Disagreement Strategies in the Discourse of American Speakers of Arabic

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Abstract: This study attempts to investigate the disagreement strategies that are used by American speakers of Arabic with a view to identifying which disagreement strategies they use in equal and non-equal status situations. In addition, it aims to see whether variables like gender and social status affect the linguistic choices and disagreement strategies that they use. The subjects of the study are 28 (14 male and 14 female) American speakers of Arabic who were learning Arabic and were residing in Jordan at the time of data collection. The researchers analyze their interactional recorded responses to a set of stimuli included in an oral (recorded) discourse completion task (ODCT) prepared for this purpose. The ODCT comprises six scenarios in which the respondent is requested to disagree with two peers, two higher-status interlocutors, and two lower-status interlocutors. The findings of the study show that the American speakers of Arabic use two main disagreement strategies, non-confrontational and confrontational disagreements, which are in turn divided into sub-strategies. Further, they employ the non-confrontational strategies slightly more than the confrontational ones, as the percentage for the former is 51% while for the latter is 49%. Interestingly, the study suggests that the topic of discussion significantly influences the choice of strategy, sometimes resulting in women being more confrontational than men, which contrasts with common perceptions reported in the literature about gender-based communication styles.

Keywords: Arabic; disagreement realizations; Jordan; pragmatics; speech acts

1. Introduction

We human beings are odd compared with our nearest animal relatives. Unlike them, we can say what we want, when we want. All normal humans can produce and understand any number of new words and sentences. Humans use the multiple options of language often without thinking. But blindly, they sometimes fall into traps. They are like spiders who exploit their webs, but themselves get caught in the sticky strands. (Aitchison 1996)

It is no secret that in a world full of ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and social diversity like ours, the likelihood of cross-cultural miscommunications to occur is great since each community has its own social rules of speaking (Hymes 1967), but how do these rules materialize on the ground and what factors lead to communication breakdowns among foreign second language (L2) learners and native speakers? Why do L2 learners often face difficulties when they want to perform acts like requesting, disagreeing, apologizing, and ordering, among others, in real-life communications in the target language in spite of learning the grammatical and formal structures of these acts in schools and universities...
previously? These puzzling and paradoxical questions and many others have attracted the interest of linguists from all over the world (e.g., Austin 1962; Azhari 2017; Brown and Levinson 1987; Leech 1983; Locher 2004; Searle 1975; Thomas 1983). The current study, which falls within the domain of intercultural pragmatics, examines the disagreement strategies employed by American speakers of Arabic. This research builds on the findings of Hamdan and Mahadin (2021), who investigated the realizations of disagreement among Jordanian Arabic speakers. By comparing these two groups, our study aims to highlight the similarities and differences in disagreement strategies, thereby providing a deeper understanding of how cultural and linguistic backgrounds influence disagreement realization in Arabic. This comparative approach enriches the existing literature on pragmatic strategies in cross-cultural communication. The focus on disagreement stems from its inevitability in communication, as individuals often hold opposing views. Understanding how disagreement is expressed and whether variables like social status, language, and culture influence linguistic choices and strategies is crucial.

Interlanguage pragmatics holds significance for L2 learners, foreign language teachers, and linguists, offering insights into L2 acquisition. It addresses the question of why even highly proficient L2 learners make communication mistakes (Cai and Wang 2013, p. 142). Research indicates that pragmatic knowledge, encompassing language use rules, conversational appropriateness, and pragmatic competence, plays a crucial role in L2 learners’ communication with native speakers.

Cai and Wang (2013, p. 142) argue that L2 learners’ pragmatic mistakes are deemed more unacceptable by native speakers than linguistic errors. While grammatical mistakes are easily identified, pragmatic failure, especially among advanced L2 speakers, may go unnoticed, potentially leading to negative stereotypes. Thus, studies emphasizing pragmatic competence, often overlooked in curriculums prioritizing grammar and vocabulary (Akutsu 2006), are increasingly essential.

Possessing adequate pragmatic knowledge can mitigate pragmatic failures, foster international understanding, and reduce communication breakdowns. Pragmatic failures occur when an L2 learner negatively transfers the social rules of their native language while speaking the target language (Thomas 1983). More studies in interlanguage pragmatics can aid in understanding and minimizing such transfers, contributing to the awareness of natural strategies for various speech acts. The current study aims to be particularly valuable for both the English learners and instructors of Arabic as a foreign language.

2. Research Questions

The current study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What are the disagreement strategies employed by American speakers of Arabic in both equal and non-equal status situations?

2. To what extent does status affect the user’s choice of disagreement strategy?

3. Literature Review

This section provides a survey of contrastive cross-cultural research on disagreement realizations in different languages, which among other things, may point to whether these realizations or strategies are language-specific or show a tendency towards universality. In the course of this survey, the main findings about disagreement realizations in different languages will be summarized and discussed. Owing to its international status as the most powerful language in the world according to the Power Language Index (PLI) ranking, the English language received considerable research attention compared to other languages in the field of interlanguage pragmatics (Beebe and Takahashi 1989; Fernandez 2013; Ramadhani 2012). Consequently, a large number of studies that examined L2 learners’ realizations of face-threatening speech acts compared and contrasted the realizations of EFL learners around the world with those of the native speakers of English.

Beebe and Takahashi (1989) examined the way Americans and Japanese perform face-threatening speech acts like disagreement and chastisement in English. The study was
motivated by a stereotype not very much different from the one investigated by LoCastro (1986), which assumes that Japanese are indirect while Americans are direct in performing those speech acts. The researchers used two data elicitation tools. The first was note-taking which was employed to collect natural speech. Here, the researchers wrote a word-for-word transcription of the interactions that took place. It seems that the researchers were not happy with this method, and thus they resorted to a discourse completion test. The findings revealed that when disagreeing with a lower-status interlocutor, Japanese were more likely to express blunt criticism than Americans. Further, Americans tended to use more softeners and positive remarks when disagreeing with a higher-status interlocutor. Japanese, on the other hand, used more explicit expressions. Based on this, the findings provided evidence that Americans are not always more direct than Japanese in stating disagreement as the stereotype perpetuated.

Guodong and Jing (2005) compared and contrasted disagreement strategies for politeness between Chinese Mandarin speakers and the speakers of American English. For this purpose, they devised a written discourse completion task (WDCT) which consisted of five disagreement scenarios. College students in the USA and the Chinese mainland were asked to fill the WDCT with what they would say when they disagreed with three peers, one higher-status interlocutor, and one lower-status interlocutor. The WDCT was completed by 82 English native speakers among American college students (47 females and 35 males), and 96 Chinese respondents (37 females and 58 males) who were all non-English major students at the University of Science and Technology of China. To detect and count disagreement strategies, Muntigl and Turnbull’s (1998) taxonomy, which recognizes four types of disagreement only, viz., irrelevancy claim, challenge, contradictions, and counterclaim, was applied. Guodong and Jing (2005) report that Chinese students tend to employ more politeness strategies and use more address forms when they disagree with higher-status interlocutors than American students do. As for disagreement with peers, the researchers note that with the increase in social distance (from friend to classmate to stranger), the contradictory statements from American students increase while their politeness strategies decrease. When it comes to the Chinese, on the other hand, the results are just the opposite. The rates of disagreement would decrease with the increase in social distance. This finding shows that Chinese students tend to seek more harmony as the social distance increases, while Americans show more interest in stating their opinions. According to Triandis and Singelis (as cited in Guodong and Jing 2005, p. 7), “East Asian collectivists are especially eager to maintain harmonious relationships while individualists from the U. S. A. are more concerned with clearly giving opinions”. Further, Guodong and Jing (2005) concluded that Chinese students apply more contradictory statements with their sisters than their American peers (Guodong and Jing 2005, p. 8). This is ascribed to the belief that Chinese males view themselves as superior to their sisters. In addition, the study suggested that female respondents in general were more sensitive to politeness; they also tended to incorporate more politeness strategies in their speech than males.

