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Research article

Discourse strategies and politeness in academic discourse

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Received: 15 March 2009

Reviewing editor: Andrey G. Kirillov
Accepted: 15 May 2009

Published online: 1 June 2009

Abstract

This paper examines the discourse strategies used in academic discourse in a professional setting. The study analyzes the politeness strategies used to show agreement and disagreement in an academic discourse specifically in an international conference where researchers gather together to share and discuss their research findings. The research was drawn from a five-day international conference which was attended by 250 participants. Twenty-four countries were represented at this international conference and 48 presentations were observed. The findings show that certain strategies are used to mitigate a face-threatening response like setting the scenario, disagreement by asking questions, softening a criticism, indirect attack, making comments, giving reference to the issue, making inquiries, asking rhetorical questions, criticizing through suggestions and making conciliatory statements. To resolve disagreements usually politeness is done in various ways like showing an initial agreement, avoiding conflict, apologizing and counterattacking, rationalizing stand taken, repeating and cross-referencing, dismissing criticism, accepting criticism, claiming ignorance and teaming up with the presenter. Generally, in an academic discourse certain politeness strategies are used to maintain politeness in an interaction.

Keywords

academic discourse; discourse strategies; politeness



For citation

David, Maya Khemlani. 2009. "Discourse strategies and politeness in academic discourse." *Language. Text. Society* 3 (1): e12-e25. <https://ltsj.online/2009-03-1-david>. (Journal title at the time of publication: *SamaraAltLinguo E-Journal*.)

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic discourse is deemed to be formal and may refer to any intellectual discussions among educated individuals. This may occur in the classroom and other professional settings where professionalism is always maintained. People who are involved in a talk or discussion usually share similar language particularly the jargon, norms and assumptions which could be considered helpful in communication and in knowledge building.

Zamel (1997) wrote that academic discourse has "its own vocabulary, norms, sets of conventions, and modes of inquiry, academic discourse has come to characterize a separate culture, one within which each discipline may represent a separate cultural community." Bartholomae (1986, 4) went further by saying academic discourse is "peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community". Hence, the academic discourse is a 'code' which is used by its members as a marker to identify themselves as being part of the academic (or intellectual) community. Fairclough (1995, 10) terms this as the 'orderliness of discourse', which subsequently becomes a 'norm' when members of the institution practise these 'orderliness of discourse', which Marshall (1998, 431) says is used to maintain 'standards of decency'.

In any form of interactive discourse, there is always potential for conflicts to occur, because communication has the potential to contain some degree of face-threatening acts. According to Brown and Levinson's (1987; 1978) well known theory of politeness, among the various face types are the 'positive and negative faces'. The positive face is the desire to be liked, whilst the negative face is the desire not to suffer from impositions. Lakoff (1989, 64) explains that the application of the principles of politeness mitigates face-threatening acts, subsequently "reducing friction in personal interaction". Martinovski, Traum and Marsella (2005) wrote that when the face is threatened with danger, the person whose face is being threatened would apply any three methods to cope or mitigate the danger: accept it (concession), prevent/avoid it (prolepsis) and/or counter-attack.

It can be said that academic discourse maintains certain standards of decency and that results in the use of less face-threatening acts by phrasing statements in a more polite way. It is therefore the objective of this research to examine the various strategies used in the question and answer phase of academic discourse. Academics after listening to a paper presentation might agree, disagree or have additional comments to make. The main aim of this research is to study the academics' ability to use a range of discourse features to signal disagreement. Do academics use specific discourse acts which are face-saving? It is also the aim of this research to examine the discourse acts used in order to resolve the disagreement.



2. METHODOLOGY

The research is drawn from a five-day international conference which was attended by 250 participants. Twenty-four countries were represented at this international conference and 48 presentations were observed. The observation was focused after the presentation when the moderator opens the question and answer portion. The interaction between the presenters and the audience were observed particularly in the exchanging of ideas and information between the presenters and the audience.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

The research analysis takes an explanatory approach to discourse analysis from the researcher's point of view. The methodology of this research had been limited because it was not possible to verify the participants' point of view. This paper will therefore take a descriptive and interpretive focus from the researcher's viewpoint.

At this juncture the goal of the researcher was not to analyze the different cultural styles of communication. Regardless of cultural-bound norms which may have existed, what was apparent was the fact that in academic discourse of this nature generally no direct accusation or criticism is leveled at paper presenters. Particularly obvious were the concepts of politeness derived by Brown and Levinson from the notion of face (first introduced by Goffman 1967) as a central issue in most interactions.

