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Title: The Use of Disagreement Strategies on Chinese Forums: Comparing Hong Kong and Mainland China

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Biodata

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Abstract

Disagreement refers to the expression of a different view from that of a previous interlocutor. Prior research on disagreement has mainly focused on its negative impact and has consequently suggested that disagreement should be avoided in communication. Regarded as a negative speech act, disagreement is rarely studied in computer-mediated communication, particularly in the Chinese context. Adopting the interactional approach, this project pioneers the investigation of how disagreement strategies are used on online forums in Hong Kong and Mainland China, in the hope of providing insights for a better understanding of disagreement in the Chinese online context and shedding light on politeness theory in intercultural communication among Chinese people. One popular forum from each region was chosen and two threads with similar topics were selected, from which 400 comments (200 per thread) were collected and annotated for further analysis. The data annotation framework, which is based on previous studies and our own data, consists of the following five strategies of disagreement: (1) giving facts; (2) giving negative comments; (3) giving opposite opinions; (4) making ironic statements; and (5) raising questions. Our results show that, instead of being a face-threatening act, disagreement maintained and enhanced the interlocutors' face and advanced the communication of information within each thread. Moreover, the distribution patterns of disagreement strategies were similar on the two forums, but there were significantly more disagreement tokens and negative comments on the Hong Kong forum. This divergence is interpreted as resulting from the different degrees of collectivism-individualism in the two regions, the Internet censorship in Mainland China, and the nature of the two forums selected. Directions for future research are provided to confirm the proposed explanations.

Highlights:

- Disagreement enhances the communication of information.
- Similar distribution patterns of disagreement strategies were observed.
- Disagreement occurs more frequently on the Hong Kong forum.

Introduction

Computer-mediated communication (CMC), the text-based interaction of human beings mediated by networked computers (Herring, 2007), is becoming more popular and is receiving increasing attention in the communication literature. However, studies on disagreement in CMC are scarce, which motivates us to investigate how disagreement strategies are implemented on Chinese online forums, in the hope of providing insights for a better understanding of disagreement in the online context and shedding light on politeness theory in intercultural communication.

Disagreement refers to the expression of a different view from that of a previous interlocutor (Sifianou, 2012). Prior research on disagreement within the classic Gricean approach has mainly focused on its negative impact and regarded it as a 'form of conflict' (Waldron & Applegate, 1994, 4). With regard to the context of CMC, very few studies have addressed the issue of disagreement. Only two studies (Lee & Shum, 2017; Shum & Lee, 2013) have considered disagreement in the CMC of Hong Kong, and the disagreement strategies used on the forums were generally perceived as polite, appropriate and positive by the browsers.

Hong Kong and Mainland China are closely related Chinese societies, but they differ from each other in several aspects. Firstly, Cantonese and Mandarin are the dominant languages of daily communication in each society. Despite having the same writing system[1], the users of Hong Kong CMC usually communicate in written Cantonese, which is quite different from standard written Chinese (Snow, 2004), and is unintelligible to a Mandarin- speaking web browser who has no prior knowledge of Cantonese. Secondly, it is argued that, unlike Mainland China, as a highly internationalised region, Hong Kong exhibits the features of both individualism and collectivism (Wu & Hui, 1997). If Hong Kong and Mainland China differ in their degrees of collectivism, we can hypothesise that there should be some observable divergence in the use of disagreement in the CMC communities.

Based on the gaps in the field, this project attempts to investigate how disagreement strategies are realised in Chinese CMC communities. Specifically, it analyses the data from online forums and compares the disagreement strategies adopted in Hong Kong and Mainland China, focusing on the following research questions:

(1) How is disagreement expressed in online communities in Hong Kong and Mainland China?

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[1] By 'the same writing system', we are referring to the logographic writing system in which characters are the basic writing units. The distinction between traditional and simplified Chinese characters is not relevant to our study.

(2) What are the similarities and differences in the use of disagreement strategies in the two regions?

(3) What are the sources of the similarities and differences?

Methodology

As the classic Gricean approach to politeness fails to address the issue of disagreement appropriately, we explore the nature of disagreement from the interactional approach (Haugh, 2007). We first extracted top forum threads with similar topics from forums in Hong Kong and Mainland China, and then identified the disagreement strategies manually.

