

Politeness strategies and power relations in disagreement

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Abstract

The speech act of disagreement is one of the fairly neglected areas of research in the Iranian context. The present study seeks to investigate this inherently threatening act by young male and female Farsi speakers under gender and power differential contexts. To collect the needed data one hundred participants (50 males and 50 females) randomly selected from among a population of undergraduate and graduate students of Isfahan and Najafabad universities were asked to complete a discourse completion test (DCT) designed by the researchers. The respondents were to read six natural situations, and react to them via making disagreements. As the major focus of the study was the role that gender and power play in the application of politeness strategies, the participants were expected to disagree with two higher power interlocutors (one male and one female), two peers (one male and one female) and two addressees with lower power status (one male and one female). In order to analyze the units of disagreement, Muntigl and Turnbull's taxonomy (1995) was employed. Students' responses were further compared with Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies. The results revealed that although both males and females are concerned about the power status of interlocutors and try to apply the appropriate politeness strategies in their disagreements, females are more cautious even when there is a high degree of solidarity.

Keywords: speech act; disagreement; power; strategies of politeness

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1. Introduction

A novel view of speech is to investigate how it is used to achieve functional goals. Within this view speeches are employed as instruments to perform varying actions such as making apology, giving thanks, expressing disagreement, making requests, etc. (Yule, 1996, p.46); however, as some are by nature face threatening, politeness strategies can be used to soften the threat to the face of interlocutors (Locher, 2004).

Speech act of disagreement as one of the least attended among other types of speech act is an inherently face-threatening verbal behavior in which people can show their dissatisfaction; therefore application of politeness strategies is vital for maintaining face. It is evident that degree of politeness could be a variable under the effects of social factors including gender and power (Liu, 2004). Power as the major player in the process of selecting strategies has been defined in different ways; Brown and Levinson (1987, p.77) for example assert that “[p]ower is an asymmetrical social dimension of relative power”. But for Liu (2004) power means *status* in which professors, administrators, and students are on a hierarchy from powerful to powerless.

Gender as another influential factor for which relevant strategies are applied, has aroused argument among researchers significantly; It is a widespread notion that in almost all cultures gender makes a difference in how power is negotiated, so the current study aims to deal with the role of both in given contexts of speech. The complex effect of the two social variables could be examined to display how norms of politeness are applied according to the context of conversations.

2. Literature Review

Recently the areas of communicative competence and speech act have received special attention; however, research on face threatening speech acts in Iranian context has been rather scant specifically dealing with disagreement which poses threat to positive face primarily. Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) and Scollon and Scollon (1995) have attracted a good deal of attention on the part of research on the speech act of disagreement. Whenever performing the FTA is unavoidable, people must choose between performing the act in the most direct and efficient way (i.e. on record) or trying to lessen the effect of it (FTA) on the face of the hearer (i.e. doing it off record); type of the strategy used strongly depends on the degree of the seriousness of the FTA which will be determined via consideration of the social situation (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The relative power of the addressee, the degree of imposition and the social distance that exists between the speaker and the addressee are the main points to estimate the degree of the seriousness of an FTA. As Scollon and Scollon (1995) put it communication breakdowns take place as a result of violating the pragmatic rules, therefore as noted by Simin et al. (2014) "the language proficiency does not guarantee the communicative efficiency" (p. 72) to produce socially appropriate utterances, linguistic and pragmatic knowledge must be present at the same time

Rees-Miller (2000) in his article "Power, severity, and context in disagreement" investigated the (disagreement) expressions which were used in the academic talks and university courses in the United States of America. The results of the study revealed that positive politeness strategies were mostly used at the times that professors wanted to disagree with their students and not with peers of the same rank, also students never use positive politeness strategies while disagreeing with their professors.

In a cross cultural study by Dogancay–Aktuna and Kamisli (1996) native speakers of Turkish and American English were compared in terms of the discourse strategies they use. The study revealed that status difference which was an important factor in the American setting was not a significant one in the Turkish work place interaction. The researchers also observed that Americans were more careful about using initial positive remarks and politeness markers to redress their disagreements.

Parvaresh and Eslami rasekh (2009) investigated the performance of young Iranian women can be affected by the level of solidarity and deference which exists in the context of conversation. Leech's classification of illocutionary functions was used to reveal that when young women disagree with males the considerations of deference might override those of solidarity but when their addressee is of the same sex they sometimes use the conflictives which have the most impolite intention. While, Behnam and Niroomand (2011) used a proficiency test to divide the participants in to two groups (Intermediate, Upper-Intermediate) and then data were collected via a DCT. The study suggested a mutual relation between politeness strategies in showing disagreement to addressees with different power status; more importantly, as even the performance of the learners with a high level of proficiency was far from that of the native speakers, the researchers concluded that L2 learners must be aware of second language socio-cultural constraints as well as grammatical rules to have a successful communication.

