Strategies used to mitigate disagreement in English as foreign language among Iranians

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Abstract: This study aims at investigating the linguistic markers which are common in mitigating the speech act of disagreement in the context of academic discourse. Taking speech act perspective and drawing upon the taxonomy of mitigating strategies by Rees-Miller (2000), the study described and exemplified the most frequent strategies highly-proficient Iranian English users employ to mitigate their disagreements. The results showed that 'partial agreement' and 'positive comments' were the two most frequent strategies.

1. Introduction

This study introduces linguistic variations in the production of the mitigated disagreements from the speech act perspective. Particularly, it explores the ways highly-proficient Iranian speakers of English as a foreign language soften the speech act of disagreement. Drawing upon the taxonomy provided by Rees-Miller (2000) for the analysis of disagreements, the study highlights on the semantic formulas which are implemented by Iranian L2 proficient speakers of English to disagree with each other in the context of academic discourse.

Disagreement is defined as "an oppositional stance (verbal or nonverbal) towards an antecedent verbal (or nonverbal) action" (Kakava', 1993: 36). In the course of arguments, disagreements occur both as a second and first part of the adjacency pair. Studies on face and politeness have assigned disagreement face threatening characteristics. Brown and Levinson (1987) classify „avoid disagreement" in their politeness strategies. Studies in Conversation analysis have argued that disagreements are dispreferred conversational action (Pomerantz, 2004).

In some kinds of institutional talk, however, disagreements constitute the mainstream of talk (Locher, 2004). Disagreements in those contexts function as a means to defend the participants professional status and well-being. In academia, the communicative events of dissertation defense (DD) sessions, departmental meetings, and scholarly seminars are the ones subjected to disagreements. In such communicative events, disagreements are an integral part of the discourse, thus its occurrence is inevitable. The talk in such discourses are often characterized as academic/institutional talk (Drew &Heritage, 1992), whereby interactants in

discourse usually pursue their institutional goals, which are not always in sheer conformity with their interactional goals (Kasper, 1990). In this discourse, disagreements have close bearing on the participants" professional status, and are expected to be as preferred as dispreferred at least in the interactions.

However, participants usually employ certain strategies to mitigate their disagreements (Brown and Levinson, 1987); that is, they try to soften the probable face threat which might be incurred to the addressee due to the production of the speech act of the disagreement. Rees-Miller (2000), from a politeness theory perspective provides a taxonomy for the analysis of disagreements, which includes both mitigated and unmitigated disagreements. This study, however, adopts the strategies which are used to mitigate the disagreements. Mitigation is a common practice in academic discourses. Some form of mitigation like hedging is even associated with academic genre in research. In the next section, the participants and the mitigating strategies of Rees-Miller (2000) are introduced.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants of the study are highly-proficient English users, who are also academic and graduate student members of some Iranian universities. Their disagreement behavior has been recorded in different academic settings, mainly, dissertation defense sessions, seminars and departmental meetings.

2.2 Data Analysis

In order to analyze data, first the linguistic utterances which fit the definition of disagreement (Kakava, 1993) were selected. Another colleague, majoring in Linguistics, also checked the coding. Next, using the taxonomy of Rees-Miller, the disagreements were divided into their constituent strategies. Five of the strategies of Rees-Miller were found to be common in the data. They are 'positive comments', 'partial agreement', 'I think/I don't know', 'verbs of uncertainty', and 'downtoners'.

3. Results

Generally, 75 disagreement acts were identifies. This number constituted 190 mitigation strategies. This means that some disagreements represented more than one strategy. The common strategies are presented according to their frequency.

3.1. Partial agreement

Partial agreement was the most frequent (N= 60) strategy in mitigating disagreements. The discourse connective 'but' was the most frequent linguistic device in partial agreements. The following example is taken from a defense session, in which both speakers (S1 and S2) use 'but' to disagree with each other.

Example 1: Data from dissertation defense

S1: but computers cannot produce tables we produce them
S2: but they have an outcome don't they?

In the above example, the partial agreement is implicit. 'But' may also be used after an explicit partial agreement. This explicit agreement can be in the form of repetition of part of the speaker's utterance, or using a verb like agree, use of yes and that's right, and so on, as in the following examples.

Example 2: Data from dissertation defense
yes but this is true for any language study

Example 3: Data from dissertation defense
of course i agree that my study suffers from its own limitations especially in terms of the size
but in some way my corpora was bigger

Example 4: Data from seminar
that's right there are ways to do that

3.2 positive comments

Positives comments are usually in the form of appreciation, thanking and expression of good feeling towards something. It is very common and can be used as an effective mitigating strategy in the realization of disagreement. The participants of this study used this strategy 59 times.

Example5: Data from dissertation defenses
that is perfect i like innovation but there are degrees of innovation you know

3.3 Downtoners

There were 31 cases of downtoners in the data. The most frequent downtoners were 'kind of', 'sort of', 'possibly', 'you know', 'well', 'maybe' and 'probably'. The following example reflects a downtoner 'you know'.

Example 6: Data from meeting
but among the very advanced students you know i have seen such mistakes you know

In the following example, 'well' has been used to soften the disagreement.

Example 7: Data from seminar
S1: no i have not rejected
S2: well you say they are in sharp contrast ok

3.4. I think/I don't know

One way to mitigate a disagreement is to reduce the possible commitment to the proposition of the utterance by using 'I think' or I don't know and the like. The data favoured 25 instances of this. The following is an example.

Example 8: data from dissertation defenses
but i think that change i mean change is inevitable

3.5. Verbs of uncertainty

The use of verbs which express the speakers' uncertainty about the veracity of the utterance occurred 10 times in the data.

Example 9: Data from departmental meeting
It seems to me we're a bit behind other departments in this respect

3.6 Questions

Questions enjoyed the frequency of 5 in the data. The most common mitigating question is expressed in the negative question 'don't you think that' as in the following example:

Example 10: Data from dissertation defenses
Don't you think that your data is a bit insufficient to substantiate such an aim

4. Conclusion

In this paper, six very common mitigating strategies used to soften the probable harsh effect of disagreements were described and exemplified. Given that disagreements are face threatening by nature, the deployment of linguistic

markers to mitigate them seems quite salient in their realizations. This is especially the case in academic discourse, because academics find it difficult to bluntly disagree with each other. It should not mean that there are not unmitigated disagreements in the academic environment. Definitely, unmitigated disagreement may be just as frequent as mitigated ones due to the nature of some academic speech events. However, this study focused only on the mitigated disagreements. Future research may want to explore all kinds of disagreements in such contexts.

Acknowledgment

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