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**Multimodal (Im)politeness:**  
**The Verbal, Prosodic and Non-Verbal Realization of Disagreement in**  
**German and New Zealand English**

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## **Abstract**

The present study takes a multimodal approach to speech act analysis. It investigates the disagreeing behaviour of Germans and New Zealanders exhibited during televised panel discussions on a verbal, prosodic, and non-verbal level. More specifically, the present study aims to uncover whether there are differences in the use of prosodic and non-verbal cues between the two groups and if potential differences influence how polite a disagreement is perceived to be. The investigation showed that, on a verbal level, Germans have a preference for more concise disagreements, with a more direct and explicit disagreeing style, producing a large number of strengthening devices, while New Zealanders produce more indirect disagreements, containing a large number of softening devices. Prosodically, the Germans differ from the New Zealanders by using audibly loud and fast speech significantly more frequently, while the two groups' use of mean pitch, pitch range and intensity range differs little. On a non-verbal level, Germans produce significantly more non-verbal cues during disagreements than their New Zealand counterparts. The main difference between the two groups, however, lies in how their disagreeing behaviour differs from their non-verbal behaviour in neutral speech. While Germans use significantly fewer non-verbal cues in neutral speech than in disagreements and also use a much more limited range of non-verbal cues, the New Zealanders' non-verbal behaviour in disagreements differs little from their behaviour in neutral speech. In order to test the effect of these differences on the perceived level of politeness, two questionnaires were developed; one prosodic questionnaire testing the effects of loud and fast speech in disagreements on the perceived level of politeness and one non-verbal questionnaire testing the effect of a large number of non-verbal cues on the perceived level of politeness. The results show that fast and loud speech has a negative effect on politeness, as perceived by New Zealanders. A large number of non-verbal cues only appear to have a negative effect on the level of politeness, as perceived by New Zealanders, when disagreements exhibit a high level of involvement and emotion. Overall, it appears that German disagreeing behaviour is likely to be perceived negatively by New Zealanders.

Für Mama und Papa

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## Table of Contents

|                        |      |
|------------------------|------|
| Abstract.....          | ii   |
| Dedication.....        | iii  |
| Acknowledgements.....  | iv   |
| Table of Contents..... | v    |
| List of Tables.....    | xv   |
| List of Figures.....   | xvii |

|                          |          |
|--------------------------|----------|
| <b>Introduction.....</b> | <b>1</b> |
|--------------------------|----------|

### Chapter 1

#### **The Importance of Multimodality to Politeness, Disagreements, and Cross-Cultural Communication: A Literature Overview**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 1 Cross-Cultural Communication.....                                 | 6  |
| 1.1 Definition.....   | 6  |
| 1.2 Cross-Cultural Communication and Cross-Cultural Competence..... | 6  |
| 1.3 Miscommunication.....   | 7  |
| 1.4 Reasons for Miscommunication.....                               | 8  |
| 1.4.1 Inadequate Perception.....                                    | 8  |
| 1.4.2 Inappropriate Comprehension.....                              | 9  |
| 1.4.2.1 Language Proficiency.....                                   | 9  |
| 1.4.2.2 Pragmalinguistic Failure.....                               | 10 |
| 1.4.3 Insufficient Relevant Knowledge.....                          | 10 |
| 1.4.4 Uncooperativeness.....  | 12 |
| 1.4.5 Production Difficulties.....                                  | 12 |
| 1.5 Is it Possible to Overcome Miscommunication?.....               | 13 |
| 2 Disagreement.....   | 14 |
| 2.1 Definition.....   | 14 |
| 2.2 Disagreement Markers.....                                       | 16 |
| 2.2.1 Verbal Disagreement Markers.....                              | 16 |
| 2.2.2 Prosodic Disagreement Markers.....                            | 17 |
| 2.2.3 Non-Verbal Disagreement Markers.....                          | 17 |
| 2.3 Is Disagreement Really Dispreferred?.....                       | 18 |
| 2.4 German vs. New Zealand Disagreeing Style.....                   | 22 |
| 2.4.1 German Disagreeing Style.....                                 | 23 |
| 2.4.2 New Zealand Disagreeing Style.....                            | 23 |
| 2.5 The Question of Explicitness.....                               | 24 |
| 3 Politeness.....   | 27 |
| 3.1 Approaches to Politeness.....                                   | 28 |
| 3.1.1 The Social Norm Approach.....                                 | 28 |
| 3.1.2 The Conversational Maxim Approach.....                        | 28 |
| 3.1.3 The Face Saving Approach.....                                 | 29 |

