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Scrutinizing the Concept of *(Verbal) Disagreement**

Terminological and definitional issues

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to scrutinize the concept of *disagreement* through highlighting some of the major terminological and definitional issues pertaining to it. With the help of empirical research, it addresses the common and distinct features of the various terms used for *disagreement* in linguistics. The paper also offers a critical review of the definitions of *disagreement* and based on the research results and the issues discussed, it proposes a new definition, which seems to be more capable of capturing the complex nature of disagreement than previous ones.
Keywords: disagreement, argument, terminology, speech act

1   Introduction

The phenomena of conflict and disagreement have been captivating researchers in linguistics for several decades. The popularity of the latter is due to the fact that it is one of the most commonly occurring speech events in everyday interactions. Disagreements are complex and entail the widely-researched issues of im/politeness and in/appropriateness. However, despite the considerable number of studies carried out on disagreement there is a lack of a uniform definition and conceptualization of the notion. Furthermore, in the literature of conflict talk, various closely related terms are used – often interchangeably – for the phenomenon of disagreement without any explanation of their meaning, as if they were self-evident. Thus, the general aim of this paper is to scrutinize the concept of *disagreement* through highlighting some of the major terminological and definitional issues. The specific aims are (1) to identify the common and distinct features of the various terms used for *disagreement* in linguistics, (2) to offer a critical review of the definitions of *disagreement*, and (3) to propose a definition of my own.

2   Terminological turmoil

Different researchers use various – but closely related – terms for the study of disagreements, such as *opposition* (Kakavá 2002), *argument* (Emihovich 1986; Maynard 1985; Muntigl & Turnbull 1998; Schiffrin 1984, 1985), *debate* (Johnson & Johnson 1985), *conflict* (Honda

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2002), *dispute* (Corsaro & Rizzo 1990; Goodwin et al. 2002; Kotthoff 1993; Sprott 1992), *confrontation* (Brown 1990; Hutchby 1992), *oppositional talk* (Bardovi-Harlig & Salsbury 2004; Corsaro & Maynard 1996), and *conflict talk* (Grimshaw 1990; Honda 2002; Leung 2005). Although it is not the primary aim of this paper to clarify this terminological turmoil, a discussion of the conceptualization issues is pertinent in order to demonstrate how these related notions are used by different scholars, and also to formulate a definition of *disagreement*.

The term *opposition* refers to a verbal or non-verbal "oppositional stance" in response to an "antecedent verbal (or non-verbal) action" (Kakavá 2002: 1539). Kakavá (2002) points out that opposition can be delivered in various verbal (e.g. disagreement) and non-verbal (e.g. gestures) ways and she also notes that silence can serve as a means of opposition (i.e., withholding approval). Honda (2002: 574) considers *conflict* to be a speech activity "in which two parties attempt to maintain their own positions by means of opposition, that is, the manifestation of negativity against the other party's position that is opposed to one's own". Negative attitude towards the other party's stance is also reflected in *confrontation*s, which are conceived as "aggravated opposition" highlighting the oppositional character of the interaction (Hutchby 1996: 25). Along similar lines, *dispute* is also conceptualized as talk consisting of extended opposition turns characterized by hostility and antagonism (Goodwin et al. 2002). Johnson and Johnson (1985) state that disagreements and argumentation are central elements of debates. Studying the effects of debates in learning groups, they claim that "debate exists when two or more students argue positions that are incompatible and a winner is declared on the basis of who presented their position best" [emphasis added] (ibid.: 238-239). They suggest that debates promote open-minded cooperation and facilitate learning, since participants do not consider them personal attacks but interesting opportunities to learn new things. The concept *oppositional talk* is generally used in a broader sense as it includes "disagreements, challenges, denials, accusations, threats, and insults" (Bardovi-Harlig & Salsbury 2004: 200). Similarly to oppositional talk, in *conflict talk* the parties occupy alternative positions *vis-á-vis* the same issue(s), but the latter is used in an even wider sense. Conflict talk is viewed as "a process of opposition which includes not only the manifestation of opposition, but the whole process of inducement, initiation, development, and management of opposition" (Honda 2002: 574).