Data collection

Two online forums (one from each region; henceforth, Site HK and Site CN) were selected from the top site rankings of Alexa Internet [2]. When selecting the threads, we consulted the criteria in Shum and Lee (2013) and made some adjustments: (1) they should be top threads with more than 200 comments, which allows us to examine the interactions of users; (2) they should address very similar topics, which makes further comparison possible; and (3) the topic(s) should be controversial, which increases the chance of instances o f disagreement among users. We found two threads with almost the same arguable topic: destinations for migration. The thread from Site HK attracted more than 600 comments and the one from Site CN had over 300 comments. At this stage, the first 200 comments from each thread were analyzed.

Data annotation

Various frameworks have been proposed for data annotation. Traditional studies tend to classify disagreement on levels of mitigation and aggravation. Alternatively, some scholars have created their frameworks based on the strategies of disagreement (e.g. Bousfield, 2008; Shum & Lee, 2013), which we think could allow for a better interpretation of the process of interactions, but further considerations are still needed. For example, as some schemes were designed for the study of oral communication, strategies such as 'interruptions' (Bousfield, 2008) were not applicable to our data and should be deleted. To suit our data, we amended the previous frameworks and formulated our own framework, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The framework of disagreement strategies for annotation

Strategy (Abbreviation)	Definition
Giving facts (FAC)	A person refers to quotes, data and personal experience to substantiate disagreement.
Giving negative comments (NEG)	A person makes comments in a negative tone, usually in a personalised way, including the use of profanity.
Giving opposite opinions (OPP)	A person gives an opinion contrary to a previous comment in a neutral tone.
Making ironic statements (IRO)	A person says something insincerely and it remains a surface realisation only. No distinction is made between irony and sarcasm.
Raising questions (QUE)	A person raises a question that clearly indicates an opposite view.

The author first annotated the selected threads to identify the cases of disagreement and coded their corresponding strategies according to the framework in Table 1. Double counting

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[2] Alexa Internet: https://www.alexa.com/

was allowed, as some instances may have applied more than one strategy. Two trained linguists, one native Cantonese speaker and one native Mandarin speaker, were then invited to code the data from Site HK and Site CN separately. In case of any inconsistency, the author went over each case with them and managed to reach a mutual agreement for the annotation.

Results

Of all the comments, 32 instances of disagreement were identified from Site HK, while only 16 were identified from Site CN. Because we allowed double counting, there were 49 and 25 counts of disagreement strategies in the site, respectively, the distribution of which is plotted in Figure 1.
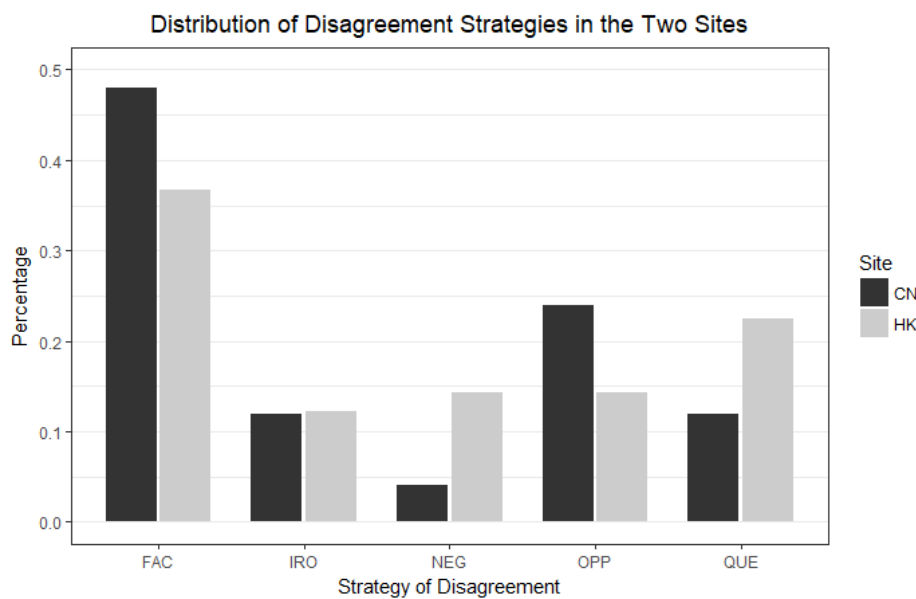

