ISSN:3030-332X
Impact factor: 9,493
International journal of scientific researchers

PRAGMATIC FEATURES OF THE SPEECH ACTS OF AGREEMENT AND DISAGREEMENT

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20043310

Abstract: This article examines the pragmatic features of the speech acts of agreement and disagreement as they operate in face-to-face and written discourse. Drawing on speech act theory, politeness theory, the Cooperative Principle, and conversation-analytic research on preference organization, the study investigates the illocutionary structure, felicity conditions, and contextual determinants of these two fundamental communicative acts. The article argues that agreement and disagreement are not simply propositional stances but complex pragmatic performances whose form and force are shaped by social variables — power, distance, and the management of face. Special attention is given to the asymmetry between agreement as a preferred and disagreement as a dispreferred action in conversational organization, to the strategies speakers use to soften or intensify disagreement, and to cross-cultural variation in the realization of both acts. The findings underscore the need for a multi-framework pragmatic approach that integrates illocutionary, politeness-theoretic, and interactional dimensions.

Keywords: speech act, agreement, disagreement, pragmatics, illocutionary force, face-threatening act, preference organization, politeness, Cooperative Principle, cross-cultural pragmatics

Аннотация: В данной статье рассматриваются прагматические особенности речевых актов согласия и несогласия в устном и письменном дискурсе. Опираясь на теорию речевых актов, теорию вежливости, принцип кооперации и конверсационно-аналитические исследования в области организации предпочтения, автор исследует иллокутивную структуру, условия успешности и контекстуальные детерминанты данных двух базовых коммуникативных актов. В статье обосновывается тезис о том, что согласие и несогласие представляют собой не просто пропозициональные позиции, но сложные прагматические действия, форма и сила которых определяются социальными переменными — властью, дистанцией и управлением лицом (face). Особое внимание уделяется асимметрии между согласием как предпочтительным и несогласием как непредпочтительным действием в организации разговора, стратегиям смягчения или усиления несогласия, а также кросс-культурным вариациям в реализации обоих актов. Результаты исследования подчёркивают необходимость мультифреймового прагматического подхода, интегрирующего иллокутивное, теоретико-вежливостное и интеракциональное измерения.

Ключевые слова: речевой акт, согласие, несогласие, прагматика, иллокутивная сила, угроза лицу, организация предпочтения, вежливость, принцип кооперации, кросс-культурная прагматика

1. Introduction

Every act of verbal communication involves, at some level, the negotiation of stances. Speakers assert, question, request, and respond — and in responding, they routinely align with or distance themselves from what a prior speaker has said. The speech acts of agreement and disagreement are among the most pervasive and pragmatically consequential acts in human interaction, yet they are also among the most structurally variable. The same communicative intention — to express alignment or non-

alignment with a prior proposition or assessment — can be realized through an enormous range of linguistic forms, from the minimal *yes* and *no* to elaborately hedged, indirect, or institutionally constrained utterances. Understanding how this variation is governed — by social norms, interactional structure, and cultural convention — is one of the central tasks of pragmatics.

The theoretical importance of agreement and disagreement extends across several subdisciplines. For speech act theory, they represent a distinct illocutionary category — responsive acts that take their force partly from the act they follow. For politeness theory, they occupy opposite positions on a scale of social risk: agreement is typically face-preserving, while disagreement poses a threat to the positive face of the interlocutor [P. Brown & S. C. Levinson., 1987., p. 66]. For conversation analysis, they instantiate the preference organization of adjacency pairs, where agreement is structurally preferred and disagreement is dispreferred [A. Pomerantz., 1984., pp. 64–65]. And for cross-cultural pragmatics, they offer a rich site of variation, since different speech communities calibrate the expression of non-alignment differently.

The present article synthesizes these perspectives into a multi-framework account of the pragmatic features of agreement and disagreement. The goal is not to produce a comprehensive survey of the literature but to trace the main theoretical lines and show how they intersect in the analysis of actual communicative practice. The article proceeds from foundational speech act theory through politeness and face considerations, preference organization, and indirect realization strategies, before turning to cross-cultural dimensions that bear directly on comparative research in English and Uzbek pragmatics.

