is more complex than a linear one and takes more time to learn during the training, linear subjects can be said less advantageous in adapting to the new task which requires each subject to learn both linear and non-linear function-forms. Differential effect of the various function-forms, on the other hand, can be a starting point in the investigation of adaptability in simple and complex cognitive structures.

In summary, these results lead us to the conclusion that the role of verbal communication in conflict resolution should be re-assessed according to the subjective aspects of meaning as well. "Agreement upon the definitions" as an opening proposition of almost every debate may not be as efficient a means to negotiate as it has been expected so far.

#### FOOTNOTES

(1) The research reported here was conducted at the Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado, where the author was a visiting scholar under the sponsorship of the Fulbright-Hays Program during the 1966-68 academic years. Special appreciation is due Dr. Kenneth R. Hammond for his valuable advice and help.

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