

# The art of mitigating disagreement: How EFL learners do it

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## Abstract

The principal motivation of this study is to investigate how Macedonian learners of English mitigate their disagreement. It is a follow-up of a much broader study in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics focusing on disagreement in Macedonian and American English (Kusevska, 2012). Our cross-cultural analysis reveals that Macedonian and American native speakers show preference for different types of disagreement, the major difference being the frequency of mitigation as well as the linguistic means used for its realisation.

For the purpose of this study, we have accepted the definition that mitigation is linguistic communicative strategy of softening an utterance, reducing the impact of an utterance, or limiting the face loss associated with a message (Fraser, 1980; Caffi, 1999, 2007; Martinovski, 2006; Clemen, 2010; Czerwionka, 2012). As mitigation in disagreement is closely connected with politeness, we have also relied on the model of politeness and the strategies for FTA realisation proposed by Brown & Levinson (1978/1987). We have looked at lexical and syntactic devices such as modal auxiliaries (e.g., *can/could*; *may/might*), hedges (*kind of*, *sort of*), discourse markers (*well*, *but*, *look*), verbs expressing uncertainty (*I think*, *I don't think*), verbs expressing vagueness (*seem*, *assume*, *guess*), conditionals etc., that learners use to mitigate their utterances.

**Key words:** speech acts, disagreement, politeness, mitigation, EFL learners

## 1. Introduction

Our interest for disagreement was spurred by numerous cases when there was breach of communication between Macedonian and English speakers due to inappropriate launch of opposite opinions. The analysis of how Macedonian learners of English mitigate their disagreement was performed on 195 speech acts of disagreement obtained through a Discourse Completion Task (DCT). The respondents were learners of English at upper-intermediate and advanced levels. Relying on the results of our previous research on disagreement in Macedonian and American English (Kusevska, 2012), we set forth the following hypotheses:

1. Macedonian learners of English do not mitigate their disagreement as frequently as native speakers of English do;
2. They use different linguistic means to mitigate their disagreement;
3. The linguistic means are differently distributed in the speech act;
4. The motivation for mitigating their disagreement and the linguistic means that Macedonian learners use are at least partly influenced by their native language and culture.

Following Brown and Levinson's theory (1987), we first distinguished direct (on record) and indirect (off record) speech acts. Depending on the kind of linguistic means used in the expressions, direct speech acts were classified as direct disagreement with redressive action (softened disagreement), and direct disagreement without redressive action. However, not all speech acts fell in these two categories. Therefore, some were further classified as strong disagreement. Kakava (2002) also introduces the category of strong disagreement, proposing a continuum of different types of disagreements ranging from strong to mitigated.

## 2. Analysis of disagreement in English and Macedonian

Our previous study of disagreement in English and Macedonian was a cross-cultural study on how disagreement is expressed in English and Macedonian. It showed that American and Macedonian native speakers view disagreement differently and show preference for different types of disagreement. The results in Table 1 demonstrate that Macedonian speakers show preference for strong disagreement, while American speakers show preference for softened disagreement.

Table 1 Types of disagreement in English and Macedonian

English		Macedonian	
Mitigated disagreement	Strong disagreement	Mitigated disagreement	Strong disagreement
264	151	105	240
48%	27.4%	20.5%	46.9%

### 2.1. Softened disagreement

English has developed a wide number of linguistic means available to speakers for softening their utterances. These include a number of pragmatic markers for mitigation used within the utterance (*just, sort of, kind of, I think, I don't know*, etc.), linguistic means for minimisation (*a little, a bit*, etc.), epistemic verbs expressing hesitation and uncertainty (*seem, guess, suppose, assume*), discourse markers (*well, but*, etc.), and modal verbs (*would, can, could, may, might*).

Macedonian speakers also use mitigating devices, but to a much lesser extent than American speakers. To mitigate their utterances, Macedonian speakers use expressions containing the verb *каже* (*tell*), adversative imperative forms *види, гледај, чекај* (*see, look, wait*), discourse markers *на, добро, да* (*well, okay, yeah*), modal verb forms, especially *може* (*can*), the adverb *можеби* and its spoken variant *може* (*maybe*), the modal particle *би* (*would*), pragmatic markers for mitigation used within the utterance like *мислам* (*I think*), *не знам* (*I don't know*), *само* (*just*), *малку* (*a little*), *малце* (*a little, diminutive*), the indefinite tenses, the marker for solidarity *бе*, etc. *Бе* is a marker used in oral communication and is used to introduce familiarity and solidarity. Tannen (1992) mention a similar marker in Greek (*re*), concluding that "*re* is a pervasive formulaic marker of friendly disagreement" (p.29). Table 2 below shows the occurrences of mitigation devices in English and Macedonian.

