Theorising disagreement

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Abstract

This collection of papers on disagreement adds new theoretical and methodological insights. It brings together interest in opposition in discourse with research on relational issues, traditionally discussed in work on identity construction and im/politeness research. We propose that the following observations in an attempt to systematically approach the understanding of disagreement: a) expressing opposing views is an everyday phenomenon; b) certain practices are prone to contain disagreement so that this speech act is expected rather than the exception; for example, they are in fact a *sine qua non* in decision making and problem solving talk in either ever day or professional contexts; other practices and contexts are less tolerant of the expression of disagreement; c) disagreeing cannot be seen as an a priori negative act; communities and groups of people have developed different norms over time which influence how disagreement is perceived and enacted; d) as in all language usage, the *ways* in which disagreement is expressed – and not only its occurrence per se – will have an impact on relational issues (face-aggravating, face-maintaining, face-enhancing); at the same time, expectations about how disagreement is valued in a particular practice will influence what forms participants choose. Against this backdrop, the aim of this special issue is to revisit the existing body of research on disagreement and to probe further in a variety of contexts in five papers and an epilogue to contribute to the debate of the impact of the context/medium on the interaction, the role of im/politeness in disagreements, the notion of 'appropriateness' in talk and the theorising of disagreement in general.

1. Setting the scene: aim and scope

'Disagreement' is often used in the socio-pragmatic literature as an umbrella notion encompassing a range of acts, at the antipode of agreement, which vary considerably in relation to their perceived effect on interaction. Apart from being a technical term, disagreement has also clear first order connotations; we all do 'disagreement' in our daily lives at home and at work and in some contexts it is more expected and appreciated than in others. What we understand as disagreement, the way we do it and the force of our utterances depend, to a significant extent, on who we are with, what it is we disagree about, the repercussions this may have on our relationship with others and the norms of the communities of which we are members. Despite the significance and complexity of the phenomenon, disagreement is not always 'unpacked' and theorised in relevant research. Accordingly, a collection of papers on disagreement that adds new theoretical and methodological insights is timely and needed. In particular, our motivation for this special issue derives from the fact that the study of disagreement brings together interest in opposition in discourse with research on relational issues, traditionally discussed in work on identity construction and im/politeness research.

We can approach disagreement from a content (i.e., what is being disagreed about), the linguistic rendition and relational perspective. From a *content* point of view, Kakava (1993:36) defines disagreement as "an oppositional stance

(verbal or non-verbal) to an antecedent verbal (or non-verbal) action". Hence disagreement stands in relation to a previously taken position and is in opposition rather than in agreement with it. Theoretically, any point of view could be followed by an act of disagreement expressed by another party. However, any view on the speech act of 'disagreeing' would be incomplete if we did not include an analysis of how it is embedded in the speech activity (cf. Gumperz, 1992), and how this speech activity is part of wider discourses. For example, there are activities that call for disagreement (decision-making; debates) and others where the conversation floor is not open or shared and expressing disagreement would not typically be expected (ritualised wedding ceremonies; formal reporting presentations). There are activities where the interactants are on an equal footing to express different points of views, while in others there are constraints which the interactants need to negotiate and challenge.

Once we turn our focus to *form*, i.e., the ways in which disagreement is expressed, we are faced with variation from direct and/or explicit to mitigated and/or implied renditions. The literature also reports on partial disagreements (Pomerantz, 1984). These forms of disagreement can then be studied in their situated context through the lens of interpersonal pragmatics[1] (cf. Locher and Graham, 2010). This *relational* view allows us to focus not only on the content of the disagreement, the interactional order of the exchange,

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[1] In Locher and Graham (2010:2) it is suggested that the ''term 'interpersonal pragmatics' is used to designate examinations of interactions between people that both affect and are affected by their understandings of culture, society, and their own and others' interpretations'' and that ''discuss topics and themes that are relevant to the study of the interpersonal side of language in use''.

and the linguistic forms in which disagreement is rendered, but also on how disagreement is used to negotiate relationships through relational work[2] (Locher and Watts, 2005). In other words, as linguists we are not only interested in the presence or absence of disagreement but in observing how disagreement is enacted and achieved and what the effects of the different renditions might be. Ultimately we study whether the linguistic form we observe (for example direct or mitigated disagreement) will contribute to face-aggravating, face-maintaining or face-enhancing *effects*.

