

Disagreements in Debate: Focusing on the Preference Structure

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Yoon, Jihye. 2008. **Disagreements in Debate: Focusing on the Preference Structure**. *SNU Working Papers in English Linguistics and Language* 7, 121-135. This paper focuses on the reversed preference structure of disagreements used in a debate setting. Unlike disagreements in everyday conversation, which are normally dispreferred (Pomerantz 1984), disagreements in debate classes are shown to be preferred, similar to the ones found in conflict situations (Greatbatch 1992, Kotthoff 1993, Gruber 1998). Two debate classes in U.S. are collected through the well-known website, YouTube, and are analyzed following the Conversation Analysis (CA) framework, focusing on the sequence organization and turn shapes. The results show that first, disagreements are preferred from the beginning of the debate; second, disagreements used to gain floor are very direct and aggravated; and third, participants sometimes try to re-reverse the preference structure of disagreement by using, for example, tag-questions. (Seoul National University)

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to look closely at the disagreement expressions used in debates. In a debate setting, the interaction between the participants is different from everyday conversation. The most striking difference is that participants in debates constantly try to disagree to their opponents, whereas in everyday conversations, speakers do not often disagree with their interlocutors. Thus, the use of disagreement expressions by the speakers in the two settings are very different from each other.

To look at the characteristics of disagreement expressions used in debate, this study will focus on the 'preference structure' of disagreements. 'Preference' is a concept which can explain the alternative second pair parts of adjacency pairs. After the first pair parts, two

different kinds of alternative second pair parts can be produced: a preferred second pair part and a dispreferred second pair part (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998). These two alternative answers differ in their turn shapes, thus examining the turn shapes of disagreement will reveal its preference structure.

Before analyzing the sequence organization and the turn shape of the disagreement expressions, I will shortly introduce the use of disagreement expressions in everyday talk and report results of previous studies where preferred disagreements are found.

2. Disagreement in everyday talk

One of the most frequently cited studies on disagreement is Pomerantz (1984). The foci of this investigation are twofold: the next turn of an assessment and the categorization of it into preferred and dispreferred next action. She finds out that there is "an association between an action's preference status and the turn shape in which it is produced" (p.64). In everyday talk, agreement is considered as preferred action while disagreement is considered as dispreferred action.

According to Pomerantz (1984), there are two types of disagreements, strong and weak. A strong disagreement is one that directly contrasts with the previous evaluation. A weak disagreement is one that occurs with agreement components. Thus, Pomerantz distinguishes strong and weak disagreement "on sequential grounds", that is, whether they co-occur with agreement expressions or not. Some characteristics of disagreement produced by English native speakers are well described in her study. First, many disagreements are delayed by silence, requests for clarification, partial repeats, etc. It may be delayed within turn by prefacing weak agreements. Second, silences after an initial assessment can be viewed as potential disagreements. Third, whereas most disagreements are dispreferred, there are certain circumstances where they are preferred. After "self-deprecations", for example, disagreeing is a preferred action. The focus of the present study, disagreement in debates, can also be seen as one of these circumstances. Before looking closely into this, I will elaborate some more settings where disagreement is preferred.

3. Reversed preference structure

Some studies found out that disagreements are preferred in certain settings. All such studies analyzed settings which involve some kind of argument. One of these settings is panel interviews where each interviewee is usually invited to advocate opposite positions from each other, examined in Greatbatch (1992). Interviewees disagree with each other throughout the interview, and the organization of these disagreements is different from that of ordinary conversations. The author finds out that first, the disagreements are expressed as an answer to the interviewer, not to the other interviewee. In this case, disagreement is produced in accordance with the turn-taking system of a news interview. There are also disagreements that are produced out in this system. Participants may directly disagree with the other interviewee and minimize the use of dispreferred markers in their turn. However, they are still more or less constrained by the interview setting. Greatbatch's look at disagreements reveals that the disagreement expressions can be restricted by the turn-taking system of the institutional setting.

A more informal debate setting was studied by Kotthoff (1993). He looked at disagreements in a debate context, specifically, discussions between students and lecturers taking place during the professors' consulting hours. The study focuses on how a dispute is performed by a change in preference structure and how this affects participants' production and interpretation of talk. Interestingly, this data shows that the preference structure of the disagreements changes during the conversation. At the openings of argumentation, disagreement is expressed as a "typical format of a dispreferred act", but after a few turns, disagreement acts no longer as a dispreferred action. In other words, once the dispute frame gets established, disagreement is preferred.