The need for further research on the two influential factors of power and gender could make the rational of this study. The combined effect of power and gender in comparable contexts will be a new approach to how the two genders compare in a traditionally viewed male dominant society of Iran. This study can be seen as a contribution to fill the gap.

3. Methodology of the study

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the effect of power in observing conventions of politeness in comparable contexts of discourse?
2. How do male and female Persian speakers compare in choosing disagreement strategies?
3. What differences in strategy use could be expected as a result of gender?

3.1 Participants

One hundred native speakers of Persian, including 50 males and 50 females who have been selected randomly from the undergraduate and graduate (i.e. BA and MA) students of Isfahan and Najafabad Universities took part in the study. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 26 and they were from different regions of Iran. The population was chosen from a larger number of participants whose data were screened based on our judgment of stereotypical performance of speakers.

3.2 Instruments

A Discourse Completion Test (DCT) (appendix B) which consisted of six discourse situations was presented to the participants to demonstrate how they disagree with two higher power statuses (one male and one female), two peers (one male and one female) and two lower status contexts (one male and one female).

3.3 Data collection

After having checked DCT employed as the instrument for collecting disagreement data via conducting a pilot study on 20 subjects similar to the target group, all 100 participants of the original study were asked to fill in a discourse completion test with their views of what they would orally produce in the given contexts. The situations were specifically designed for eliciting data representing the role of power and gender in separate as well as in a combined effect.

3.4 Data analysis

The participants' responses were analyzed in four steps. First, the total number of the valid responses was

determined via discarding the invalid ones; second, Muntigl and Turnbolls' (1998) taxonomy introducing five types of disagreements i.e. Irrelevancy Claims (IC), Challenges (CH), Contradictions (CT), Counterclaims (CC), and combination of contradictions followed by counter claims was used to identify the possible relationship between power and disagreement realizations; third Brown and Levinson's taxonomy (1987) was used for analyzing the politeness strategies; and fourth the politeness strategies of male and female participants were compared.

4. Results

As the respondents were supposed to read the six natural scenarios of the DCT within which gender, setting, social distance between the interlocutors and their status relative to each other were specified; we predicted results agreeable with the effect of power on impoliteness and gender to be reflected as representing lower power status of the females. In this part, the findings of the study relevant to each of these factors will be presented and discussed.

Situation 1

The Chairman of the company you work for planned a meeting to justify employees in connection with a workshop on modern methods of marketing; at the end of the meeting she emphasizes the benefits the workshop will have for the company, but because of the high costs of organizing and the economic status of the company you entirely disagree with her opinions, how will you express your opposition?

In this situation inconsistency between the powers of interlocutors exists, as the one the speaker is disagreeing with is of a higher power level due to her position. The data elicited displayed a clear effect of the addressee's power on formulating the expression of disagreement. Table one summarizes the frequencies of different types of disagreement units by males and females.

Table 1

Disagreement to the chairman of the company

Types of disagreement	Frequencies	
	Males	Females
1. Irrelevancy claims	0	0
2. Challenges - e.g. Do you really think that organizing a workshop would be a wise thing to do in this situation?	12%	6%
3. Contradictions - e.g. Honestly, I completely disagree with your opinion according to the current status of the company.	30%	26%
4. Counterclaims - e.g. Your opinions were always helpful, but do you not think that it would be better to think more about this issue?	24%	30%
5. Counterclaims followed by contradictions - e.g. Because of the current status of the company, I do not agree with your opinion, but perhaps you are right.	26%	28%
6. Silence	8%	10%

This tabulation shows that female respondents prefer the indirect ways of doing the threatening act of disagreement while disagreeing with a higher status, but something even more interesting is that 8 percent of males and 10 percent of females said they would remain silent and would not express their opposition.

Situation 2

You are sitting in Dr. Omid Kalani's class who is one of the most exacting masters in your college; he describes the theories that have been obsolete for several years and declares that these are completely credible and so far pundits did not raise any alternative theory, given that you have had extensive studies in this area, how do you express your opposition?

This situation seems to be just like the previous one, as here the same inconsistency exists between the

powers of interlocutors, but the major point which makes the difference is the gender of the speaker in scenarios, in the first situation participants must disagree with a female while it is exactly the opposite for the second one, table two displays the types and frequencies of disagreement expressions.