|          |  |    |
|----------|--|----|
| 3.1.4    | The Conversational Contract Approach.....                            | 30 |
| 3.2      | Problems with Politeness Approaches.....                             | 30 |
| 3.2.1    | The Social Norm Approach.....  | 31 |
| 3.2.2    | The Conversational Maxim Approach.....                               | 31 |
| 3.2.3    | The Face Saving Approach.....  | 32 |
| 3.2.4    | The Conversational Contract Approach.....                            | 34 |
| 3.2.5    | A Mixed Approach.....  | 34 |
| 3.3      | Politeness Model.....  | 35 |
| 3.3.1    | From Speaker to Hearer Model.....                                    | 36 |
| 3.3.1.1  | Culture and Social Norms.....  | 38 |
| 3.3.1.2  | Speaker.....   | 39 |
| 3.3.1.3  | Assessing Social Norms.....  | 39 |
| 3.3.1.4  | Assessing Situation.....   | 40 |
| 3.3.1.5  | Assessing Addressee.....   | 40 |
| 3.3.1.6  | Assessing Politeness.....  | 41 |
| 3.3.1.7  | Utterance.....   | 41 |
| 3.3.1.8  | Culture and Social Norms.....  | 41 |
| 3.3.1.9  | Addressee.....   | 42 |
| 3.3.1.10 | Assessing Social Norms.....  | 42 |
| 3.3.1.11 | Assessing Situation.....   | 43 |
| 3.3.1.12 | Assessing Addressee.....   | 43 |
| 3.3.1.13 | Assessing Politeness.....  | 44 |
| 3.3.2    | Implications of the Model.....                                       | 44 |
| 3.4      | Impoliteness – The Dark Side of Politeness.....                      | 45 |
| 3.5      | Indirectness and Politeness.....                                     | 47 |
| 3.6      | German vs. New Zealand Politeness.....                               | 49 |
| 3.6.1    | German Politeness.....   | 49 |
| 3.6.2    | New Zealand Politeness.....  | 50 |
| 4        | Prosody.....   | 51 |
| 4.1      | Definition.....  | 51 |
| 4.2      | Why Include Prosodic Features in a Pragmatics Research Project?..... | 52 |
| 4.3      | Functions of Prosodic Cues.....                                      | 53 |
| 4.3.1    | Semantic Content of Prosodic Cues.....                               | 53 |
| 4.3.2    | Conversational Organization.....                                     | 54 |
| 4.3.3    | Emotion Content.....   | 55 |
| 4.3.4    | Prosodic Cues as Contextualization Cues.....                         | 56 |
| 4.4      | Participant Orientation.....   | 57 |
| 4.4.1    | Impression Formation.....  | 59 |
| 4.4.2    | Cross-Cultural Communication.....                                    | 59 |
| 4.4.3    | Acquisition of Prosodic Knowledge.....                               | 60 |
| 4.5      | German vs. English Registers of Prosody.....                         | 61 |
| 4.6      | The Relevance of Prosody to the Present Study.....                   | 63 |
| 4.6.1    | The Relevance of Prosody to Disagreement.....                        | 63 |
| 4.6.2    | The Relevance of Prosody to Politeness.....                          | 66 |
| 4.6.3    | Prosody as Modification Devices.....                                 | 66 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 5 Non-Verbal Communication.....  | 68 |
| 5.1 Definition.....  | 68 |
| 5.2 How to Do Things Without Words.....  | 69 |
| 5.3 The Correlation of Speech with Non-verbal Cues.....                          | 69 |
| 5.3.1 The Autonomy of Non-Verbal Behaviour.....                                  | 69 |
| 5.3.2 Synchronization.....   | 70 |
| 5.3.3 Speech Integration.....  | 71 |
| 5.4 The Benefits of Non-Verbal Cues.....   | 72 |
| 5.4.1 Speaker Benefits.....  | 73 |
| 5.4.2 Listener Benefits.....   | 76 |
| 5.4.2.1 Interpersonal Relationships.....   | 76 |
| 5.4.2.2 Speaker Commitment.....  | 76 |
| 5.4.2.3 Speaker's Truthfulness.....  | 77 |
| 5.4.2.4 Speaker's Attitudes and Emotions.....                                    | 77 |
| 5.5 The Relevance of Non-Verbal Cues to Cross-Cultural Communication....         | 78 |
| 5.6 The Relevance of Non-Verbal Cues to Politeness.....                          | 80 |
| 5.7 Parallels in Modalities.....   | 81 |
| 5.8 Why Include Non-Verbal Means of Communication in Pragmatic<br>Research?..... | 81 |

## **Chapter 2**

### **Multimodal Disagreeing Behaviour: Methodological Issues**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 1 Research Questions.....                               | 83 |
| 2 Data.....   | 84 |
| 2.1 Authentic Spoken Data.....                          | 85 |
| 2.2 Genre Elicits Disagreement.....                     | 85 |
| 2.3 Contains Audio Data.....                            | 85 |
| 2.4 Contains Visual Data.....                           | 85 |
| 2.5 Comparability.....                                  | 86 |
| 2.6 Accessibility.....                                  | 86 |
| 3 Data Transcription.....                               | 86 |
| 3.1 Transcription Process.....                          | 86 |
| 3.2 Transcription Conventions.....                      | 87 |
| 4 Framework: Qualitative or Quantitative Analysis?..... | 87 |
| 5 Verbal Data.....                                      | 88 |
| 5.1 Identifying Disagreement.....                       | 89 |
| 5.2 Disagreement Strategies.....                        | 89 |
| 5.2.1 Pre-Disagreement Strategies.....                  | 89 |
| 5.2.1.1 Disagreement Introduction.....                  | 90 |
| 5.2.1.1.1 Explicit Disagreement Introduction.....       | 90 |
| 5.2.1.1.2 Implicit Disagreement Introduction.....       | 90 |



