

Disagreement Studies Reviewed and My Coy Disagreements

Lingling Xu^{1*}

¹ Institute of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Huaqiao University, Quanzhou, China

* Lingling Xu, E-mail: gentletinkle@126.com

Received: October 15, 2017 Accepted: October 22, 2017 Online Published: November 6, 2017

doi:10.22158/selt.v5n4p679 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/selt.v5n4p679>

Abstract

Through reviewing and combing the previous studies on linguistic disagreement over the past three decades from four dimensions or research hotspots—definitions of disagreement, classifications of disagreement, factors affecting the ways of raising disagreement, and strategies for disagreement presentation, this study shows that disagreement has experienced the transformation from being regarded as a marginal impolite phenomenon to an important, common socio-pragmatic phenomenon catching a mounting number of linguists' attention. They define disagreement via directions or discoveries of corresponding studies, but the vague boundary between the synonymous concepts restrains the definition progress. The criteria of taxonomies, with their respective merits and demerits, contain the forms, functions and levels of disagreement. As to the factors affecting the disagreement raising, contextualization becomes the trend. But the overlaps of the specific factors' scopes leave space for scrutinization. It is found that, given significant multi-perspective findings, disagreement literature often rents ideas from Impoliteness Theory, conducive to the discount of objectivity and pertinence of their elaboration. The disagreement-response or disagreement-reaction part, overtly rarely studied, makes a breakthrough for further research.

Keywords

disagreement, (im)polite phenomenon, conflict talk, disagreement raising, disagreement response

1. Introduction

Disagreement is a common phenomenon in human interaction since although people are apt to be cooperative and polite when communicating with others, each individual has sampled all the different varieties of experience and may hold disparate views on the same thing, which unavoidably incurs disagreements. The disagreeing point can be as small as the choice of buying a can of cola or sprite, or as big as territorial disputes between countries. But as impolite illocutions were regarded as marginal, abnormal acts in contrast with large-scale, normal polite acts (Leech, 1983, p. 105), disagreement was defined as “the antipode of agreement” (Angouri & Locher, 2012, p. 1549) and so received less attention in earlier studies. With the progress of pragmatics, it has been revealed that occurrence of

inharmonious discourse is frequent and regular. “Conceptual bias” gradually declining, politeness is often found to give way to impoliteness, as noted in a mutually complementary relation (Bousfield, 2008, p. 2). Disagreement therefore catches linguists’ eye and has been dealt with under variable theories, such as Speech Act Theory (Sorning, 1977; Mehregan et al., 2013; Netz, 2014; Bardovi-Harlig et al., 2015), Politeness Theory (Rees-Miller, 2000; Edstrom, 2004; Sifianou, 2012; Dynel, 2015), Preference Theory (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987) and theories of epistemic modals (Cater, 2014; Khoo, 2015; Eriksson, 2016; Boyce & Hazlett, 2016).

In China, research on conflict talk is not rare (see Zhao, 2004; Zhao & Zhang, 2005; Li & Zhang, 2007; Ran, 2010; Lai, 2011; Ran & Liu, 2011; Ran & Yang, 2011; Yang, 2013; Gong, 2014; Chen & Li, 2016; Hu & Fan, 2016). It usually involves multiple aspects, like construction, generic structures, discourse strategies, forming reasons, pragmatic functions, response or reaction of conflict talk in the discourses or texts of training courses, academic meetings, commercial communications, literary works, family communications, computer-mediated communications and so on. As a (sub)type of conflict talk, however, disagreement is rarely touched at home, let alone the targeted or focused disagreement research.

Research on disagreement multiplies in western countries in diversity and complexity. The craze for disagreement studies began in 1983, seeing research concerns shift several times with the rise and development of some linguistic schools, such as Discourse Analysis and Cognitive Linguistics. Research discoveries become more and more plentiful and in turn help to dig out more and more research topics. This study intends to review these extensive studies from four perspectives—definitions of disagreement, classifications of disagreement, factors affecting the ways of raising disagreement and strategies for disagreement presentation. By pointing out the remaining problems in the previous study, we hold that there is plenty of room for further efforts, such as the differentiation of confusing synonymous concepts relevant to disagreement and the big land of disagreement response to be developed.

If research on disagreement occurs in several fields, such as economics, politics and neuroscience, this study focuses on the studies in linguistics, more so in pragmatics which has shouldered the lion’s share of the (im)politeness study.

2. Definitions of Disagreement

Quite a few scholars try to give exact dictionary-pattern definitions to disagreement. One way is to summarize the predecessor’s research or borrow the pattern of synonymous concepts, such as “opposition”. Kakava (1993, p. 36) defines the term “opposition” as “an oppositional stance (verbal or non-verbal) to an antecedent verbal or non-verbal action”, which is used by Dynel (2015, p. 340) to refer to “disagreement”. Indeed, disagreement is regarded as the mild stage or general category of opposition by Kakava (2002, pp. 1538-1539), who also roughly distinguishes “opposition”, “disagreement”, “argument or dispute” from the degree of offensiveness and length of turns.

