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Disagreement expressions in the discourse of young Persian speakers

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d Abstract

Among various social variables such as power, solidarity, age and gender, this study seeks to explore how the speech act of disagreement is produced by Iranian male and female speakers in two contexts of formal and informal. The data of the study included: a) DCT questionnaire which contained contexts of disagreement speech in different gender as well as different formality levels, and b) interviews, observations, and audio-visual conversations involving the speech act in question used for the qualitative analysis. The data were analyzed in the framework of Speech-Act theory and the theory of Face being considered as an explanation of the motive for employing appropriate strategies of politeness. The results of the quantitative and qualitative analysis showed that there is a positive correlation between the conservativeness of disagreement and the degree of formality of the situations, on the one hand; the gender effect was observed through female speeches in the greater degree of formality of disagreements.

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Keywords: Speech act, disagreements, contextual style, gender effect

1. Introduction

Two-way process of communication whereby meaning is sent and received to gain shared understanding requires sociocultural competence of language use as well as linguistic competence to perform the speech appropriately and minimize misunderstanding. In verbal-communication, expression of disagreement, seen as a communicative act, is employed when the speaker has different attitudes from his/her interlocutor or when he/she is not contented with his/her interlocutor’s behavior or utterance. As Brown and Levinson say (1987) the illocutionary act of disagreement is most likely to arouse a threat to the hearer's positive face as disagreement usually questions the recipient's expertise or even truthfulness and, thus, damages his or her self-image.

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Based on this concept Brown and Levinson (1987), initiated their suggesting ‘choices of politeness strategies’ which communicators may employ to perform an FTA and still be able to save the hearer’s face (p.68).

For the purpose of this study, disagreement analyzed based on strategies mostly employed by young male and female Persian speakers in formal and informal context.

2. Review of literature

The term disagreement as a speech act is used to indicate speaker's opinion or belief contrary to the view expressed by the previous speaker (Edstrom, 2004). The face-threatening nature of this kind of communicative act indicates that, to express a disagreement requires addressees to employ politeness strategies to mitigate the threat they are imposing on their hearer so as to avoid judging impoliteness by other interlocutors. According to Brown & Levinson (1978), there are four basic strategies to mitigate the threat imposed on the hearer in this kind of communicative act. First, if the act is the least face threatening to the hearer (H), the speaker (S) can say it directly, for example: “What you say is nonsense!” to an intimate friend. Second, if the act is less threatening to H, S can express it with consideration to H’s positive face, for instance: “I am afraid it is not a good idea.” Third, if the act is more face threatening to H, S should utter it with consideration to H’s negative face, for example: “I’m sorry, but I think you should change your idea.” And fourth, if the act is the most face threatening to H; S should utter it indirectly, for example: “I believe your idea is good, but it would be better if we use another method.”

Within the framework set by Brown & Levinson, many scholars and researchers carry out experiments in their specific culture to test the validity of politeness theory and try to make comparisons across gender and nationality (Hobbs, 2003). Beebe and Takahashi (1989) conducted a study on American and Japanese performance of face-threatening speech acts in English, especially disagreement in the aspect of status inequality. The study demonstrated that the Japanese are much more likely to state an explicit criticism than the Americans when disagreeing to lower-status interlocutors. It also points out that the Americans used more positive remarks, more softeners, and fewer explicit criticisms than the Japanese when disagreeing to higher-status interlocutors. Japanese respondents think they could criticize even a higher-status person. So, they concluded that Americans are not always more direct and explicit than Japanese as the stereotype which assumes that Japanese are indirect and Americans are direct.

Garcia (1989) suggested two categories of disagreement strategies: confrontational and non-confrontational strategies and in a study on stylistic devices used by female American (L1) and female Venezuelan (L2) speakers in the speech act of disagreement, she found that L1 speakers prefer to use non-confrontational devices; on the other hand, L2 speakers use more confrontational devices.

