(Dis)agreements in Iranians' Internet Relay Chats

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Abstract

The present study on politeness is an attempt to examine (dis)agreeing strategies utilized by EFL learners while chatting on the internet. Subjects of the study were forty male and thirty-three female Iranian natives whose internet relay chat (IRC) interactions, composed of 400 excerpts, were collected between December 2007 and September 2008. Data analysis was based on the general taxonomy of politeness strategies suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987) which is the baseline of many politeness studies today. The results indicate that IRC is a mode of communication whose characteristics are typically different from face-to-face and real-life conversational settings. Some common face threatening acts (FTAs) like 'direct disagreements' are performed widely in chat channels. Furthermore, gender-oriented differences were found not to be statistically significant on the internet.

Keywords: (Dis)agreements, Politeness, Internet Relay Chats, Persian Learners of English

1. Introduction

As a sub-discipline of pragmatics, politeness is devised to maintain or enhance harmonious social relations between/among interactants. Not only does politeness play a great role in the successfulness of face-to-face communications, but it is also a decisive factor in the effectiveness of computer-mediated communication (CMC) which has transformed the way people interact. As a type of synchronous CMC, internet relay chat (IRC) is a real-time communication which has been applied in many fields like business management (Markman, 2009), among others.

The rapid growth of IRC has not left the field of language teaching unchanged. Chat can be used to facilitate discussions, motivate learners, promote learning and provide immediate feedback (Johnson, 2008, p. 166). In addition, it provides a space in which discussants are free from many cultural/interpersonal constraints observed in other modes of communication. These characteristics promote IRC to a path through which language learners can access authentic in/output and self-centered learning activities.

2. Background

2.1. Politeness

Politeness is an integral element of human interactions which is communicated both verbally and nonverbally (Yu, 2003, p. 1680). One of the most insightful frameworks of politeness is a 'face'-based model proposed by Brown and Levinson (henceforth BL) in 1987 (Agyekum, 2008, p. 496). According to Watts (2003, p. 85), this model is rooted in Goffman's (1967) concept of 'face' which refers to the positive social value that interactants claim for themselves through various face-works such as the avoidance processes and the corrective

processes. Face consists of two aspects: *negative face* refers to "the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others" whereas *positive face* refers to participants' desire to be liked, admired, understood and accepted (BL, 1987, p. 62).

Certain kinds of verbal or nonverbal behavior run contrary to people's face wants. These acts, called face threatening acts (FTAs), may threaten positive, negative or both faces in one or more than one way simultaneously (Erbert & Floyd, 2004, p. 256). For instance, FTAs of contradictions, challenges and disagreements show negative evaluation of interactants' ideas; and in so-doing, threat their positive face wants (BL, 1987, p. 66). When an FTA is indispensable, interlocutors may employ certain mechanisms among which positive politeness strategies aim at spotlighting their common wants (BL, 1987, p. 70). Due to their direct involvement in the communication of (dis)agreements, BL's positive politeness strategies *seek agreement* and *avoid disagreement* receive prominent attention in the present study.

It is noteworthy that BL's politeness framework has faced up some challenges. For instance, Haugh (2003, p. 398) claims that the theory regards politeness as being always inferred as an implicature; and ignores the difference between inferred and what he calls anticipated politeness. Fraser (2005, p. 66) argues that BL's theory is not void of such deficiencies as limitation on the concept of politeness, the status of politeness strategies and design flaw in the hierarchy, among others. Also, relying on the evidence from the use of imperative in Cypriot Greek, Terkourafi (2005, p. 112) criticizes BL's framework on the grounds that it does not take into account the situated appropriateness of a linguistic device. Lastly, universality of the framework has been questioned by scholars who find certain aspects of it cross-culturally unjustifiable (Fukada & Asato, 2004, p. 1992).

However, Haugh (2003, p. 410) states that there is still much work to be done in order to develop a dependable theory of politeness. In truth, despite the criticisms leveled against some features of BL's framework, it is still the most comprehensive politeness framework (Meyerhoff, 2006, p. 84). This is why most politeness studies have used BL's framework as their baseline (Ferencik, 2007; Hatipoglu, 2007; Georgalidou, 2008; Vinagre, 2008).

