

Constructing Authority in Family Conflict Talk: A Cross-cultural Discourse Study of *Friends* and *Home with Kids*

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Abstract. This study investigates how authority is constructed and resisted in family conflict talk in the Chinese sitcom *Home with Kids* and the American sitcom *Friends*. Focusing on domestic conflicts among parents, children, and family-like household members, it adopts a cross-cultural discourse analytic approach to control for institutional setting. Chinese data come from subtitle-based transcripts of *Home with Kids* (Season 1), cross-checked against selected episodes, and English data from online transcripts of *Friends* (Seasons 1 – 3). Conflict scenes are located through keyword searches (e.g., have to, must, not allowed, rules, my place and Mandarin equivalents) and filtered using operational definitions of "conflict event" and "authority talk." Each conflict is coded for setting, relationship configuration, conflict trigger, authority resources, and response types. The analysis shows that both series use roles, rules, moral evaluations, and boundary claims to enact authority, but *Home with Kids* foregrounds parental responsibility and educational goals, whereas *Friends* highlights personal boundaries and autonomy.

1 Introduction

One of the most important aspects of social life is authority inside the family. Instead of having a fixed attribute associated with roles like "parent" or "child," authority is exercised, justified, and occasionally opposed in day-to-day interactions. Family conflict talk is especially illuminating since participants openly dispute who has the authority to make decisions, give advice, and assess others.

Television sitcoms provide a useful window into such interactional phenomena. Although scripted, their dialogue is designed to sound recognisable and entertaining to target audiences, and thus crystallises culturally intelligible patterns of talk. Corpus-based work on *Friends* has shown that sitcom dialogue shares many features with natural conversation, while also exhibiting systematic differences driven by genre and narrative demands [1,2]. The Chinese family sitcom *Home with Kids* is similarly recognised as an influential representation of urban family life, centring on a remarried couple and their three children in Beijing.

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Prior research on television series has examined humour, stance, discourse markers, and the relationship between scripted dialogue and everyday conversation [1,3]. Studies on Chinese sitcoms, including *Home with Kids*, have analysed verbal humour and pragmatic strategies [4,5]. At the same time, research on Chinese and Western family communication shows that hierarchy, parental authority, and children's agency are negotiated through talk, and that these negotiations are culturally shaped [6-8].

However, little work has compared *Friends* and *Home with Kids* with a specific focus on family conflict talk and authority construction, rather than on humour alone. Furthermore, cross-cultural comparisons often risk conflating cultural differences with differences in institutional setting (for example, workplace versus home). To address these issues, this study restricts attention to domestic scenes and asks how family authority is linguistically enacted in family conflict talk in the two series.

The study addresses the following research questions(RQ): RQ1: What types of family conflict are commonly portrayed in *Friends* and *Home with Kids*, and how are these conflicts framed in the dialogue? RQ2: How do speakers in these conflicts linguistically construct and justify authority (for example, to instruct, to evaluate, to impose rules), and how are such authority claims responded to? RQ3: Controlling for the domestic setting, what similarities and differences can be observed between the English and Chinese data in the preferred bases and discourse realisations of authority?

2 Literature review

2.1 Television dialogue and sitcom research

Television dialogue was long regarded as "inauthentic," but corpus-based studies have shown that it shares core properties with everyday conversation while forming a distinct register of its own. Bednarek uses audience research, scriptwriting guides, and corpus data to show how television series speech may be methodically characterized in terms of lexico-grammar, posture, and discourse functions [1]. Quaglio compares *Friends* with a large corpus of American English conversation, showing both substantial overlap and recurrent differences that reflect the sitcom's need to advance plots and create humour [2].

Building on these observations, Xu offers a framework of experiential, temporal, and physical contextual aspects for analyzing humor in situation comedies from China and the United States, such as the Chinese comedy *I Love My Family* and *Friends* [3]. This study demonstrates how television discourse can be regarded as a valid subject for pragmatic analysis, particularly when paired with reliable sampling and coding techniques.