A study concerning disagreements in a debate setting was done by Gruber (1998). The data of this study was a T.V. debate show aired in Austria. The main finding of the study is that in conflict sequences, there is a change in preference organization, a change in turn-taking system with an increasing number of overlaps, and the use of cohesive devices.

All of the three studies involve some kind of argument situation, and

finds out that disagreements become preferred in the situations. However, the subtle differences found in the results of the studies suggest that each particular setting influences the use of disagreements and the sequential characteristics of them. This motivates the present study to look closely into a particular institutional setting, debate class, and to observe how the speakers disagree with each other.

4. Data

Data used in this paper is from the well known website, "YouTube" (<http://www.youtube.com>). Keyword "debate" was searched, and two debate classes were chosen. One of the disadvantages of using data from the internet is that we cannot have exact information about the setting. However, there are still some advantages using internet data for conversation analysts. First of all, it is convenient. If you just type in the search word, websites provide naturally occurring conversation data related to the keyword, already recorded. It saves time to search for data and record the conversation personally. Second, a variety of data becomes available. Interactions between native speakers become available to researchers in all over the world, where native speakers' interaction is hard to be observed.

The particular video clips were chosen because they were one of the few clips showing debate classes, and they involved heated discussion, thus providing a lot of disagreement expressions. Also, the two debate classes had a similar debate format, where four participants were divided into two groups. Both debate classes seem to be situated in the U.S. and all eight participants are safely assumed as native speakers of English. The age of the participants is unknown, but judging from the looks of the participants, they seem to be junior high or high school students. The age of the participants in the two debate classes may differ, but the age factor seems not to affect the results of the study. The debates are done in front of other students and the teacher in the classroom in both cases. It is not a very formal setting, compared to T.V. debates, but it still follows the norms of a debate. A brief summary of the topics and participants is provided in table 1.

Table1: Data Information

	Debate: cheerleading	Debate: genocide
Topic	Is cheerleading a sport or not?	Did the U.S. commit genocide to the indians?
PRO	F1 & F2	M4 & F4
CON	M1 & M2	M3 & F3
Length	6:19	5:59

5. Disagreeing in debate

5.1 Sequence organization

The disagreements found in the data do not seem to occur with features which signal dispreference. In other words, there are no pauses or downgrading elements used in the disagreement turns. Rather, they seem to have features normally associated with preferred actions. Thus, disagreements in this data tend to overlap with the previous utterances or come right after them, without pauses.

Also, unlike the dispute situation observed in Kotthoff (1993), the disagreements found in the debate classrooms were preferred even from the opening of the debate. This difference seems to come from the setting of the two data. Kotthoff's data was an argument talk in the middle of an ordinary conversation. Thus, the talk changed its preference structure as it went into an argument. However, in my data, participants are instructed to debate, and they even prepared notes of their opinions prior to the debate. This makes the frame of debate established right from the beginning. An example of the opening of debate is provided below:

(1) Debate: cheerleading, 1-5

- 1 M1: Okay, we're doing if uh:: if cheerleading is a
- 2 sport or not
- 3 (1.4)
- 4 M2: °It's not
- 5 M1: Yeah, it's definitely not=
- 6 F1: =Yeah it is

Most of these expressions had the form 'yes, but'. This kind of disagreement was categorized as "weak disagreements" by Pomerantz, but since this term actually makes the disagreements sound "weak", I will avoid the use of the term. They are not "weak" version of disagreements in debate, but rather a strategy, a way to express disagreement. These expressions are normally used after a turn which provides specific examples or an undeniable fact.

(3) Debate: genocide, 34-40

- 1 F4: Jeff told you >I can't really remember if Jeff or
 2 you< Ah: one's your first statement up here was,
 3 you supported cultural genocide, but not physical
 4 genocide, but I do believe, let's see, Crystal and
 5 Seth ALL had point the Modoc war, thee
 6 [um:
 7 → F3: [OK, war, war, (.) two-sided, but genocide is a
 8 one-sided completely wipes another side
 9 retaliating. This is where a WAR two side meets
 10 a battle [()]

Right after F4 mentions the term, "Modoc war", F3 comes in and disagrees with her by producing a modified version of 'yes, but'. Here, some elements are inserted between the "OK" and "but". Instead of denying the historical fact that F4 provided in the previous turn, F3 agrees with the fact itself, but disagrees with the relation of it to the topic. The relation of 'war' with 'genocide' is undermined and the fact that war is a two-sided act is emphasized.