2. Agreement and Disagreement within Speech Act Theory

The theoretical framework that makes agreement and disagreement fully visible as objects of linguistic inquiry is speech act theory, initiated by John Austin [J. L. Austin., 1962] and systematized by John Searle [J. R. Searle., 1969]. Austin's central insight was that utterances are not merely descriptions of states of affairs but actions performed in a social world — actions that succeed or fail not by truth conditions alone but by the satisfaction of what he called felicity conditions [J. L. Austin., 1962., p. 14]. Searle formalized this insight through a taxonomy of illocutionary acts — assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations — each characterized by a specific direction of fit, sincerity condition, and propositional content condition[J. R. Searle., 1969., pp. 54–71].

Agreement and disagreement fall primarily within the class of assertives, which Searle defined as acts that commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition[J. R. Searle., 1969., p. 29]. An assertion of agreement commits the speaker to the proposition that a prior assertion is true; an assertion of disagreement commits the speaker to the proposition that it is false or at least contestable. However, a purely propositional characterization misses the essentially responsive and relational character of both acts. Agreement and disagreement are always second-pair parts in an interactional sequence — they are produced in reaction to, and in dialogue with, a prior speaker's assertion, evaluation, or proposal. This responsive dimension is what gives them their distinctive pragmatic weight.

Searle also drew attention to the distinction between direct and indirect speech acts: an utterance that literally performs one illocutionary act may simultaneously or primarily perform another, inferrable from context and the Cooperative Principle[J. R. Searle., 1969., pp. 62–64]. This distinction is directly relevant to the analysis of disagreement, which is frequently performed indirectly — through questions, apparent concessions, hedges, or topic shifts — rather than through the direct assertion of a counter-proposition. The indirectness of disagreement, as will be seen, is not merely a stylistic option but a systematic response to the social risks that disagreement entails.

Within Searle's taxonomy, agreement can also carry an expressive dimension. When a speaker agrees with an interlocutor's self-assessment or emotional state, the act approximates an expressive in Searle's terms — it conveys an attitudinal stance toward the state of affairs described, not merely a propositional commitment. This duality — assertive and expressive at once — is one of the features that makes agreement pragmatically rich and contextually variable.

3. The Cooperative Principle and the Pragmatics of Non-Agreement

Herbert Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle holds that speakers are expected to make their conversational contribution such as is required at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the exchange[H. P. Grice., 1975., p. 45]. The four maxims — Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Manner — govern what counts as an appropriate contribution. Disagreement poses an interesting challenge to this framework: in one sense, the maxim of Quality demands that speakers assert only what they believe to be true, which implies that genuine non-alignment should be expressed rather than suppressed. In another sense, expressing disagreement directly may violate the social expectations of cooperative exchange and provoke conversational friction.

The tension between epistemic honesty and social cooperation is resolved, in Gricean terms, through implicature. A speaker who disagrees may choose to respond in a way that observes the letter of the maxims while conveying non-alignment through inference. A response that provides less information than is strictly available (a violation of Quantity), or that appears only tangentially relevant (an apparent violation of Relation), may implicate disagreement without asserting it. This indirect route allows the speaker to maintain the appearance of cooperation while signaling a divergent stance — a strategy well attested in discourse across languages and cultures.

Geoffrey Leech [G. N. Leech., 1983., p. 138] made this tension explicit in his Politeness Principle, which he advanced as a complement to the Cooperative Principle[G. N. Leech., 1983., p. 138]. Among his six politeness maxims, the Maxim of Agreement specifically addresses the speech situation at hand: it directs speakers to minimize the expression of disagreement between self and other, and to maximize the expression of agreement. Leech observed that there is a systematic tendency in polite discourse to exaggerate agreement and to mitigate disagreement by expressing regret, partial agreement, or qualification [G. N. Leech., 1983., p. 138]. The partial agreement response — *Yes, but...* — is a canonical realization of this maxim in practice, and it illustrates how agreement and disagreement can be jointly present in a single utterance, with the former serving as a politeness preface to the latter.