Table 2

Disagreement to the professor

Types of disagreement	Frequencies	
	Males	Females
1. Irrelevancy claims	0	0
2. Challenges - e.g. Professor, daringly are you sure that the same points have been mentioned in the recently published books?	14%	2%
3. Contradictions - e.g. Professor, I think that the point you just mentioned is completely false, because I've done a lot of studies in this field.	42%	18%
4. Counterclaims - e.g. Professor, you always perfectly discuss the materials; but I think in this case it should be referred to the most recent sources.	18%	46%
5. Counterclaims followed by contradictions - e.g. Professor, I disagree with your opinion according to my studies, but still I may be wrong.	20%	14%
6. Silence	6%	18%

This table shows somehow similar results to the previous one, as in this situation the female respondents were more conservative than the male ones, but an interesting finding apart from the silence percentage is the attention that both male and female respondents pay to the gender of their addressees; as when we compare the first two tables we can easily uncover that gender was playing a major role in both of the situations.

Situation3

You've decided to leave work for two to three hours before the end of working hours, at the same time, Mrs. Kamali one of your colleagues comes to your room and after explaining her schedule picks, starts talking about the easiness of your job and says: the recent case which was handed over to you was just a piece of cake, but because of the difficulties you had while dealing with that case, you completely disagree with her, how do you express your opposition?

In this situation, the interlocutors are status equal; table three summarizes the types and frequencies of the disagreement expressions.

Table 3

Disagreement to the colleague

Types of disagreement	Frequencies	
	Males	Females
1. Irrelevancy claims - e.g. So what? What do you want to prove?	0	10%
2. Challenges - e.g. What you say is unfair.	24%	14%
3. Contradictions - e.g. Not at all, my work has its own difficulties too.	28%	22%
4. Counterclaims - e.g. Maybe you are right, sorry; I am in a hurry to go.	32%	20%
5. Counterclaims followed by contradictions - e.g. It is not what you say, but there is no reason to debate as everyone has his own opinion.	16%	34%
6. Silence	0	0

In this situation the degree of solidarity between the interlocutors was more than the first two situations, and gender as a major player had its influence on the respondents; so it can be said that the percentages of silence and difference that exists between the frequencies of expressions used by male and female respondents are the two major points of this table.

Situation 4

You are discussing with your friends courses of the next semester during the break between two classes;

suddenly, Mr. Karimi, one of your classmates, says something about the difficulty of the courses; note that a few days ago friends who are studying in the courses you are to pass next term tell you exactly the opposite of what he says, how do you express your opposition? Just like the first and the second situations within which gender was the determining factor; this situation and situation three seem to be the similar, as here the interlocutors are status equal, table four will display the reality about the frequency with which the disagreement expressions were employed.

Table 4

Disagreement to the classmate

Types of disagreement	Frequencies	
	Males	Females
1. Irrelevancy claims	0	0
2. Challenges - e.g. How do you know? From whom did you get it?	42%	8%
3. Contradictions - e.g. You're wrong because I heard exactly the opposite of your sayings from guys of the upper terms.	34%	22%
4. Counterclaims - e.g. Maybe you are right.	6%	36%
5. Counterclaims followed by contradictions - e.g. I do not think so, but different people have different ideas.	18%	26%
6. Silence	0	8%

Just like the situation three the degree of solidarity was more than the levels in the first two situations; however, although both males and females tend to be more cautious disagreeing with the opposite sex, females try harder in order not to threaten the face of their addresses.

Situation 5

You've decided to spend some time outdoors with your family; suddenly your little sister suggests that you go to the park. But you prefer to go to the cinema and watch the recently released movie, how do you express your opposition?

Similar to situations one and two inconsistency is observed here; however, in this situation it is the speaker who possesses higher power status.

Table 5

Disagreement to the younger sister

Types of disagreement	Frequencies	
	Males	Females
1. Irrelevancy claims	0	0
2. Challenges - e.g. Why not the movies, park is very boring.	24%	18%
3. Contradictions - e.g. I completely disagree.	36%	30%
4. Counterclaims - e.g. We will go to the park, but not today because happy we want everyone to be.	14%	28%
5. Counterclaims followed by contradictions - e.g. I disagree, why not a place which can make everyone happy?	26%	24%
6. Silence	0	0

As can be seen because of the solidarity that exists in this situation both male and female respondents preferred the direct way of expressing their opposition, but still the female respondents were the ones that paid more attention to the face needs of their addressees.

