The realization of the speech act of disagreement by Tunisian non-native and American native speakers of English

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Abstract

The present study investigated the production of the speech act of disagreement among Tunisian non-native students of English and American native speakers of English. Discourse completion test (DCT) was used to elicit disagreement strategies by the informants. Non-native informants produced a total of 376 acts and native informants produced 395 acts. The acts were categorized based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Model. The speakers' performance of disagreement in variation with the contextual factors of Social Distance and Social Power was examined. Data was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Results showed that there were significant differences between native and non-native speakers of English with regard to the frequency of direct and indirect strategies of disagreement. Non-native informants used a higher percentage of direct strategies (47%) and a lower percentage of indirect strategies (13%) than their native counterparts, who produced indirect strategies considerably (30%). NNSE opting for direct disagreement strategies might be attributed to their poor pragmatic and sociolinguistic knowledge of indirect strategies. This work can have pedagogical implications in teaching speech acts and pragmatics.

Keywords: Speech acts; disagreement; pragmatics of politeness; transfer.

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Introduction

Pragmatic competence is concerned with the use of language according to context and culture. Any lack in the development of pragmatic competence may lead to cultural misunderstandings and/or communication breakdowns (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). Nakajima (1997) notices that acquiring a satisfactory pragmatic competence is the most challenging and complicated part of the target language acquisition process. The reason is that "pragmatic competence cannot be clearly judged as correct or incorrect according to prescriptive rules" (Nakajima, 1997, p. 50). More and more evidence is gathered to stress the importance of being able "to function within the total meaning system" of the target language (LoCastro, 1986, p. 5).

What generally happens when second or foreign language learners communicate with native speakers of the language they are learning is that they tend to "use the rules of speaking of [their] own speech community or cultural group" (Chick, 1996, p. 332). In performing a disagreement, a high level of pragmatic competence is necessary to carry out a disagreement felicitously. Acquiring the "rules" of appropriateness is necessary to perform the speech act of disagreement and avoid misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. The present paper seeks to shed light on pragmatic ability development (one of the obstacles to the achievement of language proficiency) and to raise pragmatic awareness among EFL learners and sensitize them about the pragmatic norms that govern the target language.

The present paper attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. Do Social Distance and Social Power have an influence on the level of directness in MA Tunisian non-native speakers' and American native speakers' disagreement strategy selection?
2. Is there evidence of transfer from Tunisian Arabic in Tunisian students' disagreement responses?

Literature review

Today, a substantial body of research exists on interlanguage pragmatics. Yet, some speech acts and some cultures have received more attention than others. Studies on apologies (Holmes, 1989; Linnell et al., 1992), refusals (Beebe,Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Nelson et al., 2002), requests (Blum-Kulka, 1989) and compliments (Nelson et al., 1993) in different cultures and languages have been conducted. Studies on disagreement are emerging (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; Rees-Miller, 2000; Georgakopoulou, 2001; Kakava, 2002). From the perspective of pragmatic transfer, disagreement has received some interest (e.g., Nakajima's, 1997, study on Japanese disagreement strategies in English). Other studies have investigated the speech act of disagreement in connection with contextual factors (Dogancay-Aktuna & Kamisli, 1996; Kuo, 1994; Rees-Miller, 2000; Takahashi & Beebe, 1993; Georgopoulou, 2001).

As early as 1987, Sacks postulated that disagreement is dispreferred in an adjacency pair sequence as opposed to agreement which, according to him, is preferred or desirable. Gardner (2000, p. 32) maintains that people are supposed to agree and avoid conflict in talk because disagreements "challenge the fundamental tendency in talk to cooperate and align."

Disagreement embodies a threat to the hearer's face in that it questions the truthfulness of an utterance and creates a conflictual situation that jeopardizes solidarity between speaker and addressee. Terkourafi (2001, p. 22) points out that to speak politely is "the unmarked way of speaking within a community… politeness most often passes unnoticed, while what is commented on is impoliteness."Kakava (1993, p. 36) claims that "since disagreement can lead to a form of confrontation that may develop into an argument or dispute, disagreement can be seen as a potential generator of conflict". Indeed, for social considerations, participants tend to avoid disagreement. In situations where disagreement is inevitable, the speaker tends to soften its effects on

the hearer and endeavors to maintain social ties. From this perspective, disagreements perceived as an indispensable part of everyday life. Participants are expected to meticulously find strategies that allow them both to express their viewpoints and soften the undesired and abrupt effect of the potential disagreement on their interlocutor.

Depending on the weight of disagreement, native speakers generally use a series of strategies to mitigate and reduce the directness of the utterance. They may use for instance 'off record'(indirect disagreement) strategies. The most popular strategy employed to mitigate disagreement is 'token agreement' where the speaker pretends to agree (LoCastro, 1986). Many studies report the use of this strategy (e.g., Locastro, 1986; Kotthoff, 1993; Locher, 2004).