Argument, one of the most commonly used terms, can be used in the traditional rhetorical sense and as an interactive process. The classical interpretation of argument is based on logical reasoning and conceptualized as unidimensional since it generally focuses on a single speaker who "presents an intact monologue supporting a disputable position" (Schiffrin 1985: 37). In contrast, argument as a type of interaction involves two or more participants who "openly support disputed positions" (ibid.). Jacobs and Jackson (1981) make an analogous distinction between argument as a type of speech act and as a type of interaction. They regard arguments as "disagreement-relevant speech events" which are "characterized by the projection, production, suppression, or resolution of disagreements, so that they function not only to manage cases of explicit disagreement, but also to regulate the occurrence of disagreeable speech acts" (Jacobs & Jackson 1982: 22-23). Thus, argument is defined formally as an expansion of the speech act of disagreement, and functionally as a means of managing disagreement in interaction. Arguing is conceptualized by van Eemeren & Grootendorst (1984) as an illocutionary act with the perlocutionary outcome of convincing. In their interpretation, arguments can extend through multiple utterances, so-called illocutionary act complexes. However, other researchers share the view that argument is broader than a single act of disagreement. Kakavá (2002: 1539), for instance, sees argument as "the activity

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in which the participants engage when they exchange oppositional moves to challenge and/or support for [*sic*] a position". Schiffrin (1984) emphasizes that argument is characterized by sustained disagreement and competition for interactionally negotiable goods. Finally, Muntigl and Turnbull (1998: 225) propose that arguments consist of "the conversational interactivity of making claims, disagreeing with claims, countering disagreements, and the process by which such disagreements arise, are dealt with, and resolved". Hence, participants oppose one another in successive turns at talk, so opposition is detectable throughout longer stretches of talk.

Thus, it can be seen that the terms discussed above are closely related with varying scope and fuzzy boundaries. The distinctions are made along the lines of positive/negative attitude and the local/interactional dimensions. It is also clear from the above that disagreement does not equate with argument, but can evolve into it.

3   *Disagreement* vs. *argument*: a corpus linguistic approach

Disagreement and *argument* are the most frequently used terms in the area of conflict talk and this makes them potential candidates for further investigation. As noted in the previous section, the two terms are closely related and some scholars use them interchangeably, assuming them to be synonymous. We can investigate the extent to which this is true by examining their synonyms. In order to compare and contrast the two terms the most effectively, I used the *Visual Thesaurus* program available at www.visualthesaurus.com. It is an interactive thesaurus, which creates word maps. In addition to synonyms, it also displays connections among word definitions, multiple word meanings, and antonyms.
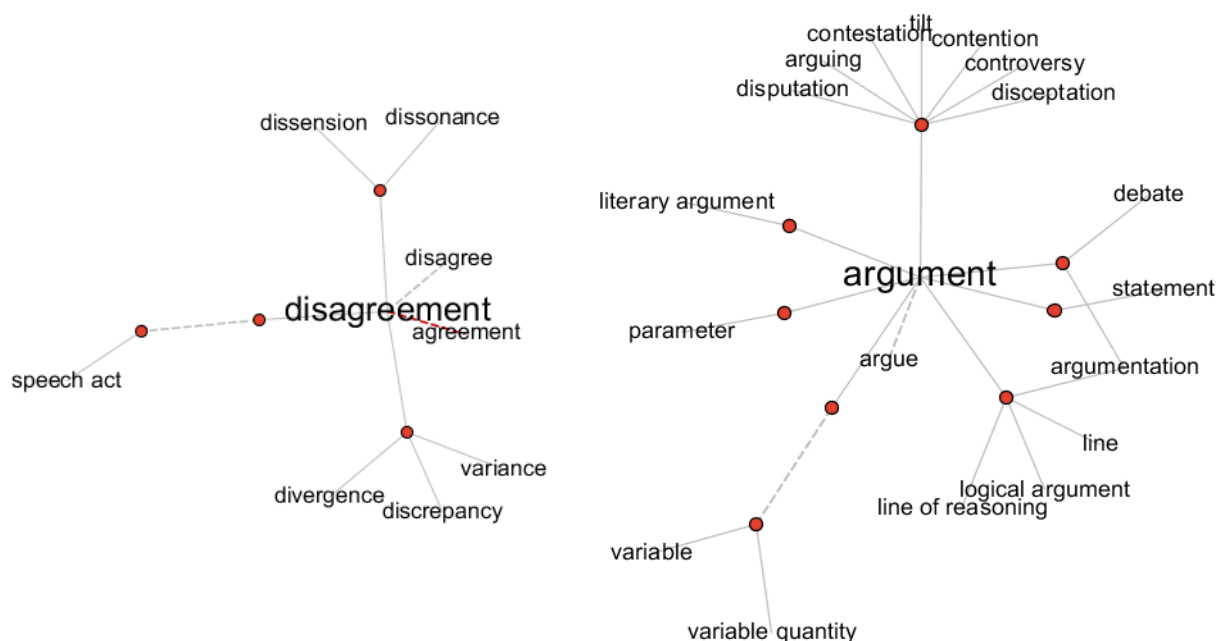