Disagreement “involves the negation of a stated or implied proposition” (ibid., p. 1539), which is more like a reaction than stance. Rees-Miller’s definition is a summary of the predecessor, Sornig’s ideas (1977, pp. 361-366). Rees-Miller (2000, p. 1088) defines disagreement as: “A Speaker *S* disagrees when s/he considers untrue some Proposition *P* uttered or presumed to be espoused by an Addressee *A* and reacts with an utterance the propositional content or implicature of which is Not *P*”. This, as I interpreted, grasps the core statements of Sornig—the conditions in which disagreement can be realized or successful, but misunderstands the so-called “natural characteristics of disagreement”. Rees-Miller thinks that Sornig characterizes disagreement as an utterance since Sornig’s study gives priority to verbal expressions of disagreement. Sornig holds, in fact, that disagreement is a reflection of a preceding (speech) act (ibid., p. 361) or even a metalinguistic or metacommunicative act (ibid., p. 362), although the object of his study touches upon classroom discourse merely. Therefore, Rees-Miller’s criticism of the incompleteness of Sornig’s definition is untenable. Rees-Miller’s borrowing, though comprehensive and practical, may misinform or over-interpret the meaning of the original if the borrower tends to adapt the borrowing to his/her own study.

Other linguists try to conclude definition from their research findings. Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997, p. 193) observe that disagreement is a “necessary part of the process of reaching agreement”, which affirms that disagreement is a common rather than marginal phenomenon in human communication. Similarly, the definition by Sifianou (2012, p. 1554) gives disagreement a positive evaluation—pointing out that sometimes it can “strengthen interlocutors’ relationships”, adding a little opaquely that “[d]isagreement can be defined as the expression of a view that differs from that expressed by another speaker”. Sifianou realizes the duality of disagreement and emphasizes the influence of linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts on it. Mehregan et al. (2013, p. 598), however, define expression of disagreement as a communicative act “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”. This definition, avoiding hitting the nature of disagreement, chooses a standpoint of context (of situation) where disagreement occurs.

The definitions discussed above all serve general or “pure” disagreement. Other definitions that describe subcategories of disagreement, such as “modal disagreement” (Khoo, 2015, p. 512) and “group disagreement” (Carter, 2016, p. 14), are not to be taken into account in this study. Since these definitions generally derive from the directions or discoveries of corresponding studies, accordingly, they unavoidably inherit the limitations of the studies. In fact, disagreement is “ambiguous and polysemous” (Angouri, 2012, p. 1551), and becomes more and more complicated with the depth of relevant research. No matter how disagreement is defined, it has to satisfy this to be a ‘good disagreement’: an antecedent proposition or act *P* and an opposition or negation to it, namely *NOT-P*.

In fact, the definition of “disagreement” has gone through two kinds of transformation. The first one is the transformation from the early standpoints that see disagreement as a negative linguistic phenomenon or act to the later studies that find disagreement non-inherently negative. The early studies

define disagreement as a speech act expressing different opinions (Sornig, 1973, 1997; Kakava, 1993), a dispreferred reaction (Sacks, 1987; Pomerantz, 1984) or an impolite phenomenon (Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 1996). Although they interpret disagreement via various theories, disagreement is consistently negative and inharmonious in their approaches. Disagreement means questioning or rejecting the interlocutor's opinions or expressions, which will threaten his/her face and even damage the social relationship between the communicators. Therefore, it "behooves" us to avoid or mitigate disagreement in interaction. Fortunately, with the development of practical research, many scholars point out the non-inherent negativity of disagreement (e.g., Angouri & Locher, 2012, p. 1549; Zhu, 2014, p. 87). Disagreement is an unmarked, preferred act and even the norm on some special occasions, like the activities of problem solving, decision making and commercial meeting, etc. (Tannen, 1981, 1998; Gray, 2001; Tjosvold, 2008; Angouri & Locher, 2012), in which there needs to be thoughts in collision so as to improve scientificity or creativity of the solutions. Sometimes, disagreement can also be seen as a sign of intimate relationship or high social competence (Schiffrin, 1984, p. 311; Kakava, 2002, p. 1562; Locher, 2004, pp. 280-281; Angouri & Tseliga, 2010, p. 66; Sifianou, 2012, p. 1554).

The second kind of transformation centers around the oppositional object, switching from the external to the internal. The research mentioned in the last paragraph is prone to describe or analyze the properties of disagreement. The content incurring disagreement is the antecedent speech act, which is the external, superficial aspect. Therefore, in such cases, the objects of disagreement are those speech acts that can be directly recognized. Recently, however, there arise explorations of epistemic disagreement (Cowie, 2014; Khoo, 2015; Carter, 2016; Eriksson, 2016; Boyce & Hazlett, 2016). Say, for example, Chinese people believe in the Buddha, westerners believe in God. This type of disagreement does not negate the expressions or opinions of the other party. Although interlocutor A knows that interlocutor B's belief is not the same as his/hers, he/she cannot assure that the ideas of B are always wrong for he/she may alter or revise his/her own *P*-belief in the process of communication. Therefore, such disagreement centers around previous assertions more than opinions (Khoo, 2015, p. 512) and is subject to the continuously changing conditions. Some researchers are thus inclined to transfer (from external act) to internal adjustment, hence seeming to look for a more plausible interpretation.