Figure 1. Distribution of disagreement strategies in the two sites

To compare the disagreement tokens in the two sites, we first employed an independent samples *t*-test, which suggested significantly more tokens of disagreement in Site HK ($t(362.221) = 3.031$, $p = .003$). We then performed a *chi*-square test of independence to examine the relation between the variable 'site' and the variable 'type of strategy'. There was a weak association between these two variables ($\chi^2(4) = 3.984$, $p = .408$), revealing similar distribution patterns of disagreement strategies in the two sites. For example, 'giving facts' was always the favoured strategy when forum users expressed their disagreement. However, we did find a notable difference in the use of the 'giving negative comments' strategy. It occurred equally with 'making ironic statements' and 'giving opposite opinions' in Site HK but was rarely used in Site CN. Only one instance was observed in the Site CN data. Further explanations are provided below.

Discussion

Disagreement as an effective way of communication

Disagreement has long been associated with conflict and discord in the literature, and it has been suggested that disagreement should be avoided in order to be polite and to maintain interlocutors' face. However, as shown above, disagreement did not generate conflicts in our data; instead, it seemed to be a way of enhancing the communication of various opinions.

Firstly, the topics of whether to migrate and destinations for migration are controversial; thus, in our case, the forum users were prone to disagree with each other's opinions. In

contexts such as decision-making and problem-solving, expressing disagreement was tolerated and even expected, which would in turn contribute more information to the discussion and make the communication more effective. Secondly, we agree with Sifianou (2012) that disagreement is actually a highly complex phenomenon and should not only be treated as a face-threatening act. Apart from the *content* of disagreement, it is necessary to consider the *form* of disagreement – namely, how disagreement is expressed. We adopted this approach and identified five disagreement strategies, among which only the 'giving negative comments' was potentially face-threatening. In our data, even those negative comments did not cause conflict in the discussion when we took the local contexts into account. Our results thus support the claim that disagreement can be face-maintaining and face-enhancing in communication. Moreover, the features of anonymity and synchronicity make CMC communication distinct from face-to-face interaction. As an increasing number of people interact with each other in CMC environments, our expectations regarding politeness have begun to shift; therefore, disagreement is more likely to occur in CMC, although further cross-modal investigations are needed to test this hypothesis.

Interpreting the Divergence

Despite the similar distribution patterns of the disagreement strategies in these two sites, their differences are noteworthy. Significantly more disagreement tokens and more negative comments were discovered in Site HK. Possible explanations are proposed in this subsection.

Rooted in Confucianism, Chinese societies are labelled as highly collectivist-oriented. However, due to having been a British colony from 1842 to 1941 and from 1945 to 1997, which made Hong Kong a centre for international trade, Hong Kong exhibits both Chinese collectivism and Western individualism, corresponding to 'concern for others' and 'concern for self', respectively (Angouri & Locher, 2012). It is plausible that, when people care more about themselves, they would express their disagreements more explicitly and frequently, while when people are aware of others' face, they may not disagree overtly with others, as shown in the two sites. The first explanation is that disagreement is tolerated more in a more individualised society such as Hong Kong.

In addition, the Internet censorship in Mainland China may also play a role. The Great Firewall of China has blocked access to several foreign websites including Site HK, and there are also Internet police officers and official observers who delete any information considered non-compliant. Therefore, forum users in Mainland China should have good manners and be careful when proposing disagreements. Besides, the author of a thread in Site CN has the right to delete any comments. It is possible that some disagreement comments had been deleted before we collected the data.

Lastly, the observed divergence might be attributed to the different cultures of the two sites. It is suggested that each online community has its own norms of politeness and that the norms may differ strikingly from community to community. Site HK and Site CN are fundamentally different in terms of community norms. Site HK is famous for its freedom, and conflicts and confrontations are very common. As a productive and creative platform, the users of Site HK even produced a list of foul language that is used exclusively in Site HK. Meanwhile, the users of Site CN may not favour conflicts and arguments. It is not surprising that more disagreements and negative comments appeared in Site HK. Further research involving forums with diverse norms would certainly provide more persuasive evidence.

Conclusion

This paper compares the use of disagreement strategies on two online forums from the

interactional approach. It is shown that, instead of being a face-threatening act, disagreement actually maintained and enhanced the interlocutors' face and advanced the communication of information. Possible explanations for the divergence and directions for future research have also been provided.

Acknowledgements

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