Previous work has shown that 'disagreement' constitutes a rich area in the study of interpersonal interaction as it entails opposing views and its enactment does pose a challenge for the interactants if they intend to "get one's point across without seeming self-righteous or being injurious" (Locher, 2004:94). This challenge is characterised by interpersonal concerns, having to do with issues of politeness, impoliteness, and appropriateness, and with issues of identity construction more generally, i.e., appearing as a person who can make a point or stand up for his or her opinion and the factual matter over which the dispute takes place.[3] In this respect, Kotthoff's (1993) finding that people might move from mitigated to straightforward disagreement during an emerging disagreement episode is enlightening. Kotthoff argues that within the same interaction, there might be a frame shift from the expectation to mitigate (and to save the addressee's face) to the expectation that a continued mitigation might be face-threatening to the person who disagrees. This shift is triggered because the person who disagrees and wants to avoid giving the impression that he/she is not convinced of his/ her point of view.

Some literature also reports on practices in which disagreement, typically related to confrontation and conflict, is evaluated as having negative effects. Pomerantz (1984) is a case in point and associates disagreement with the notion of preference from a conversation analytic perspective – with agreement typically being the preferred act (Levinson, 1983). However, the oppositional stance of disagreement need not be seen as 'black or white', either negatively or positively marked. Work on oral (dis)agreement has also shown that it may be the norm for the participants in a given context (e.g., Tannen, 1981, 1998). Schiffrin's work on 'sociable argument' referring to exchanges "with the form of argument, but without the serious substance of argument" (1984:331) is a good illustration of this. In the same vein, Tannen and Kakava's (1992) research has provided further evidence of how disagreement can be used to create intimacy and Georgakopoulou (2001:1897) has suggested that "the occurrence of disagreements does not seem to pose a threat to the participants' relation" in her data, casual conversations between young speakers in her study. In high stakes contexts, such as the workplace, disagreement has often been construed negatively in business scholarship but also in popular literature providing advice on 'how to' handle disagreement (e.g., Scott, 2008). In this context disagreement is represented as an act to be skilfully managed or avoided because of adverse consequences on team cohesiveness and employees' relationships.

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[2] Relational work is defined as ''the 'work' individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others'' (Locher and Watts, 2005:10).

[3] For the link between relational work and identity construction see Locher (2008, 2011).

Disagreement at work is also regarded by researchers (e.g., Rahim, 2011) as a prelude to conflict directly associated with negotiation of power between the interactants. However, research in the same areas has again argued that disagreement can be appropriate, beneficial (e.g., Tjosvold, 2008) and may not necessarily result in damaging the interlocutors' rapport. It is indeed the case that disagreement can be a valued activity and has been associated with creativity and 'better' quality decisions. In the same vein, research on business negotiation and problem solving (Gray, 2001) suggests that disagreement is an inherent and unmarked part of the process as the interactants negotiate and challenge opposing views in the workplace

(Angouri and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011). These important and valid findings do not deny the fact that there are indeed conflictual contexts, where expressing different points of view is not always associated with positive connotations. Work on opposing views in conflict talk was conducted, for example by Grimshaw (1990), Muntigl and Turnbull (1998), and their work shows that the substance and enactment of disagreement is of major significance in how the speakers' utterances are perceived by the interactants.

