

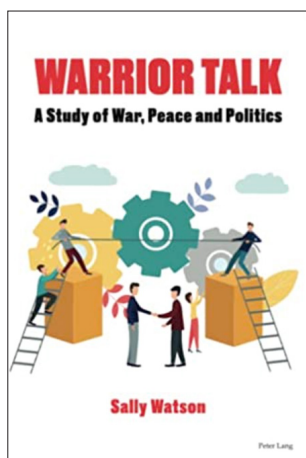
## BOOK REVIEW

# Warrior Talk

*A Study of War, Peace and Politics*

by Sally E. Watson

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### Warrior Talk

*A Study of War, Peace and Politics*

Sally E. Watson

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**I**n *Warrior Talk*, Dr. Sally Watson explores several topics in depth, including a specific type of communication used in times of war, violent conflict, crises, competition, and even small-scale everyday conflicted interaction. The book covers language, terms, and metaphors associated with war, confrontation, and violence that aim to influence people and situations, and have proven to be powerful tools to trigger emotions, provoke behavior, motivate, and shape thinking and opinions. Enduring in its nature, warrior talk plays a substantial role in human conflicts. The author argues that this is why it is so challenging, yet essential, to be aware of the potency of warrior talk, and understand how it is used in various settings.

The book targets diverse audiences: students, researchers, and readers interested in the history and politics of war and peace, political discourse analysis, and interested in the impact of warrior talk as a communication tool about human relationships, locally and globally. Dr. Watson provides practical tools, exercises, and resources to enrich the readers' experience and knowledge.

The author tracks the situation in Northern Ireland and Irish republican history over the span of five decades (1969–2019), and its impact on current politics in Northern Ireland. A case study of the Northern Ireland peace process serves as background for Dr. Watson's in-depth research into Sinn Féin's political discourse during that period. She

offers a practical context to better understand the cycles of violence and retaliation that can emerge in the course of a lengthy conflict, and the span of conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

The book is rich in many aspects, especially in its analysis of the political discourse of Sinn Féin during their journey from political activists to mainstream constitutional politicians and peacemakers. It includes the exploration of the role of warrior talk as a key powerful communication tool as Sinn Féin effectively adapted to the changes in their politics and strategies.

In addition to its practical implications for conflict resolution and peacebuilding, my professional interest was caught by the psychology behind warrior talk – its characteristic features, forms, relevance to modern societies and interactions between people.

The language of war uses a specific narrative based on stories, metaphors, and symbols that sustain the message that will dominate the outcome. The narrative consists of stories about the good and evil deeds of heroes and villains that reveal the roots and causes of the conflict. This narrative justifies the outcome as morally right, thus determining the critical role of warrior talk in conflicts, no matter their scale or scope.

*“Conflict in any form requires a psychological investment in shaping each party’s assumptions of the other, and the manifestation of this process can be observed in the language used to account for the dynamics of the situation.” (p. 213)*

Warrior talk has a powerful effect because it quickly leads to polarization and splitting between people or groups. In a loud, straightforward and simplistic manner, it emphasizes the differences between positions, opinions or interests, reducing the complexity of each situation to two alternatives – one right, and the other wrong. On its own, the concept of “war” immediately divides the parties involved into “good” or “evil,” and the language used polarizes the participants and external observers. Responding to strong emotional reactions that compromise rational thinking, the theory and practice presented in this book show how complex histories, political dynamics, and human experiences are reduced to the duality of “self” and “other.”

*“The gap between ‘self’ and ‘other’ can exist at macro and micro levels and is observable between individuals, groups, organizations and nations. The splitting process is open to further distortion when warrior talk is applied; the label of ‘other’ is replaced by another label: ‘enemy’.” (p. 228)*

Words like *enemy* and *battle* further increase emotional reactions because they inevitably evoke the perception of threat. Thus, even a small-scale, nonviolent conflict might quickly escalate to a violent state.

The author clarifies that warrior talk is not only used during times of war. It can also be witnessed in conflict situations resulting from historical or social grievances, power asymmetry in communities or societies, and incompatible differing interests. As used in formal discourse and social media, the language of war supports the formation of group identities. Belonging to a group similar to the “self” is a basic human need. Furthermore, the resulting group identity is a huge motivator to address issues of inequality and asymmetrical power dynamics. Inspired by the warrior talk within the group identity, competing parties can easily be involved in conflict or violence to defend their positions instead of engaging in “rational discussion about the structural conditions experienced by the disadvantaged group.” (p. 186) The language of war escalates conflict by demeaning, demonizing, or otherwise marginalizing opponents – a scenario that reveals the risk for warrior talk to create and sustain conditions for further conflict.

The energy, emotional intensity, and simplicity of the dualism characteristic of warrior talk can be positive attributes that influence its role in human motivation. A good example is the use of the language of war in sports. Warrior talk is also a powerful tool to inspire and mobilize people to follow a cause such as defending “the ‘sacred values’ of a group,” preserving something precious for the future, or boosting collaboration among supporters. Although warrior talk is an effective tool in preserving values, sustaining group identities, alliances, and affiliations, it also, without much difficulty, in fighting for change or overcoming a crisis can cause the outburst of a violent conflict.

Dr. Watson gives a good deal of attention to the theory of war, conflict, and violence, and especially to distinguishing the causes of conflict and the level of violence involved. It is intrinsic to warrior talk to accentuate past grievances, abuses, and atrocities and turn them into a sacred cause for generations to come thus making them a potent source of sustained controversy and conflict between groups. Warrior talk creates the ground for repeated cycles of violence and retaliation.

And now, the role of conflict resolution and conflict transformation comes into play – specifically, the importance of language in the transformation of conflict and peacebuilding. The essential prerequisite is to create trust between involved parties by changing their behavior and language. It includes not only proposing structural and systematic changes to address the root causes of the conflict, but also showing respect for the past by making provisions for forgiveness and reconciliation as a crucial human aspect of peacebuilding. As Dr. Watson states at the end of the book:

*“Warrior talk is a powerful linguistic device that requires a conscious appreciation of its potency and a thoughtful application to the situation.”*

This may well be the difference between ongoing conflict and sustainable peace.



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