However, there seems to be a tendency among non-native speakers to use simpler, less complex and shorter expressions which often lack mitigation (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989). Non-native speakers sound abrupt, direct and perhaps even rude in performing disagreement. Pearson (1986) reported that Japanese use the performative 'I disagree' in English or opt for the blunt statement of the opposite. Non-native speakers' lack of linguistic means might be behind their decision not to disagree at all (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999).

Contrary to the belief that disagreement is dispreferred, many studies have shown the opposite. In fact, preference depends on the context and the culture involved. Blum-Kulka *et al.*, (2002) studied Jewish culture and found that it favors not only disagreement over agreement but unmitigated and unprefaced forms of it. The Jewish culture belongs to the group of cultures which display a preference for direct confrontational modes of disagreement. This tendency seems to be common in the Greek culture (Kakava, 2002), the German culture (House, 1989), and the Turkish culture (Dogancay-Altuna & Kamisli, 1996).

Blum-Kulka et al. (2000) and Gardner (2000), among others, reported that disagreement is an intrinsic part of interviews in politics. Interviewees tend to employ

provocative utterances (Clayman, 1992) because the objective of the whole debate is to argue for opposing points of view. Blum-kulka et al. (2002) talk about an entertaining purpose of disagreement mainly in political discourse where hot topics are discussed. Thus, disagreements are welcome and they are produced in a "straightforward manner"", i.e. without prefacing or qualifying.

The preference for disagreement is not to be taken as a sign of impoliteness and inappropriacy. In some cultures, such as the Greek culture (Kakava, 1993) and the Jewish culture (Blum-Kulka *et al.,* 2002) not disagreeing and not defending one's point of view can be interpreted as face-threatening. Kakava (2002) noticed that disagreement among Greeks is often unprefaced. In a similar vein, in a study of disagreements in political TV shows, Blum-Kulka at al. (2002, p. 1574) noticed that "disagreements are conversationally favored and displayed blatantly." From this perspective, disagreement displays involvement.

Participants who hold an institutionalized power tend to be more direct when disagreeing in comparison to less powerful participants who are more likely to be indirect and frequently use mitigating devices (Fairclough, 1989; Beebe & Takahashi, 1989). In Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, downward disagreements (from a person of high status to a person of low status) are said to be more direct than upward disagreements (from a person of low status to a person of high status). In a study on disagreements between professors and students, Dogancay-Aktuna and Kamisli (1996) confirmed this pattern. Professors employed direct unmitigated utterances to correct students. However, other studies yielded contradictory findings. Rees-Miller (2000) investigated disagreement in academic settings between professors and students. While students are expected to use more polite forms to soften the effect of the disagreements, professors would rather use fewer polite forms (Rees-Miller, 2000). Rees-Miller (2000, p. 1096) noticed that the above expectations were not confirmed by the findings of her study and "contrary to prediction, the three professors used linguistic markers of

politeness more frequently than did the students." What was perceived as face-threatening happens to be 'face-enhancing' for Rees-miller. Disagreements made by the students are expected and even valued by their professors. Rees-Miller (2000) relates these findings to the way professors perceive disagreements made by their students. Disagreements are an intrinsic part of the learning process and they are 'face-enhancing'.

Williams (1996, as cited in Rees-Miller, 2000) maintained that "the best and most challenging education moves toward conflict rather than trying to avoid it, so that the importance of finding ways to teach about controversial issues is again reinforced. Issues such as these are a challenge to the teacher, but a necessity for the curricular."In a similar vein, Takahashi and Beebe (1993) investigated American and Japanese performance of correction in status unequal situations found that professors mitigated their corrections to students. Students, however, seemed direct in correcting professors. The degree of intimacy between participants has an influence on the strategies and markers used to express disagreement. The closer the relationship between the interactants, the more direct and unmitigated disagreements are. In Greek discourse, disagreement is a socially acceptable practice and a sign of sociability and involvement between intimate people (Kakava, 2002).

In situations where the participants feel that their beliefs, identities or values are jeopardized, disagreement becomes equated with imposition. As suggested by Rees-Miller (2000), for face considerations, the more imposing the utterance, the more politeness formulas are used; and the less serious the utterance, the fewer politeness markers are used. Rees-Miller noticed that in some instances a professor used embarrassing utterances to correct himself like "oh what an idiot I am". Such utterances "signaled to students that the severity of face threat would be minimal and therefore they could correct the professor directly and efficiently without softening the disagreement" (Rees-Miller, 2000, p. 1099). Such utterances are tickets for students that

legitimize direct disagreement even with someone superior to them in status Rees-Miller maintains. This article attempts to provide further findings on this preference / dispreference dichotomy, and it postulates that Distance and Power affect disagreement and its realization.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of the present study were thirty non-native speakers of English at Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines, University of Sousse, and thirty native speakers of English at Iowa State University, USA. The participants' ages ranged from 23 to 26 years old. The Tunisian sample was first year MA students, who have graduated and obtained their 'License' in English language and literature and enrolled in a post-graduate program. Their first language is Arabic and French is their second language.