2.2. (Dis)agreements

Agreements are the preferred responses to the acts of assessing (Oakman, Gifford, & Chlebowsky, 2003, p. 420). Such expressions are usually performed via preferred structures which are direct, to the point and immediate and sometimes interrupting (Myers, 1998; Ruhi, 2006, p. 88). Disagreements, contrarily, give birth to the feeling of powerlessness in speakers or hearers; hence, threaten their positive face wants. Disagreement avoidance, resultantly, is used as common communication strategy (Arredondo, 2007, p. 22). Some mechanisms can also be utilized by interactants to defray the threats caused by unavoidable disagreements. For example, disagreements can sometimes be voiced as questions, narratives or exclamations (Koike, Vann, & Busquets, 2001, p. 891). They can even be communicated via tone of voice rather than structural or lexical choice (Green & Carberry, 1999, p. 390). Similar ideas are held by Georgakopoulou (2001, p. 1882) who suggests that agreements tend to be immediate and simple because they maintain interlocutors' faces. By contrast, she continues, disagreements are often delayed between, within, and across turns through story telling, questions, hedges and token agreements (Holtgraves, 1997).

There has been a noticeable interest in the relationship between one's gender and his/her (dis)agreeing strategy preferences. Holmes (1999, p. 343)

suggests that women tend to avoid, minimize or mitigate disagreements while they prefer to agree with others and express support in order to be positively polite. Men, comparatively, are more probable to disagree baldly, challenge others' ideas, interrupt and show aggressiveness. Also, Guiller and Durndell (2006, p. 373) state that female disagreements are attenuated in nature, containing features such as qualifiers and personal opinions. Male utterances, in comparison, are more likely to be authoritative, making use of features such as strong assertions and challenging statements.

The preferences for (dis)agreeing mechanisms might vary across cultures, too. Yin (2002, p. 250) claims that American norms of disagreeing are not in complete concert with their German counterparts. Similarly, relying on some cross-cultural studies, Morand (2003, p. 529) argues that the degree of mitigation differs across such cultures as American, Argentinean, Australian, Canadian, German and Israeli. Cross-cultural differences are further approved by Edstorm (2004, p. 1514) who found that, although statistically insignificant, Venezuelan women are confrontational while disagreeing.

3. Research Questions

In order to investigate the relationship between the preferences used for (dis)agreeing mechanisms by the Iranian chatters, the following null hypotheses are presented in the present study:

1. There is no meaningful relationship in the use of (dis)agreement avoidance (sub)categories.

2. There is no difference between male and female preferences for the communication of (dis)agreements.

4. Methodology

To investigate the contextualization of (dis)agreements in Iranian EFL/ESL learners' IRC discourse, 400 textual chat excerpts (approximately 250000 words, 50000 postings) are discussed in terms of BL's framework.

4.1. Participants

Participants of the study are chosen from Iranian natives who conduct their IRCs in English. Participant sampling was carried out in *Yahoo! Messenger* chat rooms specified for Persian natives, rooms for some English speaking countries where large numbers of Iranians live, some international Websites favored by Iranians (e.g., *Tagged.com*) and those which target Iranian natives (e.g., *Cloob.com*).

Having been randomly selected in the above-mentioned channels, chatters were requested to provide the study with their English IRCs. As a result, a total number of 24 chatters, 12 females and 12 males, sent us samples of their English chats. In the end, the number of male and female chatters whose interactions were included in the study rose to 40 and 33, respectively. While participants ranged from teenagers of 16 to adults of 66, most of them were in their 20s.

4.2. Data Analysis

The corpus of text-based chats collected between December 2007 and September 2008, comprised of 400 excerpts of any length and about any topic, was investigated for the occurrences of (dis)agreements. The classification was the fruit of modifications to BL's (dis)agreeing strategies.