Figure 1: Visual Thesaurus screenshots of disagreement *and* argument

As can be seen in Figure 1, *disagreement* can refer to (a) a conflict of people's opinions or characters (e.g. dissonance), (b) the speech act of disagreeing or arguing, and (c) a difference

between conflicting claims or opinions (e.g. discrepancy). The word *argument* is more complex in terms of meaning, and it can be used in the following senses:

(a) the methodological process of logical reasoning,
(b) a fact or statement offered as evidence that something is true,
(c) a dispute involving strong disagreement,
(d) a discussion including reasons for and against some proposition,
(e) a plot of a literary work,
(f) in computer science, a value that is passed to a command, a program, etc.,
(g) a variable in a logical or mathematical expression (www.visualthesaurus.com)

In order to investigate the synonyms of the two terms in actual usage, I used the *enTenTen12* (hereafter *eTT12*) corpus consisting of 12,968,375,937 words (figure given by the program *Sketch Engine*). The *eTT12* corpus is comprised of material collected from the web and it was accessed and manipulated via *Sketch Engine*, a web-based program available at www.sketchengine.co.uk. The *Thesaurus* facility of the program checks whether a word shares collocational features with another words in the same grammatical relationship. Based on this data, it generates a distributional thesaurus. It lists the most similar words to a given word in terms of both grammatical and collocational behaviour. Since it is not a human-made thesaurus of synonyms, it is not subject to editorial policies and prejudices. Another benefit of this approach is that similarities are revealed through actual usage. Table 1 displays the top 15 items (in order of statistical significance) associated with *disagreement* and *argument* in the *eTT12* corpus.

DISAGREEMENT			ARGUMENT		
Lemma	**Score**	**Frequency**	**Lemma**	**Score**	**Frequency**
misunderstanding	0.316	57,446	statement	0.374	1,366,872
dispute	0.31	2,750,79	claim	0.361	1,182,023
controversy	0.302	158,263	theory	0.356	808,884
rivalry	0.246	52,332	opinion	0.344	1,128,623
quarrel	0.245	10,680	debate	0.336	584,462
contradiction	0.245	82,145	concept	0.321	1,244,493
animosity	0.242	14,555	discussion	0.313	1,172,385
confrontation	0.242	61,383	evidence	0.312	1,220,180
strife	0.242	26,486	belief	0.306	689,651
distrust	0.241	22,678	idea	0.305	4,103,609
conflict	0.233	599,070	thought	0.304	1,465,313
hostility	0.233	54,162	conclusion	0.303	599,734
dissent	0.228	32,323	notion	0.303	304,687
confusion	0.228	224,823	interpretation	0.302	310,780
uncertainty	0.228	181,218	explanation	0.302	433,134

Table 1: Top 15 synonyms (in order of statistical significance) of disagreement *and* argument *in the* eTT12 *corpus*

Based on the thesaurus companions, the most striking difference between the two terms is that most of the synonyms of *disagreement* denote a rather negative concept (e.g. rivalry,

animosity, hostility), while those of *argument* are more diverse in meaning primarily referring to neutral (e.g. opinion, discussion, explanation) or abstract notions (e.g. theory, concept, belief). This is in accordance with the wordmaps shown in Figure 1.

As a next step, I investigated the premodifiers *disagreement* and *argument* collocate with two specific aims: (1) to test the observation that *disagreement* generally has a more negative connotation than *argument*, and (2) to examine more closely the meanings and usage of the two terms. In order to obtain the most relevant results, I decided to include only adjectives into my analysis. I calculated the confidence level with which we can assert that there is an association between two words (t-score[1]) as well as the strength of the association between them (MI score[2]), and rank-ordered the top 15 adjectival collocates of *disagreement* and *argument* in Table 2 according to the t-scores. In most cases the t-score is a more reliable measurement than the MI score, as the latter does not work well with low frequencies.[3]

