

## Disagreement Politeness Among Adolescents

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**Abstract.** Some adolescents are deemed guilty of poor L2 spoken politeness due to their low proficiency level. Thus, to identify the extend of this factor, a contrastive study of disagreement politeness between L1 and L2 was carried out where a discourse completion test method [1] was adapted for data induction and taxonomy of disagreement [2] was adopted for data elicitation. Two variables, i.e. social distance and power difference were analyzed. Findings suggest both variables do significantly influence adolescents' spoken disagreement politeness. The research may conclude that a polite adolescent might not be bound to a language in adhering to politeness despite the variables.

**Keywords:** disagreement politeness, adolescents, social distance, power difference.

### 1. Introduction

Politeness, deference and tact are important social skills. While politeness is “showing consideration for the face needs of one’s addressee” [3, p. 81], deference or respect in most communities is derived from old age or experience, skills and knowledge orientation [4]. Tact is another example of social skills that enable one to wisely deal with face threatening situation. Being tactful in speech would portray submission to social expectation and create non-threatening encounters [5]. These aspects have invaluable perspective in socio-linguistics [6]. A failure to orient to this sociological offence counts as a diplomatic breach [6].

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1. Defining politeness and disagreement politeness

Internal aggression of one ethnic, while retaining the potential for aggression both in internal social control and especially in external competitive relations with others, exist in our lives [7]. Therefore, “an enormously complex kind of reflexive reasoning” [8, p.12] is necessary in politeness researches which reflect reasoning as “the roots in interpersonal ritual which may be fundamental in an evolutionary sense to social life and human intelligence” [8, p.15].

Grice’s Cooperative Principle [9] put forth the concept of Politeness Principle, with Tact, Generosity, Approbation, and Modesty maxims in dealing with politeness and impoliteness. The principle suggests no reflexive happens without reason. Leech [3], however, based his Politeness Principle on absolute politeness to create 6 maxims i.e. Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement and Sympathy. Based on a set of scales with negative and positive poles, speakers will minimize or maximize their polite illocutions based on cost-benefit, optionality and indirectness. Both Grice [9] and Leech [3] may place politeness into communicative context, however, Brown and Levinson [10] proposed culturally oriented Face Theory with three notions: face wants, face acts and politeness strategy. The ‘face wants’ are negative (the right to territories) and positive (their public self-image to be appreciated). Speakers are expected to respect others’ face wants but if a face-threatening act is detected, the speaker will attempt an own face saving act. Brown

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and Levinson [10] suggested that their Face Theory is universal, spanning different languages and cultures but it has been discussed at length in [1], [11], [12] and [13].

Disagreement is “a reactive, requiring a prior utterance from an interlocutor” [14, p. 364]. Thus it is an act of tackling dissatisfactory remarks without offending or jeopardizing affiliation [5]. This negative politeness, including hedges, being conventionally indirect and giving differences, is “a re-dressive action addressed to the addressee’s negative face: his want to have his freedom of actions unobstructed and his attention unrestricted” [10, p. 129] where it functions to minimize effects of impositions, allowing the addresser to deliver intentions freely.

## **2.2. Cultural and language interference**

The multi-facets of cultural interactions is vibrant and occasionally influenced by various diplomatic protocols. Many may put forth forms of virtual reasoning to this but some may interpret a lack of polite attitude as having aggressive intentions and register as a form of virtual offence [6]. Cultural difference is one of the hurdles in cross-cultural communication as it is a “reflection of specific cultural values” [13, p. 154]. Goody stated that ‘joking relations’ defended impoliteness as an assumption that no hostility is intended [8]. Thus, in cross-cultural instances, any social protocol in-compliant utterances could be unintentional. However, Leech’s Maxims is unsuitable for the Chinese, or even Asians, as characteristics of politeness differ [11]. Gu [11] suggested a new set of value inherent maxim to the Chinese culture: self-denigration, address, tact, agreement and generosity. The two major differences between Leech’s [3] and Gu’s [11] maxims are self-denigration and address. Self-denigration maxim consists of two notions from the Chinese culture: denigration of self (modesty) and elevation of others. Unlike the English-speaking cultures where flattery is accepted with thanks, the Chinese will denigrate themselves as unworthy of it. The address maxim reflects the respectful greetings of the Chinese whereas in English, a generic ‘you’ is perfectly acceptable. Surname and gender is used in English, but the Chinese address the surname with title or occupation to convey more respect [13]. The Malay adolescents, however, were found to be better at handling disagreement in spoken English rather than their mother-tongue [5]. There could be two simple explanations: the students were much more conscious in communicating using their L2, and they were using polite phrases taught in English classes as opposed to expressing themselves freely in their Malay mother-tongue.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Research Purpose**

