

Managing disagreement in problem solving meeting talk

Jo Angouri^{*}

*Department of English, Linguistics and Communication, University of the West of England, Bristol, Frenchay Campus,
Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, United Kingdom*

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Abstract

Problem solving (PbS) talk has been associated with disagreement and conflict as interactants oppose each other's views and express diverse opinions. Although disagreement and conflict have been regarded in earlier work as potentially negative acts more recent work points to the importance of context and local practices instead of a priori categorizations of what the interactants perceive as un/acceptable linguistic behaviour. The paper draws on data from two projects on workplace discourse, one focusing on multinational companies situated in Europe and one on small/medium firms (SMEs). The dataset consists of recordings of meetings, ethnographic observations and interviews. The analysis of the data shows that 'deviating opinions' are not only 'acceptable' but also unmarked and they form an inherent part of the PbS process. At the same time linguistic behaviour perceived as face threatening or intentionally impolite is typically rare. The paper closes by drawing a theoretical distinction between *marked* and *unmarked* disagreement. The latter is perceived as task bound and does not pose a threat to the management of the meeting participants' complex identities and relationships.
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1. Introduction

Problem solving (PbS) is a key area of business activity directly related to the development of employees but also companies as a whole. PbS *talk* has been associated with disagreement as interactants introduce, negotiate and challenge diverse views and opinions. Disagreement is a "necessary part of the process of reaching agreement" (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997:193) and as such an everyday phenomenon in both everyday and workplace contexts. Despite its frequency however, disagreement has also been seen as a negative act both in socio/linguistic research and other areas of scholarship (e.g. business, organization studies, organizational psychology to name but few). Often directly related to conflict, disagreement has been presented as an act that may have repercussions for the interactants' relationships and the overall outcome of a task oriented event such as a business meeting. This stance has been problematized and researchers (e.g. Kakava, 1993) have argued that disagreement can also be the norm in different contexts or a highly desirable act. The two positions that have co-existed and still co-exist in the literature, disagreement as the 'norm' vs. disagreement as a negatively 'marked' act, raise important issues this paper seeks to address on the importance of the context of the interaction and the perceived appropriateness of disagreement in workplace talk in general and in PbS meetings in particular.

Disagreement was discussed in early politeness literature, with scholars suggesting that it can threaten the interlocutors' (positive) face (Brown and Levinson's, 1978/1987). In both Brown and Levinson's and Leech's (1983) seminal works it constitutes the direct opposite of agreement and an act to be avoided or mitigated. Disagreement has

^{*} Tel.: +44 117 3282397.

E-mail address: Jo.Angouri@uwe.ac.uk.

also been studied in relation to the notion of preference in influential conversation analytic work where it tends to be seen as dispreferred¹ (e.g. Pomerantz, 1984).

Disagreement has been construed negatively also from a management/organization theory point of view. As put by scholars “it is almost a truism that disagreement produces conflict” (Kennedy and Pronin, 2008:833). Hence it is still presented as a potentially negative phenomenon which can escalate in intensity and reach the ‘conflict threshold’. This linear view as well as the direct relationship between disagreement and conflict is reflected in definitions. As an illustration, conflict is, typically, defined as “an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities” (Rahim, 2011:16). From this point of view then, disagreement as an act can result in conflict between the interactants, a viewpoint that suggests long term negative repercussions in the interactants’ relationship.

At the same time, sociolinguistic research (e.g. Schiffrrin, 1984; Tannen, 1981) has also suggested, over 30 years ago, that disagreement can create intimacy between interlocutors. Schiffrrin’s influential ‘sociable argument’ concept, referring to exchanges “with the form of argument, but without the serious substance of argument” (1984:331) is a clear illustration of this. And Kakava (1993, 2002) has argued that disagreement can create closeness and solidarity. This body of work has foregrounded the importance of the context of the interaction and has shown that styles differ depending on the interlocutors’ experiences and expectations. In the same vein, according to recent research (e.g. Georgakopoulou, 2002; Bousfield and Locher, 2008; Angouri and Tseliga, 2010) disagreement is often perceived by interlocutors as appropriate, unmarked and aligned with ‘the way things are done’ in a particular context, pointing to the importance of local practices and norms instead of an *a priori* prescriptive approach to what is acceptable, allowed or potentially face/relationship threatening in a given interaction (Kakava, 1993, 2002).

Undoubtedly a range of factors may cause conflict between individuals or groups in the workplace or elsewhere; the view taken in this paper is that disagreement and conflict are not and should not be placed on a linear continuum with disagreement always being the antecedent. This evidently does not mean that disagreement cannot shift to a conflictual interaction. As Locher (2004:94) argued “the need to get one’s point across without seeming self-righteous or being injurious can cause friction”. Disagreement is not, however, an *a priori* negative act and the paper will distinguish between personal attacks and task related opposing views. Although there is a rich body of work (e.g. Mooney et al., 2007) distinguishing between the cognitive (task) and affective (emotional) facets of disagreement, the area still warrants further-research from a linguistic perspective.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to focus on disagreement in face to face meeting talk in two workplace environments and discuss how it is enacted locally drawing also on the meeting participants’ perceptions of its appropriateness. Special attention is paid to the power imbalance, the enactment of local knowledge as well as the strategies the interlocutors use to oppose each others’ views.

The paper is organized in seven sections. I start by discussing further the distinction between disagreement and conflict and then move to the characteristics of problem solving events and the meeting context. The following section is concerned with the method and data collection procedures. In the remaining sections, the discussion turns to the main findings and implications for further research.

2. From disagreement to conflict

Disagreement and conflict are conceptually related but the exact relationship between them is not always explicitly discussed. Conflict typically entails disagreement (e.g. Choi and Cho, 2011) and has been associated with factors ranging from personality traits (e.g. Bono et al., 2002) to characteristics of the team such as how well the members know each other, the size of the team and its geographical distribution among others (e.g. Hinds and Bailey, 2003). Although these studies have different agendas and foci,² what is common is the emphasis on the negative implications for the participants.

Particularly in the workplace, since conflict has strong negative connotations, an expected reaction for senior employees would be to have the skills to either pre-empt or manage it. Thomas (1976) identified a well known and still influential typology of conflict resolution strategies which captures a range of acts as follows: (a) dominating/competing, (b) avoiding, (c) accommodating, (d) compromising, and (e) collaborating/integrating (for a review, see also Thomas, 1992). These resolution styles have been widely discussed (e.g. Rahim, 1983) and applied in conflict research (e.g. Brewer et al., 2002).

However, Critical Theorists (cf. Deetz, 2003 for a discussion) remain sceptical of attempts to manage and/or quickly resolve conflict, especially in the context of complex workplace systems, which are the focus here. By focusing on conflict

¹ CA scholars have extensively discussed the concept of preference in interaction. A full discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper (see Kotthoff, 1993; Gruber, 1998).

² A review on conflict studies goes beyond the aims of this paper and the discussion will not distinguish between different types of conflict.

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