|     |          |   |     |
|-----|----------|---|-----|
|     | 5.2.1.2  | Initial Agreement.....                      | 90  |
|     | 5.2.1.3  | Pre-Disagreement Justification.....         | 90  |
|     | 5.2.1.4  | Forewarn.....                               | 91  |
|     | 5.2.2    | Core Disagreement Strategies.....           | 91  |
|     | 5.2.2.1  | Performative Disagreement.....              | 91  |
|     | 5.2.2.2  | Explicit Disagreement.....                  | 92  |
|     | 5.2.2.3  | Implicit Disagreement.....                  | 92  |
|     | 5.2.2.4  | Hint.....                                   | 92  |
|     | 5.2.2.5  | Qualified Agreement.....                    | 93  |
|     | 5.2.3    | Post-Disagreement Strategies.....           | 93  |
|     | 5.2.3.1  | Concession.....                             | 93  |
|     | 5.2.3.2  | Post-Disagreement Justification.....        | 93  |
| 5.3 |          | Coding for the Degree of Explicitness.....  | 94  |
| 5.4 |          | Internal Modification Devices.....          | 95  |
|     | 5.4.1    | Softening Devices.....                      | 95  |
|     | 5.4.1.1  | Tag Question.....                           | 96  |
|     | 5.4.1.2  | Impersonalization.....                      | 96  |
|     | 5.4.1.3  | Politeness marker.....                      | 97  |
|     | 5.4.1.4  | Hesitation Marker/Pause.....                | 97  |
|     | 5.4.1.5  | Address Form.....                           | 97  |
|     | 5.4.1.6  | Hedge.....                                  | 97  |
|     | 5.4.1.7  | Gambit.....                                 | 97  |
|     | 5.4.1.8  | Disarmer.....                               | 98  |
|     | 5.4.1.9  | Modal Verb.....                             | 98  |
|     | 5.4.1.10 | Verbosity.....                              | 98  |
|     | 5.4.2    | Strengthening Devices.....                  | 99  |
|     | 5.4.2.1  | Tag Question.....                           | 99  |
|     | 5.4.2.1  | Personalization.....                        | 99  |
|     | 5.4.2.1  | Alerter.....                                | 100 |
|     | 5.4.2.1  | Aggressive Interrogative/Exclamation.....   | 100 |
|     | 5.4.2.1  | Address Form.....                           | 100 |
|     | 5.4.2.1  | Booster.....                                | 100 |
|     | 5.4.2.1  | Repetition.....                             | 101 |
|     | 5.4.2.1  | Swear Word.....                             | 101 |
|     | 5.4.2.1  | Modal Verb.....                             | 101 |
|     | 5.4.2.1  | Minimal Verbosity.....                      | 101 |
|     |          | 6 Prosody Data.....                         | 102 |
|     | 6.1      | Measurement Tools.....                      | 102 |
|     | 6.2      | Features Analysed.....                      | 102 |
|     | 6.3      | Limitations.....                            | 103 |
|     | 6.3.1    | Homogeneity.....                            | 103 |
|     | 6.3.2    | Neutrality.....                             | 104 |
|     | 6.3.3    | Overlap.....                                | 104 |
|     | 6.4      | Problems.....                               | 105 |
|     | 6.4.1    | Problem: Hertz vs. ERB.....                 | 105 |
|     | 6.4.2    | Problem Solving: Hertz vs. ERB.....         | 105 |
|     | 6.4.3    | Problem: Pitch Tracking Errors.....         | 105 |
|     | 6.4.4    | Problem Solving: Pitch Tracking Errors..... | 105 |
|     | 6.4.5    | Problem: Pauses.....                        | 106 |

|         |   |     |
|---------|---|-----|
| 6.4.6   | Problem Solving: Pauses.....                    | 106 |
| 7       | Non-Verbal Data.....                            | 106 |
| 7.1     | Transcription Process.....                      | 106 |
| 7.2     | Categories of Non-Verbal Cues.....              | 107 |
| 7.2.1   | Gesture.....                                    | 107 |
| 7.2.2   | Body Movement.....                              | 108 |
| 7.2.3   | Facial Expression/Gaze.....                     | 108 |
| 7.2.4   | Head Movement.....                              | 108 |
| 7.3     | Subcategories of Non-Verbal Cues.....           | 108 |
| 7.3.1   | Subcategories of Gesture.....                   | 109 |
| 7.3.2   | Subcategories of Body Movement.....             | 110 |
| 7.3.3   | Subcategories of Facial Expression/Gaze.....    | 110 |
| 7.3.4   | Subcategories of Head Movement.....             | 111 |
| 7.4     | Extra-Verbal vs. Co-Verbal Non-Verbal Cues..... | 111 |
| 7.5     | Disagreement vs. Non-Disagreement.....          | 112 |
| 7.6     | Problems.....                                   | 112 |
| 7.6.1   | Problem: Technical Problems.....                | 112 |
| 7.6.2   | Problem Solving: Technical Problems.....        | 113 |
| 7.6.3   | Problem: Synchrony.....                         | 113 |
| 7.6.4   | Problem Solving: Synchrony.....                 | 113 |
| 7.6.5   | Problem: Idiosyncrasy.....                      | 113 |
| 7.6.6   | Problem Solving: Idiosyncrasy.....              | 114 |
| 8       | Questionnaire.....                              | 114 |
| 8.1     | Emic vs. Etic Approach.....                     | 114 |
| 8.2     | Ethical Considerations.....                     | 115 |
| 8.3     | Purpose of the Questionnaire.....               | 115 |
| 8.4     | Questionnaire Design.....                       | 115 |
| 8.5     | Problems.....                                   | 116 |
| 8.5.1   | Problem: Single Questionnaire.....              | 116 |
| 8.5.2   | Problem Solving: Single Questionnaire.....      | 116 |
| 8.5.3   | Problem: Idiosyncrasy.....                      | 117 |
| 8.5.4   | Problem Solving: Idiosyncrasy.....              | 117 |
| 8.5.5   | Problem: Influence of Order.....                | 117 |
| 8.5.6   | Problem Solving: Influence of Order.....        | 118 |
| 8.6     | Prosody Questionnaire.....                      | 118 |
| 8.6.1   | Problems.....                                   | 118 |
| 8.6.1.1 | Problem: Inter-Feature Influence.....           | 118 |
| 8.6.1.2 | Problem Solving: Inter-Feature Influence.....   | 119 |
| 8.7     | Non-Verbal Questionnaire.....                   | 119 |
| 8.7.1   | Problems.....                                   | 120 |
| 8.7.1.1 | Problem: Dismissive Gesture.....                | 120 |
| 8.7.1.2 | Problem Solving: Dismissive Gesture.....        | 120 |
| 8.7.1.3 | Problem: New Zealand Data.....                  | 120 |
| 8.7.1.4 | Problem Solving: New Zealand Data.....          | 120 |
| 8.8     | Participants.....                               | 120 |
| 8.9     | Conducting the Questionnaire.....               | 121 |