It appears that academics tend to "face-save" and do not criticize a paper presenter (PP) directly and openly. Some of these criticisms ranged round weaknesses in data-collecting instruments, insufficient data to substantiate grandiose claims, etc. How did paper presenters meet such potentially face-threatening acts, which appeared *prima facie* to be so inordinately polite? Generally, paper presenters like to resolve the academic confrontation in a civilized manner and conflict resolution in academic discourse can generally be said to be civil.

The first apparent pragmatic feature is the degree of indirectness when points made in a paper are contradicted. The onus appears to be on the academics who had comments to make after a presentation, (hereafter Q) to make sure that the PP is not made to feel academically inept. This constraint on the Q appears to be a typical feature so as to ensure politeness. Markers of politeness were varied and included the following routines.

1. Set the scenario

Questioners i.e. academics who had comments to make after a presentation (Q), made a lengthy statement, gave an example or told a story in the opening frame. It is clear from this opening frame that the speaker is disagreeing with a point earlier made by the paper presenter. Then he "reels in the bait" by stating his opinion and connecting it with the statement made in the opening frame but avoids directly criticizing the PP, of saying anything contrary. Thus the act of disagreement is performed with minimum of direct accusatives.



Q		<i>Comment</i> Long statement about the state of the art in the opening frame
	<i>65% of Filipinos say knowing English has nothing to do with my Filipinos.</i>	Providing example which validates his previous statement and validating concluding sentence in the closing frame follows.
	<i>I don't think you get pollution from the west from the language alone.</i>	Stating an opinion which is in direct contrast with what the PP had earlier said, yet at the same time skirting and avoiding a direct accusation by not referring directly to the PP or parts of his presentation.

2. Disagreement by asking questions

Even in academic discourse the strategies used to resolve confrontation very much depends on who is questioning the speaker. It tends to become rather awkward if a cabinet Minister of the host country disagrees with one of the substantial tenets of an argument made.

The Minister in question disagreed with a major point made but the disagreement was manifested indirectly, by way of retopicalizing an issue made by the PP. The retopicalization was put in an apparently innocent question form.

Q	<i>We just use English to study. It is not to make our culture English?</i>	<i>Comment</i> Rising intonation indicating question form.
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Questions are used to indicate disagreement. Such questions appear on the surface to be extremely polite as they do not directly accuse the PP of saying anything contrary. The question is very detached from references to the utterances of the PP. The Q merely asks a general question, for example, “*On what basis does one make a decision?*” The choice of the lexical item “*one*” is intentional for it neutralizes the issue but the illocutionary force of the discourse is clear.

3. Softening a criticism

Q's tend to soften a criticism by using lexical items like “*you seem to be*” which give the benefit of the doubt to the PP. Another strategy to soften the impact of an academic criticism is to take a less direct position. For example instead of the more positive assertion “*You have not ...*” to say instead “*I don't think ...*” thus making the focus the Q rather than the PP.

<i>Just some comments</i>		
Q	I make 3 points which are germane. YOU SEEM to be reacting to model.....	



YOU SEEM TO DISMISS... but the basic point.
I DON'T THINK you paid sufficient attention
MOST of what you say doesn't agree with linguistic practices

A harsher version of the above would have been

- 1) YOU ARE COMPLETELY reacting
- 2) YOU HAVE COMPLETELY dismissed ...
- 3) EVERYTHING you say doesn't agree with linguistic practices.

The Q softened the discourse and appeared to abandon the strong stand taken by an aside in the close "*Just some comments*". The choice of the lexical item "*just*" was intentional as it appeared to de-emphasize Q's criticism and saves PP's face.

4. Indirect attack

Indirect attacks take the opposite of what one intends to do, somewhat along the lines of Marc Anthony's famous "*I come not to ...but to ...*" The academic Q made a verbal attack stating that he "*was afraid that ...*" The choice of the lexical item "*afraid*" was intentional so as to give the impression that he was not happy to contradict PP.

5. Invite the PP to make a comment which shows the weak links in PP's argument

The Q spars with PP by initially making an innocent enough comment and then asks the PP for his comments.

Q *would you like to comment?*

The real aim of the above question is not to obtain information but instead to highlight the weak links in the PP's line of argument.

6. Criticism by making reference to the issue made in PP's paper

In another form of indirect attack the criticism takes the form of a question. On the surface, it does not appear to be a criticism as the Q is merely asking for information. "*At one point you said ... You mentioned that ... Can you give us an example of that?*" This was in relation to a PP's statement that was not very clear as it was not exemplified. The criticism is not direct and the paramount pragmatic feature of indirectness and politeness are maintained.