3. Classifications of Disagreements

As seen above, there are various approaches to disagreement, according to its forms, functions, levels or objects. Due to the shortage of uniformity or relativity of these taxonomies, they will be presented chronologically in this section.

The earliest categorization could be traced to Goodwin's (1983) dichotomy—classifying disagreement into "mitigated disagreement" and "aggravated disagreement" on the basis of linguistic forms and intonational features. She collects 200 hours' conversations of urban black children and finds over 175

correction and disagreement sequences (p. 657). In her analysis, two kinds of “prefaces”—agreement (e.g., “well”) and delay (e.g., “I think”, the conditional “if”, questioning repetition) are often utilized to mitigate disagreement (p. 666). For aggravating disagreement, she holds, the speaker can apply the strategy of partial repetition or *wh*-terms + partial repetition that allows hardly any turn space. And the falling intonation helps to increase the force (p. 667). The use of “polarity”—explicit opposition (e.g., “no”) with no supportive expressions is also a popular trick for aggravated disagreement (p. 669). Goodwin’s taxonomy concerns such speech details as diction and intonation, her analysis of utterances being quite specific and convincing. Note, however, that the quantitative examples cover not only disagreement but correction. Besides the vagueness of boundary between the two activities, the unknown number of disagreements and frequencies of these linguistic forms can also be problems that may affect the research results.

From the property of disagreement, Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) summarize four types of disagreement: “irrelevancy claim”, “challenge”, “contradiction” and “counterclaim”. To express opposite opinions, the speaker can make use of relevancy claims, i.e., criticizing the antecedent speech for irrelevance to the here-and-now discussed topic (p. 229). The second type, reluctance markers, esp. the interrogative markers *wh*-particles, makes a challenge to the hearer since he/she has to make more efforts to drive the previous claim home (p. 230). Contradiction is similar to the direct negation for containing singly negative particles. The last kind, counterclaim is more mitigated by initiating a disagreement with pauses or prefaces (p. 231). What makes the classification more reasonable is the consideration of turns. The authors discuss the four types in the stages of Turn 1, Turn 2 and Turn 3 respectively. Their study would achieve exactitude and forcefulness provided that they cash in on clearer distinctions between “disagreement”, “arguing” and “dispute”.

The trichotomy of Rees-Miller (2000) enjoys greater popularity in the disagreement research. Similar to Goodwin, Rees-Miller categorizes disagreement by the standard of linguistic forms. Those including linguistic markers that belong to the expressions of negative or positive politeness are “softened disagreements”. Those containing explicit linguistic markers (negative words) or repetitions of previous claims belong to “disagreements neither softened nor strengthened”. And those that strengthen disagreements “by means of rhetorical questions, intensifiers (universal quantifiers), use of the personal *you* with an imperative or accusatory force, or judgmental vocabulary” (p. 1094) would make “aggravated disagreements”, the third type. It is found, among other things, that “softened disagreement” is the most frequent kind of disagreement in class settings.

Comparing the fierce Israeli political talk-show debates with *xavruta* interactions in contemporary Talmudic academies (disagreement as a marked preferred phenomenon in both events), Blum-Kulka et al. (2002) note three kinds of disagreement. They are “ungrounded disagreement”, that overtly and directly negates the previous proposition without explanation (p. 1577), “grounded disagreement”, that is also unmitigated but followed by a supportive proposition (p. 1578), and “downgraded disagreement”, that regularly adopts the classic patterns “yes, but...” while the part after “but” really

counts (p. 1579). Although the analysis of the two speech events seems to be a diachronic comparative study in Jewish political debates, there exists incomparability between the real oral political debates during *xavruta* and the virtual political debates in a talk show program. And the criterion of the taxonomy cannot be accepted since the three kinds do not relate to each other in a parallel manner.

Elga (2006) studies disagreement from the view of epistemic relationship between the interlocutors. It is argued that the hearer's selection of response is influenced by his/her judgment of the speaker who raises disagreement. Comparatively, the speaker may be an epistemic peer with or epistemic superior or inferior to the hearer (p. 493). Accordingly, disagreement raised by the speaker can be classified into "peer disagreement", "superior disagreement" and "inferior disagreement". On the ground of Elga's thought, Carter (2016) further categorizes "peer disagreement" by distinguishing "group peer disagreement" from "individual peer disagreement". This classification bears no suspicion for its simplicity and unambiguousness. It may not be a valuable taxonomy but it does help scholars to narrow down their research scopes.

Judging whether the truth value of the proposition exists, Eriksson (2016) proposes a new taxonomy of disagreement. If the point incurring disagreement is the different beliefs towards one object or thing, the proposition has truth value, that is to say, it is either true or false in the shoes of the hearer (p. 778). Such disagreement is called "disagreement in belief". Sometimes, however, there are claims that are faulty or faultless. A typical example is the variety of taste: one cannot impose his/her food likings onto other people. Despite disagreements between interlocutors, the fact is that perhaps neither of their claims is erroneous. This sort of disagreement faultlessness means "disagreement in attitude" (p. 775). Eriksson's classification is creatively interesting, but due to the varied personalities of people in the world, can we assume that all things in the globe leave them various reflections? How do various interlocutors evaluate the truth value of others' propositions, for agreement or disagreement?