Table 2 Mitigation devices in English and Macedonian

	Hedges	Verbs of hesitation and uncertainty	Modal forms	well на	I think мислам	I don't know не знам	Name	бе	Total
English	233	46	403	63	124	25	0	0	894
Macedonian	65	7	91	106	56	14	81	30	484

Both Macedonian and English speakers sometimes preface their disagreement with partial agreement with the previous utterance, and its frequency of occurrence is similar in the two languages: 10.7% in English vs. 7.8% in Macedonian. However, American speakers make more effort to mitigate their utterances. Also, they often push their disagreement further down in conversation, most often by asking questions, making assumptions, associations, analogies, etc.

In Macedonian, disagreement is never pushed down in conversation. It is announced in the first turn immediately after the turn which the speaker doesn't agree with. Generally, softened disagreement in Macedonian is less mitigated than in English. This happens because of the use of strong modal verbs like *мора* (*must*) and *не може* (*can't*); multiple use of adversative discourse markers to build the frame of the speech act, sometimes as many as four or five in a sequence; the use of adversative imperative forms; intonation; etc.

## 2.2. Explicit/ strong disagreement

Disagreement in Macedonian is preferably expressed explicitly and is followed by an explanation. This type of disagreement is shaped with a number of adversative markers and imperative forms, which intensify it. In addition, adversative markers, sometimes used in sequences of three, four or even five, enable the speakers to create direct, brief and simple turns which sound sharp, authoritative and confrontational. Such disagreement may spread over several turns in which speakers do not seem willing to put much effort in facework.

## 3. Linguistic means for mitigation found in Macedonian learners of English speech acts of disagreement

Macedonian learners of English used mitigating devices scarcely. There were no occurrences of most of the hedges (*just, sort of, kind of*), no occurrences of the linguistic means for minimisation (*a little, a bit, etc.*), except for one occurrence of *a little*, and no occurrences of epistemic verbs of hesitation and uncertainty (*seem, guess, suppose, assume*), except for one occurrence of *seem* (*don't seem important*). More prominently represented were the pragmatic marker *I think* and modal verbs.

### 3.1. I think

In the DCT speech acts produced by Macedonian learners of English, we found 63 occurrences of *I think* and 5 occurrences of *I don't think*. While many authors list *I think* as a hedge in expressing politeness (Holmes, 1990; Aijmer, 1997; Kärkkäinen, 2003; Baumgarten

& House, 2010), it can also convey the meaning of confidence and persuasion, in which case it does not mitigate the illocution force of the speech act.

It is this latter use of *I think* that is pervasive in the speech acts produced by Macedonian learners of English. The three occurrences of the discourse marker *so* were all followed by *I think*, which also confirms that *I think* is mostly used to express strong opinions:

- (1) I think people are entitled to a 25-day holiday;
- (2) We are working so hard and we are trying to do completely and successfully all the work in the company. So I think that we deserve five days more for holiday.

The use of *I think* seems more tentative only when used in partial agreement, but such examples are scarce. We noticed only two occurrences of partial agreement formulated with *I think* and one example when the interrogative form *don't you think* was used also in partial agreement, after the marker *but*. There was also one example when *think* was used with *maybe* and *could*:

- (3) Maybe we could think about another place and another day.

In conclusion, we can stress that sentence-initial *I think* is used to intensify rather than to mitigate disagreement.

### 3.2. Modal verbs

In the speech acts of disagreement produced by native American speakers, we found three groups of modal verbs according to their frequency of occurrence:

1. Verbs with high frequency, including the modal verbs *would* (28%) and *can* (27%);
2. Verbs with medium frequency, among which the most widespread was *could* (12%), followed by *may* (8%), *might* (7%), *will* (7%), *need* (6%), and *should* (5%); and
3. Verbs with low frequency: *must* (1) and *shall* (0).

Our findings are similar to the frequency rates of modal verbs found in other corpus-based studies. Biber et al. (2007: 495) assign the low frequency of *must* to its high command force. Because of this it is often replaced by *should*, which has weaker force, and is thus considered more polite in conversation.

Our analysis produced somewhat different results. *Will* (42%) stands out as the most widely spread in the speech acts of disagreement produced by Macedonian learners of English. It is followed by a group of three other modal verbs of medium frequency: *should* (18%), *would* (15%), and *can* (15%). The rest of the modal verbs have much lower frequency: *must* (4%), *need to* (2%), *could* (2%), *might* (2%), *may* (0%) and *shall* (0%). To express their uncertainty and hesitations learners have also used *maybe* (16) and *probably* (1).

