

Agreement and Disagreement: A Cross-Cultural Comparison¹

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Abstract

This study compares the handling of agreement and disagreement by speakers from two different cultural groups: London's British West African community and its mainstream British white community. Using data from elicited conversations, we consider naturally-occurring agreements and disagreements at three different linguistic levels. Firstly, based on Pomerantz's (1984) observations of turn-taking behaviour during (dis)agreement, we compare procedural tendencies in the delivery of the actions. Secondly, following speech act research (cf. Blum Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989), we identify and compare illocutionary features of (dis)agreement. Lastly, we consider speakers' approaches to (dis)agreement at discourse level, that is, in a broader conversational context. Taken together, the findings suggest coherent patterns of difference between the two groups and offer insights into their overall interactive behaviour. Following Tannen (1984) and Spencer-Oatey (2000a, 2000b), we suggest that, comparatively speaking, the conversational style of the British West Africans tends towards displays of 'involvement' whilst the British White style favours a more 'considerate' approach to rapport between speakers. This study relates the handling of (dis)agreement, to rapport concerns and conversational style and, furthermore, makes a case for considering conversational action using more than one level of analysis.

Introduction

The core focus of this study is to examine the handling of agreement and disagreement in interactions of culturally distinct groups of English-speaking Londoners—British West Africans and mainstream British Whites—and to explore any differences found.

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We shall here define agreement as a show of support from one speaker for a belief or proposition expressed by another. And disagreement, following Bond, Zęgarac and Spencer-Oatey (2000), can be said to occur

if some participant in a situation of communication communicates some belief or beliefs which are partly or fully inconsistent with some other belief or beliefs publicly held by another participant in the same situation.
(p. 62)

This study also aims to broaden out the approaches used within cross-cultural pragmatics both in methodology and in data analysis. Here, agreement and disagreement are not studied as isolated speech acts produced in prescribed contexts, but as routine conversational actions situated naturally in the course of unscripted interaction. As such they will be analysed combining insights and techniques from both conversation analysis and sociopragmatic work.

Finally, in its attempt to identify aspects of cross-community interactional styles, this research has the potential to contribute towards an understanding of the plurality of communicative norms in a multicultural context.

As indicated earlier, the groups chosen for comparison are British West Africans, a growing demographic consisting of those who originate from Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone, and the British White community who represent the established mainstream that newer British communities are inevitably defined against. Investigations into mainstream British White style have suggested that social interaction in this community exhibits a preference for indirectness and distance, and a concern to avoid the appearance of imposition (cf. Sifianou, 1989, 1992; Stewart, 2005).

To my knowledge, nothing has yet been published on the communicative styles of the British West African communities. However, work carried out in the field of intercultural communication suggests that West African cultural values are traditionally *collectivist*, in that they place more emphasis on family, community, and respect for old age than most Western cultures, which tend to be characterised as orientated towards the individual (Hofstede, 1997). Hofstede (1997) claims that “direct confrontation” or saying “no” are normatively avoided within collectivist cultures, whereas clashes in individualistic cultures are considered “salutary” (p. 58); however, little is offered in the way of evidence or detailed explanation to back this up. Indeed, the present study does not lend support to these claims. An absence of detailed research on West African or British West African conversational behaviour means that this study represents an exploratory start towards describing interaction within this community.

The analysis of (dis)agreement has been chosen for its rich potential to yield more general insights about how speakers approach interpersonal rapport. Everyday events for most speakers, agreeing and disagreeing are not just linguistic actions but social actions too, in that they refer directly to the

relationship between two speakers. Whilst agreement embodies an alliance between speakers' positions, disagreement expresses interpersonal contrast.

The linguistic behaviour associated with (dis)agreement has been investigated from two main perspectives: conversation analysis (CA) and sociopragmatics. We consider these briefly below.

(Dis)Agreement in Conversation Analysis

Based mainly on observations of American English speakers, work in CA explores structural features associated with (dis)agreement and suggests that there are frequent, normative patterns associated with each action (Sacks, 1987; Pomerantz, 1984). Whereas agreements are usually produced quickly and unambiguously, disagreement is frequently delayed, and often prefaced with an element of agreement, such as in the case of the ubiquitous 'yes, but'. Sacks (1987) proposes that these features constitute a structural phenomenon that can be understood as a 'conversational preference' for agreement, in which social interaction favours agreement to such an extent that expressions of disagreement will bend to it. Pomerantz's (1984) detailed investigation into (dis)agreeing responses observes that agreements tend to be undelayed and unambiguous, containing only agreeing components and often produced in overlap with the previous turn. Disagreements on the other hand tend to be more complex, bearing structural delays to the production of the actual disagreement such as long pauses, token agreements, explanations and other qualifications, as shown in these examples from Pomerantz (1984):

(please note that from hereon, a * denotes the beginning of a turn containing a (dis)agreeing action, and **bold** highlights the (dis)agreeing action itself, unless otherwise indicated)

(1) Paused disagreement (p. 71)

A: cause these things take working at
(2.0s)

*B: (hhhhh) well they do, but no, they take working at, **but on the other hand...**

(2) Disagreement preceded by agreement token (p. 72)

W: I sew by hand (.) I'm fantastic you never [saw anything like it

*L: [I know but I, I-I **still say that the sewing machine's better**

(3) Disagreement preceded by asserted agreement (p. 72)

R: Butchu admit he is having fun and you think it's funny

*K: I think it's funny,
yeah. **But it's ridiculous funny**

There has been some debate about whether these patterns have the same character in all cultural contexts. For instance, Santamaría García's (2001, 2004) comparative work on (Peninsular) Spanish and (American) English interactions showed Spanish speakers overlapping during disagreement in 42.8% of all cases, unlike the Americans at 5.2%. In (2001) a significant trend was noted within the Spanish data for displaying agreement by finishing the previous speaker's turn, whilst the (2004) study notes a comparatively stronger tendency amongst the English speakers to hesitate during both disagreement and agreement. Interesting not only for its findings, this work shows just how productive CA tools can be for highlighting cultural tendencies in conversation.