2.2 Conflict talk, (im)politeness, and authority

According to interactional studies of conflict, disagreements are times when moral principles and interpersonal expectations are made clear rather than just communication breakdowns. Tracy's notion of "reasonable hostility" shows how face-attacking moves can be seen as appropriate in particular public settings when speakers frame them as principled or necessary [9]. Within family contexts, conflict talk between parents and children has been analysed in terms of disagreement, blame, justification, impoliteness, and humour. Recent work on televised parent – child conflicts in *Modern Family* and related series has catalogued impoliteness strategies and response patterns [10,11].

In parallel, research on Chinese families highlights how reasoning talk and educational concerns structure dinner-table conversations, with parents providing logical or social reasons to support directives and evaluations [6]. Authority in these studies is increasingly

understood as interactional rather than purely structural: speakers claim rights to decide, instruct, or evaluate by invoking social roles, rules and obligations, moral commonsense, or control over participation, while co-participants may accept, negotiate, or resist these claims. This interactional view of authority informs the present study.

2.3 Chinese family sitcoms and cross-cultural family communication

Home with Kids has attracted sustained scholarly attention as a culturally salient family sitcom. Kuang and Zhao analyse humour in Season 4 using Grice's maxims, showing how non-observance of the maxims contributes to humorous effects [4]. Linfang examines verbal humour in the series through speech act theory, again highlighting how pragmatic strategies are scripted to generate entertainment [5]. Comparative work on Chinese and American sitcoms, such as *Growing Pains* and *Home with Kids*, points to cultural differences in contextualisation and politeness strategies [12,13].

Beyond sitcom research, cross-cultural studies of family communication show that Chinese families tend to emphasise hierarchy, educational achievement, and family obligation, while many American families place more explicit emphasis on individual autonomy and open negotiation [7,14,15]. Coparenting research similarly reveals differences in the distribution of parental responsibilities and the expectations placed on children in Chinese versus English-speaking families [8].

In media studies, Gao shows that young urban Chinese viewers treat American television series as a resource for thinking about relationships and selfhood, often perceiving U.S. programmes as more "realistic" and open than domestic television [16,17]. This suggests that representations of families in *Friends* and *Home with Kids* both reflect and shape viewers' expectations about family authority and conflict.

Despite this corpus of study, there is still a lack of information about how family conflict talk, in particular, develops and negotiates authority in *Friends* and *Home with Kids*, as well as how these practices relate across cultures when the domestic setting is maintained constant. This gap is filled in the current study.

3 Data and methodology

3.1 Data sources

The English data come from full episode transcripts of *Friends* hosted on an open-access script repository, which provides scripts for all ten seasons [17,18]. For feasibility, Seasons 1 – 3 serve as the sampling frame, as they introduce the main characters and contain numerous domestic scenes involving parents, siblings, romantic partners, and family-like roommates.

The Chinese data come from *Home with Kids* (Season 1), the foundational and most widely discussed season. Following earlier studies that transcribe episodes of *Home with Kids* for pragmatic analysis [4,5,13], the primary textual source is a subtitle-based transcript collection and per-episode script reconstructions, cross-checked against selected video episodes to ensure correspondence with the broadcast dialogue.

To enhance comparability, only domestic settings are considered in both series: conflicts among parents, children, and other co-resident family or family-like household members. Conflicts occurring solely in workplaces, schools, or public places without clear family framing are excluded.

3.2 Operational definitions

A conflict event is defined as a continuous stretch of dialogue that can be consistently identified and that satisfies at least two criteria: it involves opposed stances (for example, an explicit or implicit disagreement, refusal, or challenge to another participant's proposal, evaluation, or directive), and/or negative evaluation or blame (such as criticism, complaint, accusation, or other negative judgement of another's behaviour or character), and/or a directive accompanied by resistance (one party attempts to control or change another's behaviour through an order, prohibition, or insistence, while the target resists, delays, negotiates, or questions this attempt), and/or clear markers of escalation, including textual signs of rising emotional intensity such as repetition, exclamation marks, metadiscursive comments like "What are you doing?", or indications of overlapping and interruptive turns in the transcript.

Within identified conflict events, authority talk is defined as any utterance in which a participant claims or implies a right to control, evaluate, or represent others, drawing on one or more recurrent resources. These include identity and role, where speakers invoke parental status, age, experience, or family position (for example, a line that literally translates as "I am your mother. If I do not tell you, who will?"); references to rules and obligations, such as house rules, school regulations, duties, or expectations ("You have to finish your homework before you go out"; "In this house, you cannot do that"); moral evaluations that frame actions as right or wrong, responsible or irresponsible, mature or immature; and boundary or rights claims, where speakers assert control over space, belongings, or personal life (for example, "this is my place" or "this is my decision").