I. Agreeing responses

1. Express agreement directly
2. Intensify agreement
3. Repetition/paraphrase
4. Hedging opinions

II. Disagreeing responses

1. Express disagreement
2. Avoid disagreement
   a. Voice as questions
   b. Token agreements
   c. Hedging opinions
3. Intensify disagreement

Regarding agreements, the category *express agreement directly* is not represented in any separate category in BL's theory. The mechanism *intensify agreement*, similarly, is missing in BL's model although it is related to *exaggerate interest, approval and sympathy with hearers*. However, devices such as emphatic markers and boosters were used by the participants of the study to *intensify* sameness. A subset of *emphatic markers* called *amplifiers* (e.g., *all, always, full, never)* increase certainty degree of utterances (Precht, 2008, p. 98). Fulfilling similar function, boosters "allow writers to close down alternatives, head off conflicting views and express their certainty in what they say" (Hyland, 2005a, p. 52). Vassileva's (2001) classification, however, was the framework for the identification of boosters:

1. Modals, e.g., *must*
2. Adverbial/adjectival phrases, e.g., *clearly*
3. Grammatical/stylistic means, e.g., what *did* emerge …
4. Solidarity, e.g., *well-known*
5. Expressions of belief, e.g., *in my view, I think*

As will be discussed below, since most authorities consider the last category as hedges, it was dispensed with. In addition, since such verbs as *demonstrate* (Hyland, 2005b, p. 179) and *show* (Hyland, 2000, p. 183) may act as boosters, they were added to the classification. It is to note that scholarly views on boosters are not in total agreement, however (cf. Hyland, 2000, p. 180; Herring & Martinson; 2004, p. 433; McLaren-Hankin, 2008, p. 644). Further means of *boosting* propositions in IRC are metadiscourse signals like font size, italics and bolds.

The category *hedging opinions* is also missing in BL's agreeing mechanisms. Since a noticeable number of agreements were expressed via hedging devices, the mechanism was included in the classification. Furthermore, BL's (1987) category of *repetition* was extended to include *paraphrases*.

The classification of disagreeing responses was modified, too. Two new categories were devised to include *expression* and *intensification* of disagreements as impoliteness strategies (Garcia-Pastor, 2008, p. 108). Regarding disagreement avoidance mechanisms, since no instance of *pseudo-agreements* and *white lies* were detected in the corpus, they were crossed out. In addition, the use of questions for the expression of disagreements resulted in the inclusion of the subcategory *voice as questions*. BL's *Token agreements* and *hedging opinions* were the other disagreement avoidance subtypes. Token agreement, as exemplified in Discussion, helps interactants pretend to agree while having divergent ideas (BL, 1987, p. 113). Hedging, on the other hand, is the expression of possibility as a means of presenting propositions with caution (BL, 1987, p. 116). The first seven categories of the present classification of hedges are taken from Salager-Meyer (1997); categories eight and ten are

selected from Clemen (2002) and categories nine and eleven are borrowed from Skelton (1998) and Jalilifar (2007), respectively.

1. Modal auxiliary verbs, e.g., *might*

2. Modal lexical verbs, e.g., *seem*

3. Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases, e.g., *possible*

4. Approximators of degree, quantity frequency and time, e.g., *about*

5. Introductory phrases expressing doubt, e.g., *It's my view*

6. If clauses, e.g., *if true*

7. Compound hedges (made of several hedges)

8. Using passive voice (agentless), e.g., *was believed*

9. Addition of -ish to adjectives, e.g., *reddish*

10. Reference to a higher authority, e.g., *Smith (2000) claims …*

11. Putting oneself at a distance from the idea, e.g., *this study …*

It is to note that above-mentioned mechanisms can only be discussed in terms of the contexts in which they appear. For instance, in example (1), the potential booster *exactly* is employed to express speaker B's commitment to his idea. The capitalization of the negative marker provides support for this interpretation. Contrarily, in example (2), the speaker uses the combination of the negative marker and the booster as an approximator to make the disagreement less biting. Further support for this comes from the fact that *not exactly* is followed by two more hedges in lines 4 and 6.

(1)

1. A: i m certain u know tht what u shud do in that time

2. B: *exactly NOT*

3. i dnt now who am i

4. u r talking abotu that situatin!!!!!!!!!

(2)

    1. A: his medal that he got from france is his best reward

    2. no oder from iran n asia got that

    3. B: *not exactly*

    4.   *in my idea* wen his album gos for grammy in top 5

    5.   he gives concert in oscar hall n 1day is named nazeri day in usa

    6.   french medal *might* nt b best award

In sum, (dis)agreements were identified and put in the relevant categories. To lessen the threats to internal reliability, each excerpt was analyzed twice with an interval of approximately one month in between. The statistical analysis was carried out by SPSS 16.0.

