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Journal of Pragmatics 44 (2012) 1554–1564

journal of PRAGMATICS

www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Disagreements, face and politeness

Maria Sifianou *

University of Athens, School of Philosophy, Faculty of English Studies, Panepistimioupoli Zographou, 157 84 Athens, Greece

Received 12 November 2011; received in revised form 6 March 2012; accepted 9 March 2012

To the memory of Christina Kakavá, a pioneer in research on disagreements.

Abstract

Disagreement can be defined as the expression of a view that differs from that expressed by another speaker. Yet, in the relevant literature, disagreement is mostly seen as confrontational and should thus be mitigated or avoided. In CA terms, it is a ''dispreferred'' second. Similarly, in earlier politeness theories, disagreement is seen to verge on impoliteness. In contrast, recent research has shown that disagreement need not be seen only in negative terms, that is, it may not necessarily result in conflict and impoliteness, but can be a sign of intimacy and sociability and may not destroy but rather strengthen interlocutors' relationships.

This paper suggests that disagreements are complex, multidirectional and multifunctional acts, which prevent straightforward labelling such as face-threatening/enhancing, (dis)preferred or (im)polite acts. There is inter- and intra-cultural variation depending on various contextual parameters. Significantly, interlocutors have personal traits and relational histories that predispose them to particular strategies and specific evaluations. The claim being disputed in any current interaction may have roots not just in previous turns of the same interaction but also in previous interactions and this should be taken into account when analysing discourse.

Keywords: (Dis)agreement; Preferred/dispreferred action; Face; Politeness; Relational history

1. Introduction

Disagreement can be defined as the expression of a view that differs from that expressed by another speaker. Yet, in the relevant literature, disagreement has mostly been seen as confrontational and should thus be mitigated or avoided. For instance, Waldron and Applegate, 1994 (quoted in Locher, 2004:94) define disagreement as ''a form of conflict . . . taxing communication events''. In CA terms, it is typically understood as a ''dispreferred'' second (Sacks, 1973/1987; Pomerantz, 1984), which ''is largely destructive for social solidarity'' (Heritage, 1984:268). Similarly, in earlier politeness theories (Brown and Levinson, 1978/1987; Leech, 1983), disagreement is seen to verge on impoliteness and should thus be avoided in the interest of interlocutors' 'face'. However, Schiffrin's (1984) classic work has reversed such views arguing that disagreement among friends can signal sociability rather than a breach of civility. Ensuing research has also shown that disagreement need not be seen only in negative terms, that is, it may not necessarily result in conflict and impoliteness, but can be a sign of intimacy and sociability (see, e.g., Tannen, 1984; Kakavá, 1993a, 2002; Corsaro and Maynard, 1996; Locher, 2004; Angouri and Tseliga, 2010) and may not destroy but rather strengthen interlocutors' relationships (Georgakopoulou, 2001).

* Tel.: +30 210 727 7809; fax: +30 210 727 7864.
E-mail address: msifian@enl.uoa.gr.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2012.03.009

The aim of this paper is to address some of the issues raised and to suggest that disagreement is a complex, multidirectional (i.e., may affect either or both aspects of both interlocutors' face) and multifunctional (i.e., may be a sign of hostility or affiliation) act. Consequently, it is both ambiguous and polysemous (Tannen, 1994, 2002), and its full understanding requires much more than single utterances or even complete exchanges since the source of a disagreement may be located beyond the current exchange. It thus renders context, including personal traits and relational histories, very significant for understanding its function.