Instruments

In the present study, discourse completion tests (DCT) were used to elicit disagreement. Discourse completion tests (DCTs) have been widely used in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper & Dahl, 1991).The DCT applied in this study consisted of 8 situations (listed in the Appendix below), where the variables of Social Distance and Social Power were examined. These factors are considered critical in that they influence the participants' disagreement strategies in both Tunisian and Western cultures (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Some disagreement situations used in previous studies, such as those used by Takahashi and Beebe (1993) and Kreutel (2007), were adopted in the present study because they consisted of daily encounters that may be applicable to many cultures. The situations were varied as to cover the two variables included in the study, Distance and Power.

Data analysis

The data obtained underwent quantitative and qualitative analyses. Disagreement data were first coded using Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness categories: 'Bald on record', 'Positive politeness', 'Negative politeness' and 'Off record', then frequencies were obtained and tabulated. Brown and Levinson's super strategies were adopted but the taxonomy is different from theirs because the data revealed new categories along with categories available in the literature. In order to investigate if there were significant differences in the frequencies of responses used by the informants, the Chi-square test was run.

Social Distance

The statistical results indicated that there was a significant difference in the choice of disagreement strategies between NSE and NNSE in Situations 1 (unfashionable shoes) *(X^2= 25.908, p=0.000),* 2 (watching a movie) *(X^2=12.805, p=0.000),* and 4 (clerk promoting a computer) (*X^2= 10.762, p=0.003*). On the other hand, the statistical results showed that no significant differences were identified between the two groups in Situation 3 (Republic of Ireland) (X^2= 2.087, p=0.198). The differences were significant at a $p < 0.001$ level.

A detailed analysis of the disagreement strategies found in the DCT revealed interesting findings in terms of strategy selection and cultural differences. NSE did not opt for Bald-on record strategies frequently except in situation 3 (Republic of Ireland), where the setting (university) gave the informants the 'legitmacy' to disagree. Disagreement in academic settings is accepted and teachers encourage debates, which require disagreement.

NNSE opted for direct and unmitigated forms of disagreement with friends and strangers. They used direct strategies of disagreement regardless of the interlocutor (stranger, friend, or classmate). The qualitative results showed that NNSEs' uses of

some disagreement strategies were different from the conventional functions they originally serve. For instance, NNSE use of the strategy of Advice contained instances where Advice is laden with criticism.

e.g., 1. NNSE. I think you should revise your history course very soon.
e.g., 2. NSE. You know they aren't really attractive. You shouldn't get them.

In the example 1 above, there is a flouting of the Relevance Maxim. Advice is the apparent illocutionary force. The implicature is criticism. The addresser asserts that the addressee's knowledge in history is limited and invites them to reconsider their statement. The use of the urgency adverbial phrase 'very soon' indicates that the speaker's knowledge is unacceptable and "has to be attended to immediately." The original function of advice (giving recommendations) was respected in the NSE data, as example 2 illustrates.

Thus, the presence of an unsympathetic form of 'advice' seems to be culture bound. In the Tunisian culture, it is common to use this form of 'advice' to convey the speaker's dissatisfaction and disagreement with the hearer. While Native speakers of English opt for polite implicatures, non-native speakers can be taken as being "offensive" by NSE standards.

NSE used Off-record strategies more frequently than NNSE. Off-record strategies are avoidance strategies that rely on the speaker's ability to infer the intended meaning. The strategy of Indirect Refusal was identified in the NSE data considerably in Situations 1 (unfashionable shoes), accounting for 38%and 4 (clerk promoting a computer), accounting for 24%. Native informants opted for indirect and avoidance-based strategies in Situation 1 because shopping is perceived as an individual choice, where the addressee is left to decide about their choice of clothes freely.

e.g.,3. NSE. You know, my experience with that brand wasn't that great actually, but thank you for helping us. Is there another option you could also point us to?

In example 3, the speaker provides an Indirect refusal followed by a statement of thanking in which they appreciate the shop assistant's help and recommendation. The speaker concludes the utterance with a request, where the addressee is invited to recommend another brand of computers. This process portrays the speaker's unwillingness to be direct with the addressee.

Using Hyland's (2005) taxonomy of Hedges and Boosters, the analysis of the data revealed that NSE used Hedges more frequently than Boosters (55 vs. 29 occurrences). Boosters, however, exceeded Hedges in the NNSE data (22 vs. 10 occurrences).

