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The Relationship between Maxims of Agreement and the Units of the Speech Communication System

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Abstract:

This paper explores the intricate relationship between Leech's maxim of agreement, a key component of politeness theory in pragmatics, and the various units within a speech communication system. The analysis will draw upon existing research to investigate how the maxim of agreement manifests in different communication contexts and how its application (or violation) impacts the effectiveness and perceived politeness of spoken interactions. We will examine the interplay between the maxim of agreement and different levels of the speech communication system, from individual speech acts to broader conversational structures and cultural norms. Understanding this relationship is crucial for improving communication effectiveness across diverse contexts.

Keywords: maxim, politeness, pragmatics, communication, context, conversational structures

Leech's Maxim of Agreement and Politeness Theory Leech's politeness principle [1], [2], [3], [4] posits that communicators strive to maintain a balance between their own face needs (self-image and autonomy) and the face needs of their interlocutors. One of the six maxims that comprise this principle is the maxim of agreement, which suggests that speakers should minimize disagreement and maximize agreement with their conversational partners [1], [5], [4]. This maxim isn't about necessarily conforming to every opinion, but rather about strategically managing disagreement to maintain positive social relations. The degree to which this maxim is adhered to can significantly influence the perceived politeness of an utterance. A study by Afifah Raihany and Eva Nikmatul Rabbianty [1] on the imperative speech of elementary school teachers found that the teachers utilized Leech's six maxims, including the maxim of agreement, in their interactions with students.

This demonstrates the relevance of the maxim even in educational settings where clear instructions are needed. However, the extent to which agreement is prioritized might vary based on the context, power dynamics, and cultural norms at play [3], [6].

The Units of the Speech Communication System The speech communication system can be analyzed at various levels, each with its own unique characteristics and complexities. These levels include:

Phonetic/Phonological Level: This level deals with the physical sounds of speech, their production, and their organization into meaningful units (phonemes, syllables). While the maxim of agreement doesn't directly impact the phonetic properties of speech, it influences the choice of words and phrases used to express agreement or disagreement.

Lexical Level: This level focuses on individual words and their meanings. The maxim of agreement operates at this level through the selection of words that express concordance or avoid direct contradiction. For instance, using phrases like "I see your point" or "That's an interesting perspective" can signal agreement even when complete concurrence isn't present.

Syntactic Level: This level involves the grammatical arrangement of words into phrases and sentences. The construction of sentences can reflect agreement or disagreement subtly. For example, a declarative sentence might suggest agreement, while a question might imply a need for clarification or a potential point of disagreement.

Semantic Level: This level is concerned with the meaning of utterances as a whole. The maxim of agreement necessitates an understanding of the speaker's intended meaning and the crafting of a response that aligns with or acknowledges that meaning. This level requires a high degree of pragmatic competence.

Pragmatic Level: This is the highest level, encompassing the social context, the speaker's intentions, and the listener's interpretation. The maxim of agreement is fundamentally a pragmatic principle, as it addresses the social implications of verbal interactions. The degree of agreement expressed is often influenced by factors like social distance, power relationships, and cultural norms [6], [7].

Interplay between the Maxim of Agreement and Communication Units the maxim of agreement interacts with each level of the speech communication system in unique ways. At the phonetic/phonological level, the choice of intonation and stress can signal agreement or disagreement even without explicit lexical confirmation. At the lexical level, the selection of synonymous or antonymous terms directly reflects the degree of agreement. At the syntactic level, sentence structure can subtly express agreement or disagreement. For instance, using parallel sentence structure might suggest agreement, while contrasting sentence structures might highlight differences in opinion. At the semantic level, the overall meaning of utterances is crucial for assessing the extent of agreement. Finally, at the pragmatic level, the social and cultural context shapes the interpretation of agreement, influencing the degree to which the maxim is prioritized.

Several studies highlight the complex interplay between the maxim of agreement and communication units. For example, research on politeness in health care settings [8], [9] shows how doctors and nurses utilize the maxim of agreement to build rapport with patients, even when conveying potentially unpleasant news. Conversely, studies of online communication [3], [10] reveal that the maxim of agreement can be frequently violated in heated online discussions, resulting in increased conflict. This difference emphasizes the context-dependent nature of the maxim.

Methodological Considerations and Research Gaps The research on the maxim of agreement and its interaction with speech communication units often employs qualitative methods, such as discourse analysis [3], [6] and ethnographic studies [11]. While these methods provide rich insights into the

complexities of human interaction, they are often limited in their generalizability. Quantitative methods, such as analyzing the frequency of agreement markers in large corpora, could offer a complementary perspective, but such research is relatively scarce.

There are several key research gaps that warrant further investigation: Cross-cultural variations: The extent to which the maxim of agreement is prioritized may vary significantly across cultures [12], [7]. More research is needed to explore these cultural differences and their impact on communication.

Power dynamics: The influence of power dynamics on the application of the maxim of agreement needs further exploration [7]. In hierarchical settings, the less powerful speaker might prioritize agreement to avoid conflict, even if they disagree internally.

Technological mediation: The impact of technology on the application of the maxim of agreement requires further investigation [13], [14]. The asynchronous nature of online communication, for example, can lead to misunderstandings and violations of this maxim.

Developmental aspects: Research on how children acquire and apply the maxim of agreement is limited [2]. Understanding the developmental trajectory of this maxim could offer valuable insights into the acquisition of pragmatic competence.

Leech's maxim of agreement plays a crucial role in shaping polite and effective communication. Its relationship with the units of the speech communication system is complex and multifaceted. While research has explored this relationship in various contexts, significant research gaps remain, particularly regarding cross-cultural variations, power dynamics, technological mediation, and developmental aspects. Future research should address these gaps using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to generate a more comprehensive understanding of how this important pragmatic principle shapes human interaction. By understanding the nuanced ways in which the maxim of agreement operates across different levels of the speech communication system, we can improve our communication skills and foster more effective and harmonious interactions. This improved understanding will be beneficial in a wide array of fields, from education [1], [15], [16] and healthcare [8], [9] to international relations and intercultural communication [12], [7]. Further research will help refine our understanding of the maxim of agreement and its implications for successful communication.

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