

The theses of the doctoral dissertation

**The Effects of Gender and Social Distance on the
Expression of Verbal Disagreement Employed by
Hungarian Undergraduate Students**

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I. Objectives of the dissertation

The aim of my dissertation is to investigate disagreement, more precisely, verbal disagreement expressed by undergraduate students at the University of Debrecen from a sociopragmatic point of view. To date, the majority of research carried out on disagreement has focused on the English language (e.g., Goodwin, 1983; Harris, 2001), surveying the effects of power (e.g. Kakavá, 1995; Liu, 2004; Locher, 2004) and degree of imposition (e.g., Rees-Miller, 2000) on the expression of disagreement. The limited number of studies on the relationship of gender and disagreements tend to focus on one gender exclusively (e.g., Coates, 1989; Pilkington, 1992). Furthermore, most existing studies predominantly investigate the linguistic manifestation of disagreement while ignoring its functional spectrum. Hence, there remains a need to remedy these gaps observed in the literature. The aim of my dissertation is thus threefold: (1) to examine verbal disagreement as it is accomplished linguistically in the conversations of Hungarian undergraduate students, (2) to map the functional spectrum of disagreements occurring in the data, and (3) to determine the effects of the variables of gender and social distance on the expression of verbal disagreement.

At the outset of my dissertation, I give a brief critical overview of the ways disagreement has been defined by various scholars, followed by a working definition of my own: verbal disagreement is a speech act expressing speaker's opinion or belief whose propositional content or illocutionary force is partly or fully inconsistent with that of the previous speaker's utterance. Following this, a discussion is provided on the different approaches to disagreement within speech act theory (Searle, 1969), theories of politeness (e.g., Brown and Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1990; Locher and Watts, 2005) and impoliteness (Austin, 1990; Culpeper, 1996; Lachenicht, 1980). In early politeness theories, disagreement is mostly seen as a dispreferred, face-threatening act that poses a threat to the addressee's positive aspect of face, and thus may jeopardize the social harmony between hearer and speaker. Furthermore, as noted by Sifianou (2012: 6), disagreements can also pose a threat to the addressee's negative face "if they are seen as pressuring him/her to accept a different line of thought". Consequently, one of the cornerstones of early politeness theories is to seek agreement and reach a consensus. However, it is important to note that disagreements can also serve as face-saving acts, since they can be tools to defend the speaker's own stance. Postmodern views of politeness (e.g., Locher, 2004; Watts, 2003) reject the idea of any

speech act being inherently im/polite and call attention to the importance of context in utterance interpretation.

In my dissertation, I argue that a variety of contextual factors such as genre; norms; topic of conversation; culture; age, gender, relational history and social distance of participants, etc. play a significant role in the positive or negative assessment of disagreement in any given situation. Preference or dispreference for disagreement seems to be highly culture-specific. While in some cultures (e.g., Greek, Spanish, Jewish) verbal confrontation is an accepted and appropriate social practice, in other cultures (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean) the avoidance of potential discord is the norm. Disagreement is an intrinsic feature of courtroom discourse, political talk shows, parliamentary debates, and certain online forums, as in these interactions contradiction and opposition are accepted and the open expression of one's opinion plays a fundamental role.

Preference is also examined from a structural point of view, based on the works of Sacks (1973), Kotthoff (1993), and Pomerantz (1984). These scholars investigate the effect of dis/preference on the expression of disagreement from a conversation analytic perspective. Disagreement is seen as a dispreferred response, which is usually expressed towards the end of the turn, while the preferred answer is typically delivered contiguously without any delay. In contrast to agreement, disagreement is more complex structurally (marked by longer pauses, hesitation, and repetition) and it is also longer, which indicates its dispreferred nature.

The second part of Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of major empirical studies on disagreement, highlighting their merits and limitations. As a conclusion, the chapter describes the taxonomies of disagreement (e.g., Bándli, 2009; Rees-Miller, 2000) in the relevant literature from a critical point of view. Most of these frameworks of disagreement types served as a starting point for my analysis and my own categorizing system that was set up based on my empirical research.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology and research design best suited to examining the research questions of my study, which are as follows:

- 1 How do Hungarian undergraduate students express verbal disagreement?
 - 1.1 What disagreement strategies do they employ?
- 2 Are there any qualitative and/or quantitative differences in the expression of verbal disagreement in terms of the gender of the speaker? If so, what are these differences?
 - 2.1 Are there any gender differences in the frequency of verbal disagreements expressed by Hungarian undergraduate students participating in the study? If so, what are they?