5. Results

5.1. Disagreements

A total number of 2521 disagreeing responses were communicated in the corpus. The frequencies for the mechanisms *express disagreement*, *avoid disagreement* and *intensify disagreement* were 1280, 910 and 331, respectively. Chi-Square analysis was performed to see the existence of any significant preference for the selection of strategies. The significant relationship was verified by the analysis (CS[1]=544.523, DF[2]=2, AS[3]=0.000). Since the significance is less than 0.05 (p<0.05), the relationship was proven. In fact, participants most likely *expressed* disagreements *directly*.

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[1] Chi-Square

[2] degree of freedom

[3] asymptotic significance

Regarding *disagreement avoidance subtypes*, the frequencies for *hedging opinions*, *token agreements* and *voice as questions* are 420, 367 and 123, respectively. Chi-Square level of significance for the rejection of the relationship among the variables was zero; hence, not meaningful (CS=165.444, DF=2, AS=0.000). Therefore, the hypothesis claiming that disagreement avoidance mechanisms were randomly chosen was rejected.

5.1.1. Male and Female Disagreements

A total number of 1478 disagreements were expressed by male participants. The frequencies for the mechanisms *express disagreement*, *avoid disagreement* and *intensify disagreement* were 738, 552 and 188, respectively. The statistical analysis (CS=317.721, DF=2, AS=0.000) verified that males' disagreements were not communicated through randomly-selected mechanisms. Furthermore, female participants disagreed 1034 times. The mechanism *express disagreement* was the most frequent one which appeared 542 times. Disagreeing ideas were *avoided* 358 times whereas they were *intensified* only 143 times. The frequency of each mechanism was the baseline of Chi-Square analysis which suggested the existence of a significant relationship (CS=229.417, DF=2, AS=0.000).

5.1.2. Male and Female Disagreement Avoidance Mechanisms

Male participants utilized 552 disagreement avoidance mechanisms. The most favored strategy was *hedging opinions* whose corresponding frequency was 256. *Token agreements* ranked second with a frequency of 212 while the category *voice as questions* was the least common way of avoiding disagreements with a frequency of 84. The reported significance presented by Chi-Square analysis

(CS=86.783, DF=2, AS=0.000) showed that males had statistically meaningful preferences for certain strategies like hedging opinions as they decided not to communicate their disagreements directly. Regarding females, while 164 disagreeing responses were softened via *hedging opinions*, 155 instances were communicated as *token agreements*. The frequency for the last subtype, i.e., *voice as questions*, was 39. SPSS detected a significant relationship (CS=81.458, DF=2, AS=0.000) among the variables.

5.1.3. Male versus Female Disagreeing Preferences

In order to examine the existence of any significant relationship between chatters' gender and their strategy-use preferences, Chi-Square analysis was carried out. *Pearson Chi-Square* (0.286) and *Likelihood Ratio* (0.285) two-tailed levels of significance showed that the second null hypothesis stating that there is no difference between male and female preferences for the communication of disagreements was verified. In other words, participants' gender did not have any significant effect on their choice of disagreement mechanisms.

Table 1. Disagreeing Mechanisms

Count		Mechanisms			
		Bald	Avoid dis.	Intensify dis.	Total
Gender	Male	738	552	188	1478
	Female	542	358	143	1043
Total		1280	910	331	2521

Table 2. Chi-Square Tests (male/female disagreeing mechanisms)

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.504	2	0.286
Likelihood Ratio	2.509	2	0.285
Linear-by-Linear Association	0.134	1	0.715
No. of Valid Cases	2521		

5.1.4. Male versus Female Disagreement Avoidance Preferences

Chi-Square analysis was run to detect possible differences between male and female participants' choice of disagreement avoidance mechanisms. As presented in Table 4 below, statistical analysis suggests no meaningful difference between the variables. In reality, male and female chatters were found to make similar choices while disagreeing. This is concluded from both *Pearson Chi-Square* and *Likelihood Ratio* two-tailed levels of significance.