Compared to NNSE, the data revealed that NSE used a variety of Hedges and Boosters to either mitigate or aggravate disagreement. The hedges identified were Tentative verbs and modals (e.g., seem, look, may, would, and could), Tentative adverbs (e.g., probably and maybe), Conditional, Partial agreement, Reluctance markers (e.g., I don't know, are you sure?), Apology, and Empathy. NSE used different boosters such as modals (e.g., have to, should, and will), Adverbs (e.g., extremely, totally, absolutely, and completely). The findings revealed that NNSE rarely resorted to Hedges and Boosters, which reflects their unawareness of the importance of these lexical items in the performance of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs). In the NSE data, a frequent use of hedges in Situation 1 (unfashionable shoes) was observed (30 occurrences), which reflects the speaker awareness that their disagreement with a friend about shopping choices requires mitigation to reduce any possible undesirable effects on the interlocutors' relationship. NSE also employed hedges frequently in Situation 4 (clerk promoting a computer) (18 occurrences). The wide Distance relationship between the speaker and the hearer might explain the high frequency of hedges used in this situation.

Social Power

In the second set of situations (from Situation 5 to Situation 8), the relationship between the speaker and the hearer was varied depending on the social variable of Power. The

status of the addressee was changed to investigate the effect of social power on the informants' choice(s) of disagreement strategies. The data were coded using Brown and Levinson's (1987) model.

The statistical findings showed significant differences between NSE and NNSE in Situation 5 (camping) (X^2=6.168, p=0.029), Situation 6 (meeting with the supervisor) *(X^2=9.04, p=0.008),* and Situation 7 (alternate topic) (*X^2=22.682, p=0.000*). However, no significant differences were identified in Situation 8 (plagiarism) (X^2=4.745, p= 0.124).

The familiarity between the supervisor and the student in Situation 6 (meeting with the supervisor) might explain NSE's use of Positive politeness strategies (63%). These strategies assure the addressee that the speaker has a positive regard for them and wants some of the interests of the addressee (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 101).

e.g., 4. NSE. I'm sorry but I thought our meeting was at 3. Please excuse me. Should we reschedule?

e.g., 5. NSE. I'm terribly sorry. Maybe I got the time wrong. I wrote it down as 3.

In example 4, the student confirms the supervisor's claim, apologizes, and invites the supervisor to reschedule the meeting. In example 5, the student apologizes to the supervisor and assumes the responsibility of being late for the meeting. Tunisian informants' disagreements, addressed to the supervisor, were rather direct and unmitigated. The informants used Bald-on record strategies more frequently than the other politeness strategies (46%). The friendly relationship and the familiarity of the interlocutors might be behind the informants' production of direct forms of disagreement.

e.g., 6. NNSE. I'm not late because the meeting is scheduled at 3 and I'm here on time, sir.

As the example above illustrates, the informant did not preface their disagreement with an indirect strategy or a hedging device. Instead, direct disagreement was used. This directness might be attributed to a rather unsophisticated pragmatic knowledge.

Situation 7 (alternate topic), where the addressee has a higher social status (teacher) over the speaker (student), NSE opted for Negative politeness strategies, accounting for 50% of the overall number of disagreements produced. Negative politeness strategies convey deference and respect rather than friendliness and involvement. They show that the speaker acknowledges the high social power and the unfamiliarity of the hearer.

e.g., 7. NSE. Thank you for your suggestion. It's a very good topic, but I'm really interested in xxx topic and would like to have the opportunity to do research in this area. Is there any chance I would work on xxx instead?

NSE avoided direct disagreements and hedged their responses with politeness expressions (thanking, appreciation terms, and partial agreement) to redress the potential threat of the FTA (example 7). Interestingly, all the disagreements performed by NSE in situation seven ended with questions, where the speaker leaves the topic open for more discussion. Asking questions such as '*Are there any changes I could make to this topic and have it be more what you're looking for*?' and '*Is there something wrong with it*?' allows the speaker to negotiate their position and indirectly invite the hearer to reconsider their decision. NNSE opted for positive politeness strategies (49%) to perform disagreement in situation seven.

e.g., 8. NNSE.I believe that I have a passion for the topic that I chose, a passion that will make me motivated to work hard and enthusiastically, unless you find it unsearchable or broad or repetitive. Other than that, I think your cooperation with me on the topic I chose will help me do a good job.

Although positive politeness strategies characterize the linguistic behavior between intimates (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 101), NNSE used them considerably. The speaker in

example 8 above partially gives the hearer the right and 'legitimacy' to change the suggested topic and explicitly admits the teacher's scientific and academic role as an evaluator and research guide. This politeness technique is what Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 103) call 'social accelerator' that indicates the speaker's want to come closer to the addressee. In the example above, the addresser finishes the utterance with a request, where they seek the addressee's cooperation and help on the initial topic.