The above taxonomies apparently classify disagreement from such different perspectives as disagreement forms, functions and levels. Because each of the taxonomies serves as the tool or result in its study, it has its own strengths and weaknesses. It is up to the researchers to opt for the taxonomy they prefer or, if necessary, make some adjustments or supplements.

4. Factors Affecting the Ways of Raising Disagreement

In disagreement studies, the expressing ways of raising disagreement are among the earliest addressed issues. The various forms of disagreement (see §3) reflect the fact that disagreement raising does not follow the same pattern. Analyses of lexical, syntactical and textual patterns are principal parts in some research. Edstrom (2004, p. 1505), for example, discovers that Venezuelans used to voice disagreement by direct expressions like "forget it", "don't even think it" or by indirect expressions like "I'm going to give you an example". Angouri and Tseliga (2010) study "impolite" expressions which include disagreement in two online Greek fora, and they find that at the level of micro-context (discourse context), there occurs lexicalization of aggravated disagreement by means of the particle "re" and

special spelling and punctuation. Bardovi-Harlig et al. (2015, p. 325) point out several syntactical patterns of expressing different views in academic discussions: “Yeah but”/“I agree... but” to do agree-before-disagree, “What do you mean”/“You’re saying” for hinting the following specific opinion; and “I don’t think so” as an unclad (signal of) disagreement. And Uzelgun et al. (2015, p. 1) focus on the sequential pattern “yes, but” from agreement to disagreement in the discussion of a controversial topic—climate change to uncover the discourse functions of such constructions.

What makes the forms of disagreement so various or why do people adopt different ways to raise disagreement? The purposes for human communication are more than exchanging information. Personal experience(s) make(s) distinct ways of thinking, hence quite different views out of various considerations, like ensuring their own interest, constructing rapport relationship, finding the most reasonable answer, etc. Scores of factors comprehensively affect the ways of disagreement expressions. Which contributes more to the final expression (euphemistic opposition or direct negation), the scalar relationship between the interlocutors, the property of the activity, or the personality of the speaker? It depends on the specific context or contextualizes.

Among these complex factors, initial attention falls on such socio-pragmatic parameters as “social distance”, “power” and “rating of imposition” based on Politeness Theory (see Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 74). As a face-threatening act, (ways of) disagreement raising can be limited by assessments of these sociological variables. It is argued that the closer the social distance between the interlocutors, the more direct the expression of disagreement; that the bigger the imbalance of the relative power, the more strategies to soften the disagreement; and that the severer the disagreement (in other words, the greater the damage to the hearer’s face), the more euphemistic the expression of disagreement. Nevertheless, since disagreement is regarded, by laymen at least, as an impolite phenomenon, of course the above idea inherits all the problems that beset Brown & Levinson’s Politeness Theory. Out of this limited framework, later researchers (Rees-Miller, 2000; Sifianou, 2012; Angouri, 2012; Netz, 2014; Zhu, 2014; Kompa, 2015) realize the significance of considering particular contexts in elucidating the causes of the variety of disagreement expressions. Social distance, relative power relationship and the severity of impoliteness are all supposed to give way to the specificity of the context. As mentioned before, disagreement on some special occasions is not a dispreferred or damaging act at all; it is welcomed and even becomes the norm of such activities that discuss controversial topics or expect critical thinking in nature. Some scholars even nominate “contextualism” as a crucial factor (e.g., Kompa, 2015, p. 137) to emphasize its consequence. In addition, there appear discoveries of other multiple factors or reasons such as “identity” (Angouri & Tseliga, 2010; Sharma, 2013), “purpose” (Rees-Miller, 2000; Sharma, 2013), “relationship” (Sharma, 2013), “gender” (Parvaresh & Eslami, 2009; Mehregan et al., 2013), “property of the activity” (Mehregan et al., 2013) and “competence” (Priest, 2016) in their respective attempts to construct disagreement. The explanations of these factors are, to some extent, reasonable for their studies, but the names and conceptual content of some factors feel vague: for instance, the scope of “context” can embrace all of the other factors since macro-context

is a relative and broad concept; “relationship” involves the considerations of the “identities” of and “social distance” between the interactants; the content of “power” is also an ambiguous term. With ambiguity of various sorts, their studies make disagreement open to further efforts.

5. Strategies for Disagreement Presentation

Strategies are to be applied on condition that there need to be unusual or marked expressions, either to mitigate or aggravate disagreement. In addition to the mentioned lexical, syntactical and textual patterns to do softened or aggravated disagreement (see §4), the specific discussions of strategies employed to present disagreement are frequent.