Maryanty (1997) studied the linguistic choices of disagreement used by male and female students at Petra Christian University in terms of gender and status. She found that the strategy “reason giving” is the most used when lower status shows disagreement to higher status. On the contrary, higher status mostly used “down toned suggestion” when disagreeing to lower status. She also found that females tended to use “reason giving” and “down toned suggestion” towards female respondents, while male respondents tended to use “refusing to cooperate” towards their opposite sex hearers.

Parvaresh and Eslami Rasekh (2009) studied the speech act of disagreement among young women in Iran. In this study the effects of solidarity and deference, proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2001), on the use of strategy by women native speakers of Persian while doing the speech act of disagreement was investigated. The results of the study indicated that in Iranian culture the addressee's gender highly affects the use of strategies while performing the speech act of disagreement even when there is a high amount of solidarity. In this way it was found that women
employ conflictives, which have the most impolite intention, mostly when and where the addressee is of the same sex.

Current study aimed to respond the following objectives in general:
1. Disagreement strategies mostly employed by Persian male and female undergraduate students;
2. The similarities and differences in the choices of disagreement strategies in contexts of formal and informal.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

As the research was planned to investigate the disagreement strategies used by male and female, so 21 male and 21 female undergraduate students participated in the study, totaling a sample size of 42 respondents.

3.2. Data collection instrument

To collect the data, a discourse completion test was used; this is a written role-play questionnaire where respondents transcribe what they think they would say in specific situations. By using this kind of questionnaire, data could be gathered in a comparatively short period of time and all respondents are asked to respond to identical situations. Moreover, it is easier to analyze afterwards since the data are written.

3.3. Procedures

The DCT consisted of six scenarios, in which the subjects were expected to disagree with their interlocutors in formal and informal situations. When identifying the utterances of disagreement from the responses, the taxonomy from Garcia (1986) was applied, which recognizes eight types of disagreement strategies: challenging, refusing to cooperate, order, criticism of a third party, strong denial, down-toned suggestion, reason giving, expression of willingness to cooperate.

4. Data analysis

In the present study, the unit of analysis was the utterance or sequence of utterances produced by the respondents to complete the test items in the DCT. To analyze the disagreement strategies used by the Persian male and female respondents in formal and informal situations, the author omits one of the disagreement strategies i.e. criticism of a third party, introduced by Garcia (1986) and add up opting out strategy. In opting out strategy, addressors ignore to express their rejection/disagreement to mitigate the threat they are imposing on their hearer so as to avoid judging impoliteness by other interlocutors in formal context and maintain friendship, interest, and involvement in the activity in informal context. Table 1 shows the strategies coding scheme arranged from confrontational to non-confrontational ones.

Table 1. The coding scheme of disagreement strategies suggested by Garcia (1986)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disagreement Strategies</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td>a demand for an explanation or justification</td>
<td>“Are you sure it is the best price?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusing to</td>
<td>an act to show or decline the</td>
<td>“Well, what can I do?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When one expresses the disagreement directly, it can be said that he/she is more confrontational. On the other hand, someone is said to be more non-confrontational if he/she expressed it indirectly.

Table 2 shows the percentage of strategies used by Persian male and female speakers in informal situation.

Table 2. Strategy distribution used by male and female in informal context (In Percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>CH</th>
<th>RCO</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>DS</th>
<th>RG</th>
<th>OP</th>
<th>WCO</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. CH (challenge), RCO (refusing to cooperate), OR (order), SD (strong denial), DS (down-toned suggestion), RG (reason giving), OP (opting out), WCO (willingness to cooperate)

In brief, the strategy strong denial is used much more times by male respondents than female respondents in context of informal. Strategy strong denial is recognized in the following example in situation 4: "in ghesmat baraye man kheili sakhte, man nemitounam anjamesh bedam", (This section is too difficult for me, I can’t do it). Table 3 shows the percentage of strategies used by Persian male and female speakers in formal situation.