Situation 8 (plagiarism) elicited high frequencies of Bald-on record strategies (35%) and Positive politeness strategies (37%). This choice can be explained by the friendly relationship between the student and the supervisor and the seriousness of the supervisor's claim.

e.g.,9. NSE. Oh no, not again! This does keep happening; every time I get a new teacher I have to prove again that my writing is my own. And for the record it IS my own. The usual system is for the teacher to invent a topic and ask me to write an essay on it in15 minutes flat while you watch to be sure it's really me doing the writing. And then after that the teacher apologizes to me. Shall we do that now?

Example 9 above shows that Bald-on record strategies were used to express the student's categorical refusal of the supervisor's accusation of plagiarism.

e.g., 10. NSE. I know there is a lot of cheating that goes on, and that you have to be careful. And this may seem better that some of my other work this semester, but that's because I really enjoyed the assignment and worked really hard on it. I can bring in my notes and I'd be very happy to tell you about the research I did.

In example 10, positive politeness strategies were used. The student wanted to satisfy the positive face of the supervisor (in a friendly relationship context). The speaker informs the hearer that there is a similarity and agreement about 'ego's and alter's wants' (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 101). The student claims common ground with the supervisor indicating that both participants agree that plagiarism is a serious problem that

requires attention and carefulness. The speaker moves on to suggest a course of action that satisfies the hearer and gives the speaker another chance by inviting the hearer to check the notes of the assignment.

NNSE employed bald-on record strategies considerably (49%). The friendly relationship between the supervisor and the student in Situation 8 (plagiarism) resulted in more direct and less mitigated disagreements in the NNSE corpus, which shows the speaker's dissatisfaction and objection.

e.g.,11. NNSE. I strongly disagree with you. It is my own effort.

As the example above shows, NNSE used direct refusal and included performative verbs to defend their position and refuse the supervisor's claim. NNSE responses were as strong and direct as the accusation of the supervisor.

NNSE use of Direct refusal was not affected by the status of the addressee and their familiarity or unfamiliarity with the speaker. Direct refusal shows that the informants were not aware of the highly threatening nature of these verbs. Instead of mitigating their disagreements, respondents produced aggravated forms of disagreements.

The severity of the accusation in situation 8 (plagiarism), its weightiness, and the urgent need to defend themselves regardless of the addressee's status made the informants accompany their Direct refusal with the Oath expression 'I swear'. Oath expressions were used by NNSE to insist on their innocence and to give their utterances more truthfulness, as it were.

e.g., 12. NNSE. I swear it is mine. I totally disagree with you.

In the Tunisian culture, Oath is part of everyday speech. It has a religious tone. Opting for Oath expressions gives the speaker's illocution more sincerity and truthfulness.

Oath is frequently used, intentionally or unintentionally, in everyday encounters even to tell lies.

NSE used complex and elaborate Explanations. The strategy of Explanation was rarely used alone to express disagreement, as example 13 illustrates. It rather preceded and/or followed another strategy. The direct refusal, *'I can't let Jenny down'* (e.g. 13, below), is the main strategy used to perform disagreement. Explanation plays the role of a redressing strategy that would ultimately mitigate disagreement to the maximum. Speakers use this pattern as an argumentative tactic to convince the hearer of their opinion.

e.g.,13. NSE. Look, Papa, you know I have been camping in bad weather before. There was the hurricane in Scotland, for example, and the freezing in the Olympics. I've got a good tent and a good sleeping bag: nothing will happen to me! And I can't let Jenny down; I promised her to go this weekend and it was really hard for her to get the time off work for this trip.

With regard to the complexity and elaboration of Explanation, NNSE produced simple and short utterances, as shown in example 14. They also seemed to lack the appropriate pragmalinguistic equivalents to express their disagreements in English. As example 14 illustrates, NNSE performed non target-like illocutions.

e.g., 14. NNSE. I cannot be a liar. I have to fulfill my promise to my friend and to be responsible.

The social status of the interlocutor has an effect on the choice and frequency of Hedges and Boosters used either to 'soften' or 'aggravate' disagreement. The data revealed that contrary to NNSE, NSE used diverse forms of hedges and boosters to either mitigate or strengthen their disagreements. The hedges identified were Tentative verbs and modals (e.g., would, could, and may), Tentative adverbs (e.g., maybe, perhaps, and probably), Conditionals, Partial agreement, Apology expressions (e.g., sorry, excuse me, and I beg

your pardon). Boosters include verbs and modals (e.g., have to, will, should), adjectives and adverbs (e.g., sure, certain, certainly, truly, really, and entirely).

NNSE, however, used outright, short, and unmitigated forms of disagreements due to the lack of the pragmalinguistic equivalents and patterns required to perform disagreement appropriately and due to cultural differences. Accordingly, misunderstandings could arise and eventually lead to communication breakdown.

In large power distance cultures, individuals accept hierarchical relationships and they are more likely to use cooperative face-work strategies, which smooth face-threatening acts (Merkin, 2006, p. 139). The father who has power over his son or daughter can take decisions without their consent. The latter is expected to agree and show politeness and obedience. The findings of the study showed that a father/son relationship in the Tunisian culture deviates from this conceptualization.