Garcia (1989) compares the stylistic devices applied by American and Venezuelan students in the role-play situations of disagreeing in English (p. 299). It is found that the American students take use of more mitigation, usually modality markers to raise disagreement than the Venezuelan students (p. 308). Consequently, the different choices in stylistic devices can be a comparison between mitigated and aggravated disagreement. They are: “downtoned challenge versus direct challenge”, “downtoned suggestion versus order”, “expression of willingness to cooperate versus refusing to cooperate”, “impersonal accusation versus criticism of a third party”, “impersonal denial versus strong denial” and “giving reasons in different contexts” (pp. 308-317).

Based on Garcia’s discovery, Mehregan et al. (2013) replace the strategy of “criticism of a third party” by “opting out strategy” when analyzing “the disagreement strategies used by the male and female Persian respondents in formal and informal situations” (p. 600). And it is concluded that the more confrontational the speaker is, the more directly the disagreement is expressed, and vice versa (p. 601).

In the study of informal conversations among young Greek people, Georgakopoulou (2001) finds that they prefer to imply disagreement rather than contrast with others explicitly (p. 1886). The main strategies used are adding some prefacing markers, such as the particle “re” and the interrogative phrase “na sup po kati” to serve as preludes, followed by storytelling-like expressions and repeated questions. Although Georgakopoulou highlights the markers adopted to imply rather than mitigate disagreement (p. 1888), they are indeed the strategies to soften disagreement. Such distinction or emphasis does not make much sense, so it seems.

Angouri and Tseliga (2010) also approach Greek talks, but in a different context—CMC (Computer Mediated Communication). By comparing the ways to construct disagreement in two types of online fora, the authors observe unconventional spellings and punctuations as a signal of impoliteness and “re connecting with name, mate or negative attributive adjective” often used to initiate strong disagreement (p. 77). However, some claims that explain the causes for differences between the “students” and the PA fora in disagreeing do not sound so convincing, such as the age analysis.

Shum and Lee (2013) do not distinguish the kinds of disagreement when putting forward eleven common strategies: giving negative comments, using short vulgar phrases, raising rhetorical questions, making a personal stance, making an ironic statement, cursing, giving opposite opinions, rewording,

giving personal experience, giving facts and reprimanding (p. 58). In fact, it is an integration of the discoveries in the works of Culpeper (1996), Locher (2004) and Bousfield (2008). But that Shum & Lee list these strategies in aggravation-degree or mitigation-degree order is plausible. Moreover, overlaps are found among their strategies.

Netz (2014) makes use of five-point likert scale to classify disagreement into five levels and discusses the parallel strategies (pp. 149-150): a) notably long pauses, compounded downtoners, hesitations, uncertainty indicators and intonation rise to present highly mitigated disagreement; b) strategies similar to the first kind but of lower-density to construct mitigated disagreement; c) more explicit contradictions for neither mitigated nor aggravated disagreement; d) explicit and concise contradictions without accompaniment of lengthy accounts to carry out an aggravated disagreement; and e) concise and explicit contradictions with repetitions of negation to raise highly aggravated disagreement. Although the (im)polite extent of these kinds of disagreement differs, the criteria whereby to judge whether it is a “highly mitigated disagreement” or “mitigated disagreement” and whether it is a “highly aggravated disagreement” or “aggravated disagreement”, as we can see, are not clear due to the relations of inclusion.

Because disagreement as an impolite or bad act in some research, the strategies used to mitigate or aggravate disagreement are to some extent rented from the strategies to soften or strengthen impoliteness. Therefore, the objectivity and pertinence of the statements in those studies fall subject to discount or scrutiny.

6. Remaining Problems and Further Studies

By the specific discussions and evaluations of previous multidimensional studies on disagreement (see §2-5), the transformation of research concerns and the research status and trend can be concluded in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, Disagreement research in western countries is systematic and mature to some degree. With the progress of pragmatics and the rise of Cognitive Science, disagreement research has experienced a trend of multi-perspectivization and diversification. First, linguists no longer restrict disagreement in a narrow range—see it as a marginal, negative phenomenon, but rather affirm its research significance. Second, the traditional theoretical frameworks are less popular than before. Theories of epistemic modals borrowed from cognitive science are in style. The object incurring disagreement, therefore, shifts from antecedent opinion to antecedent assertion. Third, disagreement research is witnessing more perspectives and achievements. Recent taxonomies classify disagreement by its functions or the interlocutors’ epistemic relationship rather than by the superficial forms and characteristics. And the studies of the ways, factors and strategies to raise disagreement, as we can see, multiply and diversify.

