



Disagreeing without a 'no': How teachers indicate disagreement in a Hong Kong classroom

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ABSTRACT

In traditional politeness theories, disagreements are face threatening acts, regarded as dispreferred options from a conversation analysis approach. However, in the classroom context, specifically in Language Education, it is often necessary for teachers to disagree with students. Previous studies of classroom disagreement have shown that teachers use linguistic markers to mitigate the face threat inherent in disagreements. In Hong Kong, we would also expect a significant use of mitigating lexical strategies as Asian cultures are typically regarded as being conflict-avoiding. However, as hand gestures and head movements have been observed to accompany negative linguistic markers to stress the lexical or pragmatic meaning of the utterance, they could be an alternative modality to communicate disagreement in the Hong Kong classroom.

This study analyzed teacher disagreements in 10 h of Language Education classroom teaching in a Hong Kong higher education institution. The results suggest that disagreements are indeed dispreferred options in this particular context and that the salience of the act itself is minimized by avoiding negative gestures or head movements. As this behavior was observed among all teachers who disagreed, it is proposed that this behavior has been conventionalized within this community of practice.

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1. Introduction

The field of pragmatics is finally recognizing that various semiotic systems need to be taken into account to allow for a complete interpretation of the communicative act (Cienki, 2017). In particular, hand gestures, movements of the hands and arms, other than those used to perform an instrumental action, and head movements are considered communicative features belonging to a modality other than speech (Kendon, 2004; McNeill and Duncan, 2000). Although the full role of gestures and head movements in pragmatics is still not clear (Payrató and Teßendorf, 2013), there is no doubt that gestures affect the utterance (Harrison, 2010; Kendon, 1995; Müller, 2004; Streeck, 2008). Hand gestures externalize salient information (McNeill, 2016), helping the speaker in his or her cognitive process and facilitating the transmission of the message to the listener (Hostetter, 2011), and head movements are confirmed to have semantic, discourse and interactive functions (Kendon, 1972; McClave, 2000). Therefore the expectation would be to see these two types of non-verbal behaviors in speech acts where the speaker feels strongly about the content, in particular if this content is salient, such as a disagreement.

Gestures in the classroom context have not been widely studied. Most classroom-based research refers to the representative content of the hand gesture or to how gesture aids cognitive processing (for a review of existing studies see Hostetter,

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2011). Other body movements, in particular head-movements, have also been recognized as relevant to the communicative act (Harrison, 2013) and have received even less attention than hand gestures in classroom research. Disagreements have been chosen for this study because they are often mitigated linguistically but the question remains whether they are then communicated via head movements or hand gestures. Few studies have tackled teachers' disagreements in the classroom context (Charoenroop, 2016; Netz, 2014; Netz and Lefstein, 2016; Rees-Miller, 2000), other than disagreements as corrective feedback, and none, that we are aware of, have looked at disagreement from a multimodal perspective.

This study was carried out within the particular cultural context of Hong Kong higher education Language Education classrooms. The underlying hypothesis is that teachers in a classroom context mitigate content-related disagreement linguistically, in order to minimize the threat to the listeners' face, but will make it salient, making the disagreement obvious to the listener, through gestures and/or head movements with a clear negative meaning. Therefore we focused on head nods and shakes, noting also other types of head movements, and on hand gestures of a pragmatic nature, specifically those from the family of negating gestures (Kendon, 2004), recording also other types of gestures that might have a similar function as linguistic markers to indicate inclusion, humor, apology, etc.

Other forms of nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions and gaze, are also relevant in the expression of the disagreement. We chose to focus on gestures and head movements to add to the existing body of research on negating gestures and head movements.

2. Disagreements and politeness

Brown and Levinson (1987) combined the idea of politeness and 'face'; each person's self-image (based on Goffman, 1967) by defining politeness as the "strategic avoidance of face threatening acts" (FTA) mostly in informal situations (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 65). 'Face' here refers to how interlocutors behave towards each other either to reinforce the self-image of the other or to ignore it. Positive face refers to the wish to maintain a positive image of oneself that will result in closeness to others, while negative face is defined as the right to free action and not to be imposed upon. Disagreement, "the expression of a view that differs from that expressed by another speaker" (Sifianou, 2012: 1), threatens the positive image of both interlocutors and has the potential to create conflict. The interlocutor's positive face is threatened when their actions/ideas are questioned (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

In traditional politeness theories, disagreement is thus seen as a rather impolite act to be mitigated, or avoided, to save the interlocutors' face by using a series of strategies. These have been classified as positive or negative and off record politeness super-strategies. An additional strategy, bald on record, does not mitigate the disagreement but is linked to efficient communication, such as using imperatives (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 95). Positive politeness seeks to close the gap between speakers by enhancing cooperation, finding common ground or helping the interlocutor achieve their wants. In disagreements in everyday conversations between Anglo-Saxon speakers, the linguistic strategies observed to enhance positive politeness include seeking agreement through developing safe topics, agreeing, hesitating, providing token agreements, repeating part of the interlocutor's utterance but also distancing oneself from the position being advocated (Holtgraves, 1997: 236). Other positive politeness strategies to seek agreement include intensifying interest in the interlocutor, use of in-group identity markers such as jargon, claiming common ground, joking, using hedges, switching the center of knowledge to the interlocutor, giving or asking for reasons or using the plural pronoun "we" to create a sense of inclusion (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 102–129). Negative politeness "performs the function of minimizing the particular imposition that the FTA unavoidably effects" (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 129). This can be achieved by being conventionally indirect or apologizing, questioning and hedging to avoid making assumptions about the interlocutor's wishes, impersonalizing both hearer and speaker by avoiding pronouns such as 'I' or 'you', showing deference –this can also be achieved by using the plurals of 'I' and 'you', nominalizing or using passive voices (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 130–211). Off-record politeness acts use speech so indirect, ambiguous or vague that various interpretations can be possible, they allow the speaker to deny having performed a threatening speech act altogether. Some of the strategies include being ironic, ambiguous or vague, over generalizing, understating or overstating, using rhetorical questions, hints or clues (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 227). Silence can also be used to mark the disagreement, although its interpretation will be very much context and content dependent (Kakava, 2002). Holtgraves (1997) analyzed naturally occurring disagreements and found evidence mostly of positive and off-record politeness and just a few cases of negative politeness. Aside from these three super-strategies, there are occasions when disagreement is aggravated, for example, when the speakers' face is at risk and it is necessary to provide a strong defense of one's point of view (Kotthoff, 1993).

However, more recent studies on politeness are grounded on a discursive (Locher, 2004; Locher and Watts, 2005; Watts, 2003) or an interactional approach (Arundale, 2006; Haugh, 2007) with this latter one "overlapping both" traditional and discursive approaches (Grainger, 2011: 171). These newer approaches "shift from emphasizing the linguistic features of politeness to interpreting politeness in context" (Shum and Lee, 2013), regarding Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies as "realizations" of individual's efforts to align with others, or "relational work" (Locher and Watts, 2005: 10). These efforts are very much dependent on ever changing beliefs and value systems (Locher, 2015) that vary by community of practice (Kádár and Haugh, 2013: 95). Thus, disagreements are valued differently according to relationships or culture, taking into consideration that in some contexts disagreement is expected and encouraged (some business meetings) (Angouri and Locher, 2012). In Asian cultures, the concept of face is a societal one (rather than an individual psychological one) (Gu, 1990), in others, such as the Greek, speakers tend to be confrontational and disagreement is often an indication of engagement

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