In a recent study, Hamdan and Mahadin (2021) examined disagreement strategies that are used by the speakers of Jordanian spoken Arabic (JSA) in order to find out whether gender and social status affect the disagreement strategies employed and the linguistic choices they make. The subjects of their study were 28 (14 male and 14 female) Jordanian Arabic-speaking students at The University of Jordan. For their data collection, the researchers used an oral discourse completion task (ODCT). The researchers recorded the stimulus scenarios and the respondents’ answers. The ODCT comprised six scenarios in which the respondent was required to disagree with two peers, two higher-status interlocutors, and two lower-status interlocutors. The findings of the study revealed that the speakers of JSA employ two main strategies when expressing their disagreements. The first is non-confrontational, in which they tended to minimize the threat to the interlocutor’s face and avoid confrontation, whilst the second is confrontational, in which speakers explicitly expressed their disagreement in a bald on-record fashion. These two strategies are in turn divided into sub-strategies. The non-confrontational strategies encompass positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and multiple sub-strategies. In contrast, the
confrontational strategies include challenging, rejecting, using criticism and judgmental words, employing mocking and sarcasm, using intensifiers, and multiple sub-strategies.

Furthermore, the research suggests that the selection of a disagreement strategy in the Jordanian context is predominantly influenced by the topic under discussion rather than the status of the interlocutor. Interestingly, the study found no significant differences between males and females in their overall preference for confrontational or non-confrontational strategies. However, it was observed that females tend to use more words in their disagreements than males. Despite both genders favoring non-confrontational language overall, certain topics, such as ‘spouse looks’, triggered a more confrontational approach in females compared to males.

As can be seen from the review, while disagreements made by the learners of English received high scholarly attention, disagreements by the learners of Arabic, particularly the American speakers of Arabic have not. The goal of this study is to fill this gap in order to foster communications and minimize breakdowns.

4. Research Method

To collect the data, the present study relied on the ODCT that was prepared by Hamdan and Mahadin (2021) which comprises six situations in which the respondent is expected to disagree with two peers (colleague–colleague; friend–friend), two higher-status interlocutors (student–professor), and two lower-status interlocutors (landlord–farmer; professor–student). The ODCT was administered to 28 American speakers of Arabic (14 male and 14 female) who have been classified by their academic institutions as advanced learners of Arabic and who have spent at least four months in Jordan and at least two years learning the language. At the time of data collection, the participants were enrolled in two different academic institutions, viz., the Middlebury School in Jordan and the Qasid Arabic Institute. All the students were somehow familiar with the Jordanian culture because of the time they spent in the country (4 months at least) and the intensive courses and the road trips they took in their respective academic institutions. For the readers’ convenience, below are the English glosses of the six scenarios that appear in Hamdan and Mahadin (2021):

4.1. First Scenario (Equal to Equal)

“A colleague of yours tells you that in most of the times, mass media has a negative impact on our lives, but you do not agree with him. What do you tell him?”

4.2. Second Scenario (Equal to Equal)

“You talk to a friend about marriage. He tells you that the most important thing one should consider when choosing a spouse is her suitor’s physical appearance, but you do not agree. What do you tell her?”

4.3. Third Scenario (Lower to Higher)

“In one of your classes, your professor mentioned some points that you did not find convincing; you did your research and discovered that they were wrong. On the second day, the professor repeated the same points. You asked him for an appointment in his office to convey your opinion. What did you tell him?”

4.4. Fourth Scenario (Lower to Higher)

“You submitted a term paper for a course. Two days later, the professor asked you to report to his office and told you that he thought you have committed plagiarism, but you did not agree with him. What did you tell him?”

4.5. Fifth Scenario (Higher to Lower)

“Last year, your gardener grew tomatoes and eggplants in your garden and it was a success. This year, he suggested growing potato and cucumber but, based on your experience, you know that this will not succeed. What did you tell him?”
4.6. Sixth Scenario (Higher to Lower)

“You are a lecturer in a university. A student of yours wanted to give a presentation. He comes to you and tells you that he wants to read his presentation from a paper in front of him, but you think that this is not a good method for university-level presentations and want to tell him that it is better to use the computer instead. What did you tell him?”

To transcribe and codify the audiotaped data, the first researcher and a research assistant divided the data between them. The two transcribers who are native speakers of JSA agreed on a division of labor in which they first transcribe and code all the data independently on the basis of a classification developed by Hamdan and Mahadin (2021), which classifies disagreements as either confrontational or non-confrontational, followed by sub-strategies under each, and then review it together following a consensus procedure. Accordingly, each transcriber prepared a version in which he transcribed and coded all disagreements responses independently. To examine the reliability of the analysis, 25 percent of the sample, i.e., the responses of seven subjects, were selected from the transcribed and coded versions in order to be revisited and verified by the transcribers/coders. The inter-rater reliability of their transcription and coding was calculated and was found to be 80 percent. In case of agreement, the data were kept in a separate file for further analysis. However, when disagreements arose, the two transcribers/coders read the target transcribed responses thoroughly together three times. Most disagreements were resolved in the second or third reading. However, when disagreement persisted, the rest of the researchers, who share the same language background, were consulted. The two versions of the coded responses were discussed with them and the one they supported was eventually considered.

5. Results and Discussion

This section is divided into three subsections. Section 5.1 identifies the disagreement strategies employed by the American speakers of Arabic. Section 5.2 addresses the role of status in determining the disagreement strategy while Section 5.3 addresses the role of gender in determining the optimal strategy.

5.1. Identification of Disagreement Strategy

The data analysis revealed that the participants employed two primary disagreement strategies, each further categorized into sub-strategies. In the first strategy, termed ‘non-confrontational disagreement’, the subjects aimed to minimize threats to their interlocutors’ faces by utilizing various politeness strategies and mitigating devices. The second strategy, labeled ‘confrontational disagreement’, involved expressing disagreement in a direct and bald manner.

The non-confrontational strategies comprised four sub-strategies: (1) positive politeness, (2) negative politeness, (3) off-record, and (4) multiple. In contrast, the confrontational strategies encompassed nine sub-strategies: (1) challenging the interlocutor’s premise, (2) using a negative performative, (3) negating the premise, (4) employing the exclamatory no, (5) using criticism and judgmental words, (6) using mocking and sarcasm, (7) questioning the truth value of the premise, (8) devaluing the premise by assigning negative attributes, and (9) multiple.

The following section provides a detailed breakdown of these disagreement strategies and sub-strategies, complemented by illustrative examples.