(4) Debate: cheerleading, 147-167

- 1 F2: while they're having their own fight, (1.8) uhm::
 2 at all colleges now, they consider cheerleading an
 3 intercollegiate athletic [squad.
 ...
 18 F1: Okay (0.9) Now, () state university,
 19 Michigan state,
 20 → M1: It's all fine, but they don't go to competition, do
 21 they, they cheerlead
 22 F2: Yeah, they DO.

23 M1: No, they don't

F2 starts a new topic about colleges considering cheerleaders as athletes (lines 1-4). After a few turns where the participants fight over the floor, F1 goes back to this topic and lists the actual universities as an example. When this concrete evidence is provided, M1 disagrees with this by a partial agreement ("It's all fine, but"). Instead of denying the 'fact' F1 provides referring to her notes, M1 acknowledges it and only denies the 'relation' between the fact and the topic of the debate. So M1 argues that cheerleaders in colleges do not compete, and thus they are not athletes. Although M1's disagreement includes an agreement component, it is certainly not "weak".

5.2.2 Disagreements with direct disagreement tokens: 'no', 'but'

Disagreements with direct disagreement tokens are used throughout the debate, in various positions.

(5) Debate: genocide, 53-68

- 1 M3:... and SO: when I send troo::ps, (0.8) o::kay? TO
- 2 (0.6) the native groups and confront them
- 3 violently and they have confronted my citizens,
- 4 (0.9) I don't see that as an act of genocide, I
- 5 think that as an act of wa::r. first, you upon us,
- 6 and then right back at you rightfully so.
- 7 → M4:No, a responsible president would probably look
- 8 at this situation and say Why are these Indians
- 9 attacking me, and what can I do to appease them
- 10 so that this doesn't continue rather than acting-

M3 argues in his turn that the U.S. government attacking the Native Americans is not genocide, but rather a justifiable war. M4 disagrees with this long turn directly, starting with a "no". There are no pause before the disagreement, and no downgrader such as "well" or "I mean", thus the disagreement is preferred in this extract. Here, the reason why M4 uses a direct disagreement token seems to strengthen the disagreement, because it is produced after the long turn, not at the first possible point indicating a weakened disagreement.

(6) Debate: genocide, 5-19

1 M4: the current definition of genocide whether you
 2 refuse::: you admit it or not, ladies and
 3 gentlemen, inclu::de the destruction of a cultural
 4 group. Can you destroy a cultural group, by
 5 taking away its culture?
 6 (1.2)
 7 F4: yes, because-
 8 M4: wait
 9 F3: however, [we're talking-
 10 F4: [ei- ei cultural group=
 11 → F3: =no=
 12 F4: =is based on its culture. If you take away the
 13 culture of the cultural group, it's no longer a
 14 group because there's no culture
 15 [(and there's no group left)
 16 → F3: [but you're talking about when you update (0.3)
 17 the newer definition of genocide, we're talking
 18 about the previous definition of genocide and that
 19 definition had no (1.1) this (interesting) cultural
 20 and physical is completely different, and your
 21 idea is,

The participants are having a conflict because they have different definitions of genocide. In line 11 and 16, F3 opposes to F4, using "no" and "but". To point out the exact part where her opinion is different from that of F4, F3 uses the direct disagreement token, 'but'.

5.2.3 Agreement tokens: 'right'

Agreement tokens may occur alone, without 'but'. These expressions may look like an agreement at first, but they are actually rather strong disagreements. Following extract illustrates the use of agreement tokens to express disagreement.