DISAGREEMENT				*ARGUMENT*			
premodifier	**freq.**	**t-score**	**MI score**	**premodifier**	**freq.**	**t-score**	**MI score**
political	848	28.836	6.678	good	8687	86.280	3.751
fundamental	618	24.777	8.241	oral	6938	83.103	8.764
major	619	24.357	5.572	strong	5913	75.505	5.789
serious	585	23.912	6.462	main	5009	69.026	5.339
strong	547	22.966	5.791	compelling	4694	68.368	8.882
little	577	22.757	4.249	valid	4614	67.658	7.983
public	482	21.080	4.650	legal	4695	67.268	5.774
significant	384	19.177	5.549	logical	3976	62.883	8.517
minor	315	17.623	7.142	convincing	3893	62.304	9.446
internal	297	17.044	6.505	closing	3260	56.741	7.327
considerable	290	16.929	7.411	best	4062	56.558	3.151
different	343	16.779	3.411	new	4446	54.248	2.423
important	326	16.573	3.606	better	3400	52.978	3.451
sharp	271	16.372	7.507	heated	2776	52.537	8.447
real	299	16.183	3.963	political	2917	52.350	5.025

Table 2: The adjectival collocates of disagreement *and* argument *(the top-fifteen rank ordered according to t-score)*

The results reveal the similar conclusions to those arrived at earlier; that is, *disagreement* seems to have a more negative connotation than *argument*. Most of the adjectives that premodify *disagreement* refer to its degree, as illustrated by examples 1 and 2:

Example 1
Breaking these referral networks is difficult to accomplish, and many physicians and administrators come to **major disagreements** over this issue. The administrator may often overestimate the number of patients that may be diverted and does not understand the personal and professional cost to the physician in disrupting the doctor's referral system.

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[1]   cf. e.g. Church et al. (1991)
[2]   cf. e.g. Stubbs (1995)
[3]   cf. e.g. Hunston (2002) or http://wordbanks.harpercollins.co.uk/Docs/Help/statistics.html

Example 2
During a visit in October, Ms. Masuike attended a meeting of residents which revealed **sharp disagreements** over the future of the rural community. While those living inside the temple when she first visited wanted to rebuild on the site, many community members who have been living elsewhere do not want to return.

Other collocates of *disagreement* are more neutral in meaning specifying the subject (e.g. political) or nature (e.g. public, internal) of disagreement. The former is illustrated by example 3 below:

Example 3
It appears that the long-standing debate in our country over whether regulations are necessary to protect public health or whether they are unwieldy and detrimental to the economy will continue. The outcome of this **political disagreement** will dictate how much control our government has over energy projects under our soil and off our coasts.

In contrast, most collocates of *argument* suggest that it is of a positive nature, a valued skill (e.g. logical, convincing, best), as illustrated by the following examples:

Example 4
I should point out that straw man is used with shocking regularity in American discourse, especially on TV, and it is nearly universally given a pass by moderators and commentators—along with much else I might add. This is a **good argument** for more instruction in the neglected science of logic.

Example 5
He presents a **compelling argument** for both the health behavior specialist and the layperson in search of an alternative take on the behavioral potential to overcome high rates of HIV transmission.

Some collocates of the word specify the subject (e.g. legal, political) or method (e.g. oral) of argument. It is interesting to note that the only premodifier conceptualizing *argument* as a dispute involving high emotional intensity is 'heated'. It is also worth mentioning that while the adjective 'strong' often collocates with both *disagreement* and *argument*, it has a negative connotation in the first case but a positive one in the second case.

In sum, the findings of my corpus-based research seem to reinforce that the term *disagreement* is generally associated with the act of disagreeing and has a rather negative connotation, while the term *argument* appears to be a more complex concept used in many senses (mostly neutral or positive ones). When the latter refers to a type of interaction, it involves disagreement and escalated emotions.

4   Definitions of *disagreement*

At this point, it seems important to define what is actually meant by the term *disagreement*. There has been a great deal of variation in the literature in the way in which the term has been used. According to Edstrom (2004: 1505), for instance, disagreement is the "communication of an opinion or belief contrary to the view expressed by the previous speaker". Similarly,