5.1.1. Non-Confrontational Disagreement Strategies

In an attempt to minimize and soften the threat to the interlocutors’ face the American English speakers of Arabic used the following four non-confrontational disagreement strategies:

Positive Politeness Strategies

Here, the speakers appeal to the interlocutor’s ‘positive face’, using Brown and Levinson’s terminology (Brown and Levinson 1987, p. 312), which refers to “the want of every
member that his wants be desirable to at least some others”, as opposed to negative face, which refers to their basic want to be free from opposition. In this regard, the subjects employed two sub-strategies, viz., (1) appreciative comment followed by disagreement prefaced by ‘but’, and (2) giving reasons for disagreement. A detailed account of each sub-strategy along with an illustrative example of each is provided below. For the readers’ convenience and due to space limitations, the Arabic stimulus scenario and the subject’s response will be presented at two levels in English glossing.

1. Appreciative comment followed by disagreement prefaced by ‘but’.

The user of this sub-strategy first acknowledges the validity of the other interactant’s argument by starting his/her disagreement with words like okay, mazbu:t ‘true’, or any other words that indicate agreement in an attempt to make the interactant feel that he/she is appreciated and respected. Then, the speaker unveils his/her disagreement using words like la:kin/bas ‘but’ as in the following:

(1) Stimulus Scenario [female–female]:
“A friend of yours tells you that the most important thing a girl should take into consideration when choosing a spouse is her suitor’s physical appearance, but you do not agree with her. What do you tell her?”

Response:
“It’s possible. I see your point. I don’t say that looks are not important, but at the same time, there are other traits that are more important in a spouse like his character and reasoning”.

The speaker here first indicates partial acceptance by using the word لمسك ‘possible’ and then she unveils disagreement using لكن ‘but’.

2. Giving reasons for disagreeing.

The respondent introduces reasons that underlie his/her disagreement with the interlocutor in an attempt to minimize and soften the threat that results from such an act to the interlocutor’s positive face as in the following:

(2) Stimulus Scenario [male–male]:
“You are a lecturer in a university. A student of yours wanted to present part of the material in your class. He came to you and told you that he wanted to read his presentation from a paper that he would hold, but you thought that it was not a good method for university presentations and wanted to tell him that he’d better use technology instead. What did you tell him?”

Response:
“Okay, I think because you are a university student and not a secondary or primary school student, you must use computer and technology and do your presentation without reading from a paper because in the future when you work in a company, you will see that all employees use computer and this may be a training for the future”.

Negative Politeness Strategies

Here, the speakers appeal to the interlocutors’ negative face when disagreeing. Consequently, the speakers try not to impose themselves or their views on the other interlocutor with whom they disagree. In this regard, the subjects performed negative politeness through employing the following three sub-strategies.

1. Supporting disagreement by appealing to a third party.

Here, the speaker refers to an independent source to provide a context for his/her disagreement, prefacing it with phrases like ‘according to X’ or ‘based on X’, among others. In so doing, the speakers soften the imposition that their disagreement may hold.
The findings of this study suggest that this sub-strategy is more commonly used when
disagreement is made with an interlocutor who is of a higher and more powerful status.

(3) Stimulus Scenario [male–male]:

“In one of your classes, your professor mentioned some points that you did
not find convincing so you did your research about them and discovered
that they were wrong. On the second day, your professor repeated the same
points. You asked him for an appointment in his office to convey your
opinion. What did you tell him?”

Response:

“Dear teacher, during your class, I really liked the points that you presented. After
class, I wanted to know more about the points discussed through the Internet.
Based on the sources, I found some information online that goes against what
you have mentioned”.

2. Using hedges and uncertainty words.

The speaker in this sub-strategy tends to mitigate his/her disagreeing response with
some hedges, interjections, or uncertainty words like ‘well’, ‘uhm’, and ‘maybe’ consecu-
tively:

(4) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (3) above]

Response:

“Peace be upon you, doctor. First, I want to tell you that I enjoy your classes.
Yesterday, I saw on the Internet some points that may not be similar to what you
have said in class. Can you check with us this research paper?”

Here, the speaker indicates their disagreement through prefacing it with ‘maybe’,
an adverb of uncertainty, in an attempt to leave some room for the interlocutor to either
confirm the speaker’s premise or negate it. The speaker did not want to impose their view
on the interlocutor, or bluntly tell the interlocutor, a professor in this scenario, that they are
certain that the contradictory information they found on the Internet is correct.


Here, the speaker indicates that he/she cannot accept the other interlocutors’ view by
prefacing his/her disagreement with an apologetic expression.

(5) Stimulus Scenario [female–female]:

“You submitted a term paper for a course you are taking. Two days later,
your professor asked you to report to his office and told you that he thought
you had committed plagiarism, but you did not agree with him. What did
you tell him?”

Response:

“Sorry, but this is my language. I wrote everything on my own and I did not copy
from someone else”.

Off-Record Strategies

This label refers to situations in which the speakers tend to alleviate the threat of their
response by expressing implicit disagreement. In this context, the subjects employed four
sub-strategies.

1. Contradictory statements.

Here, a speaker tries implicitly to negate the premise stated earlier by the interlocutor.
This can be achieved through different means. For instance, a speaker can cite a story that
contradicts what the interlocutor said as in the following:

(6) Stimulus Scenario [male–male]:

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“Last year, your gardener grew tomatoes and eggplants in your garden and it was a success. This year, he suggested growing potato and cucumber but, based on your experience, you know that growing these will not succeed in your garden. What did you tell him?”

Response:
“I have a story. When I was young, I worked with my father in our farm here in this same area and when we tried growing potatoes in this land, the harvest we reaped after two months was not good”.

2. Self-defense by praising one’s own view, defending its uniqueness.
Here, the speaker takes a defensive position, praising his/her view, premise, or work.

(7) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (5) above]
Response:
“Peace be upon you, dear teacher. I do not know how to put it, but these are my ideas. There is some sort of similarity between my work and the work of other researchers that I read their work, but the main ideas presented in this paper are mine”.

3. Stating disagreement in the form of advice.
Here, the disagreement is indirect and is usually characterized by using words like bancalak ‘I advise you’ as in the following:

(8) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (2) above]
Response:
“Listen, Ahmad. I think that this way of presenting is below your level. Please, give an oral presentation rather than read from a piece of paper”.

4. Providing a counterargument.
Here, the speaker responds to an argument with a counterargument instead of directly telling his/her partner that he/she does not agree.

(9) Stimulus Scenario [male–male]:
“A colleague of yours tells you that in most of the times, mass media has a negative impact on our lives, but you do not agree with him. What do you tell him?”

Response:
“It is easier to criticize than be creative. We can easily criticize the role of the media. First, must respect reporters because they work hard and struggle to cover stories without always being known or visible. The media is in its golden age. You can access newspapers and articles both online and offline. This was not possible before, to be honest”.

Multiple Strategies
As the name implies, the speaker uses more than one non-confrontational strategy at the same time to express disagreement as in the following:

(10) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (6) above]
Response:
“I know that you want me to try growing potatoes and cucumber in my garden, but I have been living here for two years and I tried growing them before and it did not work. Can we try growing something else?”

The speaker here uses more than one strategy: (1) appreciative comment followed by disagreement prefaced by ‘but’, in addition to (2) giving reasons for disagreement, and (3) asking for an alternative.
5.1.2. Confrontational Disagreement Strategies

Confrontational strategies are used when the interactants give more weight to baldness and confrontation than to courtesy and indirectness in expressing their disagreement. After analyzing the data, the researcher was able to identify the following nine confrontational strategies.