Table 3. Male/female Disagreement Avoidance Mechanisms

Count		Mechanisms			
		Voice as ques.	Token agr.	Hedging op.	Total
Gender	Male	84	212	256	552
	Female	39	155	164	358
Total		123	367	420	910

Table 4. Chi-Square Tests (male/female disagreement avoidance mechanisms)

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.306	2	0.116
Likelihood Ratio	4.380	2	0.112
Linear-by-Linear Association	0.625	1	0.429
No. of Valid Cases	910		

5.2. Agreements

A total of 3107 agreeing responses were detected in the corpus. The participants expressed their agreements *directly* 2229 times. Furthermore, the frequencies for the strategies *intensify agreement*, *repetition* and *hedging opinions* were 552, 124 and 92, accordingly. The existence of a significant relationship among the mechanisms was examined by Chi-Square analysis which did not report an acceptable level of significance for the rejection of a statistically meaningful relationship (CS=3884.342, DF=3, AS=0.000). Therefore, it could be claimed that chatters most likely express their agreements directly.

5.2.1. Male and Female Agreements

Male participants agreed with their interlocutors 1712 times while they utilized the strategy *express agreement* 1240 times. *Intensify agreement* ranked second with the frequency of 356 while *repetition* and *hedging opinions* were utilized 73 and 43 times, respectively. The level of significance reported by Chi-Square analysis was less than 0.05 (CS=2193.407, DF=3, AS=0.000) and insignificant. This makes clear that the nonexistence of a significant relationship is rejected. In fact, male chatters, most probably, choose the first strategy while expressing their agreeable responses. A total of 1395 agreements were uttered by our female participants. The numbers 989, 306, 51 and 49 were the corresponding frequencies for the mechanisms *express agreement*, *intensify agreement*, *repetition* and *hedging opinions*, accordingly. Statistical analysis (CS=1692.481, DF=3, AS=0.000) showed that chatters significantly preferred to utilize the most frequent mechanism *express agreement* and agree with their interlocutors directly.

5.2.2. Male versus Female Agreement Preferences

The comparison between male and female preferences for the communication of agreeable responses was done through Chi-Square tests. Based on the output provided in Table 6 below, both *Pearson Chi-Square* (0.258) and *Likelihood Ratio* (0.259) two-tailed levels of significance are more than 0.05; hence, significant. Therefore, the nonexistence of a meaningful relationship among the variables is verified. This means there is no significant relationship between chatters' gender and their strategy choice preferences when they agree with their interlocutors.

Table 5. Male/female Agreeing Mechanisms

Count		Mechanisms				
		Express agr.	Intensify agr.	Rep./paraph.	Hedging op.	Total
Gender	Male	1240	356	73	43	1712
	Female	989	306	51	49	1395
Total		2229	662	124	92	3107

Table 6. Chi-Square Tests (male/female agreeing mechanisms)

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.034	3	0.258
Likelihood Ratio	4.021	3	0.259
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.334	1	0.248
No. of Valid Cases	3107		

6. Discussion

6.1. Disagreements

In the present corpus, *express disagreement* was the most frequent disagreeing strategy (50.7%). *Avoid disagreement* ranked second (36.09%) while *intensify*

disagreement was the least frequent mechanism (13.12%). The application of positive politeness strategies while disagreeing requires speakers to find efficient ways to communicate their true ideas while maintaining an atmosphere of agreement. The selection of an appropriate positive politeness strategy is performed in accordance with a number of complex interrelated factors among which are the type and number of movements as well as the amount of coding materials required for the fulfillment of such moves. No matter which strategy is chosen, the application of such mechanisms needs more time and space which is of critical value in IRC. Furthermore, chatters have to devote portions of their limited-in-size working memory to the acts of evaluation and selection of available techniques. It is noteworthy that the face-to-face communication activities of listening and speaking are to a great extent automated processes which do not burden interactants' memories; so, they can be paralleled to some other activities effortlessly. Chatting, contrarily, involves more challenging tasks of reading and typing. Furthermore, due to the disruption of adjacency pairs in IRC (Markman, 2009, p. 154), more mental challenges are experienced by readers who want to get a coherent sense of their interlocutors' ideas.