NSE and NNSE used positive politeness strategies more frequently. Positive politeness strategies are generally used among intimates. This choice portrays the relationship between parents and their son(s)/daughter(s) in the Tunisian culture. When adolescents reach their twenties (the age of the informants of the present study), they are treated by their parents as friends and they are encouraged to express their opinions freely and openly. They can disagree with their parents and participate in family discussions, which is a feature of small power individualist cultures.

In the same vein, the asymmetrical relationship teacher-student, where the teacher has power over the student, more indirect disagreement strategies are expected. The findings showed that NSE resorted to positive politeness strategies to perform disagreement with a –D teacher and negative politeness strategies to disagree with a +D

teacher. The more distant the relationship is the more indirect disagreement strategies are. The severity of the teacher's accusation (plagiarism) might explain NSE frequent use of bald on-record and positive politeness strategies. The more serious the offence is the more direct strategies are.

Based on these findings, Tunisian respondents' preference for more direct disagreement strategies with high power interlocutors deviates from the politeness norms expected from a low power addresser to a high power addressee. Deviating from the norms and expectations is by no means interpreted as an instance of impoliteness or rudeness. The Tunisian culture seems to favor direct strategies to disagree with high power interlocutors (father, teacher) without affecting the asymmetrical relationships. The informants do not mind performing face-threatening acts while expressing themselves for the sake of clarity and self-defense, which is a characteristic of small Power-Distance cultures.

Discussion

The findings showed that NNSE used direct disagreement strategies with friends. Direct strategies are welcomed and appreciated in mainstream Tunisian culture because they portray sincerity and honesty among friends. NNSE use of direct strategies to perform disagreement does not have negative effects on the interlocutors' relation. In the Tunisian culture, direct forms of disagreement are expected between friends and they may express involvement and camaraderie. The foregoing results and analyses of the English DCT data revealed that there are similarities and differences among NSE and NNSE. The strategies of Advice, Direct refusal, Correction, Order, Explanation, Suggestion, Request, Request for clarification, Indirect refusal, Comparison, and Expressing disappointment were the most

common strategies[2] identified in the data of both groups. The strategies of Assume/assert reciprocity, and Tell white lies were used by NSE. The strategy of Request for clarification had the function of an alternate question to cause doubt only in NSE data. The findings revealed that only NNSE used the strategies of Challenge, Protest, and Reproach. The strategy of Advice was used as a way of expressing dissatisfaction and protest rather than recommendation. In the Tunisian culture, this unsympathetic form of Advice is close to being more a combination of Accusation and Blame, since it conveys the speaker's discontent. However, using it in English might not be appropriate. It aggravates rather than mitigates the illocutionary force of the disagreement. NNSE responses would sound 'offensive' and inappropriate by NSE standards. Wolfson (1981:123) noticed that "speech acts differ cross-culturally not only in the way they are realised but also in their distribution, their frequency of occurrence, and in the functions they serve."

With respect to the contextual factor of Social Distance, Teasing among friends does not reinforce disagreement but rather reinforces solidarity and strong friendship bonds, which is consistent with the cultural norms of the Tunisian society and a sign of a collectivist culture.

NNSE also used direct strategies considerably in wide distance contexts, where the addresser and the addressee were strangers, which reveals that the informants were more concerned with showing that the addressee's claims were incorrect or inappropriate than caring for maintaining or enhancing their face. Al-Ghamdi and Alrefaee (2020) compared the refusal strategies of Yemeni Arabic speakers and American English speakers. They

2 These categories were found in Khammari's 2021 forthcoming PhD thesis.

found that Americans used direct strategies less frequently than their Yemeni counterparts. In equal status contexts, both Yemenis and Americans used fewer adjuncts to refusal when refusing a request. In higher status contexts, while Americans used more adjuncts to refusal, Yemenis used more direct strategies (Al-Ghamdi & Alrefaee, 2020, pp. 215-216).

Umale (2011, p. 32) showed, however, that Omani informants behaved differently when addressing higher status people. Indeed, more indirect strategies were used. Nelson et al. (2002) found that Egyptians were also reluctant to refuse a higher status interlocutor, reflecting an awareness of the hierarchical relationships. Begley (2000, p. 102) asserted that Egypt is a society, where "hierarchies according to age, gender, and experience are crucial." The Egyptian society is described as a collectivist high communication style society (Hofstede, 1991; Hall, 1976).