Sifianou (2012: 1554) considers the act of disagreement an "expression of a view"; however, it is not opposite to, but rather simply different from "that expressed by another speaker". Although these definitions allow for both verbal and non-verbal ways of expressing disagreement, they only deal with conflict on a content level. Rees-Miller (2000: 1088) gives a more detailed and more scientific account of what is meant by the term by stating that "[a] speaker S disagrees when s/he considers untrue some Proposition *P* uttered or presumed to be espoused by an Addressee A and reacts with an utterance the propositional content or implicature of which is *Not P* [original emphasis]". This definition points out that disagreement can be achieved indirectly, by implying opposition. Moreover, it allows S to disagree without A actually having said *P*. However, as Reese-Miller (ibid.: 1089) observes, the definition excludes teasing, nonserious verbal dueling and irony. Sornig gives the most detailed definition of the term disagreement in saying tentatively that "any *utterance* that comments upon a pre-text by questioning part of its semantic or pragmatic information (sometimes its formal structure as well), correcting or negating it (semantically or formally) will be called an act of disagreement or contradiction" [emphasis added] (1977: 363). Sornig's definition, however, seems to neglect the fact that disagreement can be a reactive act to a non-verbal expression of opinion as well (and vice versa).

5   Disagreement in speech act theory

As seen in sections 2 and 3, disagreement is generally categorized as a speech act. Sornig (1977) also defines disagreement drawing upon Speech Act Theory as one of its major theoretical frameworks. Speech Act Theory, the theory claiming that in conversation speakers perform various speech acts (e.g. promising, warning, commanding, etc.) that can be interpreted on three different levels,[4] was first developed by John Austin (1962). He set up the following classes of verbs based on their illocutionary force and presented a list of verbs which typically mark each of these categories (ibid.: 150-163):

- verdictives: "the giving of a verdict or judgement" (e.g. *acquit, convict, value*)
- exercitives: "the exercising of powers, rights, or influence" (e.g. *appoint, dismiss, nominate*)
- commissives: making promises or giving undertakings (e.g. *promise, agree, oppose*)
- behabitives: representatives of "attitudes and social behaviour" (e.g. *apologize, thank, congratulate*)
- expositives: clarify "how utterances fit into the course of an argument or conversation" (e.g. *state, agree, argue*) [emphasis added]

As is clear from the above, the classification of speech acts is not always clear-cut, a flaw that the author himself acknowledges stating that "there are still wide possibilities of marginal and awkward cases, or of overlaps" (ibid.: 151). The verb *agree*, for instance, is both categorized as a commissive and an expositive. As Bándli (2009: 20) notes, semantically, it is the opposite of *disagree*, while they both fulfil the function of expressing one's opinion. Furthermore, other verbs closely related to the meaning of *disagree* (e.g. *oppose, argue*) are also drawn into different groups in the taxonomy of illocutions. Although Austin does not list the verb *disagree* among the words exemplifying each category, he refers to its ambiguous group

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[4]   locution, illocution and perlocution

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membership claiming that "supporting, agreeing, disagreeing, maintaining, and defending" form a "group of illocutions which seem to be both expositive and commissive" (ibid.: 158).

Austin's theory of speech acts was deepened, extended, refined and incorporated into a linguistic theory by John Searle (1969). Searle refuses to accept the claim that conversation is rule-governed (ibid.: 21) and proposes that the illocutionary speech act is the basic unit of communication. Searle (1975) points out several weaknesses of Austin's framework, the most crucial one being that it is a classification of English illocutionary verbs rather than acts (ibid.: 351). As an alternative, he proposes a taxonomy of illocutionary acts comprising the following five categories (ibid.: 354-361):

- representatives (or assertives): speech acts that commit the speaker to the truth or falsity of the expressed proposition (e.g. *suggest, conclude, deduce*)
- directives: speech acts that attempt to get the hearer to take a particular action (e.g. *ask, order, beg*)
- commissives: speech acts that "commit the speaker […] to some future course of action" (e.g. *promise, oath, wow*)
- expressives: speech acts that express the speaker's attitudes and emotions towards the proposition (e.g. *thank, congratulate, apologize*)
- declarations: speech acts that are to "bring about a correspondence between the propositional content of the speech act and reality" (e.g. *resign, declare, name*)

In Searle's taxonomy, the act of disagreement is not a commissive and it differs from promises since it is a reaction act to an act that precedes it; in other words, it requires a prior utterance from an interlocutor (Sornig 1977: 364). This has implications for the study of disagreements. Since the act of disagreement depends on a pre-text, it must be analyzed within the particular context in which it occurs. Disagreements can be related to representatives, since in some cases a disagreement can be expressed by stating that a previous proposition is untrue; that is, *Not P.*

Applying Searle's framework, the following conditions and criteria should be met for a proposition to be realized as an act of disagreement (1975: 361-362):

(1) Preparatory condition:
   (a) S1 has asserted or implied or is believed to have asserted or implied *P*.
   (b) S2 understands the propositional content of *P* and there is no need for further information.
(2) Propositional condition: S2 asserts or implies *different from P* or *Not P*.
(3) Sincerity condition:
   (a) S2 believes that S1 has asserted *P*.
   (b) S2 believes that S1 considers *P* to be true.
   (c) S2 wants to inform S1 that S2 is of a different opinion and, therefore, agreement is not possible.
(4) Essential condition: Either or both S1 and S2 count the act as an act of disagreement.

