Desirable and undesirable disagreements: Jewish women studying the talmudic texts

Esty Teomim Ben-Menachem [a], [b], [*], Zohar Livnat [c]

[a] Efrata College, Israel
[b] David Yellin College, Israel
[c] Bar Ilan University, Israel

A B S T R A C T

The paired study of the Jewish Talmud in *havruta* is a traditional, well-established and prestigious form of study. *Havruta* conversation is a confrontational speech event in which disagreements are not only expected but also appreciated. The aim of this study is to explore for the first time disagreement patterns carried out by women studying in *havruta* pairs. 21 *havruta* conversations were observed and recorded, and semi-structured in-depth interviews were held individually with the participants.

The findings show that women studying in *havruta* pairs adopt the basic confrontational characteristics of the genre. However, disagreements were found mainly in conversations in which both learners were equally knowledgeable and equally dominant.

In a context were disagreements are welcomed, not all of them are equally desirable by the women participants. Desirable disagreements included downgraders, softening expressions and agreement markers and were ended in agreement. When these elements were missing, disagreement led to a threat to the face of the participants, and they expressed dissatisfaction in the interview with how the conversation had gone. An examination of the parts of the conversation that elicited dissatisfaction revealed a high frequency of disagreement markers, ungrounded disagreements, and face-threatening acts such as ironic echoing of the interlocutor.

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1. Introduction

This study discusses and analyzes the nature and function of disagreement in a unique context: conversations by women studying Jewish sacred texts in the traditional pattern of havruta (plural: havrutot) — a pair of students engaged in debating the meaning of a text before them. This conversational pattern was traditionally conducted by men using a highly confrontational and argumentative style, of which disagreement is an essential and functional element. The relatively new phenomenon of women studying in the same fashion raises questions connecting disagreement to politeness and face, sociability and gender identity.

1.1. Studying the talmudic text in havruta

The Talmud, an ancient Jewish religious text, is a repository of thousands of years of Jewish wisdom and oral law (Steinzaltz, 1976). It contains a record of debates that took place during the 3rd—6th centuries C.E. in the rabbinical academies

* Corresponding author. Esty Teomim Ben-Menachem, David Yellin College, Israel.
  E-mail address: estybenmen@gmail.com (E. Teomim Ben-Menachem).

of Palestine and Babylonia. The current layout of the page of Talmudic texts includes the main text of the *Gemara* (the Aramaic term equivalent to the Hebrew term *Talmud*), located in the middle of the page and surrounded by texts of medieval and also later scholars, suggesting interpretations, corrections to the wording of the main text, and cross-references. The Talmudic text itself is written in a mix of Hebrew and Babylonian Aramaic. In common editions, the text displays only the consonantal text without diacritical marks to indicate vowels, and punctuation marks are rarely used. The discussions are complex and encompass many arguments and proofs, demonstrating a unique style of thought and expression (Steinzaltz, 2001). Due to its high complexity, tremendous effort must be invested to undertake the task of understanding all its meanings and nuances of its language, structure, content and logic. As a consequence, the study of the Talmud requires repeated rereading of the text, a process that might continue throughout the life of the student.

A classic and historically cherished practice of studying the Talmudic text is called *havruta* — a collaborative practice in which two students having pages of the Talmud before them are engaged in debating its meaning "while intellectually juggling a host of other interpretations given to the same section, whether recorded in a given page or not" (Blum-Kulka et al., 2002: 1571). This ancient paired-study tradition is still dominant in contemporary Talmudic academies (*yeshivot*), in which the oral Jewish law is intensively studied (Heilman, 1983; Helmreich, 2000). Traditionally, these oral debates were characterized as lively, passionate confrontational speech events. In the Talmudic text itself, students studying in *havruta* were likened to enemies (Kiddushin 30b) or to one iron implement that sharpens another (Ta'anit 7a).