Due to the great importance of time and space in chat rooms, chatters use different forms of time and space saving techniques to express as many propositions as possible in the least amount of time and space possible. Such mechanisms are manifested in many forms whose exemplars are the use of contractions, emoticons, etc. In other words, people are required to save time and space even at the expense of some established norms of real-life interactions. Furthermore, pragmatic issues are highly culture-bound; i.e., what is considered polite in a given culture may be regarded as impolite according to some other cultural values. Two issues arise here; firstly, politeness is

dependant on participants' mutual understandings of their interlocutors, the specifications of situation as well as the medium of conversation. Therefore, politeness differences can be claimed to exist between commonsense written communication and its IRC counterpart whose characteristics have not been completely decrypted yet. This is to say, interactants who are cognizant of the limitations of time and space which cause their interlocutor not to spend time and energy on selection and utilization of politeness strategies applied in other modes of communication, do not regard direct disagreements that irritating. The support for this proposal comes from the fact that conversational turns continue to appear even when blunt and direct disagreements intervene. Simply speaking, if direct disagreements were really face-threatening, they either would not appear to this great extent or would result in communication breakdowns.

Secondly, cyber-space is a mode of communication where culture specific norms are becoming pale in favor of medium-specific ones. As a result, some politeness considerations of face-to-face communications may not work in IRC. In truth, one of the main reasons for the popularity of this particular mode of communication is the ability to help users overcome the cultural limitations they face in other mediums of interaction. For instance, taboo or unsafe topics, e.g., sex, are noticeably discussed in chat rooms. In addition, many chatters may never meet each other in real-life situations. They might even manipulate their characteristics, take up fake identities and deceive their interlocutors. It goes without saying that while BL's theory relies much on the weightiness computation of FTAs in terms of *social distance*, power *relationships* and the *threatening potential* of the acts in a given culture (BL, 1987, p. 76), these variables might not play significant roles in IRC. As a result of chatters' virtual homogeneity which can influence the way they communicate (dis)agreements

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(Myers, 1998, p. 89), they may perform what seems impossible in other mediums of communication, e.g., direct disagreements, even at the expense of others' face wants.

6.1.1. Disagreement Avoidance Mechanisms

When participants did not express disagreements directly, they preferred to utilize disagreement avoidance mechanisms. *Hedging* was participants' most common mechanism for refraining from blunt disagreements (46.15%). The reason for the preference of *hedging opinions* over *token agreements* and *voice as questions* can be discussed in terms of moves and elements required for each mechanism. The popularity for hedges can be attributed to the wide range of techniques it covers (See Methodology). Each of these techniques, in turn, includes various devices among which are temporally/spatially economical ones. As an instance, disagreements can be softened via simple and short utterances like 'somewhat', 'may be', etc. Since the application of such elements suits the previously-mentioned limitations of IRC fine, they are the most favorite disagreement avoidance mechanisms used by chatters.

Token agreements were next-to-the most popular way of avoiding disagreements (40.32%). Token agreements usually involve at least two moves one of which precedes the disagreeing idea which is delayed to the final positions of the utterance. Sometimes, as discussed below, token agreements include hedges, among other things.

(3)
1. A: ye dont know them there for
2.   they stay with som boys to find a good one 4 themsef
3. B: it is true
4.   but it is *not for all* girls
5. A: it is true 4 all

In the example above, speaker B tries to minimize the negative effects of the disagreement as he takes advantage of a token agreement in lines 3 and 4. In line 3, firstly, he expresses an immediate agreement with his interlocutor's opinion stated in line 2. Afterwards, using the hedging device *not for all*, he questions the accuracy of the utterance. This means he prefaces his disagreeing idea with an immediate agreement which lessens the degree of threat to speaker A's face. As a rule of thumb, the coding materials required for the creation of token agreements are usually more than the ones used for hedges. Furthermore, while true feelings and ideas are often hard to grasp in hedges, they are sometimes expressed during the final parts of speakers' conversational turns in token agreements.

(4)

    1. A: they ar dfaltuless

    2. B: *yop may be*

    3.   *but they don work very much*

    4.   *they become*

    5.   *unusable very soon*

In the example above, lines 2 through 5, chatter B who does not accept the faultlessness of Chinese DVD players tries to save his interactant's positive face as he partially agrees with him in line 2. The partial agreement, expressed as a hedging opinion, is followed by speaker B's true attitudes about the deficiencies of such home appliances. In fact, speaker A's opinion is attacked although at the final positions of his interlocutor's turn. This means the potential degree of face threat can be claimed to increase as people move from expressing hedges to token agreements. As a result, it is not illogical to expect people to prefer hedging opinions over token agreements.