**Chapter 3**  
**The Verbal Properties of Disagreement: Results & Discussion**

|       |  |     |
|-------|--|-----|
| 1     | The Verbal Properties of Disagreement: Results.....                      | 122 |
| 1.1   | Disagreement Strategies.....   | 122 |
| 1.1.1 | Pre-Disagreement Strategies.....   | 123 |
| 1.1.2 | Core Disagreement Strategies.....  | 124 |
| 1.1.3 | Post-Disagreement Strategies.....  | 125 |
| 1.2   | Internal Modification Devices.....                                       | 125 |
| 1.2.1 | Internal Modification Devices per Number of Words.....                   | 126 |
| 1.2.2 | Internal Modification Devices per Number of Disagreements.....           | 128 |
| 1.2.3 | Internal Modification Devices per Number of Disagreement Strategies..... | 130 |
| 2     | The Verbal Properties of Disagreement: Discussion.....                   | 132 |
| 2.1   | Disagreement Strategies.....   | 133 |
| 2.1.1 | Pre-Disagreement Strategies.....   | 133 |
| 2.1.2 | Core Disagreement Strategies.....  | 134 |
| 2.1.3 | Post-Disagreement Strategies.....  | 138 |
| 2.2   | Internal Modification Devices.....                                       | 139 |
| 2.2.1 | Softening Devices.....   | 140 |
| 2.2.2 | Strengthening Devices.....   | 141 |
| 3     | The Verbal Properties of Disagreement: Summary.....                      | 143 |

**Chapter 4**  
**The Prosodic Properties of Disagreement: Results & Discussion**

|         |   |     |
|---------|---|-----|
| 1       | The Prosodic Properties of Disagreement: Results.....                         | 145 |
| 1.1     | The Correlation of Prosodic Features with Disagreements.....                  | 145 |
| 1.1.1   | Pitch Mean in Disagreements.....  | 146 |
| 1.1.2   | Pitch Range in Disagreements.....   | 146 |
| 1.1.3   | Intensity Mean in Disagreements.....  | 147 |
| 1.1.4   | Intensity Range in Disagreements.....   | 147 |
| 1.1.5   | Speech Rate in Disagreements.....   | 148 |
| 1.2     | Contour Plots.....  | 148 |
| 1.2.1   | Disagreement Contour Plots.....   | 149 |
| 1.2.2   | Neutral Speech Contour Plots.....   | 149 |
| 1.3     | Cross-Cultural Variation in the Use of Prosodic Features in Disagreement..... | 150 |
| 1.3.1   | Speaker Analysis.....   | 150 |
| 1.3.1.1 | Pitch Mean.....   | 151 |
| 1.3.1.2 | Pitch Range.....  | 152 |
| 1.3.1.3 | Intensity Mean.....   | 152 |
| 1.3.1.4 | Intensity Range.....  | 153 |
| 1.3.1.5 | Speech Rate.....  | 154 |
| 1.3.2   | Audibly Perceivable Difference Analysis.....                                  | 154 |

|           |  |     |
|-----------|--|-----|
| 1.3.2.1   | Pitch Mean.....  | 155 |
| 1.3.2.2   | Intensity Mean.....  | 158 |
| 1.3.2.3   | Speech Rate.....   | 161 |
| 2         | The Prosodic Properties of Disagreement.....                                   | 164 |
| 2.1       | The Correlation of Prosodic Features with Disagreements.....                   | 164 |
| 2.1.1     | Pitch Mean in Disagreements.....   | 164 |
| 2.1.2     | Pitch Range in Disagreements.....  | 166 |
| 2.1.3     | Intensity Mean in Disagreements.....   | 167 |
| 2.1.4     | Intensity Range in Disagreements.....  | 168 |
| 2.1.5     | Speech Rate in Disagreements.....  | 168 |
| 2.2       | Cross-Cultural Variation in the Use of Prosodic Features in Disagreements..... | 169 |
| 2.2.1     | Speaker Analysis.....  | 169 |
| 2.2.1.1   | Pitch Mean.....  | 170 |
| 2.2.1.2   | Pitch Range.....   | 170 |
| 2.2.1.3   | Intensity Mean.....  | 171 |
| 2.2.1.3.1 | Intensity Mean and Pitch Mean as Compensatory Strategies?.....                 | 172 |
| 2.2.1.4   | Intensity Range.....   | 173 |
| 2.2.1.5   | Speech Rate.....   | 174 |
| 2.2.1.5.1 | Intensity Mean and Speech Rate as Compensatory Strategies?.....                | 175 |
| 2.2.1.5.2 | Gender Differences?.....   | 175 |
| 2.2.1.5.3 | Differences Between Maori and Pakeha?.....                                     | 178 |
| 2.2.1.5.4 | Pitch Mean and Speech Rate as Compensatory Strategies?.....                    | 180 |
| 2.2.2     | Audibly Perceivable Difference Analysis.....                                   | 181 |
| 2.2.2.1   | Pitch Mean.....  | 181 |
| 2.2.2.2   | Intensity Mean.....  | 182 |
| 2.2.2.3   | Speech Rate.....   | 182 |
| 3         | The Prosodic Properties of Disagreement: Summary.....                          | 183 |

## Chapter 5

### The Non-Verbal Properties of Disagreement: Results & Discussion

|       |   |     |
|-------|---|-----|
| 1     | The Non-Verbal Properties of Disagreement: Results..... | 185 |
| 1.1   | Extra-Verbal Non-Verbal Cues.....                       | 185 |
| 1.1.1 | Pre-Disagreement.....                                   | 185 |
| 1.1.2 | Post-Disagreement.....                                  | 186 |
| 1.2   | Word Accompanying Non-Verbal Cues.....                  | 186 |
| 1.2.1 | Core Disagreement.....                                  | 186 |
| 1.3   | Non-Verbal Cues in Disagreements.....                   | 188 |
| 1.3.1 | Gesture in Disagreements.....                           | 189 |
| 1.3.2 | Body Movement in Disagreements.....                     | 190 |
| 1.3.3 | Facial Expression/Gaze in Disagreements.....            | 191 |
| 1.3.4 | Head Movement in Disagreements.....                     | 193 |