(7) Debate: cheerleading, 83-88

1 F2: Okay, I don't think any of these people really

- 2 believe cheerleading is (.) gymnastics
 3 M1: I-I- don't care I-I-
 4 F2: Because in the definition of cheerleading, it
 5 doesn't say, (.) gymnastics.
 6 → M1: Right, because- because cheerleading isn't the
 7 competition, cheerleading is cheering for a sports
 8 team

Before this extract, M1 argues that cheerleading competition is not cheerleading, but gymnastics. F2 disagrees with this in line 1 and 4. After this, M1 again disagrees with F2. Although M1's utterance in line 6 starts with an agreement token, 'right', the utterance as a whole is NOT an agreement, rather it is a disagreement. Here, by acknowledging what the other participant said, M1 is using that utterance to back up his own argument. M1 uses the fact that cheerleading is not related to gymnastics, to support his own argument that cheerleading is different from cheer competition, which is a kind of gymnastics. This kind of disagreement has a powerful effect because the speaker can support his own argument without providing any new reasons, and oppose to the other participant at the same time. This extract is also an example where disagreement is used at the next turn.

5.2.4 Question-answer

Disagreement can also be expressed as a form of question and answer, like in the following extract.

- (8) Debate: genocide, 69-76 (following extract (5))
 1 → M3: oh because appeasement works? So he say, okay,
 2 I see you're mad, I see you're mad, here you go,
 3 you can- you can have this country that you
 4 want. Just, you're done, right? you're done,
 5 [right? Sure sure I'm-]
 6 F4: [()]
 7 → M3: SURE SURE I'm done I'm done let me take the
 8 rest of Europe okay? NO! appeasement does not
 9 work. Appeasement does not work. (0.3) we

- 10 confronted you, (0.8) you ran away, (0.6) okay?
 11 we pursued you, (0.3) we killed you all. I call
 12 that successful campai:gn, not genocide.

In this extract, question and answer is all done by the same speaker. Although M3 poses a question in line 1, he does not give time for the other speakers to respond. It seems that he is using this kind of form to emphasize the disagreement "NO! appeasement does not work". The use of repetitions, emphasis on words and loud voice supports the fact that the speaker is trying to emphasize his disagreement. Another interesting thing about this extract is that M3 is starting his turn in line 7, with a louder voice. This turn is produced right after F4 tries to speak up, thus M3 seems to continue his talk with a loud voice to stop F4 from starting her turn. This kind of floor gaining attempt appears a lot throughout the debates, and disagreement appears during this fight.

5.3 Disagreement used to gain floor

Throughout the debates, participants constantly try to gain floor rather implicitly, like in extract (8), where the speaker loudens his voice. Not pausing in TRPs and posing a question to the same party may also be in the line of an attempt to gain the floor. However, there are also some explicit cases where participants fight over the floor. In these cases, very direct and aggravated disagreement expressions are used. Extract (9) is the part omitted in extract (4):

(9) Debate: cheerleading, 147-158

- 1 F2: while they're having their own fight, (1.8) uhm::
 2 at all colleges now, they consider cheerleading an
 3 intercollegiate athletic [squad.
 4 M1: [I- I recently looked at a SUNY (0.3) uh
 5 F2: kay, other than SUNY
 6 M1: I recently- recently looked at a SUNY
 7 → F1: STOP CUTTING HER OFF!
 8 → M2: Shut up!
 9 → M1: hey, no, shh:: it's my turn, I recently looked at a
 10 SUNY list of ae-athle[tics,

- 11 →F1: [objection!
 12 M1: and cheerleading was not in there at all.
 13 F1: [back to you
 14 M2: [let me guess it was not in their ahhh

In the extract above, an explicit fight over the floor is taking place. Utterances in line 7, 8, 9, and 11 are all attempts to gain the floor, and the utterances in line 9 and 11 can be seen as disagreements. The speakers are explicitly telling each other to be quite, and that it is their turn. Utterances in line 9 ("hey, no,") and line 11 ("objection!") are disagreeing to the prior speakers' gaining turn, rather than the content of the previous utterance. In debates, especially where the ones that are less formal where there are not any allocated time for the each party, the chance for winning the debate gets bigger when they talk more. This is why the disagreeing expressions used in the fight to gain the floor are very direct and aggravated.

