DISAGREEMENT STRATEGIES OF MALAYSIAN SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH IN RADIO DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT: This paper is part of an ongoing research on the strategies in expressing disagreement among Malaysian speakers of English in the context of radio discourse. The corpus is taken from several local radio talks, where participants of the radio discourse are all Malaysian speakers of English as a second language. The disagreement strategies range from getting the hearer to agree to disagree with an earlier proposition in the discourse to a delayed disagreement sequence; and giving personal reasons for disagreeing. It is important to note that these strategies of disagreement are related to prior utterance or to earlier segments of the discourse and help to achieve interactional goals of the participants in the interaction process. In any forms of verbal interaction, whether it is from the genre of the media or a natural conversation, participants of the discourse have many possibilities of expressing disagreements. The choice that a speaker makes to express a disagreement will depend not only on the speaker’s speaking style, but also on factors related to the content of the discourse or commitment to the topic, as well as the position of the disagreement within the interaction. The present paper focuses on one type of strategy that is the use of hedging devices to preface expressions of disagreement in the radio interaction. Some of the varieties of hedging devices include ‘well’, ‘I think’, ‘you know’ and ‘I mean’. Based on previous researches (Shiffrin 1987; Jucker 1993; and Holmes 1995), the study provides the pragmatic functions of these hedging devices in expressions of disagreement. The theoretical framework of Conversation Analysis (CA) (Sacks et al 1974) is also adopted to study the structures and patterns of radio talk in which participants display disagreement sequences.

Keywords: conversation analysis, disagreement strategies, discourse markers, radio discourse, turn-taking

I. INTRODUCTION
The present study focuses on the linguistic devices in sequences of disagreement in the interactions among participants in a Malaysian radio discourse. The interest in this type of genre is because of the variety of spoken features in radio discourse that are similar to everyday or informal conversation, on the one hand, and to more institutional forms of verbal interactions, such as classroom exchanges, courtroom or broadcast news interviews, on the other. In studying radio interaction, we can observe how media communication affects the attitudes and opinions of society through the way it presents people and issues. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate how disagreements are expressed by the participants in radio interaction and the preferences for certain linguistic devices used in producing such utterances.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW
Previous studies define verbal disagreement as an ‘exercise of power’ (Avery and Ellis, 1978) and ‘a form of conflict’ (Waldron and Applegate, 1994). On a content level, speakers will not only be in conflict with their conversational partners but also with regard to protecting the addresses’ and/or their own face. Brown and Levinson (1987:66) consider disagreement to belong to “those acts that threaten the positive-face want, by indicating that the speaker does not care about the addressee’s feelings, wants etc. and that in some important respect he doesn’t want Hearer’s wants.” Two sub-categories of involvement politeness “seek agreement” and “avoid disagreement” were formulated by Brown and Levinson (1987:112-117).

In conversation analysis (CA), disagreements are by nature linked to previous positions, but they usually open a next position for a next speaker because a disagreement calls for some kind of reaction from the party disagreed with (Sacks et al, 1974). The key to the conversation analytic approach is the focus on sequences. By concentrating on how utterances are produced as turns in interactional sequences, conversation analysts argue that it is possible to observe and analyse participants’ own understanding of one another’s actions, and of what is going on in any given social context. The study adopts this CA approach in looking at the structures and patterns of radio talk in which participants display disagreement sequences and the kinds of common expressions of disagreement in the turn by turn sequence.

III. DATA AND ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE
The data collected for the study are part of a larger research project on disagreement strategies in media interaction among Malaysian speakers of English as a second language. The present study focuses on two radio talk shows, which were audio-recorded from a popular radio station broadcast in English in Malaysia. This type of radio programme involves a radio host who is present in the recording studio with a guest speaker(s) and radio listeners are invited to call in to voice
their opinions or to seek further clarification about the topics concerned. The talk shows were purposely selected for the study because the topics of discussion dealt with current issues which would appeal to the radio audience. The length of each show was 40 minutes. The guest speakers were briefly introduced at the beginning of the talk show, so some background information was provided. The radio callers were mentioned by name by the radio hosts and this allows the researchers to make assumptions about the callers’ background with regard to race and gender. The Malaysian society comprises different races; the Malays, Chinese and Indians make up the majority and there are also other minority ethnic races: Kadazans, Ibans, Bajaus etc. that live in different parts of the country. English is spoken as a second language and is the second language of instruction in the education system. Even though, some Malaysian terms and structures of Malaysian-English were used in the discourse, the writer’s concern is more on the patterns of interaction in relation to disagreements.

