

## **A Microanalysis of Interactional Practices for Disaffiliation in Conversations Among Friends**

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### **Abstract**

Through a microanalysis of recorded casual conversations among colleagues, this paper identifies interactional practices that the participants employ to display their lack of agreement or affiliation. Some practices include delayed response or absence of a response, hedging, and prompts for repair. This study attempts to bring awareness to the usefulness of Conversation Analysis (CA) in English language teaching and learning.

### **Introduction**

Participants in conversations respond verbally and non-verbally in a number of ways to show their participation and stances. Participants' responses can mean different things to the conversation in terms of whether they show affiliation by giving a preferred response (an expected response that portrays the listeners' interest or agreement) or non-affiliation by giving a dispreferred one (an unexpected response that signifies the listeners' disinterest or disagreement). Whichever response a recipient chooses to give can advance or kill a topic of conversation. The interactional practices to achieve affiliation and disaffiliation are important to ESOL learners because they are necessary for participating in conversations. While much attention tends to be placed on practices for displaying affiliation, this paper focuses on disaffiliation, as its exhibition can be quite nuanced. I will first review the literature on how affiliation and disaffiliation are accomplished in interaction. After describing the data and analytical approach, I will present an analysis of a few cases of disaffiliation. The paper concludes with a discussion of teaching implications.

### **Affiliation and Disaffiliation in Conversations**

Affiliation and disaffiliation are most commonly found in storytelling, in which participants' preferred responses to a story show alignment or affiliation (Stivers, 2008, p. 34). Although alignment and affiliation are both preferred responses, they are different in that the display of affiliation is usually done in the form of response tokens. These response tokens signify that the speaker should continue with their storytelling. In contrast, affiliation is defined as responses in



Wheeler, J. (2021). A microanalysis of interactional practices for disaffiliation in conversations among friends. *TESOL Working Paper Series*, 19, 39-47.

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which the “hearer displays support of and endorses the teller's conveyed stance” (Stivers, 2008, p. 35). As affiliation is done through agreements or upgrades of statements made by the speaker, they show understanding and agreement with the speaker's stance (Wong & Waring, 2020, p. 207). While affiliation is expected and preferred, the audience can choose to “resist the point of the story” and display disaffiliation through various dispreferred forms. One way to identify disaffiliation is by its format, as disaffiliative remarks are usually produced in “a dispreferred format” that includes “delay, mitigation, or accounts” (Waring, 2012, p. 266). Delay refers to how disaffiliative responses are often delayed, which means there is a notable pause before the listeners respond. Mitigation refers to the various efforts speakers make to reduce the negative impact of their disaffiliation. This is shown through hedging or agreement prefaces. On the other hand, accounts refer to remarks that act as reasoning for the disaffiliative response given. Although alignment and affiliation are important aspects of conversation to be researched, I will be focusing on disaffiliation in this paper.

### **Common Disaffiliative Practices**

Within a conversation, participants may use various interactional practices to display disaffiliation. The topic of disaffiliation was explored in Waring's (2012) study of *now*-prefaced utterances (NPU), a practice employed to show disaffiliation. Although disaffiliative responses are often begun with an agreement preface, after analyzing over one hundred cases of NPUs, Waring (2012) found evidence to support the idea that disaffiliation can be both self-directed as well as other-directed (p. 274). In their discussion, it was said that NPUs that are other-directed are used to “challenge, correct, or take issue with another's talk” (Waring, 2012, p. 271).

Another interactional practice, jocular (non-serious) mockery, was given focus and identified as another common disaffiliative practice by Haugh (2010). Analyzing excerpts of conversations in which complaints and assessments were responded to, Haugh concluded that teasing could be used to establish and encourage affiliation with conversation participants (p. 7). However, when a listener perceives a speech object as not warranting a legitimate nor affiliative response and instead is a subject for mockery, jocular mockery then becomes a form of disaffiliation (Haugh, 2010, p. 8).

