Couples bickering arises from the project ‘A Conversational Analysis of Speech Acts’ conducted by Guodong Yu and Yaxin Wu which concerns interaction and communication in everyday social conversations in China. The researchers used recordings of real-life conversations between friends, partners, and family members to conduct extensive research into how language is used to conduct the ordinary business of their social lives.

The methodology was to use voluntarily-supplied conversations from people living in Shanxi Province in China, who were asked to turn on recording equipment when it was convenient. The language used is Mandarin Chinese, and the conversations were chosen from over one hundred hours of recordings, which have been recorded from 2009 to the present. The three cases used in this study were heterosexual couples in their 20s and 30s. The authors used Pinyin Mandarin, literal English translation, and idiomatic English translation in their transcripts; we will just use the latter to save space. Likewise, we will only look at one of the featured conversations. Since Mandarin is Sino-Tibetan and English an Indo-European language, it is quite hard to translate exactly, and we will point out any linguistic and cultural modifiers that need explaining such as capitalised letters at the beginning and end of sentences which are Chinese particles. The conversations were studied using Conversation Analysis (CA), a method which relies on three pillars: action, turn design, and sequence.

In “Couples Bickering”, Guodong Yu, Yaxin Wu and Paul Drew use conversation analysis on candid, everyday conversations in Mandarin from China in order to understand communication and social action. Using the relationships in interaction of arguments and conflicts found in conversations between couples, they show how there are many linguistic and grammatical ways that conflict can be limited to bickering, rather than resulting in a damaging breakdown.

Their paper is an investigation into conflict and discord in conversations between couples in typical households in mainland China. Their research demonstrates that although couples argue with one another, they manage to keep their arguments under control through a variety of communicative practices that mitigate or reduce the force of their arguments. The result is that when couples ‘bicker’, they argue in such a way that the interactions do not result in breakdown (walkouts, shouting matches and the like), or otherwise lead to irreversible breakdown.

Some extracts from the conversations:

**Example 1**

**Husband:** What are we having for lunch?

**Wife:** Aiyah, I want to have rice for lunch.

**Husband:** Uhmm.

**Wife:** Could I trouble you to go and get some vegetables? WA?

**Husband:** I’m not going. You go WA.

**Example 2**

**Wife:** I don’t feel comfortable (lit: my body is not comfortable).

**Husband:** Whenever it is time to cook, then you are uncomfortable.

**Wife:** No. No matter what, I’m not taking care of the cooking, you have to cook the lunch.

**Husband:** I’ll cook, but we first discuss about what to have for lunch LE ME.

**Example 3**

**Wife:** It’s the same every time. Whenever it is time to cook LE, then you start to play games. Why do you have so many things to deal with. When it is time to cook, then you begin to play games, listen to songs for a while. Look into the mirror for a while. Why do you have so many things to do? Stop playing LE.
Although couples argue with one another, they manage to keep their arguments under control through a variety of communicative practices that mitigate or reduce the force of their arguments.

#4

143 Wife: Then just go there and buy the vegetables BA, and I stay home to get the rice cooked. When you come back with vegetables, then you wash the vegetables. I do the cooking. OK MA? In this way, anyhow, is it OK BAI?

144 Husband: What have you done just now? The rice has not been cooked yet?

145 Wife: Anyway...

146 Husband: You have even blamed me?

147 Wife: Ha ha ha.

PRACTICES ASSOCIATED WITH COMPLAINING

The action most associated with conflict and dissatisfaction with a partner is complaining, although the data would seem to suggest that generalised complaining by one co-participant is often shoe-horned into specific or local situations, where it typifies a behaviour that is unwanted, and becomes a form of complaining practice. In the example of a computer game before he goes to the market. After a few minutes she chides him for not going by calling him troublesome, which is a criticism of his procrastination in not only this case, but also in general.

**EXCLAMATORY TURN INITIAL PARTICLE ‘AIYA’**

In #1 we see the wife using the initial exclamation particle ‘aiya’ at 06. In Mandarin Chinese, this is a disaffiliative marker that serves prospectively to foreshadow discordance in the upcoming turn. In this case it disaffiliates, or separates, the wife’s desire to have rice and vegetables for lunch from their relationship, and so seeks to indicate that lunch is not intrinsically her responsibility within the relationship.

**TURN-ENDING DOUBLE PARTICLES**

Also in Mandarin Chinese, these disaffiliative markers can also be used retrospectively with the conjoned uses of particles ‘fu’ and ‘ya’ and ‘fu’ and ‘ma’ which can be found in the example of bickering above at #3, 115. In this case, the wife’s question as to whether he has finished playing his game or not, is a precursor to her making a general complaint about him in the next turn.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the authors demonstrate that these are some of the linguistic practices that enable couples to restrict their argument to a relatively low-level way thereby preventing conflict from escalating into outright or irreversible conflict which could lead to the breakdown of the relationship — it remains merely bickering.