(Dis)Agreement in Sociopragmatics

As a general rule, conversation analysts deliberately avoid appealing to external social systems and intuitions to account for structural phenomena. However, in discussing (dis)agreement, Pomerantz (1984) does indulge in some guarded speculation of speakers' social motives by suggesting that

conversants orient to agreeing with one another as comfortable, supportive, reinforcing, perhaps as being sociable and as showing that they are like-minded...Likewise, across a variety of situations, conversants orient to their disagreeing with one another as uncomfortable, unpleasant, difficult, risking threat, insult, or offence. (p. 77)

Sociopragmatic work has fewer reservations when linking linguistic features to postulated social motives and concerns. Most prominent is Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of 'face', which considers how speakers formulate their utterances in order to preserve the equilibrium of their addressee's social self-image, or 'face'. In this view, (dis)agreement is understood in terms of the co-operative and ongoing face-saving in which speakers "twist their utterances so as to appear to agree or to hide disagreement" (p. 114). Disagreement is considered an intrinsic face threat as it shows that the speaker has "a negative evaluation of some aspect of the hearer's face" (p. 66). Disagreeing actions are therefore likely to trigger strategies from a wide catalogue of linguistic face work: redress to positive

face might include sweetening disagreements by using first names or emphasising speakers' common ground; negative face work would involve strategies that minimise the force or the imposition of the disagreement, for example by using hedges ('sort of', 'kind of' etc). Speakers may also go 'off-record': instead of articulating disagreement they may signal it indirectly by using silence or a change of subject.

(Dis)Agreement and Cross-Cultural Variation

Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, whilst retaining enormous influence, is nonetheless criticised by many authors arguing that it is too geared towards Anglo-Saxon social concerns to be universally valid across cultures (cf. Hernández-Flores, 1999, 2004; Matsumoto, 1988; Spencer-Oatey, 2000b). Questions have arisen concerning whether or not mitigating tactics are used in the same way and to the same degree in all cultural contexts, or indeed whether the negative value associated with face threat carries the same weight cross-culturally. Spencer-Oatey (2000b, p. 40) criticises the implication that agreement is always universally favoured over disagreement, arguing that different points along a continuum of total consensus and total opposition may be favoured within different cultures and different contexts (see also Spencer-Oatey & Jiang, 2003, p. 1635).

In investigating whether the handling of (dis)agreement may be subject to cultural variation, different aspects of linguistic behaviour are considered in the present study. Firstly, the patterns of overlap and delay identified by Pomerantz (1984) are analysed to see whether they remain equally robust for each group. Secondly, following frameworks introduced by speech act researchers (Blum Kulka et al., 1984; House & Kasper, 1981), the study examines the types of face work employed by the speakers, and tries to identify any differences. Finally, after considering the data, it also seemed relevant to look beyond the delivery of the actions and to discuss the speakers' approach to consensus, and also their reactions when consensus breaks down.

In asking such questions, this study assumes that cross-cultural difference is more than the illocutionary phenomenon investigated by speech act studies. The work of Spencer-Oatey (2000a, 2000b) is of great use here: not only does she redefine the goals of linguistic face work as the management of rapport between self and other (2000b, p. 12)—a theme we shall return to in this study—but she also proposes a number of communicative *domains* that may be subject to cross-cultural difference. Spencer-Oatey's (2000b) *participatory* domain corresponds to our questions concerning turn-taking procedures during (dis)agreement, whilst her *illocutionary* domain covers the use of mitigation and presentational strategies during conversational action.

Finally, her *discourse* domain encompasses the discussion of how (dis)agreement is approached and negotiated across stretches of talk.

Methodology

(Dis)agreement needed to be generated in a manner that was simultaneously accessible to the researcher, productive for the purposes of the study, and, crucially, not so prescriptive that speakers felt unnatural or self-conscious when producing the actions. With this in mind, ‘discussion dyads’ were organised by cultural background, and participants were invited to talk on suggested topics. The goal of the sessions was for participants to jointly develop a conversation in which procedural norms for turn-taking, interruption, agreement and disagreement would hold, regardless of the researcher-provoked nature of the situation.

Twelve volunteers took part, six from London’s British white population (BW) and six from its West African or West African descended population (BWA). To keep the conversational contexts as equivalent as possible, participants were organised into same-sex dyads with people they had either never met, or had met just once before. All participants were well-educated and were engaged in professional careers ranging from teaching to the civil service to landscape design, and, with one exception, all were between 25 and 40 years old.

Following conditions set out by Häggkvist and Fant (2000), participants were given a suggested area of discussion and told they had no obligation to remain on it. They were then left alone. This was a crucial component of the research design as it avoided the possibility of conversation falling into a researcher-led ‘interview’ format. After 15-20 minutes, I re-entered to suggest a second topic related to the first, but broader in nature and also more controversial. In several instances, over both cultural groups, participants said they were already discussing the second topic or heading in that direction, so the impact of the rather un-naturalistic intrusion may be considered minimal. A second topic was deemed necessary because, firstly, it was thought that participants feeling uncomfortable with the original topic or the situation might need stimulation to continue. Additionally it meant that participants had a conversational ‘buffer zone’ that allowed them to relax in each other’s company before discussing something more sensitive.