**Challenging**

In the words of Muntigl and Turnbull (1998, p. 231), challenges are 
...often preceded by reluctance markers that display disagreement with the prior turn and they typically have the syntactic form of an interrogative. Although CHs [challenges] do not appear to make a specific claim (e.g., Why or Like who), they implicate that the addressee cannot provide evidence for his/her claim.

Challenges in this study also refer to situations in which the interactants stick to their guns, showing no signs of retreat, and challenging the interlocutor to do whatever he/she wants if he/she is not pleased with the interactant’s words.

(11) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (5) above]
Response:

“First of all, these words written in the paper are mine. I submitted my research paper on time and I had a lot of time to submit it earlier. Thus, I do not know what you mean. If you have a problem with what I am saying, you may take it to a higher level. I did not use the words of someone else”.

**Using a Negative Performative**

Here, the speaker uses constructions like ‘I do not agree’, ‘I do not think’, and ‘you cannot’, among others, in an attempt to demonstrate the rejection of the interlocutor’s premise.

(12) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (9) above]
Response:

“I do not agree with you that the media has a negative impact on our lives”.

**Negating the Premise**

Here, the speaker negates the interlocutor’s premise using a blunt statement of the opposite.

(13) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (1) above]
Response:

“There is no connection whatsoever between looks and personality and If you choose your spouse on the basis of looks, you will suffer”.

**Using the Exclamatory No**

Here, the speaker rejects the interlocutor’s premise by using the exclamatory no which is usually followed by exclamatory remarks indicating the weakness of the premise or negative comments.

(14) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (1) above]
Response:

“No. You are wrong. For me, there is more to a girl than her looks”.

**Using Criticism and Judgmental Words**

Here, the speaker throws some judgments about the other interlocutor or something that he/she mentioned. Using Bandli’s words (as cited in Koczogh 2014, p. 139), this strategy is defined as the following:

A strategy in which the speaker makes an explicit evaluative statement on the other speaker (e.g., Nem vagy normális! ~ You are insane!), the propositional
content of the other speaker’s utterance (e.g., Ezek nem jó szemüvegek. ~ These glasses aren’t good.) or the other speaker’s opinion (e.g., Ez hülyeség! ~ That is nonsense!).

(15) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (5) above]

Response:

“I was surprised by what you said in class because it was not correct in my opinion. I searched online and I saw that I was right. I want to know your opinion so that we can talk about this matter. You are a teacher and I do not want you to be worse than before and present things that are not correct in the future”.

Using Mocking and Sarcasm

Here, the speaker tends to use sarcasm and mockery to disqualify the other interlocutor’s argument as in the following:

(16) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (2) above]

Response:

“What? Do you think you are still in secondary school or what?”

The respondent expresses their disagreement with their student’s suggestion by mocking them through using a rhetorical question.

Questioning the Truth Value of the Premise

Here, the speaker expresses his/her disagreement through casting doubt on the validity of the interlocutor’s premise.

(17) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (3) above]

Response:

“I searched the topic online and found many sources that go against what you said. Can you give me your opinion again and tell me where you get your information from?”

Devaluating the Premise by Giving Negative Attributes

Here, the speaker dismisses the other interlocutor’s argument.

(18) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (2) above]

Response:

“Listen, this is not appropriate. You are a university student now”.

Multiple

Here, the speaker uses more than one confrontational strategy.

(19) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (3) above]

Response:

“Doctor, I think you presented some information about this topic in class. I searched about what you said and I have with me here this paper from a recognized academic source which has some information that goes against what you mentioned. I hope you check this and provide your students with accurate information because this is important and because we do not want to make mistakes after we graduate”.

Here, the speaker uses more than one strategy: (1) questioning the truth value of the premise, in addition to (2) appealing to a third party, and (3) resorting to criticism, though implicitly.

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is useful to quantify the use of these strategies. This may help the reader assess the weight of each strategy in the data. Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of the main and sub-strategies.
Table 1. Frequency and percentage of disagreement strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Non-Confrontational</th>
<th>Confrontational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Positive politeness</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Negative politeness</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Off-record</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Multiple</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Using criticism and judgmental words</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Mocking and sarcasm</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Questioning the truth value of the premise</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Devaluing the premise</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Multiple</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total and percentage: 86 (51%) and 82 (49%) respectively.

Table 1 shows that the American speakers of Arabic produced 168 disagreement tokens; 86 (51%) of which were non-confrontational and 82 (49%) confrontational. This indicates that these speakers, regardless of status and gender, among other variables, employ non-confrontational strategies slightly more than confrontational strategies. However, the difference between the two is really negligible.

These results are different from those attested in the data of the native speakers of JSA reported by Hamdan and Mahadin (2021) where the percentages of non-confrontational and confrontational strategies constituted 68 percent and 32 percent, respectively, of the total number of their disagreement tokens. One way to explain the high percentage of confrontations in disagreements employed by the American speakers of Arabic is to appeal to the general tendency of L2 learners to use more direct and more blunt language than native speakers (Kasper and Kellerman 1997; Bell 1998; Kreutel 2007; Glaser 2009), due to the absence of what Firth and Wagner (1997) call a ‘routinized pragmalinguistic knowledge’. Put differently, unlike native speakers, foreign language learners tend to possess a fewer number of pragmatic options when they use speech acts. It seems that the more direct language constructions within each pragmatic function are acquired earlier and thus, more accessible than the less direct ones. If this turns out to be true, then a foreign learner may find that construction like “please turn on the AC” is easier to use than “It’s hot in here” when feeling hot in a friend’s home.

Another cause for the higher percentage of confrontations in disagreements employed by the American speakers of Arabic may be ascribed to the limited and sporadic data that language textbooks offer to learners. According to Crandall and Basturkmen (2004, pp. 38–39), the writers of English for academic purposes textbooks that they reviewed, in their attempt to introduce learners to pragmatic knowledge, “present learners with lists of useful expressions for various speech acts”. The problem with this approach, however, is that these lists “typically present explicit realizations of speech acts rather than subtle and indirect ones” (Crandall and Basturkmen 2004, pp. 38–39). Further, these lists neglect showing the context of the communications presented. Thus, learners who read them would not be able to know “to who when and for what purposes it is appropriate to make a speech act [nor would they know] which expressions would be appropriate in a particular situation [and which would not]” (Crandall and Basturkmen 2004, pp. 38–39). The situation becomes even more complex when one shifts to discuss Arabic because of its diglossic nature and the challenges that this phenomenon poses to both the writers of Arabic for specific purposes textbooks and L2 learners of Arabic. There is a big gap between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) on the one hand and colloquial Arabic on the other hand with its different regional varieties. Arabic L2 learners, more often than not, find themselves
learning MSA when what they actually need to learn in order to communicate effectively
with native speakers of Arabic around them is colloquial Arabic. This dichotomy of Arabic
often causes a problem to the learners of Arabic, unless they are introduced to the two
levels of Arabic through studying naturally occurring data.