The analysis of the disagreements made clear that the category *voice as questions* was the least preferred way for keeping from direct disagreements (13.51%). In the following excerpt, for instance, speaker B does not agree with his interlocutor. Instead of posting a bald on record disagreement, he voices his disagreeing idea as questions stated in lines 3 and 4.

(5)

1. A: it goes with a speed of even 180 km

2.   without problems

3. B: *isnt it a great speed for it//?*

4.   *it can do that?*

In comparison to hedging opinions and token agreements in which dispreferred ideas are made vague, delayed or prefaced by partial agreements, questions are less likely to hide true attitudes. In lines 3 and 4 above, for instance, the disagreement is not expressed directly; nevertheless, the addressee can easily detect that his utterances are challenged. These might be reasons for the rarity of *voice* disagreement *as questions*.

The last mechanism for the communication of disagreements, *Intensify disagreement*, was found to be the least frequent one (13.12%). Lines 4 and 8 in the following example include elements, i.e., the booster *sure* and the commissive verb *bet* which are used to increase the strength of chatter B's controversial opinion. Since this mechanism spotlights the dispreferred ideas, the face jeopardizing power of the utterance will be multiplied. Consequently, the addressees can easily feel the speakers' strengthened impolite behavior which attacks their attitudes directly. This is why interactants try to refrain from *intensify*ing *disagreement*s in IRC.

(6)

    1. A: but you are doing a mistake

    2. B: no

    3. A: it means something else

    4. B: *im sure* about it

    5. A: means nice t meet u

    6.   don't be that sure

    7.   u can look it up in your dictionary

    8. B: *i bet u*

6.1.2. Male versus Female Disagreeing Mechanisms

Regarding the role of gender, no statistically meaningful difference was found between male and female strategy-choice preferences while disagreeing. Although differences were found, statistical analysis rejected their significance. For example, while 5.6% of males' disagreements were voiced as questions, the corresponding percentage for females was 3.7%. The statistical analysis did not reveal any significant differences between the two groups, however.

    Although linguistic politeness has been associated with women's language (Wardhaugh, 2006, p. 324), the idea is not unquestionable (Swim & Hyers, 1999, p. 85; Edstorm, 2004, P. 1505; Ladegaard, 2004, p. 2015). For example, Bayard and Krishnayya (2001, cited in Turnage, 2008, p. 54) found that males only swear slightly more than females and there is no noticeable difference between the intensity of the swearing uttered by two groups on the internet. This is also supported by Brown (1993), cited in Duranti (1997, p. 210), who claims that women may disagree bluntly, interrupt others extensively and express hostility, anger and dissatisfaction without redress in certain settings. In the following example, female A's opinion is directly attacked in lines 4 and 5.

In reality, speaker F's unwelcome idea is verbalized baldly as *she* posts the swearing *fucking asshole* supplemented by the attitude marker *pshyco*.

(7)

    1. A: & i have a CD of ….

    2.   i like him very much

    3. F: :-&

    4.   *fucking asshole*

    5.   he is *pshyco*

The other indispensable factor is the medium-specific characteristic of IRC, as mentioned earlier, whereby the gender-oriented differences are becoming pale. In sum, however, the results of the present study suggest that gender plays no statistically meaningful role in the selection of disagreeing mechanisms.

6.2. Agreements

The most frequent agreeing mechanism was *express agreement directly* (71.74%). According to Grice's conversational maxims, people should try not to make their participations more than necessary. There are, sometimes, reasons which make interactants violate conversational maxims in favor of pragmatically more demanded goals. The polite expressions of requests, as exemplified below, are among the manifestations of such behaviors which include extra elements explainable only in pragmatic terms.