The topics were chosen as areas the participants might find rich and interesting. Naturally, it was also hoped that there might be disagreements. BWAs were first asked to discuss the issues surrounding the maintenance of African languages amongst British African communities and, then, how they felt about the tendency of the British mainstream to perceive all black ethnic minorities, regardless of origin, as part of a generalised black community. The BW participants were given equivalent topics: firstly the

Americanisation of British English and their perceptions of certain kinds of slang, followed by questions about the idea of 'Britishness', and the confusion over what it means. At the end of the sessions, many of the participants professed to have enjoyed the experience and to have found the topics interesting to discuss, which suggests that they felt both engaged and at ease during the conversations.

(Dis)agreement: Procedural Features

Here we assess whether the tendencies observed by Pomerantz (1984) for agreements to be produced in overlap and for disagreements to be delayed hold equally true for both groups. Responses have been counted as delayed when they are characterised by pauses before or during delivery, as illustrated in example (4) below (line 470), or when the agreeing or disagreeing element is preceded by segments of talk that delay the delivery of the action and therefore undermine its force, as illustrated in example (5) below (line 582).

(4) Paul and Ed (BW)

464 E: it's cos you're enlightened (.) y'know it's going (1.3s) kill you ten
 465 years younger if you did
 466 P: =yeh I'm just slightly more health aware (.) an
 467 (.) I wouldn't say it's necessarily better
 468 E: (.) well whatever enlightened (.) I wouldn't say there's much difference
 469*P: [I (.) I wouldn't (.) I don't I wouldn't
 470 (.5s) I **I would (.5s) hesitate to (1s) say that (.) my (.) way of life is**
 471 **better than somebody else's**

(5) Russell and Sam (BW)

580 S: I do like the idea of them (.) y'know (.) slowing down legislation and
 581 (.)n n n coming up with things that (.) u:m even if it it's a bit romantic
 582*R: (.) I don't think **I think you're right I think it's very romantic**

The following table presents differences found for the turn delivery of agreement and disagreement.

Table 1: Turn Delivery

AGREEMENT	In Overlap	Without Hesitation	Delayed
British W. Africans	50%	47.1%	2.8%
British Whites	38.5%	45.8%	15.6%

DISAGREEMENT	In Overlap	Without Hesitation	Delayed
British W. Africans	42.3%	42.3%	16.7%
British Whites	15.2%	39.9%	45.7%

The pattern emerging from these results shows substantial differences between the two groups: the BWAs overlapped noticeably more during agreement *and* disagreement, and, amongst the BWs, both actions featured many more delay devices.

Consistent with Pomerantz's (1984) suggestions, the BWAs produced 50% of their agreeing responses in overlap and the BWs produced 38.5%, also a high proportion. Less expected is the phenomenon of delayed agreement. Whilst negligible amongst the BWAs, the BWs hesitated for a noticeable 15.6% of their total agreements. Example (6) is characteristic of cases where an agreeing element becomes delayed by stretches of talk whose purpose seemed to be to explain the agreement, or develop the content of the previous assessment.

(6) Jodie and Vanessa (BW)

44 V: I'm going to use the word "street" now which I feel really uncomfortable
 45 (1.5s) cos to say oh it's a bit street I feel like I'm sort of going (.) mm
 46 inverted commas a bit sort of
 47*J: I think I think the thing is it's like most words
 48 like that you don't (.) necessarily want to use them not because you think
 49 (.) like (.) um oh my god they're not like proper English **just cos you feel**
 50 **like a bit self-conscious using them well (.) completely self-conscious of**
 51 **(.) using them**

Here—in as far as saying that when you use a piece of slang word you feel like you need to put it into 'inverted commas' (line 46) is matched by saying that you feel 'completely self conscious' using those words (line 50)—we see that Jodie is backing up Vanessa. However, due to a period of 'warming up', it takes some time for this to become apparent within the response. This

response shape is not unlike the patterns identified by Pomerantz (1984) for disagreement, and is indeed used regularly by both groups during that action. Amongst BW speakers however, the ‘warming up’ period for disagreement can be particularly lengthy. For instance, Sam manages to talk for nearly a minute before articulating a contradiction to Russell’s suggestion that you pick up the slang that’s around you:

(7) Russell and Sam (BW)

- 153 R: I suppose you get used to (2s) what you what you (.) what you normally
 154 listen to and what normal language normally is but
 155*S: =mhm (2s) but that (.) I
 156 mean I <cough> (.) uh where I went to school when I was: (.) uh (.)
 157 y’know to: infant school or whatever uh .hhh (.) there were it was a lot of
 158 uh there were a lot of u:m Indian and Pakistani (0.8) uh children in the
 159 area (1.3s) a:nd (.) there (.) but even so (.) there were the odd (.) sort of (.)
 160 um (.) linguistic hhh um things that had clearly come from some form of
 161 translation like innit (.) you know the innit thing which is quite common
 162 now (1.8s) a a friend of mine didn’t used to say innit he used to say hanna
 163 (.8s) which apparently means isn’t it (1s) and I used to think it was some
 164 form of I know
 165 R: <laughter>
 166 S: he’d say I know at the end of everything to
 167 emphasise he knew it (.) John Barnes is a great footballer hanna
 168 R: <laughter>
 169 S: and **but I didn’t pick anything up (.) um I don’t think even at (.) you**
 170 **know even at the time** I (.) I suppose that they were isolated

Such delays during disagreement occur in nearly half BW disagreements, also supporting Pomerantz’s (1984) observations. However, the proportion is very different for the BWAs. Here, a comparatively low 16.7% of disagreements are delayed, and many of these are produced early on in conversations when the participants are perhaps feeling particularly self-conscious about being recorded or speaking to a new person. Instead a considerable proportion of BWA disagreements are produced in overlap—42.3%—and almost the same proportion again are produced without any noticeable delay. As in Santamaría García (2001), the high number of non-delayed disagreements contradict Pomerantz’s (1984) projected patterns, and suggest that such features may well vary in robustness from culture to culture.