- 2.2 Are there any qualitative differences in verbal disagreements (i.e., mitigated or aggravated) in terms of the gender of the speaker? If so, what are the patterns that emerge?
- 2.3 Does the gender of the speaker influence the pragmatic strategies (s)he employs for expressing disagreement? If yes, in what ways?
- 3 Are there any qualitative and/or quantitative differences in the expression of verbal disagreement in terms of the social distance between participants? If so, what are these differences?
 - 3.1 Are there any differences in the frequency of verbal disagreements expressed by Hungarian university students participating in the study in terms of the social distance between participants? If so, what are they?
 - 3.2 Are there any qualitative differences in the expression of verbal disagreement (i.e., mitigated or aggravated) in terms of the social distance between participants? If so, what patterns emerge?
 - 3.3 Does the social distance between the participants influence the pragmatic strategies they employ for expressing disagreement? If yes, in what ways?

II. Research methods

My dissertation investigates the expression of verbal disagreement in mixed-sex dyadic encounters of Hungarian undergraduates at the University of Debrecen in the light of gender and social distance of conversants. In seeking to answer the above-mentioned research questions, the following hypotheses are postulated based on the results of relevant literature:¹

- 2 There will be both qualitative and quantitative differences in the expression of verbal disagreement employed by Hungarian undergraduate students in terms of the gender of the speaker.
 - 2.1 Female undergraduate students will express verbal disagreement less frequently than male undergraduate students.
 - 2.2 Women participating in my study will tend to use more mitigated and fewer aggravated disagreements than men.

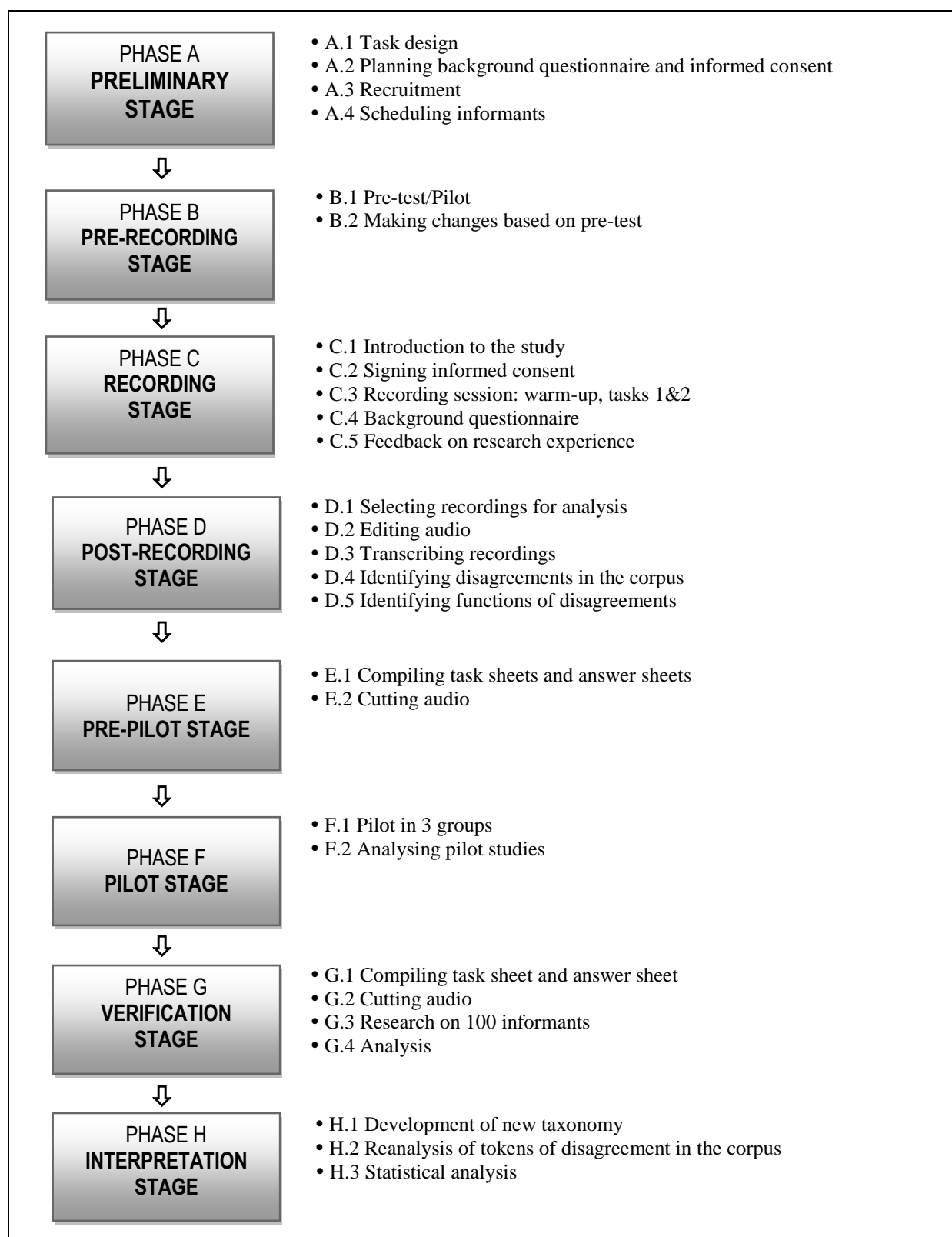
¹ For the first set of research questions, no hypotheses have been formulated, since they address a field of research that has not been investigated so far (except for Bándli's (2009) dissertation).