A further explanation has to do with Americans being more direct than Arabs, a
finding that has been reported in a number of studies that compared and contrasted the
realizations of some face-threatening acts by Arabs and American speakers of Arabic.
Morkus (2009, p. 172), who compared the refusal strategies of American speakers of Arabic
as a foreign language with those used by native speakers of Egyptian Arabic and native
speakers of English, reported that American subjects were more direct than Egyptian
speakers of Arabic. Similarly, in his study of refusal strategies among Jordanian EFL
learners, native speakers of Jordanian Arabic, and native speakers of American English,
Al-Issa (1998) found that Jordanian refusals were lengthy, elaborate, and less direct than
those used by native speakers of English.

A close examination of the non-confrontational sub-strategies reveals that some of
them were used more frequently than others. While positive politeness strategies were the
most frequent (42%), followed by off-record strategies (37%), multiple strategies were the
least frequent (5%). The fact that the American speakers of Arabic incorporated positive
politeness strategies the most goes in line with the findings reported in the literature about
Americans. Morkus (2009) posited that the statements of gratitude and appreciation along
with agreements were the most used by his American participants when they expressed
their refusals indirectly. Similarly, Fernandez (2013) reported that the American participants
in her study used more token agreements than her Egyptian participants. Thus, the frequent
use of positive politeness seems to be a feature that characterizes Americans’ politeness. As
for off-record strategies coming in second place instead of negative politeness strategies,
this might be attributed to the tendency among the American participants in the current
study to give counterarguments and contradictory statements rather than be apologetic for
expressing an opposing view. Kreutel (2007, p. 10) reported a similar finding about the use
of apologetic terms. In her words, “this expression of reverence may be inappropriate when
it comes to disagreement, indicating that a differing opinion is not necessarily a failure the
speaker needs to apologize for” (Kreutel 2007, p. 10). Moving to multiple strategies, which
came in last place. One explanation for this comes from the literature. According to Glaser
(2009, p. 51), non-native speakers “lack the complexity and features of NS [native speakers]
utterances and thus produce expressions that are, comparatively speaking, linguistically
simple, formulaic and minimalistic”.

Likewise, confrontational sub-strategies varied in terms of frequency; while negating
the premise topped the list (18%), followed by questioning the truth value of the premise
(15%), challenging (12%), using negative performatives (12%), using exclamatory no (12%),
criticism and judgmental words (12%), mocking and sarcasm (7%), devaluing the premise
(7%), and using multiple strategies (5%) were the lowest. As for negating the premise,
also known as the statement of the opposite, previous studies (Beebe and Takahashi 1989;
Kreutel 2007; Glaser 2009) reported that non-native speakers show a tendency towards
using the statement of the opposite strategy. In fact, it is the most used ‘undesirable’
disagreement strategy in Kreutel (2007, p. 9) by non-native speakers. Fernandez (2013,
p. 49) reported a similar finding where the statement of the opposite was the second
most used ‘strong’, called here ‘confrontational’, disagreement strategy by the American
participants in her study. In the study present at hand, negating the premise was achieved
mainly through providing an opposite statement on the basis of personal experience often
preceded by the phrase ‘in my view’. This pattern supports the claim proposed by Triandis
and Singelis (cited in Guodong and Jing 2005, p. 9) that “individualists from the U. S. A.
are more concerned with clearly giving opinions [not in maintaining harmony]”. As for
multiple strategies being the least used, as reported earlier, this may be ascribed to the
“lack of complexity often observed with native speakers” (Kreutel 2007, p. 4).
The findings of the current study suggest that the choice of strategy type is not haphazard or arbitrary. On the contrary, the interlocutors seem to plan their disagreement strategies consciously or subconsciously, taking into account variables such as status/power, topic, and gender involved in the situation, an examination of which is presented below.

5.2. Status and the Choice of Disagreement Strategy

In this section, the six stimulus scenarios are presented and discussed with a view to highlighting the role of status in determining the choice of the optimal disagreement strategy in each scenario by all the respondents regardless of gender. Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage of the disagreement strategies identified earlier.

Table 2. Frequency and percentage of disagreement strategies in terms of status *

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario Status</th>
<th>Freq. of Non-Conf. Strategies (n = 86)</th>
<th>Freq. &amp; % of Non-Conf. Strategies</th>
<th>Freq. of Conf. Strategies (n = 82)</th>
<th>Freq. &amp; % of Conf. Strategies (n = 82)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Equal–Equal</td>
<td>18 2 10 -</td>
<td>30 (54%)</td>
<td>4 10 6 - 42 - 26 (46%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Lower–Higher</td>
<td>4 8 4 -</td>
<td>16 (29%)</td>
<td>10 2 2 8 - 12 - 40 (71%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Higher–Lower</td>
<td>14 4 18 4</td>
<td>40 (71%)</td>
<td>- 4 2 2 2 2 - 4 - 16 (29%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36 14 32 4</td>
<td>86 (51%)</td>
<td>10 10 14 10 6 12 6 4 82 (49%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sub-strategies are numbered in line with the classification of strategies in Table 1.

Before examining Table 2, it is useful to recall that the ODCT provided contexts for three status levels, viz., equal–equal (peers), lower–higher, and higher–lower. Further, each status was illustrated by two scenarios and each scenario was attempted by 28 subjects. Thus, the number of disagreement tokens produced by the subjects in connection with each status was 56, with a total of 168 in the whole task. The table shows that within each status, the subjects used more non-confrontational strategies than confrontational ones except for the lower–higher scenarios. Furthermore, the percentage of confrontational strategies employed by equal–equal and lower–higher status interactants was considerably greater than one-third of the total number of possible tokens; however, the percentage went down to 29% for higher–lower status respondents. With regard to the preference for non-confrontational over confrontational strategies, Morkus (2009, p. 172), who compared the refusal strategies of American learners of Arabic as a foreign language with those used by native speakers of Egyptian Arabic and native speakers of English, reported a similar finding. The American learners of Arabic in his study used more indirect than direct refusal strategies. In the same vein, Kreutel (2007) noted that non-natives used more desirable disagreement tokens, named non-confrontational in this study, than undesirable strategies (65 percent vs. 35 percent).

A further examination of Table 2, particularly between the status comparison of responses, reveals that the highest percentage of the non-confrontational strategies is used by the subjects disagreeing with the lower-status interlocutors, followed by those disagreeing with the equal-status partners, and the lowest percentage is employed by the subjects disagreeing with the higher-status interlocutors. This scene is quite different with regard to confrontational strategies. The highest percentage is used by the subjects disagreeing with the higher-status interlocutors, followed by the peers, and then by the higher–lower interactants.

One may generally understand why the higher-status respondents tend to be both less confrontational (29%) and more non-confrontational (71%) than the respondents in the other two statuses when disagreeing with the lower-status interlocutors as they are unlikely to feel threatened because of their stand. However, it is not equally clear why the lower-status subjects and peers produced a relatively high percentage of confrontational disagreements (71% and 46%, respectively) while disagreeing with their interlocutors. It may be the case that status is also impacted by other variables such as the disagreement topic or focus. To examine the possible interaction between status and topic, one needs to
look into the topics underlying the use of disagreement in the two scenarios within each status. However, before moving on with the analysis, and for the readers’ convenience, Table 3 below provides the frequencies and percentages of disagreement responses related to each of the two scenarios within each status, highlighting the topic or the focus of each.