|       |  |     |
|-------|--|-----|
| 1.4   | Disagreements vs. Neutral Speech.....                      | 194 |
| 1.5   | Non-Verbal Cues in Neutral Speech.....                     | 196 |
| 1.5.1 | Gesture in Neutral Speech.....                             | 197 |
| 1.5.2 | Body Movement in Neutral Speech.....                       | 198 |
| 1.5.3 | Facial Expression/Gaze in Neutral Speech.....              | 199 |
| 1.5.4 | Head Movement in Neutral Speech.....                       | 200 |
| 2     | The Non-Verbal Properties of Disagreement: Discussion..... | 202 |
| 2.1   | Extra-Verbal Non-Verbal Cues.....                          | 202 |
| 2.1.1 | Pre-Disagreement.....                                      | 202 |
| 2.1.2 | Post-Disagreement.....                                     | 205 |
| 2.2   | Word Accompanying Non-Verbal Cues.....                     | 206 |
| 2.2.1 | Core Disagreement.....                                     | 206 |
| 2.3   | Non-Verbal Cues in Disagreements.....                      | 207 |
| 2.3.1 | Gesture in Disagreements.....                              | 207 |
| 2.3.2 | Body Movement in Disagreements.....                        | 209 |
| 2.3.3 | Facial Expression/Gaze in Disagreements.....               | 209 |
| 2.3.4 | Head Movement in Disagreements.....                        | 212 |
| 2.4   | Neutral Speech.....  | 213 |
| 2.5   | Non-Verbal Cues in Neutral Speech.....                     | 213 |
| 2.5.1 | Gesture in Neutral Speech.....                             | 214 |
| 2.5.2 | Body Movement in Neutral Speech.....                       | 215 |
| 2.5.3 | Facial Expression/Gaze in Neutral Speech.....              | 215 |
| 2.5.4 | Head Movement in Neutral Speech.....                       | 216 |
| 3     | The Non-Verbal Properties of Disagreement: Summary.....    | 217 |

## **Chapter 6**

### **Questionnaire Results & Discussion**

|         |  |     |
|---------|--|-----|
| 1       | Questionnaire Results.....                               | 220 |
| 1.1     | Hypothesis.....  | 220 |
| 1.1.1   | Expected Findings for the Prosody Questionnaire.....     | 220 |
| 1.1.2   | Expected Findings for the Non-Verbal Questionnaire.....  | 221 |
| 1.1.3   | Rating the Questionnaire.....                            | 221 |
| 1.2     | Prosody Questionnaire.....                               | 222 |
| 1.2.1   | Neutral Scenarios.....                                   | 222 |
| 1.2.1.1 | Scenario A.....  | 222 |
| 1.2.1.2 | Scenario B.....  | 223 |
| 1.2.2   | Scenarios with Increased Loudness.....                   | 223 |
| 1.2.2.1 | Scenario C.....  | 223 |
| 1.2.2.2 | Scenario D.....  | 224 |
| 1.2.3   | Scenarios with Increased Tempo.....                      | 224 |
| 1.2.3.1 | Scenario E.....  | 225 |
| 1.2.3.2 | Scenario F.....  | 225 |
| 1.2.4   | Scenarios with Increased Loudness & Increased Tempo..... | 226 |
| 1.2.4.1 | Scenario G.....  | 226 |
| 1.2.4.2 | Scenario H.....  | 227 |

|                   |   |     |
|-------------------|---|-----|
| 1.3               | Non-Verbal Questionnaire.....   | 228 |
| 1.3.1             | Neutral Scenarios.....  | 228 |
| 1.3.1.1           | Scenario A.....   | 228 |
| 1.3.1.2           | Scenario B.....   | 228 |
| 1.3.1.3           | Scenario C.....   | 229 |
| 1.3.2             | Non-Verbally Marked & Prosodically Unmarked Scenarios.....                      | 229 |
| 1.3.2.1           | Scenario D.....   | 229 |
| 1.3.2.2           | Scenario E.....   | 230 |
| 1.3.2.3           | Scenario F.....   | 231 |
| 1.3.3             | Non-Verbally Marked & Prosodically Marked Scenarios.....                        | 231 |
| 1.3.3.1           | Scenario G.....   | 231 |
| 1.3.3.2           | Scenario H.....   | 232 |
| 1.3.3.3           | Scenario I.....   | 232 |
| 2                 | Questionnaire Discussion.....   | 233 |
| 2.1               | Prosody Questionnaire.....  | 234 |
| 2.1.1             | Neutral Scenarios.....  | 234 |
| 2.1.2             | Scenarios with Increased Loudness.....  | 234 |
| 2.1.3             | Scenarios with Increased Tempo.....   | 235 |
| 2.1.4             | Scenarios with Increased Loudness & Increased Tempo.....                        | 235 |
| 2.2               | Non-Verbal Questionnaire.....   | 237 |
| 2.2.1             | Neutral Scenarios.....  | 237 |
| 2.2.2             | Non-Verbally Marked & Prosodically Unmarked Scenarios.....                      | 238 |
| 2.2.3             | Non-Verbally Marked & Prosodically Marked Scenarios.....                        | 239 |
| 3                 | Implications of the Prosody Questionnaire and the Non-Verbal Questionnaire..... | 240 |
| <br>              |   |     |
| <b>Chapter 7</b>  |   |     |
| <b>Conclusion</b> |   |     |
| 1                 | Research Questions Revisited.....   | 243 |
| 2                 | Verbal Disagreeing Behaviour.....   | 245 |
| 2.1               | Preference for Disagreement vs. Agreement.....                                  | 245 |
| 2.2               | Preference for Explicitness vs. Implicitness.....                               | 246 |
| 2.3               | Preference for Strengthening vs. Softening.....                                 | 247 |
| 3                 | Prosodic Disagreeing Behaviour.....   | 249 |
| 3.1               | Preference for Clarity vs. Politeness.....                                      | 249 |
| 3.2               | Preference for Strengthening vs. Softening.....                                 | 250 |
| 4                 | Non-Verbal Disagreeing Behaviour.....   | 251 |
| 4.1               | Preference for Changed vs. Unchanged Non-Verbal Behaviour.....                  | 251 |
| 4.2               | Preference for Strengthening vs. Softening.....                                 | 252 |
| 5                 | German vs. New Zealand Disagreeing Behaviour in a Nutshell.....                 | 253 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 6 Implications of the Questionnaires..... | 253 |
| 7 Does this Mean Germans are Rude?.....   | 255 |