4. Face Theory and the Asymmetry of Agreement and Disagreement

The single most influential account of why disagreement is communicatively costly is Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's [P. Brown & S. C. Levinson., 1987] politeness theory, built on Erving Goffman's [E. Goffman., 1967] concept of face — the public self-image that every person claims and that every interlocutor is expected to respect. Brown and Levinson [P. Brown & S. C. Levinson., 1987., p. 61] distinguish between positive face — the desire to be approved of and liked — and negative face — the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions. Face-threatening acts (FTAs) are acts that by their nature run counter to these desires.

Disagreement is, by Brown and Levinson's account, paradigmatically face-threatening to positive face. When a speaker disagrees, they implicitly signal that the interlocutor's assertion, evaluation, or assessment is wrong, inadequate, or contestable — a direct challenge to the latter's claim to be a credible, rational, and socially competent person [P. Brown & S. C. Levinson., 1987., p. 66]. This face threat is what accounts for the characteristic indirectness of disagreement in many speech communities: speakers resort to hedging, qualification, delay, and mitigation strategies precisely in order to minimize the FTA weight of their non-alignment.

Agreement, by contrast, is face-enhancing to positive face: it confirms the interlocutor's claim, endorses their epistemic stance, and signals solidarity. This basic asymmetry — agreement as face-supporting, disagreement as face-threatening — explains why, all else being equal, agreement is the socially easier response, and why cultures that place a high value on harmony and social hierarchy tend to develop particularly elaborate repertoires of indirect disagreement.

The weight of a face-threatening act, as Brown and Levinson specify, is determined by three sociolinguistic variables: the social distance between interlocutors, the relative power of the parties, and

the ranking of the imposition in the given culture[P. Brown & S. C. Levinson., 1987., p. 74]. These variables are directly applicable to the analysis of disagreement: the same counter-claim will carry a very different FTA weight depending on whether it is addressed to a close friend, an equal peer, a superior, or a stranger. Cross-cultural research has demonstrated that the thresholds at which mitigation is required differ systematically across societies, with high-context, collectivist cultures — including Uzbek — tending to require more elaborate face-work for disagreement than individualistic, low-context ones [Lingvospektr.uz., 2025., p. 3].

5. Preference Organization: Agreement as Default, Disagreement as Work

Conversation analysis approaches agreement and disagreement not primarily through the lens of intention or politeness but through the structural organization of talk. The foundational work of Anita Pomerantz on the sequential organization of assessments established that agreement and disagreement are not symmetrical options for a second speaker but structurally differentiated responses governed by a preference system[A. Pomerantz., 1984., pp. 57–101]. In conversation analytic terms, a preferred response is one that is produced without delay, without mitigation, and without qualification; a dispreferred response is one that is typically delayed, prefaced, hedged, and framed in ways that acknowledge the problematic status of the action being performed.

Pomerantz demonstrated through detailed sequential analysis that agreement with assessments is a preferred second action: it is produced promptly, without preamble, and typically upgrades or at least matches the evaluative force of the prior assessment[A. Pomerantz., 1984., pp. 64–65]. Disagreement, by contrast, is a dispreferred action: it is typically preceded by a delay, introduced by a partial agreement or a token of understanding, hedged with epistemic markers, and formulated so as to reduce its oppositional force. The structural signatures of dispreferred actions — delay, mitigation, partial agreement prefaces — are so consistent across speakers and contexts that they can be treated as reliable indicators of the speaker's orientation to the face-threatening character of what they are about to say.

Pomerantz's work also identified an important exception to the general preference for agreement: in the context of self-deprecation, where a speaker assesses themselves negatively, the preferred response is disagreement — that is, a counter-assessment that challenges the self-deprecation. This reversal of the preference structure demonstrates that preference is not an absolute property of agreement or disagreement as acts but a context-sensitive feature of the specific sequence in which they occur[A. Pomerantz., 1984., pp. 75–78]. The same point was elaborated by Helga Kotthoff, who showed that in disputational contexts, where disagreement has already been established and ratified, the preference structure shifts, and participants are expected to defend their positions rather than concede[H. Kotthoff., 1993].