The analysis treats authority as successful or unsuccessful depending on how it is taken up in subsequent turns. A claim of authority that is immediately laughed off, mocked, or ignored is interpreted as an "authority performance" rather than a fully ratified authority move.

3.3 Selection and coding procedure

The selection and coding procedure follows four steps, using the episode as the unit for initial screening. First, a keyword-based pre-screening is conducted: for each episode, authority-related keywords are used to flag candidate segments. In *Friends*, the English transcripts are searched for expressions such as have to, have got to, must, can not, not allowed, allowed to, supposed to, should, should not, rule, rules, policy, in charge, under my roof, my place, my apartment, and you do not get to ... In *Home with Kids*, the Mandarin subtitles or reconstructed scripts are examined for lexical items whose meanings correspond to "must," "have to," "should," "not allowed," "rules," "regulations," "principles," "responsibility," "obligation," or closely related notions. Occurrences of these expressions trigger manual inspection of the surrounding dialogue (approximately five turns on each side) to identify potential authority-related segments, and episodes are also skimmed more broadly for obviously heated family arguments that may lack the exact keywords but clearly involve conflict and control.

Second, candidate segments are evaluated against the conflict definition in Section 3.2. Minor reminders that elicit immediate, unproblematic compliance and playful teasing sequences without genuine opposition are excluded, and the remaining segments are demarcated as discrete conflict events, from the first clear opposition to the point where the interaction returns to non-conflict talk or the scene changes.

Third, an authority screening is carried out. Within the set of conflict events, only those that contain at least one instance of authority talk, as defined above, are retained as the core dataset, while conflicts that are purely emotional—such as brief exchanges of anger or hurt

without any claim to rights, rules, or responsibilities—are noted but not analysed in detail for authority.

Finally, each retained conflict event is coded for series and episode, domestic setting (for example, living room, kitchen, bedroom), relationship configuration (parent – child, step-parent – child, siblings, quasi-family roommates), conflict trigger (homework, chores, privacy, romantic relationships, money, behaviour), authority resources invoked (identity or role, rules or obligations, moral evaluation, boundaries or rights), explicit versus implicit authority, response types (compliance, negotiated compliance, resistance, humour, appeal to another authority figure), and outcome (directive enforced, compromise, unresolved disagreement, topic shift). A second coder independently annotates approximately 20% of the sample for whether a segment qualifies as a conflict event and whether it contains authority talk; intercoder agreement is calculated as percentage agreement, and any disagreements are discussed and used to refine the coding manual. Given the scope of the project, the subsequent analysis focuses on recurrent qualitative patterns rather than detailed statistical modelling.

4 Analysis and findings

4.1 Conflict types and triggers in domestic settings

In *Home with Kids*, domestic conflicts are pervasive and explicitly framed as educational episodes. Typical triggers include homework and academic performance, violation of house rules (coming home late, lying, misusing money), sibling rivalry, and perceived disrespect. Parents frequently frame their interventions in terms of what is "good for the child's future" or "necessary for your growth," and conflict episodes often culminate in explicit moral lessons. This pattern resonates with findings that Chinese family interaction heavily foregrounds academic achievement, character formation, and moral reasoning in everyday talk [6,7].

In *Friends*, domestic conflicts arise in a broader range of constellations. Among the six main characters, disputes commonly involve roommate relations, romantic relationships, and occasionally parents or siblings visiting from outside the core group. Triggers include privacy violations, jealousy, perceived betrayals, money, and lifestyle incompatibilities. When biological parents appear, conflicts may concern life choices or expectations about careers and grandchildren, but these episodes are less frequent than the everyday tensions among adults living together.

Despite these differences, both series regularly stage scenes in which one character claims a right to set rules in the household and to evaluate others' behaviour, making them comparable sites for examining authority talk in domestic contexts.