**Table 3. Frequency and percentage of disagreement strategies in terms of status highlighting topic.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario Status</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Freq. &amp; % of Non-Conf. Strategies</th>
<th>Freq. &amp; % of Conf. Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. E-E</td>
<td>Media impact</td>
<td>20 (71%)</td>
<td>8 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. E-E</td>
<td>Spouse’s looks</td>
<td>10 (36%)</td>
<td>18 (64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. L-H</td>
<td>Instructor presenting false</td>
<td>8 (29%)</td>
<td>20 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. L-H</td>
<td>Student accused of plagiarizing</td>
<td>8 (29%)</td>
<td>20 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. H-L</td>
<td>Farmer’s proposal to grow new</td>
<td>22 (79%)</td>
<td>6 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fruits and vegetables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. H-L</td>
<td>Presentation method</td>
<td>18 (64%)</td>
<td>10 (36%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The presentation and discussion of the content of this table will be based on the responses within each status, starting with equal–equal, then lower–higher, and ending with higher–lower.

5.2.1. Disagreement with Equals

A look at the first and second scenarios in Table 3 shows that there are differences in the percentage of disagreement responses given to each. While the percentage of non-confrontational strategies used by the subjects was 71% in the first scenario, it dropped to 36% in the second scenario. The researcher believes that this drop is influenced by the scenario topic. In the first scenario, the interlocutor posits that the media’s influence on viewers is negative most of the time. Apparently, the topic under discussion is neither controversial nor contentious. Further, ‘negative’ in this context is a relative term. What is considered to be negative by some may turn out to be positive by others. When it comes to media, there is no universal agreement on what is considered positive or negative. In fact, the definitions of these two terms depend on a multiplicity of factors such as the recipient’s personal experience, the language used, and the political stance of the news agency. In the second scenario, the interlocutor posits that a spouse’s appearance and beauty are the most important criteria in marriage. Undoubtedly, this topic is very controversial. While some people give more weight to the physical appearance of the spouse, others give more weight to other criteria such as personality, manners, and education. Looks can be deceptive sometimes. A person’s physical beauty does not guarantee that he or she will be a good marriage partner. Physical beauty and attractiveness may not last. Several factors may alter this beauty such as aging, stress, and disfigurement, among others.

Furthermore, couples in the American society are not prohibited from living together and having babies long before they are married. Thus, they have the chance to stay together for a long time and face the challenges that life throws at them, a context that makes it quite reasonable for them to give more weight to personality than to beauty when choosing a spouse for marriage.

5.2.2. Disagreement with Higher-Status Interlocutors

Table 3 shows that the addressee in the third and fourth scenarios is a university professor, an authority with whom a student seeks the least degree of confrontation. However, the percentage of confrontational strategies used in these two scenarios significantly outweighed the percentage of non-confrontational strategies. In both scenarios, the percentage of non-confrontational strategies accounted for only 29% of all the disagreement tokens.
while the percentage of confrontational strategies accounted for 71% of all the disagreement tokens. Different variables and factors may have led to this finding. In the third scenario, the topic, viz., instructor presenting false information, was the sole variable that influenced the subjects’ responses. In the fourth scenario, viz., instructor accusing students of plagiarism, three variables were at play, namely the (1) topic, (2) source of the face-threatening act and its directionality, and (3) seriousness and weightiness of the face threat.

The first factor that may have influenced the subjects’ responses is the scenario/situation topic. In the third scenario, the professor unintentionally made some false points. His/her goal was to introduce new pieces of information to the students. However, for the American speakers of Arabic, receiving false information from the teacher is something they do not tolerate. Thus, though the topic may not be controversial for Jordanians, for instance, it has turned out to be highly sensitive and controversial for Americans. This was manifested in their tendency to question the truth value of what the professor said as in 20 below, or to criticize him/her as in 21.

(20) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (3) above]
Response:

“I searched the topic online and found many sources that go against what you said. Can you give me your opinion again and tell me where you get your information from?”

Here, the speaker asks the professor where they got their information from because they discovered that what was said in class was false. While this is possible and feasible in the American culture, it is highly doubtful that such a response will be made by Arab students when they are disagreeing with their professors.

(21) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (3) above]
Response:

“I was surprised by what you said in class because it was not correct in my opinion. I searched online and I saw that I was right. I want to know your opinion so that we can talk about this matter. You are a teacher and I do not want you to be worse than before and present things that are not correct in the future”.

Here, the speaker explicitly and harshly criticizes their professor.

Another explanation for questioning the professor’s premise or criticizing them as stated by another student is that if the American students did not confront and express their disapproval, they will learn something wrong, which eventually will impact them negatively in the future when they join the labor market as illustrated in (22) below:

(22) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (3) above]
Response:

“Doctor, I think you presented some information about this topic in class. I searched about what you said and I have with me here this paper from a recognized academic source which has some information that goes against what you mentioned. I hope you check this and provide your students with accurate information because this is important and because we do not want to make mistakes after graduation”.

Moving to the fourth scenario, one can see that the topic is contentious. Accusing the respondent of plagiarizing is an ethical matter, which may have fueled the feelings of discontent with the professor by the students, especially because they believed they did not plagiarize. The source of the face-threatening act and its directionality is another factor that may have influenced the subjects’ responses in this scenario. The professor starts the threat by accusing the student of plagiarizing parts of his/her term paper. Thus, the students were reacting to the professor’s words and accusations, which posed a serious threat to their faces. The last variable that may have influenced the subjects’ responses in the fourth
scenario is the seriousness and weightiness of the threat. In this scenario, the students are at risk of failing the course or losing points if they do not stand up and confront the professor.

5.2.3. Disagreement with Lower-Status Interlocutors

Table 3 shows that while non-confrontational strategies accounted for 79% of all the disagreement tokens in the fifth scenario, the percentage went down to 64% in the sixth scenario. In the fifth scenario, the interlocutor is a farmer who proposes growing new vegetables and fruits, while in the sixth scenario, the interlocutor is a student who proposes reading their presentation from a paper instead of using the data show. One explanation that may be suggested for this variation in the degree of non-confrontation is that while the farmer’s proposal was viewed as a suggestion that helps improve the quality of the harvest, and thus requires no confrontation as in (23) below, the student’s proposal was viewed as a sign of laziness, and thus was worth reproaching by the speaker who chose to be confrontational as in (24).

(23) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (6) above]
Response:
“Hello. I know that you want to grow potatoes and cucumber in my farm, but I have been living here for two years and I tried to grow them before and things did not work well”.

Here, the speaker expresses the disagreement through referring to personal experience in a non-confrontational fashion.

(24) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (2) above]
Response:
“What? Do you think you are still in secondary school or what?”

Here, the speaker mocks the interlocutor by asking them a rhetorical question.

However, despite the instances of confrontation, the general preference was for non-confrontational strategies in the sixth scenario. This preference can be attributed to a number of variables. The role of a professor is to support students and improve their performance rather than to attack them or say things that would impact their self-esteem negatively. Further, the interlocutors in this scenario are adult mature students and thus, the norm with such students is to advise them rather than to attack them.

5.3. Gender and the Choice of Disagreement Strategy

In this section, the six stimulus scenarios are presented and discussed with a view to highlighting the interplay of gender and disagreement strategies in each scenario. In what follows, the researcher compares the disagreeing responses elicited from both the groups in terms of the number of words produced by each. Then, he compares the disagreement strategies that were used by males and females in all scenarios, highlighting the role of topic and status.