On the other hand, wide distance contexts affected NSE choice of strategies. The hypothesis that the more distant the relationship between the interlocutors is, the more indirect strategies are used seems to apply to NSE. NSE seemed to care about the addressee's face. Expressions such as '*thank you for helping us*', *'are there other options you could also point us to*?', and '*we'll let you know if we need help*' are utterances that demonstrate the addresser's concern about maintaining and enhancing the addressee's face. One of the native respondents included parenthetical information, which states *"I would wait until the clerk left and then tell my friend directly that I recently bought a similar model and that it sucks"*, which shows that directness is avoided, particularly, with strangers. Even in equal social distance relationship, NSE preferred to use indirect forms of disagreement with friends. Advice and recommendations were accomplished implicitly by means of stating personal

preference and the addresser avoided communicating their opinion in a blatant way. Instead, native speakers of English relied on the addressee's ability to infer the meaning.

Both groups used direct strategies of disagreement in academic classroom contexts, where negotiations and discussions are expected among students (Rees-Miller, 2000; Alhaidari, 2009). NSE, however, used mitigation devices considerably to reduce the face-threatening nature of their disagreement and gave particular attention to the position of direct disagreement in their utterances. The data revealed that NSE foregrounded their responses with dispreference markers. Lack of mitigation devices in the NNSE responses resulted in direct and abrupt expressions of disagreement. Indeed, NNSE relied on performative verbs very often to express disagreement to friends and strangers.

With regard to how the contextual factor of Power affected the realization of disagreement, NNSE employed direct strategies of disagreement with higher status interlocutors (father, teacher) due to the content of the issue of disagreement, transfer of L1 norms, and low pragmalinguistic awareness of the target language. Traces of transfer were evident in the data and they affected the quality of responses provided. Many studies in Tunisia (Labben, 2003; Aribi, 2016; Ben Hedia, 2020) and in other Arab speaking countries (Al-Isaa, 1998; Stevens, 1993) tackled the issue of L1 interference in the production of speech acts in English. Al–Zumor (2010, p. 19) investigated Apology strategies produced by Arab learners of English studying in India. He found that cultural differences (beliefs, concepts, and values) are behind Arab learners' deviations. Al-Zumor (2010, p. 28) found features of transfer in the Arab learners' apologies in English and attributed them to the influence of the native language and the limited exposure to the target language/culture. Boudjemaa

(2016) investigated Algerian EFL learners' production of requests and apologies and found evidence of pragmatic transfer from Algerian to English.

In the Tunisian culture, traditionally the father's decisions or choices were unquestionable and unarguable. Social transformations and cultural changes have changed the parent-son/daughter relationship. Parental authority has given way to a more friendly relation between parents and their siblings, where debates and discussions are welcomed and encouraged. Adolescents are given more freedom and encouragement to discuss personal and family-related matters and to contribute to the decision making process. This societal development makes the Tunisian culture different from other non-western collectivist cultures. The categorical view that all non-western cultures belong to the collectivist pole requires reconsideration. Instead of adopting a two-pole view of cultures (individualist versus collectivist), cultures can be studied in a continuum that would respect the changing nature of cultures over time depending on socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors. Peetz (2010, p. 385) states that "collectivism and individualism are points on a continuum of possibilities rather than the only two possibilities. In practice, most people exhibit some combination of individualism and collectivism in their attitudes and behavior."

The frequent use of bald-on record and positive politeness strategies displays the changing nature of the Tunisian society, where collectivist principles are giving way to more individualist attitudes. The data showed that the teacher-student asymmetrical relationship did not result in a frequent use of indirect and avoidance-based strategies. The informants produced bald-on record and positive politeness strategies considerably. Tunisia, which according to Hofstede's (1991) classification, belongs to collectivist high

power distance countries has witnessed socio-cultural changes for the last sixty years. The changes have been rather fast due to various factors; especially the spread of information technology and the political changes. The openness of the country on western and European nations has also made the Tunisian society different from other Arab countries. Tunisia is "in many ways a moderate, socially progressive state virtually unique among its Muslim contemporaries" (Berry & Rinehart, 1988, p. 74). Grouping Tunisia in the list of collectivist and high power distance countries does not conform to the reality of the Tunisian culture. Grainger et al. (2015, p. 51) asserted that not "all Arabic speaking cultures are homogeneous. There are for example, great differences between Western and Eastern Arab society norms and traditions. Even within particular Arab cultures there is great diversity." Unlike other Arab cultures, the Tunisian one is closer to the western culture. However, it is not identical to it, as there is still more directness.

The findings showed that NNSE responses were not affected by the high-status of the interlocutors. Varying the degree of familiarity did not change NNSE behavior. The informants used primarily Bald-on record strategies to disagree with high power addressees (teacher, supervisor). NNSE did not hesitate to challenge the addressee (supervisor) and ask them to provide supporting evidence for their claims. NSE used Positive and Negative politeness strategies to disagree with high-status interlocutors. NSE were more sensitive to the variable of power and the politeness conventions required in such contexts. It is also important to note that both groups produced more hedges when interacting with someone higher in status. But, still, NSE used more mitigation devices in the second set of situations (Power) than NNSE.