The conversation analytic concept of preference organization is important for dissertation research on speech acts because it provides an empirical, interactional grounding for claims that are otherwise stated only at the level of social norms or psychological dispositions. The preference for agreement is not simply a cultural value — it is a structural feature of conversational sequences, visible in the timing, turn design, and sequential placement of responses.

6. Strategies for Realizing Disagreement Indirectly

Given the face-threatening and interactionally dispreferred status of direct disagreement, speakers across languages develop an extensive repertoire of indirect strategies for expressing non-alignment while minimizing the social cost. The pragmatic literature identifies several major types of such strategies, each of which can be illustrated from both English and cross-cultural discourse.

The first and most widely documented is the *yes-but* pattern, in which the speaker produces a token of agreement before introducing the contradictory element. Leech identifies this as the canonical realization of the Agreement Maxim in practice: the initial agreement token performs positive politeness (validating the interlocutor's position), while the subsequent qualification performs the actual

disagreement. The *but* functions as a pragmatic pivot that signals the impending FTA while retrospectively reframing the agreement token as a face-saving preface rather than a genuine concession[G. N. Leech., 1983., p. 138].

The second strategy is *hedging* — the use of epistemic qualifiers that reduce the speaker's commitment to the counter-proposition. Expressions such as *I'm not sure but...*, *it seems to me that...*, or *I might be wrong, but...* all signal that the disagreement is tentative, personal, and potentially revisable. Hedging reduces the FTA weight by presenting the counter-claim as a contribution to a shared epistemic project rather than a challenge to the interlocutor's authority.

A third strategy is *indirect refusal or avoidance*, in which the speaker neither agrees nor explicitly disagrees but produces an utterance that conversationally implicates non-alignment — a change of topic, an ambiguous response, a request for clarification, or a reframing of the question. In high-context cultures, including Uzbek-speaking communities, this kind of implicit disagreement is particularly prevalent, since the social costs of direct counter-assertion are higher and the tolerance for ambiguity in responses is greater [Lingvospektr.uz., 2025., p. 3; AFU Portfolio., 2025., p. 2].

A fourth strategy, particularly relevant in institutional and professional discourse, is *recontextualization*: the speaker agrees at a general level while implicitly disagreeing at the specific level, or agrees with part of the proposition while leaving the rest unaddressed. This strategy is common in academic, political, and diplomatic settings, where direct contradiction would threaten the collaborative framing of the exchange. Searle's notion of indirect speech acts provides the theoretical account: the surface illocutionary force is agreement, but the primary illocutionary force — the one the hearer is expected to recover — is qualified or partial dissent[J. R. Searle., 1969., pp. 62–64].

7. The Pragmatic Structure of Agreement: Upgrade, Match, and Downgrade

While disagreement has attracted more scholarly attention because of its social complexity, agreement is itself pragmatically multifaceted. Pomerantz distinguished three principal types of second-assessment agreement based on the evaluative force of the response relative to the prior assessment[A. Pomerantz., 1984., pp. 58–64].

The first type is the *upgrade*: the responding speaker not only agrees but intensifies the evaluation — producing a response that is stronger than the original assessment. If A says *It was quite good*, and B responds *It was absolutely brilliant*, B has produced an upgrade agreement. The pragmatic effect of upgrading is to signal strong affiliation, enthusiasm, and solidarity with the prior speaker's position.

The second type is the *same evaluation*: the speaker repeats the prior assessment or produces an equivalent expression, confirming it without intensification. This is the unmarked, baseline form of agreement — it ratifies the prior speaker's position without adding evaluative energy.

The third type is the *downgrade*: the responding speaker agrees in principle but produces a weaker evaluative term than the prior speaker — *Yes, it was fairly good* in response to *It was excellent*. The downgrade is pragmatically ambiguous: it is formally an agreement but carries the implicature of partial reservation. Depending on context and intonation, a downgrade may be heard as a weak agreement, a subtle expression of qualified approval, or a prelude to a more direct counter-assessment.