Given the above, it is argued here that early CA research and politeness theories presented a rather restricted view of disagreements. On the one hand, early politeness theories concentrate primarily on single utterances and the effect disagreements have on the addressee's positive aspect of face. On the other hand, early CA work focuses on the internal structural organisation of turns and their sequential organisation in single interactions and sees disagreement as a ''dispreferred'' second, with the exception of certain turn types, such as compliments, where disagreement is a ''preferred'' second. As a ''dispreferred'' second, disagreement is frequently prefaced, softened and delayed in contrast to preferred actions which are structurally simple, explicit and typically immediate (Sacks, 1973/1987; Levinson, 1983; Pomerantz, 1984:65). Despite the usefulness of such research findings, these early theories do not seem to consider the fact that any current interaction may also draw on previous exchanges, something that may not be apparent to an outsider. Thus, it appears that such frameworks cannot account for the complexity of acts like disagreements (see section 3).

2. Setting the scene

As Myers (2004:112) observes, disagreement has acquired a bad name, being regarded as a kind of failure between interactants. For Pomerantz (1984:77) disagreement is dispreferred because disagreeing with one another is uncomfortable, unpleasant, difficult, risking threat, insult or offence, whereas agreeing with one another is comfortable, supportive, reinforcing, and perhaps sociable, since it demonstrates that interlocutors are like-minded. In his paper on the preference for agreement, Sacks (1973/1987:65) notes that this is not a matter of individual preference but rather an aspect of a formal apparatus, a possible property of the system. In other words, interlocutors design their utterances not according to personal preference but so that they will elicit agreement (see also Levinson, 1983:307; Atkinson and Heritage, 1984:53). Thus, for instance, if the speaker believes that the card has been posted to James, s/he will use an utterance like ''You've posted the card to James, haven't you?'' This turn design makes a positive response a preferred second action. If, however, the speaker believes that the card has not been posted, then an utterance such as ''You haven't posted the card to James, have you?'' shows a preference for a negative response. Despite this line of reasoning, which views preference as a purely structural concept, comments linking preference to social considerations are found even in early CA work. For instance, Sacks (1973/1987:69) notes that the preference for agreement may stem from social expectations, because as he says ''it is not that somebody or everybody psychologically does not like to disagree, but they may not like to disagree because they are supposed to not like to disagree; they are supposed to try to agree perhaps''. Thus even though the concept of preference in CA terms is conceptualised and analysed as a structural phenomenon, it is not entirely devoid of social considerations (see, e.g., Pomerantz at the beginning of this section). Atkinson and Heritage (1984:55) make social considerations explicit when they state that the institutionalised design features of preferred/dispreferred actions are oriented to maximising cooperation and to minimising conflict in interactions. Such views have been further elaborated in recent research (see, e.g., Lazaraton, 1997; Clayman, 2002; Heritage and Raymond, 2005; Robinson and Bolden, 2010), which links preference with the promotion of solidarity and affiliation and dispreference with the weakening of solidarity and disaffiliation. Such views imply or explicitly state face considerations (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984:56; Brown and Levinson, 1987:38; Lerner, 1996); in particular, the need to avoid face-threatening acts and ultimately conflict in interactions (see section 4).

As is well known, the notion of 'face' attracted scholarly attention especially through Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) politeness theory who (1987:114) also detected ''preference for agreement'' in their British English data.[1] They present a number of devices that interlocutors use to avoid disagreement or to concur superficially with the other speaker before sometimes voicing a strong contrary opinion to that expressed by the other. This aversion to disagreement appears so strong that, in some cultures at least, a social agreement principle has been suggested as underlying interaction (Yaeger-Dror, 2002). In contrast, Tannen (2002) notes the pervasiveness of ritualised adversativeness or agonism, in a wide array of social situations, such as contemporary western academic discourse since the 1990s. Chiu (2008:398) argues that in problem solving group activities disagreements (more than agreements) increase micro-creativity by stimulating attention and encouraging group members to consider more aspects of the situation from more perspectives (see also Angouri, this

[1] It is interesting to note here that despite Brown and Levinson's (1987:38–39) description of preference organisation as a structural phenomenon, they illustrate how face considerations appear to determine which of the two alternative seconds will be typically associated with the preferred format (see Bousfield, 2008:237).