We were not surprised by the high frequency of *will*. First, learners identify it as a marker for expressing futurity; second, it helps them to express firmly their opinion (example 4). Neither were we surprised by *should* following it (example 5). In Macedonian it is translated with *мреба*, which also has high frequency in Macedonian speech acts of disagreement. It is also not surprising that *could* and *might* have very low frequency. Their meaning is elusive for Macedonian learners and their pragmatic function is difficult to grasp.

- (4) I will stay strong with my topic and I won't consider another one.
- (5) I think we should do the training as soon as possible.

We are, however, surprised by the frequency of *would*, which we would expect to be even lower. It seems that Macedonian learners understand its function as a marker for politeness and that they identify it with the Macedonian particle *ōu*, used for this purpose. *Would* is frequently used in the expression *I would like*, and this makes it more salient for the learners. Another reason may be that *would*, like many other language means, is not equally distributed among different speakers. Some learners favoured using *would* in shaping their disagreement. Other learners preferred a different modal verb. And most of the learners have used them scarcely.

### 3.3. Partial agreement

Learners also used partial agreement to mitigate their disagreement (13%). They framed it with expressions like *I agree, but; I don't know about you, but I think; It's interesting, but;* etc. However, none of them used the most common way that native speakers use to frame partial agreement with *Yeah, but*.

## 4. Disagreement frames

Macedonian learners of English used the following frames for shaping their disagreement:

1. *I think* was found in 25% of the speech acts;
2. Disagreement prefaced with the verbs *disagree/ don't agree* + explanation accounted for 19% of the examples;
3. Disagreement prefaced by *I'm sorry, but* was noted in 6% of the cases;
4. Explanation without any preface was present in 50 cases (26%);
5. Discourse markers (*well, but*) were found in 7% of the speech acts;
6. Partial agreement was noted in 14% of the speech acts;
7. Hints had the lowest frequency (3%).

The first two groups clearly belong to strong disagreement because Macedonian speakers do not use *I think* to make room for other people's disagreement, but to emphasize their opinion. They also don't use *I'm sorry* with the aim to apologize but to emphasize that their opinion is different and there is no reconciliation about it. And while there was only one occurrence with *I agree with that* and one with *I don't disagree* in the native speakers' speech acts, their number of occurrences in the learners' speech acts was much higher (38). The discourse markers used here (*well, so, but, actually*) do not always soften disagreement either.

Some of the explanations without any preface represented strong disagreement (22), some softened (22) and only few neutral disagreement (6). Softened speech acts contained weak modal verbs (*can, could, need to*, etc.) if clauses, and other linguistic means for mitigating disagreement.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of this study have confirmed the hypothesis we put forward at the beginning of this paper. They can be summed up as following:

1. Macedonian learners of English shape their disagreement as strong (61%), softened (33%), neutral (3%) and as hints (3%). So when they want to disagree they would most probably opt for strong rather than mitigated disagreement.

2. When mitigating their disagreement, learners use fewer of the linguistic means they had at their disposal than American speakers. Their use of pragmatic markers for mitigation is extremely limited and their use of hedges and verbs for hesitation and uncertainty are rendered null. Although we have seen that they use modal verbs, the most frequent one in their speech acts is *will*, which conveys the meaning of firmness and decisiveness.

3. While in American speech acts mitigation devices are distributed throughout the speech acts, Macedonian learners' speech acts are prefaced with expressions which help them state their disagreement explicitly.

4. The previous statements about learner's disagreement mirror the most common way that Macedonian native speakers shape disagreement, thus confirming our last hypothesis that in shaping their disagreement, Macedonian learners are at least partly influenced by their native language and culture.

One of the striking questions in this analysis is why Macedonian learners do not use discourse markers, which are pervasive in shaping speech acts in Macedonian. The reason may be that the meaning of these sequences is complex and it would be difficult to find one-to-one correspondences in English, as illustrated below:

*Виду сега вака* (see now like this ) – You told me what you thought of it on the basis of your knowledge, or on the basis of your beliefs. However, that is not all that there is to it. So now I'll tell you what I have to say about it. And what I am going to say will be different.

*E na (добро) сега* (well but okay now) - I don't like/ I don't agree with what you are saying. You know that we have talked about this (made a choice, we have decided, we have worked a way out, etc.) and you shouldn't be telling this; *добро* intensifies the utterance.

*А бе чекај сега малце* (but бе hold on a second) - What you are saying can't be right. We are friends and I respect you, but you have to hear my opinion, and my opinion is different from yours.

In conclusion, it is justified to claim that this paper contributes to the studies which hold that the speech act of disagreement is culturally constrained. Negotiating opposing views is reality that learners will have to engage in on daily basis when communicating in the foreign language. Contrastive studies which compare learners' conversation with native speakers provide insights into the problems students may face when communicating in a foreign language.

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