These distinctions matter for a theory of agreement because they show that agreement, like disagreement, is not a uniform act but a gradient one. The choice between upgrade, match, and downgrade encodes important social and epistemic information — about the speaker's degree of alignment, their relative status, and the conversational context in which the exchange occurs.

8. Cross-Cultural Dimensions: Agreement and Disagreement in English and Uzbek

The realization of agreement and disagreement is not culturally invariant. While the underlying preference structure and the face-theoretic account of their asymmetry have broad cross-linguistic

validity, the specific linguistic forms, pragmatic conventions, and social thresholds governing these acts differ substantially across speech communities. This cross-cultural dimension is central to any comparative pragmatic analysis involving English and Uzbek.

English, particularly in its British and American varieties, has developed a distinctive pragmatic culture around disagreement that favors indirect formulation in formal and institutional contexts but tolerates more direct counter-assertion in peer interaction. The characteristic English disagreement preface — *I see what you mean, but...* or *That's a fair point, though...* — combines acknowledgment of the prior position with qualification, maintaining the appearance of collaborative discourse even in adversarial contexts. Face-saving strategies in English disagreement typically operate through the negative politeness system: the speaker respects the interlocutor's autonomy and expertise by framing the counter-claim as their own tentative perspective rather than a correction [P. Brown & S. C. Levinson., 1987., pp. 129–131].

Uzbek communicative culture, rooted in the values of collectivism, hierarchical social structure, and relational harmony, places particularly high demands on the management of face in disagreement contexts. Research on speech acts in English and Uzbek has consistently noted that Uzbek speakers tend to avoid direct expression of disagreement, particularly in hierarchical relationships such as those between students and teachers, subordinates and superiors, or younger and older interlocutors [Lingvospektr.uz., 2025., p. 2]. Disagreement in such contexts is frequently conveyed through silence, topic change, ambiguous responses, or the deployment of heavily face-mitigating formulas that do not commit the speaker to a counter-position.

A comparative study of speech acts in conflict situations in English and Uzbek found that while English speakers tend toward more explicit, though still indirect, expressions of disagreement, Uzbek speech acts are characterized by a stronger preference for indirectness, relational maintenance, and the avoidance of any formulation that could be perceived as a direct challenge [AFU Portfolio., 2025., p. 2]. This difference reflects not a poverty of disagreement in Uzbek discourse but a different calibration of the social variables that Brown and Levinson identify as determinants of FTA weight: in Uzbek-speaking communities, the power differential and social distance dimensions tend to be weighted more heavily in determining the degree of mitigation required[P. Brown & S. C. Levinson., 1987., p. 74].

At the level of agreement, Uzbek discourse shows its own cultural specificity. The use of kinship address terms as politeness markers — responding with *aka* (elder brother) or *opa* (elder sister) as part of an agreement token — performs solidarity and hierarchical alignment simultaneously, in a way that has no direct structural equivalent in English [Madina Nuriddinova., 2025., p. 16]. Agreement in Uzbek is, in this sense, not only an epistemic act but a relational performance that constructs and maintains the social positions of both interlocutors.

9. Indirect Speech Acts and the Illocutionary Complexity of Agreement and Disagreement

The distinction between direct and indirect speech acts, as theorized by Searle and further developed in his later work, is nowhere more practically consequential than in the domain of agreement and disagreement[J. R. Searle., 1969., pp. 62–64**]**. An utterance whose propositional content is an agreement may carry the primary illocutionary force of a disagreement — and vice versa. The ability to recognize and produce such indirect acts is a core dimension of pragmatic competence, particularly in cross-cultural contexts where the conventions governing indirectness differ[J. R. Searle., 1975., pp. 59–82].

The canonical case is the indirect expression of disagreement through an apparent agreement. A speaker who responds to an interlocutor's assertion with *Well, that's certainly one way of looking at it* has produced an utterance whose surface form is affirmative but whose conversational implicature — particularly the *one way* qualification — signals that other ways exist, and that the speaker does not endorse the presented view as the only or best one. The hearer is expected to perform a Gricean inference:

given that a fully cooperative speaker who agreed would simply say so, the marked formulation implies non-alignment.