The *havruta* practice has been investigated from several perspectives: historical (Halbertal and Hartman, 1998; Stampfer, 1995), ideational-conceptual (Holzer and Kent, 2013), sociological-anthropological (Ramiel, 2007) and educational (Feiman—Nemser, 2006; Holzer, 2006; Kent, 2006, 2008; Segal, 2013; Tedmon, 1991). In recent years, its argumentative, confrontational character has attracted the attention of discourse analysts, especially in regard to the question of preference structures.

1.2. Disagreement, preference structure and face

In conversation-analysis-oriented work, especially following Pomerantz (1984), agreement was assumed to be the preferred response to a claim in everyday conversation, with disagreement being the non-preferred response (Greatbach, 1992). However, disagreements are complex, multidirectional, and multifunctional acts that fulfill a range of social functions in different contexts and cultures (Sifianou, 2012). A number of studies showed that in a variety of cultures and contexts, disagreement may be the preferred response and that disputes may be conceived as sociable elements of a given event in a specific community. A culture-specific tendency in this respect was argued by Tannen (1981), Schiffrin (1984) and Blum-Kulka (1997) in regard to the Jewish culture. This unique discursive pattern and mode of argumentation is considered by scholars a cultural pattern that is echoed in various discursive contexts of Jewish and Israeli society until today (Heilman, 1976; Schiffrin, 1984; Tannen, 1984; Blum-Kulka, 1997; Blum-Kulka et al., 2002). Data from other cultures (i.e. Goodwin, 1990, Goodwin et al., 2002) suggest that it is not unique to Jewish culture. Especially, evidence from Greek (Kakavá, 1993; Tannen and Kakavá, 1992; Sidiropoulou, 1994; Georgakopoulou, 2001; Marki-tsilipakou 1991, 1995; Koutsantoni, 2005) suggests the same tendency to confrontation.

Context and genre sensitivity was demonstrated in studies by Kotthoff (1993), Myers (1998), Yaeger-Dror (2002), Clayman and Heritage (2002), Tannen (2002), Chiu (2008), and Netz (2014), among others. Recent studies on contemporary online political discourse that involves public participation provide further support for the claim that the traditional assumption regarding the preference for agreement is an overgeneralization, focusing on the social and entertaining functions of disagreement (Johansson, 2015; Kleinke, 2010; Dori-Hacohen and Shavit, 2013; Livnat and Dori-Hacohen 2013; Livnat and Kohn 2018). In the context of *havruta* conversations, disagreement and dispute are viewed as serving the goal of maximizing mutual comprehension between interlocutors and as necessary for unpacking the deeper meaning of the complex text. Two studies on *havruta* conversations undertaken in Israel (Hacohen, 2001; Ramiel, 2007) indicate that in this unique educational setting there is a preference for disagreement and that the conversation is perceived as more profound and more efficient to the extent that there is more argumentativeness and disagreement. In this context disagreement is perceived as a desired action that does not undermine the relations of those sharing the study experience and does not threaten the participants' positive face. The pattern showing preference for disagreement in *havruta* discussions was empirically confirmed by Hacohen (2001) through an examination of a 50 min corpus consisting of twenty segments from 10 pairs of same-sex students, male and female. Hacohen (ibid.) found that 61% out of all turns in the corpus that express either agreement or disagreement expressed disagreement. Within the disagreements turns, only 22% used any form of downgrading, in other words 78% of the disagreements turns were performed as preferred responses. This discursive analysis might be enhanced by Ramiel's (2007) ethnographic description of men's *havruta* in *Har-Hamor Yeshiva*, which emphasizes the performative aspects of the study: shouting, large hand gestures and moving from sitting to standing, all presenting preference of an aggressive mode of disagreement over a "polite" one.

However, Schwarz (2011) distinguishes between *iyun* study, an in-depth analysis of the text, and *beki'ut*, a more perfunctory review of the text, with an emphasis on a more general understanding of the topic without getting into the more minute details. Schwartz examined one male *havruta* in *Mir Yeshiva* in Israel, in which the participants reviewed a text they had previously studied, and showed that most of the activity involves paraphrasing or reviewing arguments presented by the Sages in their give-and-take with one another over the meaning of the text, usually by means of an explanation of their disagreement with the specific text, but without any expression of disagreement between the two members of the *havruta*