Table 1. Progression of Disagreement Research

| Research Foci | Early Time | Recent Time |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Definitions | dispreferred, impolite action | non-inherently negative, common phenomenon |
| Theories | Speech Act Theory Politeness Theory Preference Theory | Theories of Epistemic Modals (Cognitive Science) |
| Oppositional Objects | antecedent opinion | antecedent assertion |
| Classification Criteria | form, property | function, epistemic relationship |
| Raising Ways | lexical pattern | syntactical and textual pattern |
| Socio-pragmatic Parameters | social distance, power, rating of imposition | contextualism (identity, purpose, relationship, property of the activity, competence, etc.) |
| Strategies | single standard: to soften or aggravate disagreement | diversified standards: synthesizing level, diction, tone, intonation, syntactical structure, etc. |

Nevertheless, since “disagreement” has a number of synonyms, such as “conflict”, “opposition”, “argument”, “dispute”, “negation”, “contradiction” and “objection”, term incongruity sometimes leads to theorizing confusion. Some scholars replace “disagreement” by other terms casually or invariably, unconditionally regard some of them as exact synonyms (e.g., Muntigl & Turnbull, 1998; Kakava, 2002; Langlotz & Locher, 2012; Sharma, 2013). This lends some linguists an opportunity for metascientific discussion of these terms for disagreement studies (e.g., Georgakopoulou, 2001; Angouri, 2012; Dynel, 2015). But it is not a surprise that, with their terminology “clarification”, the boundaries between these notions are still in a mess. It is necessary to differentiate them so as to restrict the disagreement research scope.

Research on disagreement revisited hitherto, we could find the high diversity in relevant studies: from definition to expression, from daily conversation (e.g., Locher, 2004; Habib, 2008; Zhu, 2014) to institutional discourse (e.g., Angouri & Tseliga, 2010; Langlotz & Locher, 2012; Shum & Lee, 2013), from pragmatics to socio-psychology, to name a few. But the significant disagreement-response or disagreement-reaction part does not get enough attention. How do people react to disagreement? Are there differences between the reactions in differentiated situations? What are the strategies used to respond to disagreement? What are the effects of these strategies? They are among all the (more) interesting topics to be addressed, as far as disagreement is concerned.

Recent studies on disagreement are prone to quantitative methods when dealing with corpus data (Rees-Miller, 2000; Georgakopoulou, 2001; Kakava, 2002; Angouri, 2012; Bolander, 2012; Langlotz &

Locher, 2012; Netz, 2014; Bardovi-Harlig et al., 2015; Uzelgun et al., 2015) to make the results more objective, but the analyses and discussions on the data are inevitably subjective. For instance, what is the criterion of judging the effectiveness of disagreements? How do researchers prove or guarantee plausibility of their deductions? Plenty of studies, for shortage of assessment or a complete evaluated system, fail to verify, let alone prove their discoveries.

Finally, considering involvement of psychological facets in disagreement interpretation, it is not certain with many studies whether the analyzed disagreeing expressions are authentic. Given various contexts, the speaker may hide his/her minds or change his/her diction, so it is deducible that to judge the sincerity of disagreements suggests more work than so far assumed.

7. Conclusion

Disagreement is one of the foci of linguistic research as long as human interaction exists. The scope of disagreement is very large since it can cross several turns and all the confrontational utterances can indicate disagreement. But now that there is a need to differentiate those synonymous concepts (disagreement, argument, conflict, etc.), it may be simple and effective to restrict the specific disagreement research in the study on the initial turn of raising different opinions (*Not-P*). “Negotiation”, “argument” or “conflict” that contains more than one-turn interaction involves disagreement in each turn. In other words, a disagreement includes only one turn but it can be entailed in other kinds of conflict talk that involve turn-taking.

Their relationship and difference can be roughly presented in Figure 1 as below.

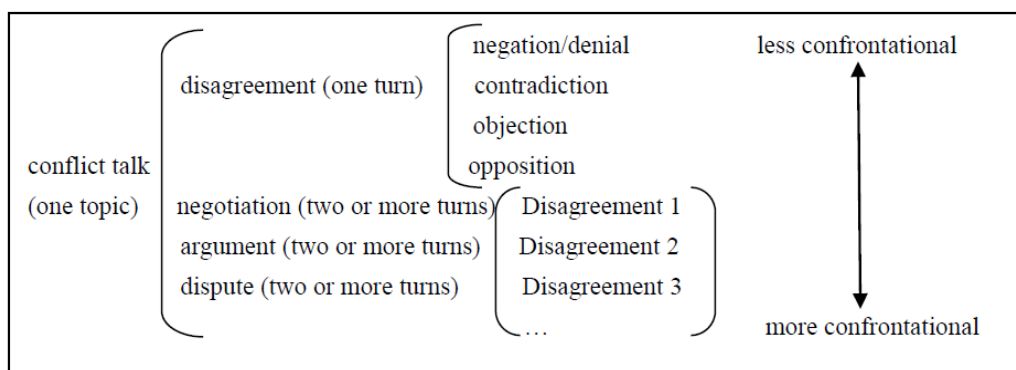


Figure 1. Relationship between the Synonymous Concepts

As stated in Figure 1, a conflict talk aims at one topic, which can figure out the complex interlaced relationship of the utterances and turns among multiple interlocutors. With the rise of conflictiveness or confrontationality of social interactions in modern work and life, people’s (positive) face is more often than ever before, so it seems, so that conflict talks easily occur. Conflict talk is divided into disagreement, negotiation, argument and dispute. For analysis convenience, I differentiate disagreement from other kinds of conflict talk from the view of turns, so that I restrain it in a single turn, at the

sacrifice of turn-taking, among other things, so as to highlight disagreement as an opposition to the antecedent *P*. In cases of turn-taking studies, nonetheless, the researcher can choose to cope with one and no more than one stage of conflict talk for an investigation of its disputes, arguments, argumentations, negotiations, and resolutions. And he/she can try treating each opposite turn as a disagreement just to figure out the complex relationships. There are, for example, Disagreement 1, Disagreement 2, Disagreement 3, ... Disagreement *n*. Moreover, disagreement can be called negation/denial, contradiction, objection or opposition on different occasions according to conflictiveness or confrontationality. Such a pragmatic labor division is a preliminary or primary, rather than utmost or ultimate attempt to figure out these confusing synonymous concepts relevant to disagreement.