5.3.1. Gender and Disagreement Strategies in Terms of Word Count

The length of the disagreement tokens varied in terms of word count. While the shortest consisted of 5 words by males and 14 by females, the longest amounted to 114 by males and 131 by females. This was also evident in the total number of words used by each gender group. While the number of words produced by males was 2814 (40%), it rose to 4174 (60%) in female disagreements, making a total of 6988 words used by both groups. The researcher believes that the female subjects used more words because they elaborated more than the male subjects.

5.3.2. The Role of Gender in Determining the Preferred Disagreement Strategy

In this section, the six stimulus scenarios are presented and discussed with a view to highlighting the role of gender in determining the choice of the optimal disagreement
strategy in each scenario, taking into account variables like status and topic. Table 4 below provides the frequencies and percentages of disagreement responses related to each of the two scenarios within each status, highlighting the gender of the speaker and the topic under discussion.

Table 4. Frequency and percentage of disagreement strategies in terms of gender highlighting status and topic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Freq. and % of Non-Conf. Strategies (n = 86, 51%)</th>
<th>Freq. and % of Conf. Strategies (n = 82, 49%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. E-E</td>
<td>Media impact</td>
<td>12 (86%)</td>
<td>8 (57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. E-E</td>
<td>Spouse’s looks</td>
<td>2 (14%)</td>
<td>8 (57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. L-H</td>
<td>Instructor presenting false information</td>
<td>6 (43%)</td>
<td>2 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. L-H</td>
<td>Student accused of plagiarizing</td>
<td>4 (29%)</td>
<td>4 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. H-L</td>
<td>Farmer’s proposal to grow new fruits and vegetables</td>
<td>12 (86%)</td>
<td>10 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. H-L</td>
<td>Presentation method</td>
<td>8 (57%)</td>
<td>10 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>44 (52%)</td>
<td>42 (50%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The presentation and discussion of the content of this table are based on the responses within each status, starting with equal–equal, then lower–higher, and ending with higher–lower.

Table 4 shows that the percentages of the male and female disagreement strategies, whether non-confrontational or confrontational, are not significantly different. A look at the non-confrontational disagreements reveals that the male tokens constitute 52 percent, while they constitute 50 percent in the female data. A similar picture is evident with regard to the confrontational disagreements; the percentages of male and female tokens are 48% and 50%, respectively. This finding is inconsistent with that reported by Lakoff (1973) in which women are regarded as more indirect than males in giving their opinions. However, things are not always what they seem like. The topic, the status, and the seriousness of the threat may all have influenced both male and female disagreement strategies differently. In light of this, the interaction of gender, status, and topic in each scenario is examined below in order to highlight the similarities and differences between the male and female performance.

Disagreement with an Equal Status Interlocutor

A look at the first and second scenarios in Table 4 shows that although disagreement was expressed by a peer, the degree of confrontation and non-confrontation in the language used by males and females varied significantly. While females showed a slight tendency in both scenarios towards being non-confrontational, the males who were non-confrontational in the first scenario became very confrontational in the second scenario. As can be seen, the percentage of female non-confrontational tokens remained 57 percent in both scenarios. For males, however, the situation was different; the percentage of non-confrontational tokens dropped from 86 percent in the first scenario to 14 percent in the second. This is an interesting finding that the researchers did not expect when they first analyzed the responses. Thus, in order to seek more explanations, the first researcher approached the American participants again and asked them why they disagreed in the way they did in the second scenario. Further, he asked them who they thought was more confrontational, males or females, and why. According to a female respondent, males are more confrontational. She justified her answer by proposing that in sensitive topics like ‘spouse appearance’, or in topics in which there is no threat to the female’s face like ‘media impact’, women try to give more weight to courtesy than to bluntness or directness. In her own words,
“Women tend to take a more sensitive and nuanced approach—taking into account the other person’s feelings so that even though they are contradicting them, they are not hurt or irritated by their point of view”. This view was also corroborated by another female participant who noted that other factors like the girls’ personalities and where they were raised in the United States also influence their choices. “Northern cultures tend to be more passive in expressing their opinion and that is just a representation of Northern culture. Eastern culture is much more direct since people tend to be more aggressive in cities”, she added. Further, she posited that although she is from the Northern culture and is supposed to be less direct, she is more influenced by her father’s southern culture mannerisms and, thus, she is more aggressive and direct than girls who are more influenced by their mothers’ mannerisms and, thus, are less direct. A third female participant commended the view, adding that females are more confrontational when they feel threatened, as when somebody tries to harass them for instance. However, they are less confrontational when they want to tell another person that they have a different view. She added that males may be more confrontational in a situation like the one here in the second scenario because “in America guys are ‘raised’ to be men and to stand up for themselves and it’s kind of a constant competition over being the ‘alpha male’”.

Some male respondents also expected males to be more confrontational in the second scenario. In his explanation of his view, one male respondent posited that women tend to use their logic and their own experience more in such sensitive and personal topics like the one discussed in the second scenario. In his words,  

“If I was to guess about this, I would think that American women would try to use logic or their own experiences to point out why they think that choosing a spouse based on his looks is not a good way. If, for instance, speaker A, a woman, insists on her view that looks are the most important criterion in choosing a spouse, speaker B, also a woman, will agree with her, and, then, when things do not work, she will say ‘I warned you’. American men, in contrast, may be more insistent (could be interpreted as aggressive) that she shouldn’t choose a guy this way because they expect that she’ll find a bunch of assholes rather than a nice guy who won’t take advantage of her beyond what she is ok with. It is like that they see their female friends as their little sister. I would guess that American men try to protect women by really expressing why this scenario is a bad idea whereas women will do so but will let her at the end do what she wants. In American dating culture, a girl can date someone and even have it known that they are having sex and then break up with little to no negative repercussions. Women do not really need to protect other women like they will in Jordan. American men will try to protect them if they are connected (sibling, good friend, etc.).”

In light of the aforementioned discussion, one may posit that in the American culture, non-confrontation is the norm for females when disagreeing with friends of the same sex about personal social matters unless they feel they are threatened. American males, on the other hand, give more weight to directness than to indirectness when discussing personal matters, especially with friends of the same sex. Nonetheless, due to the study limitations, this finding will not be pursued any further and has to await future research.

Disagreement with a Higher-Status Interlocutor

Table 4 shows that both males and females employed more confrontational than non-confrontational strategies in the third and fourth scenarios in which the respondent disagreed with a higher-status interlocutor, namely, a professor.

In the third scenario, the topic is ‘instructor presenting false information’. Although the topic does not pose any immediate serious threat to the positive image of the subjects, it, according to the respondents, negatively affects their academic achievement whether in school or after graduation, and thus warrants a confrontation. This probably explains why the responses were mostly confrontational. While confrontational strategies accounted for 86 percent of all the disagreement tokens expressed by women, they accounted for
57 percent of all the disagreement tokens by men. This finding again is inconsistent with Lakoff (1973). The American female subjects in this study were not always less direct than males. Whenever they felt threatened, or felt that their future was threatened, they employed more confrontational than non-confrontational strategies. When confrontational, the female participants mainly used ‘questioning the truth value of the premise’ and ‘criticisms’ the most in their disagreements as these two strategies were equally used and they both accounted for 67% of all their confrontational disagreement tokens in this scenario. Below are two illustrative examples of these strategies, starting first with ‘questioning the truth value of the premise’ followed by ‘criticism’ in (25) and (26), respectively.