(Dis)agreement: Illocutionary Features***Agreement***

The analytic framework used to study agreement here partly incorporates the observations of Pomerantz (1984) and Santamaría García (2001), but, in a large part, has also responded to patterns in the data.

Many agreeing responses were accomplished in just one or two words: ‘yeh exactly’, ‘true’, ‘absolutely’, ‘that’s right’. These non-complex gestures have been counted as agreement tokens. Following Pomerantz (1984), agreeing assessments have been categorised into three types. Firstly are those which contain repetition of the previous assessment, or an evaluation which has fundamentally the same content:

(8) Paul and Ed (BW)

448 E: we’re off topic

449 P: =we are (.) it’s bread

450 E: (.) bread bread is great

451*P: =**bread is great**

Secondly are those in which agreement appears, but the force of the original assessment is weakened—a tactic often associated with disagreement:

(9) Chioke and Thomas (BWA)

393 C: telling-calling a West Indian a Nigerian he’d find it offensive

394*T: <laugh> =**he**

395 **might find it offensive yeh** [he will

396 C: =no might (.) [he would

Finally, we shall count those responsive assessments in which the meaning of the first is either intensified, or extended to imply a more universal truth, as in example (10) where Patricia demonstrates her agreement and understanding by expanding Annabel’s father’s experience to fit within a general principle.

(10) Patricia and Annabel (BWA)

298 A: I think he was um (1s) y’know (.) branded in a way because he was almost

299 seen as a foreigner (.) cos he hadn’t been there for so long

300* P: =**that’s what**

301 **happens**

Following Santamaría García (2001), observations regarding turn finishing as a strategy for displaying agreement (see (11) below) shall be included here for comparison.

(11) Chioke and Thomas (BWA)

233 T: if you think about it and then your life has gone because you've thought
 234*C: =**too hard** [about (.) **where you belong and what you should be doing**
 235 T: [too hard about it and about (.) without actually living it

In addition to the categories provided by Pomerantz (1984) and Santamaría García (2001), we identified a number of other strategies occurring regularly within the data:

Performatives: Explicitly stating 'I'd agree with that', here described as a 'performative' following Austin (1962):

(12) Patricia and Annabel (BWA)

192 P: you're always too British to be African (.) and too African to be British
 193*A: [I agree
 194 **100 percent!**

Knowledge Markers: Where the responder agrees by laying claim to the same knowledge or belief as the giver of the assessment, by saying 'I know', or 'I think so':

(13) Jodie and Vanessa (BW)

278 J: for years I was just kind of pretending <laugh>
 279*V: **I know** <laugh>

Appreciation Markers: Participants also occasionally displayed their agreement by stating their appreciation of the other's assessment ('good point' or 'I think you're right').

(14) Paul and Ed (BW)

336 J: things from like hip hop which are (.) now sort of (.)
 337 T: universal
 338 J: =yeh (.)
 339 universally accepted things like bling (.) blinging
 340*T: =**bling yes** that's a very
 341 **good point**

Topic Developer: Contributing an assessment that built supportively on the content of the previous assessment, thereby developing it as a topic.

(15) Patricia and Annabel (BWA)

141 A: well that was the other thing cos no:w um going back (.) to Nigeria t two
 142 years ago (.)for me was the first step I think I have to (.8s) y'know take a
 143 a real (.) effort (.) to ensure that at least (.) y'know a minimum of once
 144 every two years (.) o- optimally [every year
 145*P: **[and you know (.) it's very important**
 146 **that people like us realise that (.) because when you're born (.) you're**
 147: **born here isn't it?**
 148 A: [yeh
 149 P: **when you're born and bred here it's so easy to lose**
 150: **your culture**

The differences in the illocutionary handling of agreement are presented in table 2 below.

Table 2: Features of Agreement

Tokens and Assessments	British W. Africans	British Whites
Agreement Token	26.4%	31.2%
Same Evaluation / Repetition	22.6%	26.6%
Expanded Assessment	9.4%	7.3%
Weakened Assessment	1.9%	1.8%
Other Strategies		
Turn Finishing	14.2%	3.7%
Explicit Performative	1.9%	2.8%
Knowledge Claimer	1.9%	8.3%
Topic Developer	15.1%	15.6%
Appreciation Marker	0.9%	3.7%

Most of these results are roughly equivalent, and both groups show a strong tendency to produce non-complex agreements such as tokens or same evaluations. However, it seems that the BWs agreed using knowledge claimers more often than the BWAs, 8.3% to 1.9%. And furthermore, like Santamaría García's (2001) Spanish speakers, the BWAs displayed a noticeably higher tendency to finish each other's phrases as a show of agreement. Consider example (16):

(16) Daniel and Godfrey (BWA)