Table 3. Strategy distribution used by male and female in formal context (In Percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>CH</th>
<th>RCO</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>DS</th>
<th>RG</th>
<th>OP</th>
<th>WCO</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. CH (challenge), RCO (refusing to cooperate), OR (order), SD (strong denial), DS (down-toned suggestion), RG (reason giving), OP (opting out), WCO (willingness to cooperate)
In general, the result displayed in table 3 shows that female respondents use more non-confrontational strategies than confrontational ones in formal situations. Particularly, as also revealed from the collected data, *down toned suggestion* and *reason giving* is most frequently employed by both male and female respondents in formal situations. Following figure shows the tendency of how both groups of participants used the strategies in context of formal and informal.

![Strategy distributions used by male and female and formality context](image)

**Fig. 1.** Strategy distributions used by male and female and formality context

In terms of confrontational strategies, generally speaking, as shown in figure1, the male respondents use more confrontational strategies than female respondents (62% and 53%, respectively) in informal situations. In situation3, a male respondent denies strongly “I don’t like this T-shirt, it isn’t beautiful at all” and in situation4, a male respondent denies directly “I am not interested in playing volleyball, it would better go walking”.

In contrast in formal context, female respondents perform greater tendency to down toned suggestion which classified as non-confrontational strategies. In situation1: a female respondent states her reason first, which paves the way to the follow-up suggestion:“writing a paper will take more time and energy in the condition of final exam. So, may you introduce a ready paper to us just for study or at least for presentation?”

To sum up, the similarity that female and male respondents share is that both use more non-confrontational strategies than confrontational ones in formal situations and prefer *down toned suggestion* and *reason giving* strategies the most when expressing their disagreement in formal context. However, the difference is that male respondents are more confrontational than female respondents in informal context. Table 4 shows chi-square results for the relation between the gender and disagreement strategy use.

Table 4. Chi-square results for the relation between the gender and disagreement strategy use
The chi-square test yielded a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2=11.297, p<.05$) between the gender of the respondents and their disagreement strategy preferences. The strength of the relationship is 0.76 and is significant ($p<0.05$). Thus, the relationship between the gender of the participants and their use of strategies is strong.

5. Conclusion

Following Brown & Levinson's suggestion (1987) “Don’t do the FTA” strategies, that is, speakers may use confrontational or non-confrontational strategies, in which the choices are taken into account in a thoughtful way that helps reduce the most threat to the hearer and Biser's (2008) exclamation, while confrontational disagreement decreases productivity and could lead to the disbanding of the group, non confrontational strategies demonstrate a level of trust, honesty and constructiveness, and encourage people to learn and improve themselves, current study on politeness strategies seeks to explore whether gender differences influence the choice of disagreement strategies in two context of formal and informal or not. Our present data indicates that women use markedly less confrontational strategies in both formal and informal speech style.

From socio-linguistic and psychological studies (e.g. Hogg, 1985 and Tannen, 1993), it appears that women tend in general to be more intimate or involved in conversations, whereas men remain more distant or detached towards their conversation partners. Tannen (1992) summarizes the stylistic differences between men and women by noting that the former are most comfortable with a style she calls "report-talk", the latter with "rapport-talk" put it other way, men focus on the literal, informational content of the message, while women tend to focus on the implied relationship with their partner.

Our finding proves that the frequency of non-confrontational disagreement strategies used by female respondents is greater than that of male respondents. This means the female respondents tend to be more indirect and less aggressive than the male respondents.

In terms of confrontational strategies, it was also found that the male respondents are more confrontational in expressing disagreement than female group. The strategy strong denial is used much more frequently by male respondents than female respondents.

Moreover, as from the afore-mentioned findings, it can be easily recognized two similarities in the way respondents choose their disagreement strategies. First, both the respondents tend to be more non-confrontational when they express their disagreement in formal context; Second, strategies down toned suggestion and reason giving are most preferred by both groups of respondents.

Finally, it was found that gender variations influence the choice of disagreement strategies and support the arguments on gender and language that the female is more polite than the male.

References