Further to this, the rich body of work on stylistic variation has highlighted factors influencing the speakers' interactional choices particularly in relation to their backgrounds, experiences and expectations. As disagreement is not an a priori negatively marked act, variation in 'how it is done' points to the importance of context, local norms and practices regarding what is acceptable, allowed or preferred in a given interaction. The enactment of disagreement has also been associated with 'culture' more globally. For example, Paramasivam (2007) in a study on negotiations between Malay and Japanese speakers argued that 'culture' (understood as nationality) is related to the ways in which people tolerate or handle diverging opinions in interaction. This is a, still, widespread view in intercultural communication research in general (see also Ting-Toomey, 1994 for an influential paper on intercultural conflict) and in studies that attempt to capture 'culture' and to describe its constituting elements. From this point of view, disagreement or conflict resolution has been associated with notions such as 'concern for self' vs. 'concern for others' (e.g., Gabrielidis et al., 1997) corresponding to notions of individualism and collectivism (Hall, 1966; Triandis, 1995). Although generalisations on 'culture' that seem to apply to large (national, social or other) groups, presented as homogenous, can be limiting and limited (see Angouri and Glynos, 2009), what is important to note is that this work has foregrounded variation in what people understand as 'disagreement' and subsequently variation in the strategies used to either enact or handle it.

To summarise, the following observations are offered in an attempt to systematically approach the understanding of disagreement:

a) expressing opposing views is an everyday phenomenon;
b) certain practices are prone to contain disagreement so that this speech act is expected rather than the exception; for example, they are in fact a *sine qua non* in decision making and problem solving talk in either ever day or professional contexts; other practices and contexts are less tolerant of the expression of disagreement;

c) disagreeing cannot be seen as an a priori negative act; communities and groups of people have developed different norms over time which influence how disagreement is perceived and enacted;

d) as in all language usage, the *ways* in which disagreement is expressed – and not only its occurrence per se – will have an impact on relational issues (face-aggravating, face-maintaining, face-enhancing); at the same time, expectations about how disagreement is valued in a particular practice will influence what forms participants choose.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this special issue is to revisit the existing body of research on disagreement and to probe further in a variety of contexts by continuing the discussion initiated during the panel on "Disagreement on- and offline" at the *Fifth International Symposium on Politeness*, held at the University of Basel in July 2010, where drafts of the papers were first presented. The papers offer a theoretical overview of the connection between disagreement and politeness/relational work research (Sifianou), the discussion of sociable, politic or unmarked disagreement (Angouri, Marra, Bolander), conflictual disagreement and the connection to emotional display (Langlotz and Locher) as well as a discussion of the interactional order of the observed disagreement (all papers). Taken together, the papers contribute to the debate of the impact of the context/medium on the interaction, the role of im/politeness in disagreements, the notion of 'appropriateness' in talk and the theorising of disagreement in general.

2. Disagreement on and off line: from theory to empirical findings and back

The first paper by Maria Sifianou takes a theoretical perspective and reviews the existing literature on disagreement and their connection to facework/relational work. She especially highlights that disagreements can be perceived and constructed as face-threatening as well as face-enhancing. As a consequence, disagreement can be a sign of intimacy and sociability as well as conflict and impoliteness, and should therefore be labelled as both "ambiguous and polysemous" (Tannen, 1994, 2002). Sifianou points out the intricate negotiations of face concerns, politeness issues and conflict and especially argues that researchers should cast their net wider when analysing disagreement since the source of disagreement might in fact lie outside the observed data stretch that is available for analysis. The discussion raises important methodological questions for the study of the 'here and now' of talk in relation to the participants' previous discourse histories. In combination with the knowledge of the "personal traits and relational histories" of the interactants, this more global understanding of the speech event is fundamental for a better understanding of the function of disagreement. Sifianou's review of current and past work sets the stage for the ensuing four papers, which combine theoretical points of interest with empirical analysis.

The first two empirical papers work with data collected in face-to-face contexts, while the second two deal with computer-mediated interactions. The papers by Jo Angouri and Meredith Marra report on data from workplace contexts in Europe and New Zealand