199 G: because when you lose your culture (.) lose your language [you have=
 200*D: [then then=
 201 G: = lost an identity
 202 D: =**you don't yeh then you don't find** (.) [**you know you don't have a**=
 202*G: [y'see xxx you
 203 D: =**place**
 204 G: [**you don't have a**
 205 D: =in the globe <laugh>
 206 G: =yeh
 207 D: that's that's why yeh
 208 G: [that's why
 209 in the globe now we: we: we recognise
 210 D: [yeh

Two separate agreements were identified in this extract. Daniel first contributes a possible ending to Godfrey's assessment (lines 200, 202), and then Godfrey echoes Daniel's contributions in overlap (lines 204, 208-209). This style of interaction not only produces isolated acts of agreement, but also an intensified atmosphere of agreement. The main train of thought appears to be developed simultaneously, and such highly collaborative talk strongly emphasises alliance between the two men's perspectives. This kind of behaviour is one example of how agreement is signalled and built up in the discourse domain, as will be later discussed.

Disagreement

Disagreement is projected to be the more complex of the two actions, and this is reflected by the far wider range of strategies used to accomplish it. In order to compare the illocutionary handling of disagreement, we have borrowed elements from the frameworks proposed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) and House and Kasper (1981) which we list below. These authors have identified a variety of mitigation types associated with face-threatening acts

such as requesting, apologising and complaining, and these may be productively adapted to analyse disagreeing behaviour:

Hedges/Understaters: Adverbial elements by means of which the speaker avoids specification in making a commitment to the illocutionary point of the utterance (e.g., ‘kind of’, ‘sort of’, ‘a bit’).

Downtoner: Sentence modifiers which modulate the impact of an utterance (e.g., ‘it depends’, ‘pretty much’, ‘that’s quite’, ‘perhaps’, ‘probably’).

Hesitator: Deliberate malformulations used to display qualms about expressing one’s intention (e.g., ‘um’, stuttering, reduplication).

Cajolers/Appealers: Devices that are explicitly hearer-directed and appeal to an alignment between speaker and hearer (e.g., ‘you know’, ‘you see’, ‘yes?’, ‘isn’t it?’). These are thought to ‘increase, establish or restore harmony between the interlocutors’, or ‘function to elicit a hearer signal’.

After some consideration, it was decided not to include in the present analysis markers of subjectivity such as ‘I think’, ‘I feel’, or ‘I don’t think’, ‘I don’t feel’ as mitigating components to disagreements. This is not to deny their softening impact on a disagreement, but rather that an equivalently high usage amongst both groups of speakers during disagreement, agreement and elsewhere shows that this is also a highly routine way of presenting opinions, and therefore—for the purposes of this study—its mitigative function is ambiguous.

Further strategies include Brown and Levinson’s (1987, p. 213-223) off-record disagreements: that is devices that trigger inferential work on the part of the hearer rather than make disagreement explicit, including metaphors, ironic intonation, rhetorical questions or extremely minimal, but suggestive responses (e.g., yeh, well...). And finally, in response to the data, we identified a need for categories for the comparison of unambiguous contrast between speakers. This includes the use of the word ‘no’ when employed to mark contrast, and also, the occurrence of explicit contradiction, where the content or certain aspects of the content of the previous assessment is refuted without mitigation, as in the following example:

(17) Chioke and Thomas (BWA)

353 T: but you can’t have a: (.) Muslims and Christians (2s) hanging out
 354 together in the same country kind of thing
 355*C: =of course you can

Table 3 illustrates the findings:

Table 3: Features of Disagreement

	British W. Africans	British Whites
Hedge/ Understater	10.3%	15.2%
Hesitator	12.8%	23.7%
Downtoner	11.5%	16.9%
Cajoler/Appealer	15.4%	6.7%
Off-Record	7.7%	16.9%
Contradiction	24.5%	20.3%
Saying 'No'	14%	3.4%

While not necessarily always substantial in their difference, these figures show a general trend in which downgrading mitigation (i.e., hedges, hesitators and downtoners) is used more frequently by the BWs than by the BWAs. This is true most patently in the case of hesitators, used in 23.7% of BW disagreements, against 12.8% for BWA disagreements. Furthermore, the BWs displayed a greater preference for off-record strategies, 16.9% against 7.7%. At the other end of the scale, the BWAs employed the opposition-marking 'no' nearly four times as much as the BWs, and also produced more explicit contradictions.

The final noteworthy finding is the greater usage of cajolers and appealers by the BWAs: over twice as much as the BWs at 15.4% to 6.7%. Cajolers and appealers like 'you know' and 'isn't it' function in what Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 120) call a "personal-centre switch", where the speaker claims the knowledge of the addressee. Rather than reducing the negative impact of disagreement by downgrading its force, cajolers and appealers arguably do the same work by instead highlighting interpersonal engagement. Unlike the other mitigating devices, this is a tactic associated with positive face work.