7. Inquiries

Some academics after referring to parts of the paper would then ask a whole series of questions. The questions in themselves indicated that the Q had doubts about the validity of the arguments made by PP.

Q *Should...?*
 Should...?
 Should...?

8. Rhetorical questions

Rhetorical questions, asked and answered by the Q, do not provide any means for the PP to make a defense but in the 48 presentations observed was used only once.

Q *How much do they actually read and write?*
 And you will find that the majority do not write outside their job area.

9. Criticisms in the form of suggestions

The act of complimenting and suggesting an alternative was used simultaneously by some Q. Without directly criticizing a suggestion was made.

Incidentally, compliments must sometimes be taken at face value. After the presentation of a very weak argument Q said “*Your paper SOUNDS very good*” (my emphasis). It may have sounded that but that was as far as it went!

Q	<i>My comment is my delight in knowing you used in-depth interviews.</i>	<i>Comment</i> Compliment
	<i>Perhaps a follow-up interview?</i>	Rising intonation

In such a situation the easiest comeback would be to thank Q for his comment or alternatively comment on his suggestion, whether feasible or not etc.

10. Conciliatory or “defacing” Q

The data shows only one example of a Q’s comment which took the following routine.

Q *Correct me if I’m wrong.*



Such routines decrease the risk of face-threat. Conversational maxims were generally maintained and seldom are Qs interrupted. Interruptions occurred only once as exemplified in “*Before you go on I’m quite aware of this*” interrupts P in an attempt to cut Q short. Apparently, interrupting is not a strategy often used by academics, even if they do not agree with a speaker, they hear him out.

Resolving Disagreements

1. Initial agreement

The easiest way to resolve a confrontation and to restore the social equilibrium of harmony between Q and PP is to agree to one's academic shortcomings. However, many academics do not do this readily. One can minimize the potential for academic conflict by appearing to agree with Q in the initial turns and then provide a caveat.

Example 1.

	<i>Comments</i>
<i>That is CERTAINLY true</i>	100% agreement.
<i>I hope you are right</i>	Slowly withdrawing his initial 100% consensus.
PP <i>but</i>	Definitely about to withdraw initial stand.
<i>I'm not ALWAYS convinced that this is ALWAYS the scenario.</i>	Notice duplication of “always” twice within sentence to emphasize point made.

Example 2.

<i>I agree with you.</i>	100% agreement.
<i>There is the problem of justice and equality.</i>	Giving reason for agreeing.
PP <i>In an ideal situation that would be the only ...</i>	About to withdraw initial agreement—but ours is not an ideal world.
<i>But ...</i>	i.e. your criticism holds only if ours is an ideal world.

2. Complete agreement

Sincere agreement of the shortcomings of one’s paper is a simple and effective way of conflict resolution in the academic domain. The Q after making some comments on Japan the PP had not mentioned in his paper received the following response from the PP.



PP *Thank you for both comments. I quite agree with what is happening in Japan.*

Abandoning a position earlier taken and accepting the decision/opinion of Q can be viewed as self-effacement. The data indicates that the degree of agreement varies. At one end of the continuum one could very unabashedly say “*I hadn’t thought of that and thank you*” or a not very enthusiastic “*I wouldn’t disagree with most of your comments.*” At the other end of the pendulum one could say “*I couldn’t agree with you more.*”

3. Avoid comment

Another strategy to avoid conflict is to reject the challenge and retreat from the issue at hand thus avoiding open disagreement and conflict.

PP	<i>“Yes”</i>	One can’t but agree with an important minister of the host country when one is but an invited guest.
	<i>As to the other part of your question I don’t think I can do much justice.</i>	Withdrawing from the situation and making a tactful retreat instead of defending the basic argument made at the paper presentation phase i.e. that exposure to English does lead to unwanted cultural practices.

The withdrawal from a very pertinent issue made earlier is a strategy used to avoid conflict but it does NOT reflect agreement. It is more akin to the “no comment” made by politicians when they do not want to be drawn into a controversial issue. It is generally a comment which belies the words used. It does not mean I have nothing to say but rather I have much to say but not to you and not at this point in time! There is a wide gap between the surface and deep level of the discourse.

4. Apologizing and counterattacking

It is necessary to get the Q’s defenses down. This can be done by initially thanking the Q for his comments. “*Thank you very much for very interesting comment*” or “*That is a tremendous question*”.