respectively. The workplace provides the context where our professional identities are constructed and negotiated particularly in task oriented events, such as in business meetings. In her contribution on "Managing Disagreement in Problem Solving Meeting Talk", Jo Angouri discusses problem solving as a key business activity. The chapter highlights that disagreement is expected and unmarked in business meetings which the participants perceive as having a problem solving function. Angouri works with data from two teams where disagreement is not marked as an exception. Instead, it is perceived as a daily activity, needed and valued in order to reach a solution or consensus between the interactants. The analysis of the transcripts of business meetings and the post-event interviews with participants confirm the view that the interactants see disagreement as a normal part of the process of negotiating opposing views. Disagreement in this context does not pose a threat to the management of the meeting participants' complex identities and relationships. The participants orient towards *task related opposing views* and avoid personal attacks which are negatively marked in her corpus. The discussion suggests that linguistic behaviour perceived as face threatening or intentionally impolite is typically rare in this context. The chapter uses the term 'opposing views' to avoid the nuances and negative connotations associated with disagreement and conflict and closes by making a case for repositioning disagreement at work.

Meredith Marra focuses on the case of employees who join a new workplace in the context of an internship programme in New Zealand workplaces. The chapter entitled "Disagreeing without being disagreeable: The case of skilled migrant interns" shows the complexities of disagreeing appropriately at work. Learning how to disagree and to manage the power imbalance inherent in any workplace context is a challenge for any new employee and can have serious and tangible consequences for one's professional development and career prospects. Marra draws on previous research on disagreement in New Zealand workplaces and argues that employees tend to avoid *explicit* disagreement. While disagreement is common, participants use various discursive strategies to avoid on-record disagreement. Handling this tacit knowledge and acquiring the necessary sociopragmatic skills can be a complex task for employees who are not native speakers of the language/s used in a particular context. The chapter takes a Communities of Practice theoretical perspective and reports on naturally occurring data between skilled migrants and their New Zealand colleagues. The analysis of the data shows that the mentor and colleagues with whom the interns interact appear not to take up potential disagreements. Although this may construct the new employees as members of the communities where the goal is to 'host' the skilled migrants, it does not provide the interns with the potential to 'learn' how to disagree in a longer term workplace community where disagreements are seen as permissible and negotiated.

Andreas Langlotz and Miriam Locher turn to conflictual rather than unmarked disagreement and are interested in the role of emotional display when disagreements occur. This is because conflictual disagreements generally do not leave interactants cold but arouse feelings of annoyance, irritation, anger, contempt, or disgust in various degrees, which are driven against the communicative partner (Jones, 2001). The authors work with

English online data gathered from the reader comments section to articles posted at the *MailOnline* site. This is thus the first of two papers to deal with computer-mediated communication. After establishing how the interactional order of disagreements in the online commentary section works, they turn to a discussion of the connection between emotional display, disagreement and relational work. They find that there is a notable presence of emotional stance through the display strategies of conceptual implication, explicit expression, and emotional description in the 120 comments analysed. In addition, the authors argue that, in order to understand the interaction between conceptual, relational and affective meaning, we need a qualitative discursive approach to interpersonal pragmatics.

Drawing also on on-line contexts, Brook Bolander works on establishing the interactional order of disagreement and agreements in eight personal/diary blogs written in English. Her point of interest is to find out how bloggers and commentators create responsiveness in their agreements and disagreements to prior posts/comments. In a computer-mediated environment in which this responsiveness is not indicated by the system, the writers need to draw on their linguistic resources to indicate whom they are addressing. The forms that Bolander studies are 'naming, format tying (Muntigl and Turnbull, 1998) and quoting'. It transpires that the commentators orient towards a default addressee – the blogger – in a neutral way, and predominantly only explicitly mark their contributions when addressing other comment writers. This means that they are co-constructing a particular practice in which the blogger is given higher status than the comment writers. This study confirms that responsiveness in an online blogging context is not self-evident but creatively achieved and it draws our attention to the fact that disagreeing with one party might explicitly or implicitly imply agreeing with another in a public online context (cf. Baym, 1996).

Finally, Alexandra Georgakopoulou casts a critical eye over the findings of the five chapters and reacts to the ideas presented from the perspective of a discourse analyst. Georgakopoulou brings together theory and empirical findings and synthesises the five papers. The epilogue raises questions and avenues for further research and also highlights the complexity and subtlety of the acts typically covered under the term disagreement in socio/linguistic research.

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