

Disagreement patterns in gifted classes

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Abstract

In white Anglo-American society, disagreement has traditionally been considered a face-threatening act, which interactants seek to avoid. Conversation analysts have noted that interactants orient toward agreement, and express disagreements as dispreferred responses, via mitigation markers, such as delays, prefacing, and hedges. However, recent studies indicate that disagreement is highly influenced by culture and context. These studies have shown that in some cultures/context, disagreements are not necessarily mitigated, and are often shaped as preferred responses and perceived as unmarked. In this paper I offer quantitative and qualitative analyses of data from a fully transcribed corpus of 15 h of interactions in gifted classes, grades 5–8, in Virginia, USA. It will be shown that in comparison to disagreements in other contexts and communities of practice in the US, disagreements in the gifted classes observed were significantly less mitigated. Gifted classes, therefore, constitute another interactional context in which disagreements are unmarked and do not seem to undermine solidarity among interactants. This study provides further empirical support to the claim that disagreement is not inherently face-threatening and needs to be contextualized.

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"I love argument, I love debate. I don't expect anyone just to sit there and agree with me, that's not their job."

Margaret Thatcher, interview, 1980

1. Introduction

The aim of the current study is to explore the structure of disagreements and their effect on interactions and relations in gifted classes. This study is part of a larger project describing discourse in gifted classes. The scholarly field of giftedness has been receiving growing attention since the 1970s. At first, the focus was mainly on the gifted as an individual. In the last two decades, however, it is becoming clear that the study of giftedness is triggered also by societal motivations, since gifted members of society are often viewed nowadays as a national asset (e.g. [Renzulli, 1999](#); [Tannenbaum, 1992](#)).

Disagreement is a topic that has been dealt with quite extensively in the literature. In early Conversation Analytic studies, within the framework of Preference Theory (e.g. [Pomerantz, 1984](#); [Sacks, \[1973\] 1987](#)) it has been noted that interactants orient toward agreement, and express disagreements as 'dispreferred responses', via mitigation markers, such as delays, prefacing, and hedges. Similarly, within the framework of Politeness Theory (e.g. [Brown and Levinson, 1987](#)), disagreement has been considered a face-threatening act, which interactants generally seek to avoid. However, numerous recent studies indicate that disagreement is highly influenced by factors related to culture and context

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(e.g. Angouri, 2012; Angouri and Locher, 2012; Angouri and Tseliga, 2010; Blum-Kulka et al., 2002; Georgakopoulou, 2001; Kakava, 2002; Schiffrin, 1984; Sifianou, 2012; Takahashi and Beebe, 1993; Tannen, 1981). In fact, the *Journal of Pragmatics* has recently devoted a special issue to the topic of disagreements (2012, Volume 44, Issue 12). As noted in the empirical papers in this special issue and summarized in the theoretical overviews (Angouri and Locher, 2012; Sifianou, 2012), it is necessary to contextualize the study of disagreement, rather than assuming an inherently face-threatening quality to this discursive act. In support of this approach, the current study provides yet another context in which disagreements, contrary to common belief, are perceived as unmarked, non-face-threatening acts, which do not seem to undermine solidarity among interactants.

The present study draws on several theoretical frameworks. It is influenced by Conversation Analysis in its attentiveness to structure, sequencing, and minute details of conversation. It is also influenced by Politeness Theory, as well as the perspective of 'relational work',¹ paying attention to face-concerns and to discursive aspects involving the negotiation of relationships (e.g. Angouri and Locher, 2012; Langlotz and Locher, 2012; Locher and Watts, 2005).

The structure of this paper is as follows. In Section 2 I present a review of the literature, focusing on the different taxonomies of disagreement available in the literature, as well as a synopsis of findings from previous studies. I then turn in Section 3 to my own study. First, I will present the 5-level taxonomy used here, including short examples of each level from my corpus. I then present my quantitative analysis of the distribution of disagreements according to this 5-level taxonomy, taking into consideration also the source of disagreement (teacher/student) and the addressee (teacher/student). Frequencies will also be presented and interpreted in light of frequencies presented in previous studies. Next, I will present two extended excerpts from my corpus and discuss these excerpts in more detail. Finally, Section 4 summarizes the main conclusions of the study and suggests directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of disagreement

In the current study, following Kakava (2002:1538), disagreement is defined as "the negation of a stated or implied proposition". This definition, as interpreted here, includes the negation of or objection to not only factual statements, but also points of view, positions, plans and actions. It has been noted by Kakava (2002:1538) that oppositional acts occupy the second part of an adjacency pair, but of course the disagreement itself may very well extend over more than two turns. Following Schiffrin (1987:18), Kakava (2002:1538) refers to the latter case as an argument or dispute.

In the present paper, data analysis involves both quantitative presentation of frequencies, and qualitative micro-analysis of examples. For the purpose of quantification, I have decided to focus on the oppositional act occupying the second turn of an adjacency pair (henceforth T2, following Muntigl and Turnbull, 1998). In the qualitative analysis, however, I will present and discuss excerpts from the corpus covering extended arguments.

2.2. Disagreement vs. corrective evaluation

This study analyzes disagreements taking place in the classroom. The "unmarked" (Cazden, 1988) mode of instruction is Recitation, which is usually equated with the "Triad Structure" (Lemke, 1982) of Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF), first described by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). In exchanges of IRF, the teacher initiates a question, followed by student response, which is followed, in turn, by teacher feedback. Researchers sometimes refer to this sequence as IRE, rather than IRF, where E stands for Evaluation (e.g., Mehan, 1979). Yet others (e.g. Nassaji and Wells, 2000; Wells, 1993; Wells, 1996) defined the third move as Follow-up, and argued that the distinction between Evaluation and Follow-up was significant. According to these latter researchers, Evaluation occurs when the teacher merely checks the students' knowledge (i.e., correct/incorrect). Follow-up, on the other hand, occurs when the teacher integrates the student's response in an attempt to further develop the discussion (Wells, 1993).

Numerous studies described the pervasiveness of the IRE sequence in mainstream classrooms (e.g. Applebee et al., 2003; Cazden, 1988; Galton et al., 1999; Mehan, 1979; Molinari et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2004). These studies addressed various questions related to IRE and its effects on discourse and learning. Research indicates that classroom discourse predominated by IRE does not leave much room for student initiation (Drew and Heritage, 1992). Waring (2009:817) argued that "chained IRFs. . . are almost impervious to restructuring, as one IRF makes the next conditionally relevant," forming what Schegloff (2007) referred to as "sequences of sequences".

¹ 'The 'work' individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others' (Locher and Watts, 2005:10).

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