An apology is another means of reducing defenses.

PP	<i>Thanks for your comments.</i>	Thanking.
	<i>I apologize I cannot do justice to</i>	Apologizing.
	<i>I simply suggest that linguists make sloppy statements which have made it difficult to challenge them</i>	COUNTERATTACKING Perhaps that is why you are not challenging....



5. Rationalizing stand taken

Academics sometimes defend a stand taken in the paper presentation phase by apologizing and providing a reason for the limitation. Example “*Sorry, I didn't elaborate on it*”. And so the academic conflict is resolved by an elaboration at the question and answer phase of conference proceedings.

At other times the PP acknowledges that the Q may have made a valid criticism

PP	<i>I quite agree with what is happening in Japan</i>	The Q had taken offence at examples taken from his country.
	<i>I was not making a social political</i>	Gives reason to resolve conflict.
	<i>I was not making a record of the facts</i>	

6. Repetition and Cross Reference

At times when the Q makes comment which indicates that the answer to the question has already been discussed in the presentation, the PP will gently remind him of it and thus forestall further discussion as in “*I did mention when...*” At other times the PP goes on the offensive and chides the Q for not listening to the presentations. When asked for an example to validate something he had said in his paper but had not provided examples of, the PP retorted, “*I think Dr XYZ gave us an example.*” This is an effective counter-attack strategy and the PP escapes without responding to the question.

7. Dismissing criticism as trivial

At times the PP can dismiss the criticism as trivial as shown in the following example:

Q	<i>At one point you said But the question is on what basis does one make a decision?</i>
PP	<i>That is no problem. If you want a simple answer the solution would be in the Philippines.</i>

8. Accepting criticism

Accepting the criticism and turning the tables by indirectly complimenting the Q is another form of conflict resolution. If “*the point is well taken*” it indicates that the line of criticism is sound.

9. Claiming ignorance

A pathetic but honest response to an accusation is to claim ignorance or inability “*I don't know how to respond*” or “*I was not aware...*” / “*I don't honestly know*”.



PP *I was not aware. My impressions were ... but beyond that I would not be able to comment*
... so we have conflicting data
I don't know how to respond.

At times Q may persist despite the claim to ignorance as is clear in the following extract:

Q *Is this happening?*
PP *I am not sure*
Q *So they are really keeping them quite apart?*
PP *I am not sure what they are doing outside their home.* Repeats ignorance of the situation.

Ignorance and rationalization can be combined as in “*When I first wrote my review I had done research primarily in the North American context.*” This suggests that the PP did not know of the settings but since then I have become aware of research in new settings.

Ignorance or inability to answer a question can either be indicated directly as seen in “*I wonder whether you can make comparisons with this part of the world?*” The PP says openly, “*No, I cannot actually.*”

The seasoned PP does not blatantly indicate inability. Rather he side-steps the issue at hand. The question will be left unanswered as in:

Q *And will they speak Malay with their children?*
PP *That's an interesting question.*

10. Team up with Q

A strategy used only once in the data was to not only agree with the comment, but invite the Q to work with the PP to resolve or overcome the problem indicated by Q's question.

Q *... .. So perhaps you may have some insights into that?* Referring to a statement earlier made.
PP *I think it is in a research program which starts at the school level whereby the answers are to be found.*
So I would like to work with YOU on the broader society which surrounds language teaching and then in seven years WE will have strategies. My emphasis

In another situation, P who said he was unable to answer Q's question (a strategy to defuse a potential area of conflict) without considering a great number of variables (a rationalization strategy) turns the tables on Q and asks Q the question “*Perhaps you have a specific example?*”



Q *I found your paper circular*

Direct criticisms were very seldom used although this does not mean they do not exist. When directly accused, the general stance taken is to attempt to provide a valid reason for the criticism.

PP	<i>For me to catalogue</i>	Gives reasons why it was necessary to make the definitions he did.
	<i>... the effect is to make implications.</i>	Shows the validity of defining as he had.

Unfortunately the argument did not convince the Q who states.

Q *I don't think it has happened.*

However even this direct confrontation is softened by “*think*” rather than the more brutal “*This has not happened*”. Explicit negation results in a deviation from the norm of politeness generally maintained in academic discourse. Consequently the PP reacted to this deviation very negatively. There was an explicit display of anger on PP’s part – the only example drawn from the data. PP retaliated by mimicking the words of the Q but with the emphasis on “*You*” implying that “*You*” were not the only one at the conference. Non-norm compliance of academic routines and non-maintenance of face resulted in overt anger displayed. Politeness considerations were dismissed by both PP and Q. In this case, apart from the pragmatic features of academic discourse in a conference setting, linguistic features, like stress placement and voice quality came into play.