Research on speech act realization in English and Uzbek has noted that indirect speech acts in Uzbek are frequently realized through means that go beyond the verbal — through tone of voice, pausing, and the deployment of culturally specific hedging particles and discourse markers that have no direct translational equivalent in English [Inlibrary.uz., 2025., p. 4]. This observation points to a methodological challenge for cross-linguistic pragmatic research: the analysis of agreement and disagreement cannot be confined to lexical and syntactic forms but must extend to prosodic and interactional features that are themselves culturally coded.

10. Theoretical Implications for Pragmatic Research

The preceding analysis points to several theoretical implications for the study of agreement and disagreement as speech acts. First, these acts cannot be adequately described within a single theoretical framework. Speech act theory provides the foundational account of their illocutionary structure and felicity conditions. Politeness theory explains the asymmetry between them and the mitigation strategies associated with dispreferred responses. Conversation analysis contributes the sequential and structural dimension — the turn-by-turn interactional organization within which agreement and disagreement acquire their pragmatic force. And cross-cultural pragmatics demonstrates that the conventions governing their expression are culture-specific in ways that have significant practical consequences.

Second, the preferred/dispreferred distinction developed in conversation analytic research [A. Pomerantz., 1984., pp. 64–65] is not a merely descriptive observation but a theoretically significant finding: it shows that the face-theoretic account of disagreement as face-threatening and agreement as face-supporting has structural correlates in the organization of conversational sequences. The two frameworks are not competing but complementary — they describe the same pragmatic reality at different levels of analysis[A. Pomerantz., 1984., pp. 64–65].

Third, the cross-cultural dimension underscores what Anna Wierzbicka] argued more generally about the culture-specificity of pragmatic conventions: the pragmatic meaning of an utterance is not fully recoverable from its propositional content or its illocutionary type, but depends on the shared background assumptions and social norms of the community in which it is produced[A. Wierzbicka., 1991. For this reason, a contrastive pragmatic analysis of agreement and disagreement in English and Uzbek must be attentive not only to the formal differences in their linguistic realization but to the different social and cultural values that govern their deployment.

Fourth, indirect disagreement — whether through hedging, the yes-but structure, topic avoidance, or recontextualization — is not a peripheral or exceptional phenomenon but a central feature of pragmatic competence. Learners of a second language who acquire the propositional and grammatical resources of that language without acquiring its conventions for indirect disagreement risk producing utterances that are pragmatically infelicitous — either inappropriately blunt in cultures that expect mitigation, or opaquely indirect in cultures that expect more explicit formulation. This has direct implications for language pedagogy and for the teaching of pragmatic competence alongside grammatical form.

11. Conclusion

This article has examined the pragmatic features of the speech acts of agreement and disagreement through the intersecting lenses of speech act theory, the Cooperative Principle, politeness and face theory, and conversation analytic research on preference organization. The analysis has shown that agreement and disagreement are not simply positive and negative responses to prior assertions but complex pragmatic performances whose form, force, and social meaning are shaped by the sequential position they occupy, the social variables of power and distance, the cultural conventions of the speech community, and the face-management strategies available to speakers.

The asymmetry between agreement as a preferred, face-supporting act and disagreement as a dispreferred, face-threatening one is a structural feature of conversational interaction that has broad cross-linguistic validity, though the specific linguistic realizations and the thresholds of social tolerance for direct disagreement vary substantially across cultures. English and Uzbek represent two distinct pragmatic cultures in this respect: English allows for relatively more explicit, though still mitigated, expression of disagreement in peer contexts, while Uzbek pragmatic conventions place a higher premium on relational harmony and hierarchical face-respect, producing a preference for indirect, ambiguous, or suppressed disagreement in many interactional contexts.

For the study of pragmatics as an academic discipline, and for the training of communicative competence in language education, the speech acts of agreement and disagreement offer a productive lens through which the intersection of language, social structure, and cultural value becomes visible at the level of individual utterances and conversational exchanges. A full account of these acts — their illocutionary structure, their sequential organization, their cross-cultural variation, and their indirect realization strategies — requires the multi-framework approach that this article has attempted to outline.

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