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6   A working definition of *verbal disagreement*

The primary aim of this paper is to define *verbal disagreement*[5], however, first we need to note some issues pertaining to the complex nature of disagreements:

(1) When disagreeing, the truth value of S1's utterance and that of S2's do not have to be in contrast with each other. Example 6 illustrates this point (disagreement is indicated by an arrow):

Example 6
Two students are talking:
S1   Did you watch the talk the President of Hungary gave yesterday?
→ S2   No, I only watched Áder's speech.

S2's utterance is defined as an act of disagreement, even though the propositional content of the two utterances are not opposite to each other, since S2 lacks the world knowledge that the President of Hungary is János Áder and believes that they are talking about two different entities.

(2) As already mentioned, according to Edstrom's (2004: 1505) definition, disagreement is "the communication of an opinion or belief". However, analyzing speaker's belief is always problematic, as it is hard, or in some cases, even impossible to access. In my view, S2's utterance does not always have to mirror speaker's belief, as it can be a joke or teasing the other and still count as an act of disagreement. For instance in Example 7, the illocutionary force of S2's utterance is a disagreement with S1's boasting about his looks expressed by a joke. Naturally, S2 does not think that S1 has a star-like head.

Example 7
S1   No wonder that every girl in class is into me: I have a baby face and star-like eyes.
→ S2   Star-like is your head!

(3) The disagreeing utterance does not have to oppose the whole of an antecedent utterance, it can be inconsistent with a part of it. For instance, in Example 8, S2's utterance challenges only a part of S1's proposition:

Example 8
S1   This car is cheap and reliable.
→ S2   Cheap? / I don't think it is reliable at all.

Accordingly, full inconsistency exists when the disagreeing utterance contradicts the whole of a preceding utterance, illustrated by Example 9:

Example 9
S1   Tom is a handsome and intelligent guy.
→ S2   I don't think so.

(4) Another important thing to remember is that disagreement can be generated by all kinds of prompts, including non-verbal expressions of opinion as well. Furthermore, this prior prompt

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[5]   Although I am aware of the fact that there are also nonverbal ways of expressing disagreement, such as posture, facial expressions, and paralinguistic features, these are beyond the scope of this paper.

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does not need to precede the disagreement immediately; they may be separated by sequences of talk.

(5) We also need to keep in mind that disagreement is not always judged negatively. Its interpretation is highly context and culture dependent and is influenced by parameters such as the participants, the interactional goal, the norms, the topic of conversation, etc.[6]

(7) Finally, speech act theory seems to be too rigid to account for the dynamics of disagreement. Instead of conceptualizing disagreement as a speech act, it is rather considered a "situated activity, interactionally managed by interlocutors" (Sifianou 2012: 1557), which has to be interpreted in context.

Thus, keeping in mind the results of the empirical research as well as the aforementioned points, the following definition for *verbal disagreement* is suggested:

> *Verbal disagreement is a situated activity whose function is to express an opinion (or belief) the propositional content or illocutionary force of which is – or is intended to be – partly or fully inconsistent with that of a prior (non-verbal) utterance.*

7   Conclusion

The general aim of the present paper was to investigate the concept of *disagreement* through highlighting some of the major terminological and definitional issues pertaining to it. The paper provided a brief critical review of the terminology and definitions used for the notion of disagreement and also attempted to clarify the difference between the two most frequently used terms, i.e. *disagreement* and *argument*. On the basis of the results of the empirical research we can conclude that the term *disagreement* seems to be used mainly for the act of disagreeing with someone and thus it often has a negative connotation. In contrast, *argument* is used in wider semantic domains and often evokes neutral or positive associations. After considering the research results as well as the discussions on the characteristics of disagreement, I proposed a definition of *verbal disagreement* that seems to be more capable of capturing the complex nature of disagreement than the definitions proposed in the relevant literature.

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[6]   For more on this topic, see Koczogh (2012).

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