- (10) Debate: cheerleading, 51-57
 1 F1: OK, anyway, (1.5) uh::: A sporting event is
 2 defined as a contest for [()]
 3 M1: [Gymnastics
 4 isn't a sport because it is a physical exercise.
 5 → F1: Hai, could you let me finish,
 6 → M1: NO, I can't let you finish
 7 → F1: well I'll finish anyway
 8 → M1: No, gymnastics is a physical exercise

Again, in extract (10), the speakers explicitly fight over the floor. When F1 asks M1 to let her finish in line 5, M1 answers by saying "NO" in a loud voice in line 6. In line 7, F1 continues to attempt to start her turn saying that she will continue anyway, but in line 8, M1 again disagrees with her by saying "No" and continues to talk. M1's utterance in line 8 is once again a disagreement to F1's attempt to gain the floor, not a disagreement regarding the debate topic. This fight to gain the floor happens after M1's disagreement expression in line 3, which is placed in the middle of the previous TCU. Although disagreements do occur at this place quite often without any objection, M1's utterance is considered as problematic by F1, this time. This is because M1's utterance

is not a disagreement produced right after the specific disagreeing word is uttered. M1's turn is not related to F1's utterance in line 1, where she says about a sporting event. Rather, M1 is referring back to the conversation where they talked about gymnastics being a sport. Thus, M1's disagreement is a much delayed one, and this kind of disagreement is not acceptable to be placed in the middle of the previous turn.

5.4 Attempt to RE-reverse the preference structure

As we saw in the excerpts above, disagreements are generally preferred in the debate setting. However, participants still want the other party to agree with them, so they try to reverse the established preference structure by shaping the turn to elicit agreements. Tag-questions are frequently used as a means to re-reverse the preference structure. Extract (4), which is provided once more below, shows a use of tag-question to elicit agreement:

(11) Debate: cheerleading, 147-167

- 1 F2: while they're having their own fight, (1.8) uhm::
 2 at all colleges now, they consider cheerleading an
 3 intercollegiate athletic [squad].
 ...
 18 F1: Okay (0.9) Now, () state university,
 19 Michigan state,
 20 → M1: It's all fine, but they don't go to competition, do
 21 they, they cheerlead
 22 F2: Yeah, they DO.
 23 M1: No, they don't

The use of tag-question in line 20 and 21 shapes the preference structure, thus preferring a "no" answer. However, the response in line 22 is a "yes" answer without any hesitation or mitigation. In this extract, it seems that the preference structure determined in the debate setting wins over the preference structure embedded in the turn shape.

(12) Debate: cheerleading, 19-28

- 1 F1: yeah,

- 2 M1: and it's not really a sport
 3 (0.6)
 4 F1: But,
 5 (0.8)
 6 F2: It's-
 7 F1: Cheerleading [occurs on a sporting event
 8 → F2: [ain't that a physical activity is it?
 9 M1: yeah it occurs in a sporting events and it cheers
 10 for the people that are playing in the sporting
 11 event

Extract (12) also shows the use of tag-question in order to elicit agreement from the other party. F2 in line 8 produces a turn including a tag question, which shapes the response to prefer a "yes" answer. In this case, M1 does not response to the utterance at all; instead, he responds to F1's utterance that overlapped with F2's turn.

6. Conclusion

The present study examined the disagreements expressions used in debates, focusing on the preference structure. The summary of the findings is provided below.

- (a) In debates, disagreement is preferred even from the beginning. Disagreement expressions found in the debate classroom data lacked typical dispreferred features such as pauses or downgraders.
- (b) Disagreements including partial agreements are used after a turn stating undeniable facts or providing specific examples. They are not "weak" disagreements, but just a different way to express disagreement.
- (c) Disagreements used to explicitly gain floor in debates are very direct and aggravated.
- (d) Sometimes, participants try to re-reverse the preference structure by shaping their turns. Since participants want the other party to agree with them, they try to re-reverse the preference structure by using tag-questions.

Apart from the findings stated above, the types of disagreement used in debates were also found. Partial agreements, disagreements with direct disagreement tokens, disagreements with agreement tokens and question-answer were the types found in the data.

With the findings above, the present study has some contributions to the field of Conversation Analysis. First, in the line with the studies of preference structure, the present study showed another setting where the preference structure is reversed. In addition, when it comes to the studies concerning institutional setting, this study found the characteristics of an institutional setting, debate, and identified various types of disagreement expressions used in debates.

Despite of these contributions, the study also has some limitations. First, the size of the data was too small. A further study with a larger data could find some more generalizations about the disagreements found in debates. Second, the effect of the topic was not considered. The two debate classes differed in their topics, cheerleading and genocide, but the topic difference was not taken into consideration in the study. A close look at debate settings with a larger data could overcome these limitations, and support the findings of this study.

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