The speech patterns which indicate disagreements were extracted from the data in order to identify the disagreement strategies used and to analyse their pragmatic functions in the interaction. The most common types of expressions of disagreement in relation to the frequency of use in interaction in the corpus were also identified.

IV. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

In the present study, several expressions of disagreements or variations of them were used by the participants to voice disagreements. The phrases used to express disagreements range from more direct negative responses to earlier statements in the discourse like “No, no, no” or “I’m not to say” to less direct expressions to soften the disagreement statements like “well...although” or “yeah... I don’t think”. The present paper only deals with the hedging devices used in expressions of disagreements in the radio talk such as, well, I think, I mean and you know. These common strategies used when expressing disagreements are discussed in the following sections.

A. The use of hedging devices to preface disagreements

Hedges are linguistic devices such as sort of, maybe, I mean or well. Aijmer (1986:6) defines the functions of these words and phrases as follows: “The hedge frees the speaker from the responsibility of the word and saves him the trouble of finding a ‘better’ word or phrase.” Hedges are a means to hesitate before choosing to comment on what is on one’s mind, or to abbreviate or to condense information; and this can also be achieved by intonation and voice quality (Aijmer, 1986). According to Tannen (1993:28) hedges may soften the impact of negative statements. Holmes (1995:78) states that an analysis of hedges must always consider the function the device carries out in context. It can also express referential meaning, for instance, when an expert in a discussion uses I think for a statement, then he/she gives his/her evaluation more weight (boosting). Holmes (1995) views that laypeople often use I think to express insecurity and to detach themselves from the truth value of an utterance.

In the remainder of the paper, we will discuss the functions of these hedging devices performed in the discourse. For each hedging device, a brief overview of the main functions identified by previous researches is provided. This will serve as the basis for the investigation of the pragmatic functions of these devices used in the discourse. Samples of speech extracts of participants’ use of such linguistic devices in discourse will also be displayed. There were 60 occurrences of hedging devices which precede disagreements in the data. The four categories of hedges which occurred most were: I think (20%), you know (19%), I mean (12%) and well (4%).

1) Using you know and I mean as prefaces to disagreement sequences

The hedging device you know serves two functions: (1) As a marker of meta-knowledge about what speaker and hearer share; and (2) as a marker of speaker knowledge about what is generally known in the culture, society or group (Shiffrin, 1987). The hedging device I mean marks a speaker’s upcoming modification of the meaning of his or her own talk, where it also includes both an expansion of ideas and explanations of intentions.

Instances of participants’ use of you know and I mean include the following:

(1) No... No, no, no.. I mean, I think you know, whatever kind of university education you have it does have no bearing on your career as a writer
(2) Well... I don’t think the language skill should be seen as as something so cut and dried... you know is not

The phrase I mean (example 1) used in this sequence shows a reformulation to a statement given by an earlier speaker. Another implication of using I mean in this sequence could also be that the speaker was initially being impolite by expressing a strong disagreement of ‘no (4X) and later tried to soften the disagreement by uttering I mean or ‘What I actually meant was.’ as a polite strategy of disagreement. The phrase you know used before a disagreement sequence shows that the speaker assumes that the hearer shares some kind of meta-knowledge.

In example 2 the expression you know followed by the negative marker “is not” is used as a strategy to express a disagreement to the hearer’s earlier speech. This strategy also suggests that the speaker is in fact asking the hearer to disagree with him by saying “You know is not...”. This shows that you know is used to mark speaker’s knowledge about what is generally perceived in the society. In other words, this indicates that there is some kind of meta-knowledge between the speaker and the hearer, in which the speaker presumes that the hearer should in fact disagree with this kind of generalisation made about the Malaysian society or what the society seem to believe to be true. The example shows that in disagreeing to an earlier statement, a participant tries to use
strategies to get the other party to agree so as to disagree with the statement that has been proposed earlier.