- 2.3 Female undergraduate students will favour less face-threatening, indirect strategies when expressing disagreement, while male undergraduates will be apt to employ more direct disagreement strategies.
- 3 There will be both qualitative and quantitative differences in the expression of verbal disagreement employed by Hungarian undergraduate students in terms of the social distance between participants.
- 3.1 The frequency of disagreements expressed will increase with the decrease of the social distance between participants.
- 3.2 In comparison to couples and siblings, strangers will be inclined to use more mitigated, fewer neither mitigated nor aggravated, and even fewer aggravated disagreements.
- 3.3 Strangers will use proportionally fewer direct and more indirect disagreement strategies than couples and siblings.

In my research, a multi-step and multi-method strategy was adopted in order to address the research issues, shown in a concise form in Figure 1 on the following page. As the aim was to collect and analyse as data that was as authentic as possible involving a high occurrence of the phenomenon under investigation, I examined the expression of disagreement in mixed-sex face-to-face dyadic interchanges of undergraduate students who were discussing highly controversial topics and the characters in a story of a love triangle, both of which generated conflict and disagreement. A triangulated approach was adopted to collect data by means of audio-recording these dyadic interactions and by completion of background questionnaires including questions about participants' social background and relationship with each other.

After filtering the data, the final research corpus used for analysis comprised 444 minutes (7hrs 24mins) of task-based speech of 30 undergraduate students, equally divided by sex. The transcription of the data amounted to 68,194 words.

Figure 1
Research Process Flowchart



Once all the utterances expressing disagreement had been identified in the corpus, I set up my initial categorizing system based on the taxonomies of previous studies. Following this, my framework was tested and validated first by 30, then by 100 informants. A constant feedback between linguistic data and theory ensured the development of a final (metatheoretical) categorization scheme (cf. e.g., Kertész and Rákosi, 2008, 2012) that is capable of capturing the complex nature of Hungarian disagreements. In order to find the answers to the research questions of this study and to test the initial hypotheses, both descriptive and inferential statistics were used.

As highlighted in my dissertation, certain prosodic features (especially intonation) play an important role in the expression of disagreement, since at times disagreement is “communicated more by tone of voice than lexical choice” (Edstrom, 2004: 1505). Therefore, I also employed acoustic analysis to identify disagreement strategies and I marked intonational contours on the examples used for illustrative purposes in my dissertation with the help of Praat 5.3.22 and Prosogram (v2.8).