(18) Patricia and Annabel (BWA) (cajolers and appealers are in bold)

448 P: my (.) previous partner was Westernised like me (.) he was Ghanaian
 449 born here and bred here (.) now the had a level of understanding with
 450 him (.) was easier than it is with this one (.)
 451 A: ok (.) ok
 452 P: =d'you see what I mean
 453 A: yeh

454 P: =because (.) obviously we got- with this one
 455 is going to be ha:rdner than the fight wi with that one
 456 A: yeh (.)
 457 P: d'you see what
 458 I mean (.) cos understanding it
 459*A: =yeh but **you see:** the other thing **Patricia**
 460 is it's not it's the understanding and all the rest of it but to me what it
 461 boils down to is (.) the individual personality **like I said to you**

In (18), after Patricia has presented problems with her partner as being down to cultural difference (also repeatedly using the applier 'd'you see what I mean', lines 452, 457-458), Annabel disagrees using several cajoling forms, thereby simultaneously stressing her contrast but also her involvement with Patricia. Comparatively, the BWs actively avoided drawing attention to contrast between speakers. Let us consider two examples, first, an instance of off-record disagreeing:

(19) Paul and Ed (BW)

480 E: I think that there are certain (.) absolutes (.) that one can aspire towards
 481 o:r (.) abhor (.) u:m
 482 P: (1.5s) decided by you <laugh>
 483 E: (.) m ju:st deci:ded as generally beneficial for society
 484*P: (.) hmmm (.) hm (.) <laugh>
 485 E: well one can go from the very basics that it's:
 486 not good to hurt other people

This disagreement is completely unarticulated, instead communicated by several cynical-sounding 'hm's at line 484. The strategy is certainly recognised by Ed who starts to respond to what he interprets the content of Paul's disagreement to be, but whether a disagreement this inexplicit is universally recognisable in all contexts is debatable.

A second example shows the densely mitigated handling of a very slight contrast.

(20) Jodie and Vanessa (BW)

171 V: hhh it's funny cos th- words like u:m I always think a really s't of (.) I
 172 suppose black word (.5s) is attitude (.) and um (.) that's quite interesting
 173 cos I walked round Peckham and I thought yeh this has got attitude but I
 174 don't know what I quite (1s) what I quite mean by that an and I would
 175 happily say that (.) t:omorrow and I say I was walking through Peckham
 176 and I thought there was quite a lot of attitude going on (1s) not necessarily
 177 in a (.) derogatory sense or a negative sense but it's just this
 178 J: [yeh

- 179 V: = kind of .hhh u::m (1s) hhh ener- energy oh god here we go it it's=
 180 J: <laugh>
 181 V: = almost like the it's the atmosphere (1.5s)
 182 J: yeh
 183 V: of the place (.) that makes me just (.) I don't know you feel a bit (.5s) .hh
 184 V: (.) it just it sums it up but I don't know where that word came from then
 185 V: you got this (.) in xx you got this magazine called Attitude for ga:y men
 186 and how does that- how do they combine the two meanings o:r
 187*J: [is it just a
 188 general (2s) a general thing isn't it (1s) I don't know I've never really
 189 used attitude in that (.) context I don't think maybe that (.) I'm just being
 190 behind the times or something (.) I I don't know what I'd say (.) I'd
 191 probably say it's u:m (1s) uh (1s) oh I don't I don't know (.) I don't know
 192 what I'd say (2s) I do think- **I guess you could say a place has (.) a-**
 193 **attitude I just I don't know I just never (.) have done (.) x**

Here, Jodie is not convinced that the word 'attitude' is used in the way Vanessa has described, but obscures her disagreement behind hedges, pauses and expressions of self-doubt ('I don't know', lines 189-194; 'maybe I'm just being behind the times', lines 190-191). Both these examples show a great reluctance to articulate disagreement, a tendency less apparent amongst the BWAs:

(21) Patricia and Annabel (BWA)

- 375 P: but even if it's there it's not in the excess of how it is here
 376*A: =you don't
 377 **know because it's all behind closed doors**

In order to better situate these apparently different orientations towards disagreement, we shall now consider the ways in which agreeing and disagreeing are handled in broader conversation, beyond the specific actions.

Agreement and Disagreement: Discourse Approaches

Enquiry into (dis)agreement at discourse level is to be understood here as a look at (dis)agreement in context: (dis)agreement is seen not just as a turn in conversation, but as an area of ongoing conversational negotiation. This involves examining the ways in which speakers support agreement, and how they respond to disagreement. As such, the 'discourse' level in this study should not be confused with the 'discourse analysis' applied to (dis)agreement by Santamaría García (2004), for example. Her framework concentrates solely on the (dis)agreeing sequences themselves, and in fact is

Like cajolers, the use of such terms emphasises involvement with the hearer. The fact that they lack completely in the BW data suggests that for these speakers, use of address terms may seem too intimate among strangers.

Similarly, turn finishing is a stronger feature across the BWA conversations than in those of the BWs, indicating that the BWA speakers are perhaps less inhibited about showing that they are formulating interpretations of another person's train of thought. Here, potential for error appears to take a back seat when weighed against the advantages of displaying engagement. On the basis of these features, it seems that speakers are orienting towards shared and supported knowledge—'agreement' in other words—as a presumed state of play.

In contrast, the conversations of the BWs really do seem to prioritise a certain restraint in making assumptions about others' meaning. Judging by the BWs noticeably higher use of agreeing knowledge claimers, as well as frequent 'I don't know's', responsibility for marking any shared knowledge or outlook between the participants often seemed to fall to the responding party. This is not to suggest that the BW speakers only use negative face work, or that they shy away from concrete alliances with each other. In fact, we see solidarity between speakers being referred to a number of times, (in bold in the following example):

(25) Russell and Sam (BW)

442 S: if we talk generally (.) y'know **we're we're** (.) <cough> seem to be
 443 fairly (.) um open to it and not have any strong (.) um **you and I** don't
 444 seem to have any strong uh feelings about what should should be
 445 R: =yeh
 446 S: =considered British and what shouldn't (.)