4.2 Authority in *Friends*: boundaries, ownership, and autonomy

In the domestic conflicts of *Friends*, authority is often tied to spatial control and ownership. Characters justify directives and prohibitions by invoking the apartment as a bounded space with associated rights; for example, a character may insist that, because they pay rent or have their name on the lease, they get to decide who can stay, what can be done in the living room, or where certain belongings are kept. Such moves combine role ("host," "roommate," "parent") with boundary and property rights.

Another prominent pattern is the construction of authority through emotional investment and closeness. Characters sometimes claim a right to criticise or advise because of their special relationship with the other person ("I care about you more than anybody else"), but

such claims are vulnerable to counterclaims of individual autonomy ("It is my life"). Thus, interactions strike a balance between intimacy and independence, a pattern that is similar to how young adult relationships are portrayed in American media. [1,16].

Sarcasm and humor are essential for both establishing and challenging power. In some interactions, exaggerated "parental" statements that resemble archetypal domestic authority—for instance, "as long as you live in my place, you follow my rules" in literal translation—are considered as caricatures. In order to reframe the statement as a joke rather than a serious imposition, co-participants may react with laughing, mocking, or humorous resistance. As a result, it is important to pay analytical attention to how authority claims are taken up; without the surrounding turns, a single line that sounds powerful could distort the sequence's true authority dynamics.

The *Friends* data highlights a number of recurrent patterns of domestic authority: resistance to such authority is usually framed in terms of autonomy and self-determination, frequently mitigated or softened through humor; authority is often grounded in personal boundaries and ownership in shared living spaces; it is also linked to emotional closeness and care, but remains open to challenge.

4.3 Authority in *Home with Kids*: responsibility, achievement, and commonsense

In *Home with Kids*, authority is tied very visibly to ideas of parental duty and everyday morality. Parents rarely present a directive as a matter of personal preference; instead, they speak as people who are obliged to instruct and protect their children. Lines that can be literally rendered as "I am your parent; it is my responsibility to tell you this" appear repeatedly and frame authority as a moral task rather than a simple exercise of power.

These authority moves are not confined to the domestic sphere. Parents routinely appeal to rules and obligations that originate outside the home, drawing on school regulations, teachers' complaints, and widely shared expectations about "proper" behaviour. In doing so, they position themselves as intermediaries between the child and wider institutions, rather than as the sole source of control. Evaluative language is pervasive: children's actions are labelled irresponsible, immature, or disrespectful, and episodes are explicitly framed as chances to correct behaviour and character. This pattern is in line with research on Chinese parenting and family education that highlights discipline, academic achievement, and intergenerational harmony as central concerns [6,8].

Humour is also a constant presence, but it typically works in support of authority rather than against it. Parents use exaggeration, irony, and playful threats to criticise or pressure children while maintaining a clear generational hierarchy, so that amusement and instruction are tightly intertwined. This matches findings from studies of aggressive humour and impoliteness in Chinese sitcoms, where joking often reinforces rather than subverts social norms [4,14,17].

Resistance in *Home with Kids* rarely takes the form of rejecting parental authority outright. Instead, children tend to argue about whether particular rules are fair, reasonable, or applied consistently. They complain about unequal treatment between siblings, bargain for exceptions, or seek support from another parent. Claims to absolute autonomy—utterances that could be translated as "It is my life and only my decision"—are highly unusual. More typically, children contest how far authority should extend in specific situations or insist that their efforts and viewpoints have not been properly recognised.

Taken together, the *Home with Kids* data suggest a model of domestic authority that rests on unequal parental responsibility and future-oriented educational goals, is reinforced through alignment with institutions and commonly accepted norms, and is negotiated through

resistance that focuses on fairness and scope rather than on the legitimacy of parental power itself.

4.4 Cross-cultural comparison

Limiting the analysis to domestic settings makes it possible to separate cultural tendencies from the influence of different institutional environments. Within this narrower frame, several cross-cultural contrasts become clearer.

To begin with, the two series draw on a broadly similar toolkit for building authority. In both, speakers rely on social roles, references to rules and obligations, moral evaluations, and claims about boundaries or rights. Both corpora contain highly explicit authority work, such as direct orders and prohibitions, as well as more indirect strategies, such as rhetorical questions or appeals to commonsense. In each case, authority claims may be taken up, negotiated, or resisted, which supports an interactional view of authority as a set of discursive options available in both English and Chinese.