Sometimes participants begin their turn with I mean to further express a disagreement or to indirectly disagree. In some instances, the hedging device is used to show the current speaker’s upcoming modification of his own talk. There are also instances where several turn-taking develop in order for the speaker to reassess his/her suggestion or to further reinforce the speaker’s ideas or views.

The discourse marker you know is the second most frequent discourse marker used before expressing disagreements in the data. On most occasions, you know is used when the speaker feels that the hearer shares some kind of meta-knowledge about the issue, and you know is used as a strategy to get the hearer to agree with the speaker. In other instances, you know is used as a marker of speaker knowledge about what is generally perceived in the society. I mean is the third most common hedging device used in a disagreement sequence when the speaker modifies the meaning of his/her own prior talk, to show ‘what the speaker meant’. Therefore, in the upcoming utterances, the speaker will expand on his/her ideas and explain his/her intentions. In other words, I mean is quite frequently used when the current speaker supports his/her arguments in the discourse.

2) Using I think in a disagreement sequence
According to Holmes (1995:92-93), I think may function as a hedge or booster and can express referential meaning when a speaker expresses insecurity about the truth value of an utterance. Brown and Levinson (1987:164) regard this discourse particle as a quality hedge which means that “the speaker is not taking full responsibility for the truth of his utterance.” It can also be considered as a politeness strategy in which the speaker tries to avoid openly imposing on the addressee (Brown and Levinson 1987). The following shows instances of such expressions:

(1) **Yah I think that’s become completely ridiculous and over politicised and I think that it shows a certain lack of self-confidence**

(2) **I think that...........I think you know. grammar is important that means, you...there are rules and you need to know them**

I think is used in a disagreement sequence to further strengthen the speaker’s disagreement. Sometimes several sequences of I think occur in the same speaker turn that functions as a booster to emphasize the speaker’s belief about the issue. In instances where the particle I think precedes you know (example 2), they seem to indicate that the speaker and hearer share some kind of meta-knowledge, and that the hearer should agree with the speaker’s views. The linguistic device I think functions as a booster which emphasises the speaker’s beliefs which helps to strengthen rather than weaken the force of the utterance. When a disagreement is expressed in a long turn, this provides the speaker the opportunity to fully present his/her views. In other words, the speaker engages in a lengthy development of his/her own point of view which is linked to the mediated context of talk, self-represented in the public occasion of speaking.

In the analysis, the hedging device I think is the most frequent type of linguistic device used in a disagreement sequence. In most instances, when a participant disagrees with a co-participant, I think is used as a strategy in which the speaker tries to avoid openly imposing on the addressee. To verbally disagree with another person is to directly threaten that person’s positive face, therefore speakers try to find means for performing disagreement politely. In most instances, the use of I think in a disagreement sequence acts as a booster to further strengthen the speaker’s beliefs or what the speaker perceives to be not true. It also expresses referential meaning when a speaker expresses a disagreement to the truth value of prior utterance. Rather than openly or directly disagreeing with a co-participant, in which under normal circumstances, people would say ‘no I disagree with the statement’, we find that the participants in the radio talk on most occasions try to avoid imposing on the addressee directly.

3) Using well before expressing a disagreement
According to Schiffrin (1987: 102), well is a multi-functional word and can be used as an adverb, a noun, a degree word or as a discourse marker. Jucker (1993:438) proposes four uses of well as a discourse marker: as a marker of insecurity, indicating some problems on the content level of the current or the preceding occurrence; as a face-threat mitigator, indicating some problem on the interpersonal level; as a frame marking device indicating a topic change or introducing direct reported speech; and as a delay device.

The extract below shows the use of well in a disagreement sequence.