Discussing affiliative and aligning practices in storytelling, Selting (2017) identified a case in which one of the participants continuously expressed their disaffiliation and established the strategies that the speaker employed to elicit affiliation from the other participants. The participant employed the disaffiliative practices of “mere continuers or acknowledgment tokens,” which are minimal response tokens that do not explicitly express an opinion but merely acknowledge the speaker, in addition to the absence of a response. When faced with disaffiliation, the speaker pursues affiliation by expanding the story by repeating a part of the story, adding another climax, or repackaging their statements or assessments. If those approaches do not result in affiliation, the speaker provides downgraded versions of their previous assessments. Likewise, if the goal of affiliation is still not reached, the speaker will stop their pursuit of affiliation and give a final assessment or statement. The speaker or listeners will then change the topic (p. 26).

By observing how disaffiliation occurred and how it was managed in a couple's therapy session, Muntigl (2013) identified several different disaffiliative practices. Despite disaffiliation being often encouraged during counseling sessions to address clients' issues, Muntigl (2013) showed that the disaffiliation displayed by the counselor and clients resulted in a communication breakdown and halted progress. The disaffiliative practices employed by the male client were downgraded agreement (responses that deny knowledge via non-committal prefaces) and prompts for repair. With this

encounter, the female client and counselor both disaffiliated with the male client by directly addressing his disaffiliation. However, this resulted in a new affiliation between the female client and counselor, sharing a mutual disaffiliation against the male client. As a result, the male client subsequently exercised the practice of withdrawing and disengaging further from the interaction and topic to show continued disaffiliation.

Also focusing on forms of disaffiliation, Yu et al. (2019)'s study focused on analyzing the management of disaffiliation between romantic heterosexual partners in Mandarin. Yu et al. (2019) found that when disagreements/disaffiliation occur, the participants attempted to 'manage' the tension that would arise as a result. Various disaffiliative practices the participants employed were "(i) repair initiations through questioning repeats, (ii) rejections and rebuttals, (iii) practices associated with complaining" (p. 463). To mitigate a disaffiliative response, the listener would display their disaffiliation in the subtle form of a repeat question. They offer a chance for the speaker to repair and repackage their statement in such a way that the listener will affiliate with the speaker (p. 465). However, a more direct form of disaffiliation would be a rejection and rebuttal in response. A clear expression of disagreement and subsequent counterstatement might be given, yet in a dispreferred format, with accounts, mitigation, or indirect statements contesting the speaker's stance (p. 469). In other cases, the participants expressed their disaffiliation through complaints about the speaker's character or negatively associating them with a group (p. 472).

In the present paper, I will explore the disaffiliation practices employed in casual conversations among young colleagues.

### **Research Question**

How do participants employ disaffiliation practices in the sequential organization of a conversation?

### **Methodology**

#### **Data**

This paper uses seven audio recordings of casual online conversations among co-workers (aged 19-28) at a college tutoring center during breaks, totaling about 60 minutes. The method I will be using to analyze my data is Conversation Analysis. Natural conversations were analyzed systematically to understand how participants orient to and maintain social order through talk. After audio/video recordings were made, they were transcribed in close detail, following Jefferson's transcription system (2004). I identified instances of disaffiliation in my data by examining the transcripts and marking responses that showed delays, mitigation, or accounts (all indicators of disaffiliation). The goal of the analysis is to uncover how participants employ these practices sequentially.

### **Analysis**

#### **Delayed and Absence of Response**

In this conversation between colleagues during a lunch break, War describes what he considers to be 'abnormal' garlic chicken (as sold at a particular restaurant) versus 'normal' garlic chicken. The analysis of this excerpt will show that the participants display affiliation through the practice of delayed and absent responses.