(25) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (3) above]
Response:

“When I read about this topic at home, I found sources that provided information that goes against what you said. How can you explain this because they were all recognized scholarly sources?”

Here, the subject first casts doubts on the validity of the interlocutor’s premise through appealing to contradictory information that she found in sources she came across. Then, she demonstrates her dissatisfaction through posing a question.

(26) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (3) above]
Response:

“When I was in class today, I heard you say some information about North Korea. I am not saying that I know more than you, but I know that what you have said today was wrong. In the future, [before you say anything in class] you have to check if what you know is true or false”.

In this example, the subject is reproaching the teacher explicitly. They are telling their teacher that they are wrong and that they need to search more about the points they present in advance before coming to class. There are no signs of indirectness in such a response.

For males, who were also more confrontational than non-confrontational in this scenario, ‘questioning the truth value of the premise’ was the most used confrontational strategy, constituting 50 percent of all the confrontational tokens, followed by both ‘criticism’ and ‘multiple confrontational strategies’ each constituting 25 percent.

With the change in topic from being non-confrontational to confrontational, i.e., ‘student accused of plagiarizing by the instructor’, and with the increase in threat to the subjects’ positive image, the subjects, both males and females, persisted to be more confrontational than non-confrontational. In actuality, the confrontational strategies constituted 71 percent of all the disagreement tokens produced by males and females. There were no differences between males and females in this scenario. This is probably because the professor’s accusation poses a threat to the students regardless of their gender and if they do not stand their ground and confront, they might run the risk of failing the course or scoring a poor grade. Challenging was the most used confrontational strategy by both males and females. It constituted 60 percent of all the confrontational disagreements produced by females, while it constituted 40 percent of all the confrontational disagreements produced by males. Below is an illustrative example.

(27) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (5) above]
Response:

“Why do you say they are not mine? Do you have an evidence or not?”

Disagreement with a Lower-Status Interlocutor

Table 4 demonstrates that when it comes to disagreement with a lower-status interlocutor, both males and females resorted to non-confrontational language the most. An explanation for this is that in such cases, the subjects are unlikely to feel threatened because of their stand. Non-confrontation was the prevailing strategy, constituting 86 percent of
males’ disagreeing responses in the fifth scenario and 57 percent in the sixth scenario and 71 percent of females’ disagreeing responses in both the fifth and sixth scenarios.

Although there were no differences between males and females in their preference for being non-confrontational in these two scenarios, there were differences between them in their preferred non-confrontational strategy in each of these two scenarios. A multiple strategy consisting of giving appreciative comments followed by disagreement through citing reasons was the most used non-confrontational strategy by female participants in the fifth scenario, constituting 60 percent of all their non-confrontational tokens. In contrast, the most used non-confrontational strategy by males was contradictory statements, constituting 50 percent of all their non-confrontational disagreements. The multiple disagreement strategy is illustrated in (28) below while the contradictory statement is illustrated in (29).

(28) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (6) above]
Response:
“I appreciate your expertise, but we tried growing these crops before and we could not succeed”.
Here, the participant starts first by appealing to the interlocutor’s positive face through appreciative comments. Then, they state the reason for their disagreement.

(29) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (6) above]
Response:
“I think growing tomatoes and eggplants is better”.
Here, the speaker mitigates their contradictory statement through hedging.

The analysis of the sixth scenario also shows that there are differences between males and females in their preferred non-confrontational disagreement strategy. Giving reasons was the prevailing non-confrontational strategy among the female participants, constituting 60 percent of all their non-confrontational disagreement tokens, whilst giving advice through suggesting or asking for alternatives was the most common strategy among males, constituting 50 percent of all their non-confrontational disagreement tokens. Giving reasons is illustrated in (30) below whilst giving advice through suggesting or asking for alternatives is illustrated in (31).

(30) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (2) above]
Response:
“You need to learn how to use technology in this kind of presentation now because if you do not learn in this stage, when will you?”

(31) Stimulus Scenario: [same as in (2) above]
Response:
“Listen, Ahmad. I think that this way of presenting is below your level. Please, do not read from a piece of paper”.

6. Conclusions

The findings of the study revealed that the American speakers of Arabic, just like native speakers of JSA (see Hamdan and Mahadin 2021), employed two main disagreement strategies. The first is non-confrontational whilst the second is confrontational. These two strategies are in turn divided into sub-strategies. The non-confrontational strategies comprised four sub-strategies, viz., (1) positive politeness, (2) negative politeness, (3) off-record, and (4) multiple. In contrast, the confrontational strategies included six sub-strategies, viz., (1) challenging, (2) using a negative performative, (3) negating the premise, (4) using exclamatory no, (5) using criticism and judgmental words, (6) using mocking and sarcasm, (7) questioning the truth value of the premise, (8) devaluing the premise by giving negative attributes, and (9) multiple.

Further, the findings of this study suggest that the choice of a disagreement strategy in the Jordanian context by Americans, whether confrontational or non-confrontational,
more often than not, tends to be influenced by the topic under discussion rather than by the status and gender of the interlocutor.

7. Implications for Future Research

The current study highlights the importance of studying intercultural communication, particularly in the area of disagreement strategies among L2 learners, and offers various insights for future research. In light of the results, a number of areas await future research to improve our comprehension of face-threatening acts and provide L2 learners with more effective support in tackling them:

1. Comparative Studies Across Different Cultures: Although the study concentrated on the American and Jordanian speakers of Arabic, extending the research to encompass additional cultural contexts may yield a more thorough knowledge of the ways in which disagreement strategies differ among the speakers of various languages and cultures. Comparative research may help identify which aspects of disagreement strategies are universal and which are culture-specific.

2. Longitudinal Studies on the Development of Pragmatic Competence: In the future, researchers may use longitudinal designs to monitor how L2 learners’ pragmatic competence develops over time. This would aid in comprehending the processes and timing by which L2 learners acquire various disagreement strategies, as well as the elements that facilitate or hinder this process.

3. Impact of Instructional Interventions: It could be beneficial to examine how well various instructional pedagogies teach pragmatic competence, particularly disagreement strategies. Experimental research could examine the effectiveness of pragmatics-focused training vs. standard grammar-focused instruction to determine which approach best prepares second language learners for communication in context.

4. Pragmatic Competence in Different Speech Acts: While this study focused on disagreement strategies, future research could extend to other speech acts such as requests, apologies, and compliments. Comparing how L2 learners handle different speech acts could reveal broader patterns in interlanguage pragmatics.

5. Real-World Applications: Finally, applied research investigating how findings on disagreement strategies can be incorporated into language teaching materials and curricula would be beneficial. Developing practical tools and resources based on empirical findings could significantly enhance L2 instruction and learner outcomes.


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Note

1 The Power Language Index is constructed to compare/rank languages on their efficacy in five domains, namely, (1) geography, (2) economy, (3) communication, (4) knowledge and media, and (5) diplomacy. It is retrieved from: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/12/these-are-the-most-powerful-languages-in-the-world (accessed on 1 January 2023).
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