

Chapter 1

Introduction

Human interactions tend to seek successful communication. When such norm is violated, the interaction is disconnected and, more seriously, the interpersonal relationship behind the communicative activity is jeopardized. Disagreement is one of the major events that may lead to communication breakdown. In order to pursue successful communication and to avoid damaging interpersonal relationship, the verbal devices and the functional strategies to encode disagreement are worth of further investigation.

1.1. Linguistic Disagreement

Studies on disagreement and activities of similar nature (such as argument, dispute, and conflict talk) have been a core study in verbal communication, and have drawn attention from many disciplines, especially in sociology, anthropology, and linguistics (Grimshaw, 1990: 7). One of the reasons why disagreement receives so much attention is that disagreement, which, by nature, violates social expectations, is inevitable in everyday interaction. Moreover, as Grimshaw (1990: 4) points out, conflict can “serve to organize and perhaps even facilitate interpersonal relations.” That is, conflict talk may not be as harmful and worthless as we thought; in fact, in some circumstances, it can even provide resolution to the problems and open new communicative channel between the interlocutors. However, if true, then why are people so reluctant to show disagreement in conversations?

Goffman (1967) proposed that the reason of people’s avoidance of disagreement (or conflict) lies in the need to maintain *face*. Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) suggest that disagreement is a *face threatening act* (FTA). Therefore, without verbal mitigation, disagreeing always implies impoliteness, and make people feel their

face is or will be threatened (Lin, 1999: 1).

Another reason to avoid disagreement results from social-cultural constraints. In Chinese society, politeness and individual's face are highly valued. In all situations, making someone lose his/her face, is an ultimate humiliation, and once such humiliation is induced, it could be a sign for the termination of the interpersonal relationship between the speaker and his/her hearer. As Kuo (1992: 398) observes, "In Chinese society, a submissive, obedient, and conforming individual is the model for all, and nonconformity and argumentativeness are seen as negative quality." In other words, the milieu of Chinese culture, any manifestation of disagreement is considered as drawbacks and shortcomings of an individual person, especially when social distance between interlocutors emerges, and is prohibited.

1.2. The Problem

Although disagreement in linguistics has received high attention and many related studies have been conducted, there are still gaps that need to be bridged. First, most of the disagreement studies have concentrated on analyzing the linguistic forms and pragmatic strategies of disagreement (to name a few, Kuo, 1992; Wang, 1997; Lin, 1999). However, a management of the referential content of the issue (including both accuracy and clarity of the message) that the interlocutors disagree upon have not been put into consideration.

Also, contextual factors related to disagreement have barely been examined in Taiwan. Age seems to be a promising social factor controlling the verbal manifestations of disagreement because age is one of the essential components that constitute the Chinese value system, and social distance derived from age difference is always stubborn and powerful in Chinese society.

1.3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on what is mentioned above, three research questions are proposed individually in different section and each section ends with the hypothesis to the individual research question.

First, which type of disagreement occurs more frequently? Is it disagreement based on message content or disagreement based on subjective judgment? The researcher's hypothesis is that the latter would occur more frequently than the former because different value systems are not shared.

Disagreements evoked by subjective judgment can further be divided into two kinds: one based on personal preference, and the other on social-cultural preference. The second research question is thus derived: Which of these two subcategories of evaluation-based disagreement emerges more often? For the second research question, the researcher hypothesizes that personal judgment for E-disagreement happens more often than social-cultural evaluation for E-disagreement.

In this research, the factor to determine verbal expressions of disagreement will be age. Accordingly, the third research question of this study is: Is age a truly influential factor in disagreement? The researcher hypothesizes that age is a significant factor to determine the linguistic forms and pragmatic strategies in the performance of disagreement. More specifically, more indirect and less face-threatening forms and pragmatic strategies will be used when age difference exists between speaker and hearer; on the opposite, if speaker and hearer are from the same age group, then less indirect and more face-threatening strategies will be used.

With the above research questions and hypotheses, this study is designed and related data are analyzed.

1.4. Organization

This thesis includes five chapters: Chapter 1 introduces the reason for conducting this research, Chapter 2 reviews and discusses some related studies, Chapter 3 describes the research design, Chapter 4 depicts data analyses and findings in this research, and Chapter 5 draws the conclusion, limitation and suggestion, and further application of this study.