As to the nature of disagreement, I agree on contextualism—it depends on the specific situations. Disagreement itself is non-inherently positive or negative. It is unwelcomed in social etiquette but expected at thesis defenses. It can be an effective way to resolve problems and conflicts. As water is the source of life and meanwhile, it can be the devil to destroy everything, disagreement incurs disharmony, while at other times improving efficiency of decisions.

I am inspired by the finding that there still exists large space in the field of research on disagreement. Besides the mentioned defects in previous studies, the big land of disagreement response awaits to be explored: the various responsive ways, the factors that affect the ways, the responsive strategies and the effects, etc. By putting these questions into different regions and fields or even having a comparison between cultures, there must be a large number of interesting topics and discoveries.

Acknowledgements

I owe a debt to Huaqiao University which, by “Subsidized Project for Cultivating Postgraduates’ Innovative Ability in Scientific Research of Huaqiao University”, and by “Innovative Pragma-rhetoric Team Programme”, funds this research. And I thank Professor Guojin Hou for guiding and polishing me all through this study in addition to his consistent help and encouragement in my academic life. My thanks also go to Associate Professor Feifeng Sun for interesting me in disagreement matters and her advice for this study, and Jiang Jin, Mengling Liu and Yingnian Tao for their careful proofreading.

References

- Angouri, J. (2012). Managing disagreement in problem solving meeting talk. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44(12), 1565-1579. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2012.06.010>
- Angouri, J., & Locher, M. A. (2012). Theorising disagreement. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44(12), 1549-1553. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2012.06.011>
- Angouri, J., & Tseliga, T. (2010). “You HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT!?”: From E-disagreement to E-impoliteness in two online fora. *Journal of Politeness Research Language Behaviour Culture*, 6(1), 57-82. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jplr.2010.004>

- Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2015). The effect of instruction on pragmatic routines in academic discussion. *Language Teaching Research*, 19(3), 325-331. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168814541739>
- Bargiela-Chiappini, F., & Harris, S. (1997). *Managing language: The discourse of corporate meetings*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Blum-Kulka, S. et al. (2002). Traditions of dispute: From negotiations of talmudic texts to the arena of political discourse in the media. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 34(10), 1569-1594. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(02\)00076-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(02)00076-0)
- Bousfield, D. (2008). *Impoliteness in interaction*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Boyce, K., & Hazlett, A. (2016). Multi-Peer disagreement and the preface paradox. *Ratio*, 29(1), 29-41. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rati.12075>
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carcia, C. (1989). Disagreeing and requesting by Americans and Venezuelans. *Linguistics and Education*, 1(3), 299-322. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0898-5898\(89\)80004-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0898-5898(89)80004-X)
- Carter, J. A. (2016). Group peer disagreement. *Ratio*, 29(1), 11-28. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rati.12077>
- Chen, X., & Li, M. (2016). Identity conflicts and discourse strategies in academic context: Based on the analysis of moderator's discourse at academic conferences. *Foreign Languages Research*, 2, 16-22.
- Cowie, C. (2014). Epistemic disagreement and practical disagreement. *Erkenn*, 79(1), 191-209. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-013-9485-9>
- Culpeper, J. (1996). Towards an anatomy of impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 25(3), 340-367. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(95\)00014-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(95)00014-3)
- Dynel, M. (2015). The landscape of impoliteness research. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 11(2), 329-340. <https://doi.org/10.1515/pr-2015-0013>
- Edstrom, A. (2004). Expressions of disagreement by Venezuelans in conversation: Reconsidering the influence of culture. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 36(8), 1499-1518. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2004.02.002>
- Elga, A. (2006). Reflection and disagreement. *Noûs*, 41(3), 478-502. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0068.2007.00656.x>
- Eriksson, J. (2016). Expressivism, attitudinal complexity and two senses of disagreement in attitude. *Erkenn*, 81(4), 775-794. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-015-9767-5>
- Georgakopoulou, A. (2001). Arguing about the future: On indirect disagreements in conversations. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 33(12), 1881-1900. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(00\)00034-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(00)00034-5)
- Gong, S. (2014). A pragmatic analysis of emotional stance in online conflict commentaries. *Modern Foreign Languages*, 37(2), 168-178.
- Goodwin, M. H. (1983). Aggravated correction and disagreement in children's conversations. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 7(6), 657-677. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(83\)90089-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(83)90089-9)