It is worth pointing out that the opportunities for direct exposure to the target language are very restricted for Tunisian EFL learners. The chances of interaction in an FL context are confined to classroom. Ellis (2014, p. 38) claimed that "If learners do not receive exposure to the target language they cannot acquire it." Direct exposure to language in real life situations helps learners learn forms and uses of the foreign language. Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1985) stressed the importance of the length of stay in the target culture to approximate native like competence in the performance of requests and apologies in English. Still, teaching materials, in the Tunisian context, should address the deficiencies that NNSE face as to better equip them with the appropriate pragmatic knowledge about the language they are learning. When teachers have a good understanding of the pragmatic norms that govern the target language, learners will be aware of the appropriate forms and strategies to use in different encounters. In the Tunisian FL context, some studies (e.g. Ben Abdalla's 2015 study on requests) reported that EFL learners benefited from explicit teaching of the appropriate use of speech act strategies.

Conclusion

The outputs of the study do not seem to support the assumption that there is a correlation between politeness and indirectness in some particular contexts of usage of the strategies of disagreement. Directness seemed to strengthen friendship ties in some contexts. NNSE used direct disagreement strategies such as Challenge, Protest, and Teasing, which seemed to be face-enhancing strategies among friends in the Tunisian culture. From this perspective, disagreement seems a preferred speech act among friends in certain encounters. Other researchers in other cultures support this finding (e.g., Ben-Menachem &

Livnat, 2018; Kakava, 1993). The relationship between politeness and directness/indirectness can be examined in relation to the social and cultural norms and values. What strengthens social ties in one culture can lead to misunderstanding and communication breakdown in another.

The findings also revealed that non-native informants used direct and unmitigated forms of disagreement with high status interlocutors (teacher, supervisor). This could be attributed to the informants' poor pragmatic skills in English resulting in inappropriate choices of strategies. Tunisian respondents' preference for direct disagreement strategies with high power interlocutors deviates from the politeness norms expected from a low power addresser to a high-power addressee.

NSE employed indirect strategies when disagreeing with high status interlocutors. Negative and off-record politeness strategies were used considerably, which shows that the informants were aware of the high social power of the interlocutors. NSE used the strategy of 'request for clarification' considerably and they did not expect answers. Their questions were rather alternate questions to cause doubt and indirectly invite the interlocutors to reconsider their suggestions or opinions. NSE and NNSE also opted for positive politeness strategies to disagree with a father, which indicates the friendly and open relationship joining parents and their siblings in both cultures. In the Tunisian culture, siblings can disagree with their parents and take part in discussions and debates without losing face or being judged as impolite.

With regard to the complexity and elaboration of disagreement, NNSE produced simple and unsophisticated responses. They also seemed to lack the appropriate

pragmalinguistic expressions to disagree in English. Non-target like linguistic features were identified and they seemed to be the result of transfer from TA.

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Appendix

DISCOURSE COMPLETION TEST

Situation 1:

You are out doing shopping with your class friends. One of them tries on a pair of shoes that you find unfashionable, but your other friend says: "God, you have to buy these shoes. They are really good on you!"
You say: "----------"

Situation 2:

For the first time in almost a week, really good weather conditions have prevailed on your city. You think you should profit from it and go to the beach with your friend. However, your friend says: "I think we should go watch a movie."
You say: "----------"

Situation 3:

In a classroom debate about the United Kingdom, a classmate you do not know very well claims that the Republic of Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. Because you did internet research on the topic, you know for sure that the Republic of Ireland is a sovereign country, independent from the United Kingdom.
You say: "----------"

Situation 4:

While you are at the supermarket helping your friend pick a new computer, the clerk intervenes and starts talking about the good features of a specific brand. Recently, you have bought a similar computer and you are very dissatisfied with it. You feel that you have to disagree with the clerk.
You say: "----------"

Situation 5:

Your friend and you have planned to go camping this weekend. When you informed your father about your program, he totally refused to let you go on a camping trip claiming that bad weather conditions are expected this weekend. You cannot decline the camping trip because you gave your friend your word.
You say to your father: "----------"

Situation 6:

You have a meeting with your supervisor, whom you have known for a long time and who is friendly with you. The meeting is scheduled at 3 o'clock. You arrive at 3 and you find that your teacher is really angry and he claims that you are one hour late.
You say: "----------"

Situation 7:

By the end of the semester, you are required to hand an end -of -term paper on a topic that you choose and discuss with your teacher. Recently, you have found a topic that you think is interesting. You hope your teacher can give you some suggestions. However, your teacher suggests another topic instead of yours.
You say: "----------"

Situation 8:

The day you submit your mid-term paper your friendly teacher questions its originality and thinks that it is not your personal effort. You know very well that it is your personal work and that you worked very hard on it.
You say: "----------"