III. Research findings

The key findings of my research are presented below:

- 1 Disagreement (in my research) was expressed either via a single disagreement strategy (67%)² or optionally with a combination of two or sometimes even three strategies (33%).³ 7.8% of disagreements were preceded by a pre-sequence with the functions of hesitation, agreement, alerter, or meta-communication. The pragmatic force of disagreement was mitigated (28.2%) or aggravated (37.1%) with the following linguistic items or devices, called *pragmatic force modifiers* (PFM):

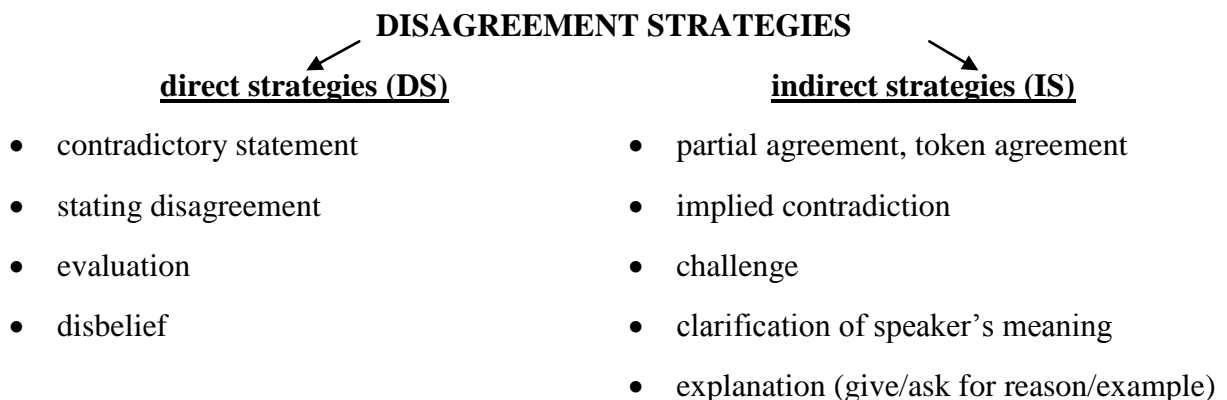
² I call disagreements expressed by a single strategy *simple disagreements*.

³ Disagreements that consist of a combination of two or three strategies are termed *complex disagreements* in this dissertation.

Pragmatic force modifiers (PFMs)	
Mitigators	Aggravators
humour	irony/sarcasm
hedge	intensifiers
impersonalization	interjections
tag question	verbal shadowing, repetition
conditional	rhetorical question
term of endearment	tag question

34.7% of disagreements were unmodified, that is neither mitigated nor aggravated in my data.

1.1 The Hungarian undergraduates participating in my research employed the following direct and indirect strategies in conveying disagreement:



Stating disagreement and *clarification of speaker's meaning* are two disagreement strategies emerging from the research corpus that do not appear in the previous literature. The three most frequently employed disagreement strategies in my data were contradictory statement, explanation and disbelief. It was also revealed that the three most commonly employed co-occurring strategies were *partial agreement* followed by an *explanation*, *contradictory statement* preceding an *explanation*, and *partial agreement* followed by a *contradictory statement*. It can be stated that the undergraduate students participating in my research utilized both direct and indirect strategies for expressing disagreement. However, the fact that the most commonly used disagreement strategy was a direct strategy, namely *contradictory statement*, implies that in certain cases the

speaker's need to express disagreement prevailed over considerations of the addressee's face.

- 2 One of the research results of my study is that the gender of the speaker affects both the frequency of disagreements and the means by which they are expressed.
 - 2.1 My hypothesis that women express their disagreement less frequently than men do was not confirmed by the research results. The study found that female participants (0.96 token/100 words) used a much higher rate of disagreements than their male counterparts (0.6 token/100 words) did, although this difference did not prove to be statistically significant.
 - 2.2 In contrast to my initial hypothesis, the gender of the speaker did not have any influence on the use of PFMs in my research. Both male and female students employed a very similar proportion of aggravated, mitigated, and unmodified disagreements, with the slight differences having no statistical significance. These results refute Guiller and Durndell's (2006) finding that women's disagreement is rarely aggravated.
 - 2.3 As for the gender differences in the disagreement strategies employed, I found that men adopted the strategies of *contradictory statement*, *explanation*, and *disbelief* the most frequently in simple disagreements, while women favoured *contradictory statement*, *disbelief*, and *partial agreement/token agreement*. An interesting finding of the research is that the strategy of *clarification of speaker's meaning* was employed exclusively by female students, although this strategy had a low occurrence in the corpus, and thus does not allow for any conclusions. Generally, women were more likely to utilize direct strategies when the overall distribution of strategies was considered, although the pattern was not found to be of statistical significance. In complex disagreements, in comparison to males, women used more direct and fewer indirect disagreements. Furthermore, female students employed fewer disagreements with the direct+indirect pattern than the reverse, while the opposite holds true for male students. These differences proved to be statistically significant.