This is a clear positive politeness suggestion that 'you and me, we are the same', however, there are a few qualitative differences between this kind of emphasised solidarity and the turn finishing or cajoling 'assumptions' that the BWAs regularly employ. Firstly, these 'you and me' remarks are often made conclusively, based on evidence from the previous sequences of talk: they are a way of summing up an established cohesiveness, rather than creating it. Secondly, the spelled-out nature of these alignments could be argued to be yet another strategy to avoid the controversy of presuming something without checking first; perhaps a potentially dangerous move in terms of maintaining rapport between speakers. It seems the BWs are no less engaged in establishing bonds with each other, but rather they may be employing a different approach to 'rapport management' which values a more tentative handling of other speakers' points of view.

The high presence of downgrading mitigation throughout the BW conversations further illustrates participants' wish to not encroach upon their

interlocutor's point of view by forcefully presenting their own. In examples (26) and (27), we see speakers producing an overall effect of vague commitment to their propositions by using the devices highlighted in bold. This is consistent with the behaviour predicted by Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 112, 116) concerning the avoidance of disagreement.

(26) Russell and Sam (BW)

136 S: **probably** it's:- they're careful anyway **I mean probably** what whatever you
 137 get (.) in schoo:l is (.) is allowed in cos it's spelled the British way even
 138 if it was written by an American **maybe I don't know I don't know what**
 139 **happens**

(27) Jodie and Vanessa (BW)

259 J: **I just (.) it's really (.) I mean it's kind of boring but it's kind of**
 260 **fascinating** how they (.5s) decide what goes in the dictionary (.)

However, the BWAs appear to pay less heed to such tactics, as shown in (28):

(28) Patricia and Annabel (BWA)

385 P: but over here I belie- the thing is the family the family thing like in Africa
 386 (.8s) it's like (.) there's a big family there's no need for social services
 387 (.5s) there no need for that kind of sector because we believe in extended
 388 family (.5s) now suppose you lot were white kids (.) yeh and that
 389 misfortune the loss of your mum had happened (.) they would have been
 390 taking some here they would have said the man can't cope (.) these- the
 391 grandma would'a come and said no we want our bloody kids (.) you know
 392 (.) they'd of just tried to scatter everything but because of that African
 393 value (.) of (.) keeping the family together that is why your dad (.) made
 394 sure

Compared to (26) and (27), example (28) shows a far less reluctant opinion being conveyed through emphatic repetitive devices and prosodic stress, and also a very low use of downgrading mitigation. In terms of preparing the ground for agreement, it appears the BWs work harder to create a sense of open-endedness, thereby dampening possibilities for disagreement, whilst leaving room to manoeuvre should it occur. Nowhere is this tactic more obvious than in the case of self-deprecation, a marked feature of the BW conversations, shown below in bold:

(29) Jodie and Vanessa (BW)

396 V: what do you like d'you think (.) [about England =yeh
 397 J: (.) [about England? u:m **oh it's a bit naff**
 398 but I like the sort of un:derplayed sense of humour (.) a lot (.) u:m (1s)
 399 <laughing> **oh god I'm going to sound like John Ma::jor**

Such self-deprecation occurs several times in each of the three BW conversations, but only once in the entire BWA data. Once again this can be understood in terms of approaching rapport between speakers with reference to negative face concerns. By joking about the validity or extremity of one's own opinions, one can distance oneself from their force, thus protecting one's own face from the threat of disagreement whilst also protecting the hearer from the imposition of a strong opinion.

The Repercussions of Disagreement

Having established that the BWAs seem to produce more explicit contradictions and contrastive 'no's, we shall now consider the impact such actions have on rapport between speakers. The only explicit disagreements among the BWs occurred between Paul and Ed, (a conversation later described by one of the participants as 'antagonistic'), and a degree of unease between the speakers is quite apparent in the following excerpt, which directly follows the criticism and disagreement of example (19) above:

(30) Paul and Ed (BW)

486 E: well one can go from the very basics that it's: not good to hurt other people
 487 (.) to: uh
 488 P: =it goes back to the ten commandments in my xx (.) very sensible peo=
 489 E: [oh fu:ck (.) that
 490 P: =very sensible the ten commandments

Here, Paul displays sarcasm (line 488) and Ed responds to the implicit hostility in kind (line 489). Later on, although the hostility lightens, the latent distrust remains:

(31) Paul and Ed (BW)

659 E: it's difficult to get (.) good simple French food in France (.) you get (.) you
 660 disagree?
 661 P: =I (.) don't know (.) really I haven't been for ages

Ed assumes that Paul is disagreeing with him (line 660), but when challenged Paul in fact claims—very hesitantly it should be noted—that he is not (line 661).

Overt contrast in the BWA data does not appear to create the same degree of discomfort. Consider the following example:

(32) Chioke and Thomas (BWA)

333 C: there's a way of looking at blacks as homogenous which they're not in
 334 any sense (.) but it's only if you look at it from (.) a (.)
 335 T: superficial level
 336*C: =no from a a white perspective not necessarily superficial because
 337 they are (.) different but they all look the same so
 338 T: [well if you talk black culture
 339 if if if y-what I mean
 340 C: =what is black culture I I don't believe in
 341 T: =what is it?

Even after a direct contradiction has arisen (lines 336), the speakers continue to collaborate in developing the point 'what is black culture anyway?' (lines 338-341). And in the encounter between Patricia and Annabel, which also sees several episodes of unambiguous and prolonged opposition, the participants left claiming to have 'quite enjoyed that'.