PP	<i>You don't think it has happened!</i>	Rising intonation—using you in derogatory sense.
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This was the only example of unresolved conflict. The academics were not successful in this one and only example from the data of resolving conflict amicably and with minimum friction. This was certainly not good or successful academic negotiation of meaning but as information of the prior relationship between Q and PP is not available it is rather premature to indicate that perhaps the outburst was initiated due to a poor relationship between the two interlocutors.

4. DISCUSSION

In academic discourse it is evident that the act of decency is well maintained from the linguistic to the pragmatic aspects of an interaction. Based on the findings of the study, it reveals that in an academic discourse specifically in international conferences the presenters and the audience have reservations in giving their blunt and direct comments and suggestions. The use of politeness strategies in asking and answering questions predominate in the lexical, prosodic and pragmatic features in an interaction. It can be observed that in showing disagreement, rare direct

confrontation was made. In fact, a few strategies are used to mitigate a face-threatening response like setting the scenario, disagreement by asking questions, softening a criticism, indirect attack, making comments, giving reference to the issue, making inquiries, asking rhetorical questions, criticizing through suggestion and making conciliatory statements. The use of such strategies can be considered as politeness strategies to save face in academic discourse.

In resolving disagreement, certain strategies among the interlocutors manifest. To resolve disagreements usually politeness is done in various ways like showing an initial agreement, complete agreement, avoiding conflict, apologizing and counterattacking, rationalizing stand taken, repetition and cross reference, dismissing criticism, accepting criticism, claiming ignorance and teaming up with the presenter. It is evident that in resolving disagreement, politeness in academic discourse is shown through the use of appropriate lexical items, proper framing of sentence structure and less confrontational intonation.

In general, it can be said that in academic discourse, the presence of negative face seems to be common. This is the reason why more face-saving devices are used by most interlocutors. Perhaps this happens because of the perception that an academic discourse is more professional and part of being professional is by displaying a polite attitude to others.

5. CONCLUSION

Although for purposes of analysis the writer has separated the various strategies for resolving conflict in academic discourse this does not mean that both the Q and PP use these strategies in isolation. Instead, a range of the above mentioned strategies in one speech event are noted as is evident in the following example:

Q	<i>I endorse, sorry wrong word I see ...</i>	Retracts from initial strong recommendation of a point made by PP —was it intentional? He reduces the intensity of his conviction before elaborating and gives further examples to indicate PP has neglected an important variable in his presentation.
	<i>I wouldn't disagree with any of that</i>	Agrees but the surface structure of the utterance is not in the positive—i.e. I agree with All you say. A condition is predicted.
PP	<i>I would say I'm not completely convinced of the ability of the average student</i>	Contradicts point made by Q. Note face-saving strategy by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. lexical use of “not completely” and b. earlier agreement thus giving “face” to Q.
	<i>This has been borne out by</i>	Provides reason and validates the point made in the presentation.
	<i>I CERTAINLY don't disagree with what you say</i>	Repeats agreement but reinforces it by use of “certainly”.
	<i>I hadn't thought of that before</i>	Admission of validity of Q's point.
	<i>Thank you.</i>	



Another example of the range of strategies used both to criticize and to defend an argument follows.

Q	<p><i>... So does it really make sense to make a distinction between a and b?</i></p> <p><i>The other 2 definitions I can understand</i></p> <p><i>but I do have my doubts about your 3rd category of EPL</i></p> <p><i>Would you like to comment?</i></p>	<p>Sets scenario for question. Question form-surface structure but really a criticism.</p> <p>Compliment of sort.</p> <p>Criticism.</p> <p>Solicitating and passing turn.</p>
PP	<p><i>I will simply say I will try to empirically support the distinctions made</i></p> <p><i>I share the doubt with you</i></p> <p><i>But as a research programme this is where I have to stop.</i></p>	<p>Statement of intent—to provide reason for stand taken.</p> <p>Strategy of agreement-however caveat follows.</p> <p>Reasserting earlier stand taken—I share the doubt but I still hold to my views.</p>

This exploratory research has investigated the various discourse acts used by academics to criticize or comment on papers presented at international conferences and the strategies used by academics to resolve conflicts which arise as a result of such criticisms. It has been noted that academics use a number of face-saving strategies to criticize and resolve such disagreements between the PP and the Q.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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