The present research unfolded the nature of how adolescents handle disagreement politeness in situations with varying degree of power and social distance [15]. Social indexing [16] looks at choices of situational variables and intentions whilst strategic politeness [17] focuses on relationships between the addressers and addressees in addressing politeness. Berger, Betsch and Brehmer [18] define these two as independent systems, though evidences of interconnectivity may somehow be visible.

### **3.2. Research Questions**

Research question 1: Do social distance and power difference affect adolescents’ way of handling disagreement politeness both in English and Malay?

Research question 2: In which occasion do adolescents promote disagreement politeness better?

### **3.3. Method and materials**

49 Malay adolescents aged 19 to 21 responded to a discourse completion test adapted from [1] in both English and Malay language with adequate time and place intervals to minimize translation attempts. Their proficiency level is rather average as their vocabulary knowledge ranged at 2000 words level [19] and scored average in a speaking test [20]. These respondents are assumed to self-role play as the discourse completion test consists of five situational sets of probable questions that induce implicit and explicit answers from the students. These five different situations range from reacting to: (Set 1) a supervisor’s accusations on the authenticity of an assignment; (Set 2) a friend’s comments on the data stated in a thesis; (Set 3) an acquaintance’s comments at a seminar on the effect of modern technology; (Set 4) a friend’s comments of a

university course at a party; and (Set 5) a younger sister's comments on female prejudice while watching a movie.

Sets	Recipient	Power difference	Social distance	Issues	Situation
Set 1	Supervisor	++P	++D	Formal	Accusing
Set 2	Friend (Equal status)	-P	-D	Formal	Offering an improvement
Set 3	Acquaintance (Equal status)	+P	+D	Formal	Reacting on an issue
Set 4	Friend (Equal status)	-P	-D	Informal	Reacting to a comment
Set 5	Younger sister(Subordinate)	--P	--D	Informal	Criticizing

Table 1: Summary of question sets

This test method is adopted from [1] as they suggested Asians are less likely to disagree in public to avoid face threatening situations. Being culturally 'collectivists,' Asians prefer to get along harmoniously as opposed to Westerners who are 'individualists' and prefer to express themselves [21]. Observing the respondents in natural situations may not yield much data and would require more observation hours or even some interference from the observer. Liang and Han [1] also used more comprehensive scenarios: including face threatening (shameful) situations and a variety of power difference and social difference situations [15]. As the respondents were entirely L2 learners, the self role-playing can be assumed to elicit responses similar to real-life based on their average proficiency. The data were transcribed and Muntigl and Turnbull's [22] disagreement taxonomy was used to identify the types of disagreement: irrelevancy claim, challenge, contradiction and counterclaim. Rees-Miller's [2] politeness strategy for disagreement taxonomy was also employed. A disagreement is identified when the implied content of the speaker's statement contradicts the addressee. It is divided into three according to the strength of linguistic markers: soft, medium and strong expression of disagreement. Soft expression would include partial agreements, positive comments and humor. Medium expression contains occasions of a definite negative statement or contradiction including words like *yes* and *no* is made. When the disagreement includes rhetorical questions, intensifiers, accusatory or judgmental vocabulary, it is categorized as strong expression of disagreement.

#### 4. Findings & Discussion

The usage of disagreement politeness in Malay language and English language correlates in handling disagreements although at different situations and different levels of formality. Thus, a polite person would be polite regardless of the language used [5], topic or place of discussion.

Sets	Recipient	Superiority	Situation	Topic	Correlation value	Sig	Sig level
Set 1	Supervisor	Superior	Formal	Formal	.698(**)	.000	0.01
Set 2	Friend	Equal	Formal	Formal	.878(**)	.000	0.01
Set 3	Acquaintance	Equal	Formal	Formal	.648(**)	.000	0.01
Set 4	Friend	Equal	Informal	Informal	.759(**)	.000	0.01
Set 5	Younger sister	Subordinate	Informal	Informal	.871(**)	.000	0.01

Table 2: Correlations between topic, place and language used

Table 2 shows the correlation values between Malay language and English language within the five sets of situations. With significant value of 0.000, the top two correlation values are in sets 2 (0.878) and 5 (0.871). This shows that familiarity (-D) such as with a friend/sister may erode some of the conscious effort of communicating in L2 because the adolescents were at ease with the interlocutors and were lesser concerned with social appropriateness and politeness strategies. Indirectly, disagreement politeness also waned thus making their conversation in English no more polite than how they would be when conversing in Malay.