At the same time, the typical combinations and preferred emphases differ quite markedly. In *Friends*, domestic authority is closely linked to personal boundaries and control over space and property, and to the idea that adults are entitled to make their own choices. Even when parents appear, they must negotiate with adult children or roommates; strong authority moves are often met with appeals to autonomy or to individual preference, and humour is frequently used to cast inflexible or "old-fashioned" authority as unreasonable. In *Home with Kids*, by contrast, authority is more consistently grounded in parental responsibility, educational success, and a sense of moral commonsense. Parental directives are presented as necessary for the child's development and as aligned with what schools and society expect. Children may question particular applications of authority, but they seldom dispute the underlying right of parents to set rules, and humour tends to ease face-threats rather than dismantle hierarchical relations. These tendencies are consistent with wider work on Chinese and Western family communication and parenting values [6,7,15].

There are also differences in how conflicts unfold and are resolved. In both series, disputes can escalate and cool down again, but in *Home with Kids*, the close of a conflict episode more often includes explicit moral commentary and a reaffirmation of family harmony. In *Friends*, endings are more frequently low-key: characters may simply stop arguing, change the subject, or repair relationships through small gestures and jokes, without overt moral closure.

Such contrasts reflect not only cultural expectations about family hierarchy, children's voices, and the balance between autonomy and obligation, but also the different premises of the two programmes: one revolves around young adults building a "chosen family," while the other centres on parents raising children in a nuclear or step-family household.

5 Analysis and findings

This study has explored how authority is claimed, justified, and challenged in family conflict talk in *Friends* and *Home with Kids* through a cross-cultural discourse analytic lens that combines corpus-based sampling with close qualitative analysis. By concentrating on conflicts within domestic settings among family or family-like household members, the study addresses concerns about comparing interaction across fundamentally different media ecologies and instead brings two distinct televisual representations of family life into dialogue.

The analysis points to three main contributions. First, it reinforces an understanding of family authority as something that is accomplished in interaction rather than simply derived from role labels. Across both series, participants do not merely "have" authority; they work

to establish rights to instruct, evaluate, and decide, and these efforts are accepted, negotiated, or resisted on a turn-by-turn basis. The data make visible the specific resources—social roles, reference to rules and obligations, moral judgements, and boundary claims—through which such authority work is carried out.

Second, the comparison shows that, while both series draw on a shared repertoire of authority resources, they distribute weight across this repertoire in different ways. In *Friends*, personal boundaries and individual autonomy are prominent pillars; in *Home with Kids*, parental responsibility and alignment with educational and moral norms are more salient. This asymmetrical weighting echoes broader findings on Chinese and Western family communication and parenting practices [6,7,15] and suggests that what counts as "reasonable" authority is culturally patterned.

Third, the findings highlight the importance of genre and narrative premise. Cross-cultural contrasts in authority talk do not float free from the fictional worlds that sitcoms construct. *Friends* centres on young adults whose ties to their families of origin are backgrounded, making it natural to portray authority as negotiable among peers and romantic partners. *Home with Kids* places parenting and schooling at the heart of its narrative, which invites plots in which authority is presented as a necessary, though sometimes contested, component of guiding children's development. Taking these premises seriously helps avoid reducing all differences to national culture and encourages more nuanced readings of media texts.

The study also has clear limitations. It is restricted to selected seasons and a manageable number of conflict events, and it relies on subtitle-based transcripts for *Home with Kids*, which inevitably smooth over prosodic and interactional detail. A fuller account would require larger and more systematically sampled corpora, multimodal analysis that includes prosody and gesture, and comparison with naturally occurring family interactions. Future work could expand the range of sitcoms examined, investigate how viewers interpret the authority scenes discussed here, or combine discourse analysis with experimental research on how exposure to different televised parenting styles influences perceived norms [16].

Even with these constraints, the analysis demonstrates that corpus-informed, explicitly operationalised discourse study can sharpen people's understanding of how "who gets to decide at home" is written into and negotiated within English- and Chinese-language family sitcoms. Rather than relying on broad clichés about "strict Chinese parents" and "liberal Western parents," it shows in detail how authority is verbally claimed, justified, resisted, and turned into humour in the conflict talk of *Friends* and *Home with Kids*.

6 Conclusion

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