This lends some explanatory support to the differing behaviour observed at the procedural and illocutionary levels: disagreement may be weighted more negatively amongst BW speakers than amongst BWAs.

(Dis)agreement and Conversational Style

In her discussion of disagreement, Pomerantz (1984) states that "an action, *by virtue of how the participants orient to it*, will be housed in and performed through a turn shape that reflects their orientation" (p. 64, my italics). While the features of the BW disagreement regularly indicated reluctance, the BWA patterns were less consistent. This perhaps suggests that, in many instances, producing disagreement was simply not as stigmatised for these speakers. Indeed, in contexts where devices claiming the agreement of the hearer (e.g., 'you know what I mean'), are frequent, explicit disagreement may be the only effective way of counteracting such presumption.

The greater discomfort displayed by the BWs during disagreement is apparently related to a stronger preference for maintaining consensus overall. Taking our lead from Spencer-Oatey's analysis (2000b) (see also Spencer-Oatey & Jiang, 2003), it seems the two groups may be displaying different preferences for an 'optimum' level of consensus, in which consensual

discussion is more intimately related to the maintenance of rapport amongst BW speakers than it is amongst BWA speakers, who instead rely on a heavier and wider use of devices associated with solidarity and positive politeness to signal rapport. This tendency amongst BWAs is also borne out by procedural aspects of talk such as frequently overlapped (dis)agreement, as well as discourse behaviour such as the unhesitant development of topics. According to Tannen's (1984, p. 30) investigation of conversational style, these features signal an emphasis on interpersonal involvement—which indeed may also be related to forthrightness during disagreement. In contrast, the BWs' hesitant delivery, slower (dis)agreement and mitigated opinions would, in Tannen's (1984) analysis, suggest a conversational style with an emphasis on 'considerateness': an orientation perhaps likely to value consensus highly and to approach disagreement as potentially destabilising for rapport.

To interpret these differences cross-culturally, we would need to link them to broader cultural values. Hofstede's (1997, p. 53) cultural indexes, although unappealing for their rather deterministic outlook, nonetheless provide some interesting guidelines for this type of analysis. His work suggests that the BWAs come from a 'collectivist' cultural background, and that the cultural background of the BWs is 'individualistic'. He predicts that those oriented towards collectivist principles will place more stigma on direct contradictions than those oriented towards individualistic principles. This, however, is not supported by this study's findings. If the collectivist/individualist distinction is valid, any relationship with interactive norms is more subtle than Hofstede (1997) suggests. A collectivist-related concern to emphasise interpersonal engagement between speakers does not automatically equate with a strong emphasis on interpersonal harmony, because, as we have suggested, displaying engagement with other speakers can involve explicitly disagreeing with them. Likewise, placing emphasis on the rights of 'the individual' does not necessarily go hand in hand with the production of assertive disagreements as we must also take into account the strength of a related preference to not impose one's opinions on others. Whether the interactive tendencies identified here are culturally-associated or not—an interpretation that would need to be corroborated by further research—this study has nonetheless demonstrated that the more features of involvement an interaction displays, the more likely rapport between two speakers will be able to withstand explicit disagreements.

Conclusion

We have shown that features relevant to the communication of (dis)agreement operate within three separate domains of interaction—procedural, illocutionary and discourse—and that in examining

conversational action at all three levels, coherent groups of interactive tendencies emerge which offer insight into speakers' rapport orientations.

Whilst to some extent this study corroborates the analyses of Pomerantz (1984) and Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) who project that agreement is a less complex and more readily proffered action than disagreement, we nonetheless support to notion that the tendencies they have observed concerning the turn-delivery or use of mitigation may vary by degrees cross-culturally. Within the current comparison, BWA speakers appear to favour a conversational style emphasising interpersonal involvement by using a greater degree of turn finishing, cajoling mitigation and overlapping speech during (dis)agreement. These features, and the approach to rapport they indicate, also seem to involve an apparently higher tolerance for overt disagreement. Rapport between the BWs on the other hand appears to rely more on features that emphasise 'considerateness' and non-imposition, such as downgrading mitigation, hesitancy and self-deprecation. This meant that explicit contrasts were largely avoided, but when they did occur, relations between speakers became markedly uneasy.

In terms of this study's methodological and analytical aims, it is hoped that elicited conversations have been shown to provide valuable access to information concerning the interactive aspects of linguistic actions, such as their timing or discourse context. In considering the procedural, illocutionary and discourse features of (dis)agreement we have refined and expanded upon techniques and theoretical perspectives used in conversation analysis (cf. Pomerantz, 1984), sociopragmatics (cf. Blum Kulka et al., 1989) and previous combinations of the two (cf. Santamaría García, 2004) and have built up a holistic picture of cross-cultural variability in conversation that goes beyond the analysis of speech acts, politeness markers or turn-taking procedures. As a result, we have not only described different tendencies for the handling of (dis)agreement, but different tendencies for handling the broader concern of 'rapport'.

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Key to Transcript Notation

This notation is adapted from transcription conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (1984).

<u> </u>	stress
xx	unintelligible
[onset of simultaneous speech
(.)	pause; length noted in the brackets when over 0.5s
:	indicates a lengthening of previous sound
=	indicates either the start of a turn immediately after the finish of a previous speaker's turn, or the continuation of one speaker's turn over interrupted lines of transcription
-	indicates a speaker's self-interruption, often accompanied by a change in rhythm or pitch
!	animated intonation
?	questioning intonation
hh	exhaled breath
.hh	intake of breath
< <i>italics</i> >	paralinguistic information, such as laughter

The names of all participants have been changed.

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