The two lowest correlation values from Table 2 are from sets 1 and 3 i.e. 0.698 and 0.648 respectively. Though minimal, there is significant correlation in disagreement politeness usage between the L1 and L2 when conversation happens between superior (+P) and low familiarity (+D) interlocutors. Two possible explanations are: due to intimidation from the superior/unfamiliar recipients, the adolescents try to respect the culture norms of politeness. By doing so, they would practice better language control in English by using proper polite phrases as taught in classrooms. However, the pressing urgency to respond to the supervisor's accusations (Set 1) may also contribute to rushed responses in Malay and in the process be slightly impolite. The adolescents may practice more caution in L2 for fear of offending the recipient. Thus, a lesser proficient adolescent may practice more restraint gestures which inadvertently increase their use of politeness strategies.

Table 3 below indicates that these students adhere to greater disagreement politeness when they are at formal (+D) as opposed to informal situations (-D). Better disagreement politeness can also be observed when the students are having a formal conversation with a recipient of low familiarity (+P).

Sets	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Set 1	98	1	4	1.85	.829
Set 2	98	1	4	1.71	1.005
Set 3	98	1	4	1.72	.835
Set 4	98	1	4	2.29	.862
Set 5	98	1	4	2.56	.750

Table 3: Situational change

Sets 2 and 4 involve recipients of equal standing but different levels of formality, a mean difference of 0.58 may be observed. Set 2 presented a mean of 1.71 (SD 1.005) as opposed to set 4 where the mean is 2.29 (SD 0.862) where informality/familiarity might have made the adolescents become less polite in handling disagreement as they are more at ease thus made lesser effort. In a formal situation (set 2), the adolescents observed better control of handling disagreement despite being with a recipient of high familiarity. This supports Liang and Han [1, p.7] as the Chinese and Americans gave "fewer contradictory statements as friends are cherished in both cultures" and 'face wants' is stored. The present research finding on set 4 is rather coherent with Triandis and Singelis [1998, p. 39 as cited in 1] on Americans who "are more concerned with clearly giving opinions." Set 3 ( $\bar{x}$  = 1.72, SD 0.83) shows that lack of familiarity/formality demand the adolescents to also handle disagreement better. Thus, disagreement politeness is better upheld despite equal level of superiority due to the formal situation and lack of familiarity. Set 1, with mean 1.85 (SD 0.829), shows slightly less disagreement politeness compared to sets 2 and 3 despite involving a formal topic in a formal situation with (++P)/(++D). A possible explanation is the adolescents were under duress and the need to defend oneself has become a bigger priority to them than adhering to disagreement politeness. In table 3, Set 5 presented a mean of 2.56 (SD 0.750) which shows politeness in handling disagreement is the least upheld. Respondents performed the least disagreement politeness when they are with someone of lower level of superiority, and having an informal conversation at an informal place [1]. Thus being at home (--D)/(--P), the notion of greater place of authority and power makes them feel at ease in handling disagreement. Whenever the level of familiarity is higher, there is a perceived tendency for pushing the boundaries of politeness in handling disagreement.

## 5. Conclusion

Regardless of language, place formality and topic of disagreement, an intuitively polite adolescent may adhere to disagreement politeness strategy. S/he may portray a better disagreement politeness when addressing a friend (-P) at a formal situation (+D) while arguing a formal topic, as opposed to a friend (-P) at an informal place (-D) on an informal topic. This may be due to the greater application of self-denigration in a situation with greater social distance [11]. In a disagreement with someone of higher level of superiority like an educator, adolescents may use less tact depending on the severity of the face threatening situation (set 1). The adolescents have been placed under pressure to defend their positive face wants despite the positive power difference (+P) and social distance (+D) (lecturer-student). In general, the students would show a

greater disagreement politeness in formal situations (+D)/(+P). In an informal situation (-D) with lower level of superiority (-P), the students would adhere the least to politeness strategies during disagreement handling.

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