

## **ABSTRACT**

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

The primary aim of this 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 and investigated the linguistic manifestation of disagreement while ignoring its functional spectrum. Furthermore, the limited number of studies on the relationship of gender and disagreements tend to focus on one gender exclusively. Hence, to remedy these gaps observed in the literature, the aim of my dissertation is threefold: (1) to examine verbal disagreement as it is accomplished linguistically in the mixed-sex 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.

In my research, a multi-step and multi-method strategy was adopted in order to address the research issues. A triangulated approach was employed to collect data by means of audio-recording mixed-sex face-to-face dyadic interchanges of undergraduate students and by completion of background questionnaires. Since certain prosodic features (especially intonation) play an important role in the expression of disagreement, acoustic analysis was also used in the identification of disagreement strategies. The present study proposes a framework of disagreement strategies, which was tested and validated by 130 informants altogether. A constant feedback between linguistic data and theory ensured the development of a final (metatheoretical) categorization scheme that is capable of capturing the complex nature of Hungarian disagreements. The analysis of disagreements was also strengthened by descriptive and inferential statistical analyses.

During the detailed analysis of Hungarian disagreements, I identified a pool of direct and indirect disagreement strategies and various pragmatic force modifiers that are employed to mitigate or aggravate the pragmatic force of the utterance. The analysis revealed that

disagreement in my research was expressed either via a single disagreement strategy or optionally with a combination of two or sometimes even three strategies. Some disagreements were also preceded by a pre-sequence with the functions of hesitation, agreement, alerting, or meta-communication. The main conclusion drawn from my research is that both the gender of the speaker and the social distance between the interlocutors affect the frequency of disagreements as well as the means by which they are expressed (although not always in the anticipated way). For instance, the female undergraduate students participating in the research were not found to express disagreement less frequently than their male counterparts did. Likewise, the research results did not lend support to the hypothesis that, in comparison to male students, female students are more likely to adopt indirect disagreement strategies. A statistically significant inverse relationship was found between the rate of disagreements and social distance. 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. 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.

In the light of my empirical research, I proposed the following definition of verbal disagreement: 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.