## Excerpt 1: Garlic Chicken

[Clip 0091 \(00:40-01:39\)](#)

01 War: ↑yeah=  
 02       =>it's not-< (.) it's not like d:a=  
 03       =>↑you know (how) like-,<  
 04       (0.9)  
 05 War: garlic chicken right?=  
 06       =you ↑think of ↓d:a=  
 07       da o↑ne (.) where y:ou (.) you actually cr↑ust i::t,  
 08       and there's like that sauce and its crun↑chy  
 09       (.)  
 10 War: right?  
 11       (2.0)  
 12 Joe: ((yawns))  
 13 Shy: <SU::re.>  
 14       (2.5)  
 15 Shy: >I don't know.<  
 16       (3.5)  
 17 War: >it's li- it's like< th:e- the sw:eeet garlic so:y (.) kinda  
 18       ↑sauce, (.) instead o:f (.) like >i- i- it's just like<  
 19       (1.8)  
 20 War: they made- (.) barbeque chicken,  
 2       but they just put- choke garlic.  
 22 Shy: ↑↓O:H, yeah, that's [typical.  
 23 War: [yeah yeah ye  
 24       (2.0)  
 25 War: >but ↑like< if I order from like the other ell an ell (L&L) like  
 26       Waipahu they actually make it correctly where it's actually like  
 27       fried chicken with the garlic soy sauce?  
 28 Shy: °hm.°  
 29 War: °it's so weird.°  
 30 Shy: I think they just all have their own methods.  
 31       (4.0)  
 32 Shy: I got the chicken- the barbeque chicken plate from ell an ell  
 33       (L&L) today,

Through lines 1-8, War attempts to get the other participants to validate his complaint/assessment of the garlic chicken. In lines 5 and 10, he asks for confirmation from the others that they agree with his assessment. The preferred answer to the question in line 8 would be an affirmative one, one that is produced immediately. However, the pauses in lines 11, 14, and 16 show Joe and Shy's disaffiliation (Wong & Waring, 2020). Joe does not respond at all, which may be a sign of disinterest in the current topic, thus, disaffiliating (Selting, 2017). In addition, Shy's responses in lines 13 and 15 may be preferred in terms of content, but they are dispreferred in how they are performed. In line 13, Shy's response is lengthened in a slow tempo, showing reluctance and possibly doubt (Wong & Waring, 2020). The recipients do not verbalize they agree in any way, which exhibits their lack of affiliation. This is displayed further by Shy's continued response in line 15, as she responds to War's solicitation *right?* with, *I don't know*, a non-committal response (Muntigl, 2013).

In the beginning of line 17, War's response provides evidence that there is disaffiliation by the recipients. He quickly stammers as he pursues the current topic with further descriptions of the garlic chicken (Selting, 2017). Although some may argue that Shy and Joe gave dispreferred answers because they did not yet understand his point, this does not seem to be the case. In line 22, Shy acknowledges

War's point with the change-of-state token "O:H," showing recognition, followed by a clear disagreement (Heritage, 1984). Her choice of the word *typical*, used to assess the garlic chicken, contrasts with War's point that the garlic chicken he ordered was unusual (Muntigl, 2013).

In lines 25-27, War continues to pursue this topic, perhaps to solicit a preferred answer. However, in line 28, Shy's minimal token again shows disaffiliation. This was perhaps done to terminate the topic (Selting, 2017). In line 29, War stops trying to solicit agreement and, with a final upgraded strong assessment token, terminates the topic this turn (Selting, 2017). In line 30, Shy attempts to diffuse the disagreement by giving a softer hedge with a less-confrontational statement. By choosing to resolve the disagreement by making a non-accusatory statement, this disaffiliation does not show that she agrees with War's perspective nor continuous solicitation of agreement in lines 5 and 10 (Wong & Waring, 2020).

In this excerpt, the practice of delayed and absent responses is used repeatedly, particularly by Shy. More specifically, the disaffiliative practice of non-committal response is present in line 15, when Shy responds to War with a remark that does not explicitly express disagreement. However, the absence of agreement displays disaffiliation. The last practices exemplified are the production of a different assessment of the same object in line 22 and hedging in line 30.