(8)

    1. A: hola

    2. B: hi dude

    3. A: im not dude man

    4. B: oh sory

    5.   *wud u pls* tell me about yourself then

Line 5 includes one linguistic unit of three items whose absence will not make any semantic change to the sentence. In other words, the utterance "*wud u pls* tell me about yourself" is semantically indifferent from its blunt form "tell me about yourself". However, the *italicized* words help speaker save hearer's negative face and make the imposition less irritating. As a result, it is not unreasonable to expect people to make their requests more polite at the expense of Grice's maxims. As far as agreements are concerned, there is no reason for the deviation from Gricean maxims since rather than causing threats, agreements enhance interactants' face wants. Therefore, they are usually expressed directly using the least possible materials. The requirement of IRC that contributions be as concise as possible provides further rationale for the popularity of direct agreements.

Regarding *intensify agreement*, overall, emphasis on agreeable ideas results in the enhancement of chatters' positive face wants while it does not demand the application of complex linguistic items. This is why *intensify agreement* was the most favorite alternative (21.3%) for direct agreements. In the following example, the exaggeration of the agreement is done through the insertion of the booster *absolutely* which is itself strengthened via capitalization.

(9)

    1. A: can u tell me story of prinses of persia

    2. B: i dont kno anything about her

    3.   i havent heard it

    4. A: this is not a simple matter

    5. B: *ABSOLUTELY*

The category *repetition and paraphrases* ranked third (3.99%) suggesting an unpopular way of agreeing. On the whole, although the mechanism helps

chatters satisfy their interlocutors' positive face wants, it is not as preferable as direct agreements. While speakers can simply say 'yes' and give positive feedback to their partners, the repetition of previous utterances does not seem to be economical in chat channels where the greatest number of propositions are expected to be expressed in the shortest way possible. In fact, the use of the mechanism *repetitions and paraphrases* could be supported as an efficient way of agreeing if it fulfilled any particular function such as the one carried out by *agreement intensification*. The data, however, failed to show any particular function performed by repetitions and paraphrases. Therefore, the rarity of *repetition and paraphrases* seems to be reasonable.

The least frequent strategy agreeing mechanism was *hedging opinions* (2.96%). Unfortunately, the study could not find a defendable rationale for the appearance of hedging agreements since agreeable responses are preferred and it is not pragmatically logical to make them vague. However, there are reasons which might suggest cornerstones for the utilization of such unpopular expressions. Participants of the study were Iranian natives whose culture is *tæ'arof*-oriented (compliment-oriented, to use the English version). This means they are expected to dispraise their capabilities to show their correct socialization *(tærbiæt)* which is directly related to the Iranian concept of face (Koutlaki, 2002, p. 1755). Speaker B, being praised in lines 1 and 2 below, puts herself at a distance from the agreeing idea as she utilizes the hedging device *people say*. In the next line, however, she expresses her true attitude which is in agreement with the ideas presented in line 1. In sum, hedges are used by Iranian chatters who want to show their humbleness. Except for this function, however, the study could not find any reason for the rare appearance of hedging agreements.

(10)

1. A: hey girl u r beau cute slim u
2.   r in swiming team u do sports
3. B: *peple say* that to me
4.   im slim now n i should keep it

Moreover, there was no significant difference between males and females in terms of agreeing preferences. For instance, males expressed 2.51% of their agreeable responses via different forms of hedging opinions whereas the corresponding percentage for the female group was 3.51%. However, the Chi-Square analysis made clear that the differences were not statistically significant. The reasons for the absence of gender-oriented differences in the communication of disagreeing responses (see above) all work in favor of the same phenomenon here.

7. Conclusion

The present study shows that online disagreements do not necessarily end in conversation breakdowns. The noticeably large number of unmitigated disagreements suggests that IRC direct disagreements are not as face threatening as their real-life counterparts. This is grounded in the fact that cyber-space chatters often continue to talk although their face wants are attacked by unmitigated disagreements. The face-saving/enhancing act of agreeing, likewise, is likely to be performed directly. While the immediacy of agreements is supported by the limitations of time and space in internet chat channels, the simplicity is in concert with pragmatic norms of face-to-face communication.

Furthermore, the relationship between participants' gender and their (dis)agreeing strategies was not statistically meaningful. On the whole, Iranian online chatters' strategy-choice preferences for the communication of (dis)agreements were found not to be in total harmony with politeness norms governing natural-life face-to-face conversations. This can be attributable to the medium-specific characteristics of IRC, suggesting the emergence/evolution of a unique cultural milieu awaiting further research.

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