## **Appendices**

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Appendix 1: Coded Disagreements and Coded Modification Devices.....             | 257 |
| Appendix 2: Explicitness Coding Form.....                                       | 306 |
| Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet.....                                  | 308 |
| Appendix 4: Prosody Questionnaire Word-Only Condition.....                      | 310 |
| Appendix 5: Prosody Questionnaire Word + Prosody Condition.....                 | 313 |
| Appendix 6: Prosody Questionnaire Word + Prosody + Non-Verbal Condition.....    | 316 |
| Appendix 7: Non-Verbal Questionnaire Word-Only Condition.....                   | 318 |
| Appendix 8: Non-Verbal Questionnaire Word + Non-Verbal Condition.....           | 322 |
| Appendix 9: Non-Verbal Questionnaire Word + Non-Verbal + Prosody Condition..... | 327 |

|                                |            |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| <b>List of References.....</b> | <b>330</b> |
|--------------------------------|------------|

## List of Tables

|           |   |     |
|-----------|---|-----|
| Table 1:  | Disagreement Strategies.....                                      | 122 |
| Table 2:  | Pre-Disagreement Strategies.....                                  | 123 |
| Table 3:  | Core Disagreement Strategies.....                                 | 124 |
| Table 4:  | Post-Disagreement Strategies.....                                 | 125 |
| Table 5:  | Internal Modification Devices.....                                | 126 |
| Table 6:  | Number of Words.....  | 127 |
| Table 7:  | Softening Devices Per Number of Words.....                        | 127 |
| Table 8:  | Strengthening Devices Per Number of Words.....                    | 128 |
| Table 9:  | Number of Disagreements.....                                      | 128 |
| Table 10: | Softening Devices Per Number of Disagreements.....                | 129 |
| Table 11: | Strengthening Devices Per Number of Disagreements.....            | 129 |
| Table 12: | Number of Disagreement Strategies.....                            | 130 |
| Table 13: | Softening Devices Per Number of Disagreement Strategies.....      | 130 |
| Table 14: | Strengthening Devices Per Number of Disagreement Strategies.....  | 131 |
| Table 15: | Hints.....  | 136 |
| Table 16: | Turn-Interruptive/Turn-Competitive Disagreements.....             | 139 |
| Table 17: | Audibly Perceivable Pitch Mean, German Speakers.....              | 156 |
| Table 18: | Audibly Perceivable Pitch Mean, New Zealand Speakers.....         | 157 |
| Table 19: | Audibly Perceivable Intensity Mean, German Speakers.....          | 159 |
| Table 20: | Audibly Perceivable Intensity Mean, New Zealand Speakers.....     | 160 |
| Table 21: | Audibly Perceivable Speech Rate, German Speakers.....             | 162 |
| Table 22: | Audibly Perceivable Speech Rate, New Zealand Speakers.....        | 163 |
| Table 23: | Number of Prosodic Markers.....                                   | 169 |
| Table 24: | Intensity Mean and Pitch Mean as Compensatory Strategies.....     | 172 |
| Table 25: | Intensity Mean and Speech Rate as Compensatory Strategies.....    | 175 |
| Table 26: | Gender Differences, Pitch Mean.....                               | 176 |
| Table 27: | Gender Differences, Pitch Range.....                              | 176 |
| Table 28: | Gender Differences, Intensity Mean.....                           | 177 |
| Table 29: | Gender Differences, Intensity Range.....                          | 177 |
| Table 30: | Gender Differences, Speech Rate.....                              | 177 |
| Table 31: | Ethnic Differences, Pitch Mean.....                               | 178 |
| Table 32: | Ethnic Differences, Pitch Range.....                              | 178 |
| Table 33: | Ethnic Differences, Intensity Mean.....                           | 179 |
| Table 34: | Ethnic Differences, Intensity Range.....                          | 179 |
| Table 35: | Ethnic Differences, Speech Rate.....                              | 179 |
| Table 36: | Pitch Mean and Speech Rate as Compensatory Strategies.....        | 180 |
| Table 37: | Non-Verbal Pre-Disagreements.....                                 | 185 |
| Table 38: | Non-Verbal Post-Disagreements.....                                | 186 |
| Table 39: | Number of Words Captured on Camera in Disagreements.....          | 187 |
| Table 40: | Number of Words Accompanied by Non-Verbal Cues in Disagreements.. | 187 |
| Table 41: | Number of Non-Verbal Tokens in Disagreements.....                 | 188 |
| Table 42: | Types of Non-Verbal Cues in Disagreements.....                    | 188 |
| Table 43: | Types of Gesture in Disagreements.....                            | 189 |
| Table 44: | Types of Body Movement in Disagreements.....                      | 191 |
| Table 45: | Types of Facial Expression/Gaze in Disagreements.....             | 192 |
| Table 46: | Types of Head Movement in Disagreements.....                      | 193 |
| Table 47: | Number of Words Captured on Camera in Neutral Speech.....         | 194 |
| Table 48: | Number of Words Accompanied by Non-Verbal Cues in Neutral Speech. | 194 |
| Table 49: | Number of Non-Verbal Tokens in Neutral Speech.....                | 195 |