- Gray, P. H. (2001). A problem-solving perspective on knowledge management practices. *Decision Support Systems*, 31(1), 87-102. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-9236\(00\)00121-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-9236(00)00121-4)
- Hu, C., & Fan, L. (2016). Research on conflict talks in business context. *Foreign Language Education*, 37(2), 12-16.
- Kakava, C. (1993). *Negotiation of disagreement in causal Greek conversations and classroom discourse* (PhD dissertation). Georgetown University, Washington D.C.
- Kakava, C. (2002). Opposition in modern Greek discourse: Cultural and contextual constraints. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 34(10), 1537-1568. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(02\)00075-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(02)00075-9)
- Khoo, J. (2015). Modal disagreements. *Inquiry*, 58(5), 511-534. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2015.1033005>
- Kompa, N. (2015). Contextualism and disagreement. *Erkenntnis*, 80(1), 137-138. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-014-9663-4>
- Lai, X. (2011). The adaptation approach to conflict talk between couples in Chinese context. *Foreign Language Research*, 4, 59-63.
- Langlotz, A., & Locher, M. A. (2012). Ways of communicating emotional stance in online disagreement. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44(12), 1591-1606. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2012.04.002>
- Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman Publishing Group.
- Li, X., & Zhang, D. (2007). Research on the structural features of the quarrelling discourse. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, 12, 4-7.
- Locher, M. A. (2004). *Power and politeness in action: Disagreements in oral communication*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Mehregan, M. et al. (2013). Disagreement expressions in the discourse of young Persian speakers. *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 70, 598-604.
- Muntigl, P., & Turnbull, W. (1998). Conversational structure and facework in arguing. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 29(3), 225-256. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(97\)00048-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(97)00048-9)
- Netz, H. (2014). Disagreement patterns in gifted classes. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 61, 142-160. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2013.09.007>
- Parvareh, V., & Rasekh, A. E. (2009). Speech act disagreement among young women in Iran. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 11(4), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1565>
- Pomerantz, A. M. (1984). *Agreeing and disagreeing with assessment: Some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Priest, M. (2016). Inferior disagreement. *Acta Analytica*, 31(3), 263-283. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12136-015-0277-5>
- Ran, Y. (2010). A survey of the pragmatic studies about conflict talk in interaction. *Foreign Language Education*, 31(1), 1-6.
- Ran, Y., & Liu, Y. (2011). A pragmatic study of conflicting responses in non-aggressive speech.

- Foreign Language Research*, 5, 65-69.
- Ran, Y., & Yang W. (2011). A pragmatic analysis of deliberate offensive utterances in interpersonal conflicts. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, 34(3), 49-55.
- Rees-Miller, J. (2000). Power, severity, and context in disagreement. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32(8), 1087-1111. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(99\)00088-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(99)00088-0)
- Sacks, H. (1987). On the preference for agreement and contiguity in sequence in conversation. *Talk and Social Organization*, 54, 54-69.
- Schiffrin, D. (1984). Jewish argument as sociability. *Language in Society*, 13(3), 311-335. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500010526>
- Sharma, B. K. (2013). Enactment of teacher identity in resolving student disagreements in small group peer interactions. *Linguistics and Education*, 24(2), 247-258. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2012.09.002>
- Shum, W., & Lee, C. (2013). (Im)politeness and disagreement in two Hong Kong internet discussion forums. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 50(1), 57-58. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2013.01.010>
- Sifianou, M. (2012). Disagreements, face and politeness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44(12), 1554-1564. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2012.03.009>
- Sornig, K. (1977). Disagreement and contradiction as communicative acts. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 1(4), 347-374. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(77\)90028-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(77)90028-5)
- Tannen, D. (1981). New York Jewish conversational style. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 30, 133-149. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.1981.30.133>
- Tannen, D. (1994). *The relativity of linguistic strategies: Rethinking power and solidarity in gender and dominance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tannen, D. (1998). *The argument culture*. New York: Random House.
- Tannen, D. (2002). Agonism in academic discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 34(10), 1651-1669. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(02\)00079-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(02)00079-6)
- Tjosvold, D. (2008). The conflict-positive organization: It depends upon us. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 29(1), 19-28. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.473>
- Uzelgun, M. A. et al. (2015). Managing disagreement through *yes, but...* constructions: An argumentative analysis. *Discourse Studies*, 17(4), 467-484. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445615578965>
- Yang, W. (2013). On interpersonalized clues in business conflict interactions: From a perspective of discourse power. *Modern Foreign Languages*, 36(4), 371-378.
- Zhao, Y. (2004). Conflict Talk Analysis. *Foreign Language Research*, 5, 37-42.
- Zhao, Z., & Zhang, L. (2005). A study of speech conflicts from the perspective of Relevance Theory. *Foreign Language Education*, 26(1), 17-21.
- Zhu, W. (2014). Managing relationships in everyday practice: The case of strong disagreement in mandarin. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 64, 85-87. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2014.01.010>

Note

Note 1. The word is not in italic form in the original text (Rees-Miller, 2000, p. 1094). Here I italicize it because “you” plays the role of the studied object.