### Downgrading and Contrast

In this excerpt, Joe, Shy, and War discuss what they ate for lunch. Eventually, the conversation turns to the cookies sold at Costco, a wholesale store. The disaffiliative practices that are present in the analysis are downgrading, contrast, and distancing.

#### Excerpt 2: Costco Cookies

[Clip 0091 \(02:16-03:35\)](#)

01 Joe: i can one up you=  
 02 =i ha::d (.) thr:ee chocolate chip cookies,  
 03 .hhh (.) and th↑en I think >immabout to eat< two more  
 04 (.)  
 05 if they're still in the break room.  
 06 (2.4)  
 07 Shy: >that's not even< wu- ↑upp- ing me hh (yo(h)u kn(hh)o(h)w)?  
 08 .h[h th]ats-  
 09 Joe: [WHAT?]  
 10 ↑eating five chocolate chip cookies? ↓versus one french toast?  
 11 (°what are you talking a[bout°)  
 12 Shy: [but like-  
 13 chips aHOY or hh l(h)ike,  
 14 Joe: like=  
 15 War: =the actual (.) like (.) big kine.  
 16 Joe: yeah like the <big kine.>  
 17 War: ↓o:h.  
 18 Shy: oh=from costco hh (1.2) \$°safeway°? hh  
 19 (.)  
 20 War: ↑e:h >bruh da< Costco ones are good though (no can-)  
 21 Shy: they're ↓ok:ay, they're not the be(h)st.  
 22 (2.5)  
 23 War: >i- y- ↓ye:ah< but like- as far as like (.)  
 24 <easily accessible an cheap ones,>  
 25 yeah °it's probably°.

26 (1.0)  
 27 War: >i don- i< don't really like the safeway ones they kinda hard.  
 28 (4.0)  
 29 Shy: i don't eat any of them.  
 30 Joe: hh hh  
 31 Shy: †i like the ones from kalapawa:i,  
 32 they have like the sea salt on top of their chocolate chip cookies  
 33 .hhh h::o <that's the be:st.>  
 34 (1.0)  
 35 War: that's an <interesting combination>.  
 36 Shy: †>what do you mean,<=  
 37 =it's like eating sea salt with caramel and chocolate,  
 38 but like its cookies.  
 39 (2.5)  
 40 War: <i've nevv:a (.) †experienced that>.

Excerpt 2 is very similar to Excerpt 1 in that War is assessing something. This time, Shy disagrees with him, displaying disaffiliation (Yu et al., 2019). In line 20, War gives his positive opinion with his emphasis on *good* on Costco cookies. Shy does not share it as she does not upgrade, nor does she use the same word, *good*, to describe the cookies; she downgrades it from *good* to *okay*, thus showing disaffiliation. The lowered pitch and continued downgrading also indicate a difference in opinion (Muntigl, 2013).

War's silence in line 22 shows his disagreement with Shy's answer. His response in lines 23-25, which is delayed and contains an agreement preface *yeah* but leads to a contrastive *yeah but*, shows his disaffiliation with Shy's assessment by still maintaining and defending his position (Muntigl, 2013). Unlike Shy, War gives his dispreferred answer in a dispreferred format, stating his agreement at first, then beginning his dispreferred response. Shy continues in line 29 by distancing herself entirely from the subject, which is a form of disaffiliation (Muntigl, 2013). In lines 31-33, Shy recycles *best* when referring to a different cookie to disaffiliate with War's assessment of Costco cookies, which displays a disagreement with his opinion. War disaffiliates with her in lines 35 and 40, as seen in the delay in lines 34 and 39, and lengthened *interesting combination*. Also, his non-committal responses that do not indicate a position of agreement or disagreement with Shy's statement support this idea.

In short, Excerpt 2 features the practices of downgrading of assessments, recycling words to show contrast, and distancing to show disaffiliation. Distancing is similar to the disaffiliative practice of producing a different assessment of the same object, as seen in Excerpt 1. However, downgrading is clear in Excerpt 2 with the use of words that are less positive and does not upgrade the assessment but presents the object in a downgraded view.