|           |  |     |
|-----------|--|-----|
| Table 50: | Types of Non-Verbal Cues in Neutral Speech.....                                    | 196 |
| Table 51: | Types of Gestures in Neutral Speech.....   | 197 |
| Table 52: | Types of Body Movement in Neutral Speech.....                                      | 199 |
| Table 53: | Types of Facial Expression/Gaze in Neutral Speech.....                             | 199 |
| Table 54: | Types of Head Movement in Neutral Speech.....                                      | 201 |
| Table 55: | Non-Verbal Strengthening Devices in Pre-Disagreements.....                         | 204 |
| Table 56: | Non-Verbal Strengthening Devices in Post-Disagreements.....                        | 205 |
| Table 57: | Subcategories of Gesture in Neutral Speech vs. Disagreement.....                   | 214 |
| Table 58: | Subcategories of Body Movement in Neutral Speech vs. Disagreement...               | 215 |
| Table 59: | Subcategories of Facial Expression/Gaze in Neutral Speech vs.<br>Disagreement..... | 215 |
| Table 60: | Subcategories of Head Movement in Neutral Speech vs. Disagreement...               | 216 |
| Table 61: | Scenario A, Prosody Questionnaire.....   | 222 |
| Table 62: | Scenario B, Prosody Questionnaire.....   | 223 |
| Table 63: | Scenario C, Prosody Questionnaire.....   | 224 |
| Table 64: | Scenario D, Prosody Questionnaire.....   | 224 |
| Table 65: | Scenario E, Prosody Questionnaire.....   | 225 |
| Table 66: | Scenario F, Prosody Questionnaire.....   | 225 |
| Table 67: | Scenario G, Prosody Questionnaire.....   | 226 |
| Table 68: | Scenario H, Prosody Questionnaire.....   | 227 |
| Table 69: | Scenario A, Non-Verbal Questionnaire.....  | 228 |
| Table 70: | Scenario B, Non-Verbal Questionnaire.....  | 228 |
| Table 71: | Scenario C, Non-Verbal Questionnaire.....  | 229 |
| Table 72: | Scenario D, Non-Verbal Questionnaire.....  | 230 |
| Table 73: | Scenario E, Non-Verbal Questionnaire.....  | 230 |
| Table 74: | Scenario F, Non-Verbal Questionnaire.....  | 231 |
| Table 75: | Scenario G, Non-Verbal Questionnaire.....  | 232 |
| Table 76: | Scenario H, Non-Verbal Questionnaire.....  | 232 |
| Table 77: | Scenario I, Non-Verbal Questionnaire.....  | 233 |

## List of Figures

|            |   |     |
|------------|---|-----|
| Figure 1:  | Politeness Model.....                       | 37  |
| Figure 2:  | German Culture vs. Anglo-Saxon Culture..... | 49  |
| Figure 3:  | Prosody.....                                | 52  |
| Figure 4:  | Pitch Mean in Disagreements.....            | 146 |
| Figure 5:  | Pitch Range in Disagreements.....           | 146 |
| Figure 6:  | Intensity Mean in Disagreements.....        | 147 |
| Figure 7:  | Intensity Range in Disagreements.....       | 147 |
| Figure 8:  | Speech Rate in Disagreements.....           | 148 |
| Figure 9:  | Disagreement Contour Plots.....             | 149 |
| Figure 10: | Neutral Speech Contour Plots.....           | 149 |
| Figure 11: | Pitch Mean in Speaker Analysis.....         | 151 |
| Figure 12: | Pitch Range in Speaker Analysis.....        | 152 |
| Figure 13: | Intensity Mean in Speaker Analysis.....     | 152 |
| Figure 14: | Intensity Range in Speaker Analysis.....    | 153 |
| Figure 15: | Speech Rate in Speaker Analysis.....        | 154 |

## **Introduction**

Our world is becoming more and more globalized. Cross-cultural encounters have become a daily reality for many of us. Overseas work experience has come to be seen as an asset (if not a necessity) to employers. With a growing travel industry and infrastructures improving, the world is becoming more and more accessible. With the number of cross-cultural encounters on the rise, the demand for cross-cultural communication skills is also growing rapidly.

Efficient and successful communication with members of different cultures is indispensable for international business, international politics and any other form of international encounter. Sensitive and sensible communication across cultures is, however, not an easy task. Most people who have attempted to communicate with people from other cultures will have experienced problems and difficulties somewhere along the line. Miscommunication is almost inevitable and forms an integral part of cross-cultural encounters. This has caught the interest of many linguists, causing them to devote their research to the study of cross-cultural communication.

In the past, much attention has been given to discovering the typical speech behaviour in a variety of cultures with regard to specific acts of speech, such as complaints, refusals or compliments. Differences between cultures have been uncovered and contributed immensely to our understanding of culturally influenced behaviour and speech activity. The value of exploring culturally different speech patterns lies in the invaluable contribution these studies make to a world-wide better human understanding. Much of our understanding of one another's actions lies in how well we understand each other's speech and how appropriately we interpret the intentions that underlie the words that were spoken. The study of speech is indispensable if we want to arrive at a smoother, more successful outcome of cross-cultural communication. However, the study of the words spoken and their pragmatic meaning alone is not sufficient to uncover communication behaviour. This became clear to me when asked to assess several radio broadcast interview excerpts for interrater reliability checks solely on the basis of written material. It was not only difficult to identify disagreements in general, but it was nearly impossible to identify the more indirect disagreements. This experience accentuated the importance of prosodic and non-verbal cues to convey meaning to me and raised my interest in the interplay of verbal and non-verbal means. Sadly, what we know about prosodic features and non-verbal cues in connection with speech acts is very limited. While politeness is a much-studied phenomenon in connection with speech acts, the effect of

prosody and non-verbal activity on politeness remains practically unresearched to date. Communication, however, does not occur independent of prosodic and non-verbal cues. The study of communication should, therefore, not be carried out independent of prosodic and non-verbal activity either.