**Extract 1**

H: Host 1
T: Guest speaker

H: being Malaysians, and now with the literacy rate going up, people want to read books...they want to read books from overseas.....
T: yeah, well... although I think you know, that’s beginning to change and suddenly

The reference to “being Malaysians” by speaker H reflects that the Malaysian society seems to prefer reading “books from overseas”. Here, we can see that speaker T starts his turn with an agreement particle ‘yeah’, followed by the discourse particle well and the discourse connective “although” to show a disagreement with the fact that people’s perception about local writers have now changed. In this instance, well is used as a delay device before voicing a disagreement. In our earlier discussion, it was mentioned that the phrase I think you know is expressed in order to show the relationship between what speaker and hearer share and this is
again acknowledged in this disagreement sequence with “yeah..well..although I think you know”.

In the following extract, the discourse particle well occurs in a disagreement sequence with ‘I don’t think’.

Extract 2

T: **Well..I don't think** the language skill should be seen as as something so cut and dried, **you know is not**, you don’t have to write flawless English.

This is another instance which shows the use of the discourse marker well as a delay device before a speaker voices a disagreement, and this is followed by “I don’t think”. Again, there is the occurrence of “you know is not” in the speaker’s utterance, which is used as a strategy to get the other participant to agree with the speaker (see Section A 1).

The use of well which precedes a disagreement is not frequently used by the participants in the radio talks. On most occasions, well is used as a hesitation or a delay strategy device before a speaker proceeds with a disagreement. It usually prefaces in a disagreement sequence such as **well I don’t think, well I mean that** and well I think you know. Going back to the pragmatic functions of I mean and I think you know (see Section A 1 and 2), this suggests that the particle well is used as a strategy before a speaker reformulates his/her utterance. In other words, the speaker uses the strategy when he/she does not agree completely with the hearer but tries to build some kind of close contact with the hearer so as to get the hearer to see his/her point of view.

**V. CONCLUSION**

To disagree with another speaker is to threaten that person’s positive face and this is considered as an uncomfortable position, therefore, people are more motivated to lessen this threat. In the present corpus, rather than directly stating their disagreements and opinions, speakers frequently hedge. The specific strategies of disagreements used by the participants correspond closely to the positive politeness strategies described by Brown and Levinson (1987). A lot of I mean and you know sequences are used when a disagreement to prior utterance is expressed to further strengthen or reinforce the current speaker’s points of view. The sequences of you know is not and I think you know which precede disagreements are also preferred strategies by participants in order to get the hearer to agree to disagree with earlier propositions in the discourse. There is also the use of well as a preface to a disagreement before a speaker reformulates his/her utterance. It is also discovered that speakers have certain preferences for expressing disagreements. For instance, speaker T in the corpus (Data 1) uses 28 disagreement devices of well, I mean, I think and you know, in his utterances, and C1 (Data 2) uses 9 disagreement strategies with you know and I think. Therefore, there is a preference for participants to use certain discourse strategies when expressing disagreements. Participants in the study are also aware of their roles in the interaction and the functions of the linguistic devices used in English, even though English is the second language spoken in Malaysia.

The use of such communication styles could be culturally related to the Malaysian society in which politeness is highly observed. According to Asmah Hj Omar (1992) the rules of speaking in a society are always related to the cultural value of the society. In other words, speakers in a communication setting try to maintain good relationship among the interlocutors and the society as a whole.

As the conversation during a phone-in radio programme is rather time-constrained, the presence of the broadcast audience may also influence to some extent the speakers’ choice of disagreement strategies. There is also the need to consider the fact that guest speakers and callers are aware of the presence of the audience which may lead them to be more reluctant to resort to direct and confrontational strategies. Although the data reflect a small sample size of the Malaysian society who come from diverse cultures and have different mother tongues, one thing that they have in common is that, they are generally polite. They seldom convey direct disagreement such as ‘No, I disagree with what you have just said’, but rather, these Malaysian speakers almost always try to avoid imposing on the addressee. Furthermore, they are also aware of the discourse functions of the pragmatic particles that they use in order to express their disagreements.

REFERENCES