Situation 6

You are studying sensitive documents in your room; at the same time the serviceman of company enters and starts talking about the new boss, he says: the boss is a bad-tempered person with whom you cannot come to terms at all, but because of your own interactions with the boss and what you have heard from other employees

you completely disagree with him, how do you express your opposition?

In this last situation, there exists power inconsistency and gender is playing the major role. Table six will reveal the reality about the responses of the participants.

Table 6

Disagreement to the serviceman

Types of disagreement	Frequencies	
	Males	Females
1. Irrelevancy claims	0	0
2. Challenges - e.g. Why do you say so? Did you see any special behavior from him?	16%	10%
3. Contradictions - e.g. I do not agree at all, as I myself met him before.	28%	22%
4. Counterclaims - e.g. Perhaps you are right, but as he has just started the job we have to wait and see what happens.	26%	34%
5. Counterclaims followed by contradictions - e.g. I don't think so, but everyone has his/her own opinion.	24%	20%
6. Silence	6%	14%

Although situations five and six are somehow similar, the degree of solidarity was variable in them; so it can be seen that in this situation both male and female respondents were more concerned with norms in expressing their oppositions.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

As Scollon and Scollon (1995) put it, violating the pragmatic norms of politeness is the main cause of conversational breakdowns; therefore, attention to the effect of social factors such as power and gender is the key to appropriate speech. The current study on politeness strategies seeks to explore the influences that gender and power may have on the choice of disagreement strategies in real life contexts.

The study indicates that female respondents tend to be more indirect and less assertive than male respondents, as they use remarkably less confrontational strategies in nearly all the comparable contexts. Overall, two similarities are observed: First, both groups of respondents tend to be non-confrontational when they express their disagreement to an addressee of a higher status; second the non-confrontational strategies are most preferred by both groups of respondents whenever expressing opposition to the opposite sex.

In conclusion, it can be said the Islamic culture of Iran may be the main cause for the conservative behavior of male and female respondents when interacting in contexts of opposite genders. In this way it was found that both male and female respondents use confrontational strategies more frequently whenever expressing their oppositions to a person with the same sex which could be explained with regards to the effect of social solidarity which can potentially overrule the effect of power and gender differences.

5.1 Pedagogical implications

Bearing in mind the findings of the present study, the following pedagogical implications are made. Firstly, it should be noted that the speech patterns within the mother tongue of individuals (Persian) must be taken into account while developing new materials for the target language (English). Secondly, instructors can compare and contrast the speech patterns of the two languages in order to find the best way for presenting the materials. Moreover, it can be claimed that consideration of the differences will lead to better results, as the trained individuals are more communicatively competent.

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Appendix A

The English Version of the Discourse Completion Test

Thank you very much for your time and help.

Your Age: __ Gender: __ Hometown: __

Six scenarios are described below in which you are expected to **Disagree** with the speaker on different occasions.

How would you respond? Please write out what you are to SAY in real life scenarios.

1. The Chairman of the company you work for planned a meeting to justify employees in connection with a workshop on modern methods of marketing; at the end of the meeting she emphasizes the benefits the workshop will have for the company, but because of the high costs of organizing and the economic status of the company you entirely disagree with her opinions, how will you express your opposition?

2. You are sitting in Dr. Omid Kalani's class who is one of the most exacting masters in your college; he describes the theories that have been obsolete for several years and declares that these are completely credible and so far pundits did not raise any alternative theory, given that you have had extensive studies in this area, how do you express your opposition?

3. You've decided to leave work for two to three hours before the end of working hours, at the same time, Mrs. Kamali one of your colleagues comes to your room and after explaining her schedule picks, starts talking about the easiness of your job and says: the recent case which was handed over to you was just a piece of cake, but because of the difficulties you had while dealing with that case, you completely disagree with her, how do you express your opposition?

4. You are discussing with your friends courses of the next semester during the break between two classes; suddenly, Mr. Karimi, one of your classmates, says something about the difficulty of the courses; note that a few days ago friends who are studying in the courses you are to pass next term tell you exactly the opposite of what he says, how do you express your opposition?

5. You've decided to spend some time outdoors with your family; suddenly your little sister suggests that you go to the park. But you prefer to go to the cinema and watch the recently released movie, how do you express your opposition?

6. You are studying sensitive documents in your room; at the same time the serviceman of company enters and starts talking about the new boss, he says: the boss is a bad-tempered person with whom you cannot come to terms at all, but because of your own interactions with the boss and what you have heard from other employees you completely disagree with him, how do you express your opposition?