The present research project devotes its focus to the study of prosodic and non-verbal behaviour in connection with the speech act 'disagreement'. As this is a speech act with a rather large potential to cause offence, it is particularly crucial to apply an appropriate degree of force and politeness to it. What is considered to be an appropriate degree of force and politeness is, in part, dependent on the cultural perception of what is appropriate. This research project aims to uncover differences in communication behaviour in German culture and New Zealand culture. To this end, the present study investigates a number of disagreements in both cultures and aims to explore their verbal disagreement strategies, including verbal modification devices used to alter the force of the disagreement strategies, as well as the use of prosodic and non-verbal strategies. This study will compare the use of these strategies and features in the German and New Zealand cultures and hopes to shed light on both differences and similarities in the use of strategies and the frequency with which they occur.

The present research project is organized as follows:

In Chapter 1, I will review the literature of previous research projects on cross-cultural communication/miscommunication, in order to establish why interactions with members of different cultures poses problems, what these problems are and how they affect interlocutors. This chapter will also address why the speech act of disagreement was chosen as a basis for the comparison of the two cultures and why politeness plays such a crucial role in cross-cultural interactions, particularly in connection with face-threatening speech acts such as disagreements. Finally, this chapter will address why the present study includes the investigation of prosodic and non-verbal features, how they contribute to disagreements and politeness, how the study of these features benefits listeners and learners of a foreign language and why these features are important to the success of cross-cultural interactions.

In Chapter 2, methodological issues will be addressed. This chapter will discuss in detail what research questions were addressed in the present project, what data was used in order to try to answer these questions and the reasons for using this particular type of data. The chapter will also address the process of identifying disagreements and coding them on various levels and

describe the framework that was applied for the comparison of German and New Zealand cultures. The subsequent section of the methodology chapter addresses each of the three communication channels investigated; the verbal channel, including the features and modification devices that were investigated, the prosodic channel, including the tools that were used, the features that were analysed, and the problems and limitations the researcher faced, and the non-verbal channel, including the features that were analysed, and the problems that arose during the analysing process. Lastly, the chapter describes the questionnaire that was used in order to verify the findings of the analysis and addresses the problems that were encountered and how they were solved.

Chapter 3 reports the findings of the verbal result section and discusses their potential implications. In the verbal result section three main issues are addressed. Firstly, the use of disagreement strategies is assessed, including pre-disagreement strategies, core-disagreement strategies and post-disagreement strategies. Both their use and distribution are investigated and differences as well as similarities in the use of these strategies in both cultures are identified. Secondly, cultural preferences for certain types of strategies are explored, with a focus on the preference for explicit vs. implicit strategies. Thirdly, the use of internal modification devices is assessed. Ten categories of softening devices and ten categories of strengthening devices are investigated and their use, frequency and distribution are discussed. In the verbal discussion section, the findings of the result section will be discussed and possible implications of the findings are proposed. Where findings differed from expected results, qualitative analyses were carried out and assessed, and these are discussed.

Chapter 4 reports the findings from the prosody analysis and discusses their implications. Three primary issues are addressed in this section. The first part attempts to answer the following questions: Is there a correlation between disagreements and the prosodic features of mean pitch, pitch range, mean intensity, intensity range and speech rate, and if so, how consistent is this correlation? In the second part, the speakers are analysed for their individual tendencies to incorporate these prosodic features into their disagreements. A comparison between German speakers' trends and New Zealand speakers' trends is carried out and assessed for similarities and differences in prosodic disagreeing behaviour. In the third part, the question of audibility will be addressed. There may well be differences in preferences for using certain prosodic features in connection with disagreements, but more important is the question of whether these preferences are audible, and therefore meaningful to the receiver of a message. To this end, the two cultural groups are assessed for the number of disagreements

that differ inaudibly from their neutral speech and those that differ audibly from their neutral speech. The findings are then discussed and evaluated for their potential implications.

Chapter 5 reports the results of the non-verbal analysis and discusses potential implications of the use of non-verbal cues in speech. Non-verbal findings are reported in two main sections. In the first section, the non-verbal cues that were observed in the disagreement instances are reported, while in the second section the non-verbal cues that were observed in neutral speech are reported. Both sections look at the overall frequency of non-verbal cues as well as the frequency of use of the four categories under observation, namely gesture, body movement, facial expression/gaze and head movement. The use of non-verbal cues in disagreements is compared to the use of non-verbal cues in neutral speech, not only to explore potential patterns of non-verbal behaviour connected with disagreements, but also to investigate potential differences in non-verbal activity between the Germans and the New Zealand speakers. The non-verbal discussion section points to differences and similarities between these two cultural groups and proposes potential explanations for their respective behaviour.

Chapter 6 reports the results of the questionnaires and discusses the findings. The questionnaires are conducted as a form of data validation process and test the findings from the prosody chapter and from the non-verbal chapter. More specifically, two separate questionnaires were conducted. Each of them was presented to participants in three different conditions, a word-only condition, followed by a word + prosody condition or a word + non-verbal condition, followed by a third condition that exposed participants to all three channels of communication. The prosody questionnaire was conducted in order to test the effects of loudness and rapid speech on the participants' perception of politeness. The non-verbal questionnaire was issued in order to test the effect of a large number of non-verbal cues and specific types of non-verbal cues on the perception of politeness of the participants. The effect of these prosodic and non-verbal features are explored in the subsequent discussion section and the findings of both questionnaires are then compared and potential implications are proposed.

In Chapter 7, the most important findings and their possible implications are reviewed and revisited, including the use of disagreement strategies, the production of modification devices, the correlation of various prosodic features with disagreements, the audibility of prosodic changes in speech as well as the number and type of non-verbal cues and their implications on

the perception of politeness. The findings are reviewed for general trends, tendencies, preferences and disagreement patterns and the implications of these are discussed.