An examination of the overall distribution of the first disagreement strategy by gender revealed some divergent patterns of statistical significance. The two strategies most frequently utilized by both men and women were *contradictory statement* and *partial agreement/token agreement*; however, they were unevenly distributed across the two genders, with men using considerably more *contradictory statements* and fewer *partial agreement/token agreement*. Similarly, strong correlations were found between gender and the distribution of the second disagreement strategies in complex disagreements.

Thus, the results listed above do not lend support to my hypothesis that in comparison to male students, female students express their disagreement less frequently and are more likely to adopt indirect disagreement strategies. These results might be explained by the influence of the academic context (where argumentative skills are expected and highly appreciated) as well as the different personality and (perhaps more argumentative) conversational styles of research participants.

- 3 Similarly to gender, the social distance between participants had a significant impact on the rate of disagreements as well as the linguistic expression of opposition in my research.
 - 3.1 A statistically significant inverse relationship was found between the rate of disagreements and social distance. That is, the frequency of disagreements increased with the decrease of the social distance. Overall, *couples and siblings* disagreed with each other twice as frequently as *strangers* did. This supports my assumption that those with strong ties between them express their disagreement more frequently, since in their relationship honesty plays an important role and disagreements do not pose a risk to their relationship as their ties are stronger.
 - 3.2 As regards the relationship between social distance and the use of PFMs, the results of the current study partly confirm my initial prediction, since *strangers* employed fewer aggravated, more unmodified, and about the same proportion of mitigated disagreements than *couples and siblings* did. However, the relationship between overall use of PFMs and the social distance between the speakers did not prove to be statistically significant.
 - 3.3 In terms of the impact of social distance on the utilized disagreement strategies I found that *couples and siblings* employed significantly more direct disagreements than strangers, which is in accordance with Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim. Focusing on the specific disagreement strategies it was observed that overall *strangers* utilized fewer *partial/token agreements*, *contradictory statements* and *challenges* but more *explanations*, *implied contradictions*, *statements of disagreement*, *disbeliefs*, and *evaluations* than *couples and siblings* did. It is interesting to note that the strategy of *clarification of speaker's meaning* was used exclusively by the *couples and siblings*. As regards the combinations of disagreement strategies, research participants with close relationships between them employed *partial agreement* followed by an *explanation* the most frequently and the second most preferred combination was a *contradictory statement* preceding an *explanation*, while the reverse order can be observed in the category of *strangers*. Although the correlation between social distance and the use of

disagreement strategies is of no statistical significance, the calculated value is suggestive and indicates some tendencies as it only slightly exceeds the 5% critical rate ($p=.055$).

Considering the overall distribution of the first disagreement strategy in both social distance categories, the research results show that *strangers* accounted for a greater percentage of the strategies of *explanation*, *implied contradiction*, *stating disagreement* and *disbelief*, and for a smaller percentage of the other disagreement strategies in comparison to *couples and siblings*. The statistical analysis indicated a strong correlation between the social distance of participants and the choice of disagreement strategy in simple disagreements as well as the use of first disagreement strategy in complex disagreements.

In terms of the impact of social distance on the utilized disagreement strategies, the associations between great social distance and the use of indirect strategies was generally supported, but great social distance did not always warrant a greater preference for indirect disagreement. It is also clear from the results that *strangers* expressed their disagreement proportionally more with the help of direct disagreement strategies such as *stating disagreement* or *evaluations*. As an explanation for these results it has been offered that in certain situations the need to convey opposition outweighed consideration of the other's face needs. All in all, my research findings do not seem to support the bulge theory (Wolfson, 1988), which proposes that interlocutors at the two extremes of the social distance continuum exhibit very similar speech behaviour as opposed to the middle section.

Towards the end of my dissertation, in the light of my empirical research, my initial definition was reconsidered and the following new definition of verbal disagreement was proposed: verbal disagreement is a situated activity whose function is to express an opinion (or belief) the propositional content or illocutionary force of which is – or is intended to be – partly or fully inconsistent with that of a prior (non-verbal) utterance.

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V. Published papers and conference presentations of the author related to the topic of the dissertation

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