### **Preface to Disagreement**

To provide context, Shy and Joe are conversing about what they had done over the past week, and Shy begins with an anecdote about what happened with her manager at work. In this excerpt, compared to Excerpts 1 and 2, Shy gives an answer showing disaffiliation produced in a dispreferred format, containing delay, mitigation, and accounts.

#### Excerpt 3: Lockdown

[Clip 0090 \(00:00-00:55\)](#)

01 Shy: \$it was- (.) it was >painf:ul<  
 02 (2.7)

03 Shy: but anyways,  
 04 (1.0)  
 05 Shy: it was suc↑cessful  
 06 .hhh and then he came back  
 07 .hh (.) and gave m:e ↑coco puffs fro:m liliha bakery.  
 08 Joe: s↑ee h[e knew] who (.) how hard you worked.  
 09 Shy: [yay]  
 10 (2.0)  
 11 Shy: °i guess° s:o.  
 12 (5.8)  
 13 Shy: but that was it.  
 14 (4.0)  
 15 Shy: °nothing too° eventful. besides that.  
 16 Joe: i mean,  
 17 (1.0)  
 18 Joe: we are on lac- lo:::ck- down.  
 19 (2.0)  
 20 Shy: yea:h,  
 21 (3.0)  
 22 Shy: >but ↑like-< you can still do stuff,  
 23 (1.0)  
 24 Shy: you know?  
 25 (1.0)  
 26 Joe: true.  
 27 (4.0)  
 28 Joe: .hh tr:::ue.

When Joe responds to Shy's story in lines 16 and 18, he affiliates with Shy by quickly responding and with a possible explanation for why *nothing too eventful* happened, according to Shy. In the delays in lines 19, 21, and 23, Shy shows her hesitation, which is a form of disaffiliation (Wong & Waring, 2020). Shy's lengthening of the word *yeah* with slightly rising intonation can be heard as a preface for disagreement. The 3-second pause in line 21 supports this, as no other participant responds to her remark at this time. In line 22, Shy continues her disaffiliation with a *but* to contrast with Joe's statement. She then says *like* as a hedge into her own assessment, and prompts *you know?* to solicit a response showing agreement with her remark in line 24 (Muntigl, 2013). In previous excerpts, Shy has shown much more delay and hesitation in her dispreferred responses. However, in this excerpt, Joe affiliates with Shy in line 26 *true*, unlike War in Excerpts 1 & 2, who continued to maintain his position in the face of disagreement.

In addition to delayed response, contrast, and hedging, which were disaffiliative practices already shown in excerpt 1, excerpt 3 displays the practice of agreement prefaces to mitigate a disaffiliative response.

### Discussion and Conclusion

To answer my research question, how do participants employ disaffiliation practices in the sequential organization of a conversation, the participants used interactional practices such as delayed and absent responses in excerpts 1 and 3, and non-committal response in excerpt 1. Others identified were hedging (Excerpts 1 and 3), production of a different assessment of the same object to show contrast (Excerpt 1), and recycling words to show contrast and downgrading (Excerpt 2). Finally, agreement prefaces illustrated in Excerpt 3 were the practices used to display disaffiliation as seen throughout the data. There is a difference in the way Shy displays her disaffiliation. Shy produces her disaffiliated response in



a dispreferred format, which may signify the difference in her level of attachment/connection to these participants. She may not feel as amiable towards War as she does towards Joe, as evidenced by the fact that she does not take any opportunity to affiliate with War. At the same time War most often attempts to still solicit affiliation even after Shy's disaffiliation. This shows that War may feel positive towards Shy, despite Shy not reciprocating. Also, with Shy's consistent disaffiliation in Excerpt 2, War's disaffiliation may be a direct response to Shy's disaffiliation. War is not necessarily disaffiliating with Shy's statement but with Shy herself. This is consistent with my knowledge as a member of this community.

Considering the small number of analyzed cases, further research needs to be done until a proper conclusion can be reached and generalized. Also, the analysis begs the questions of how other participants react in the event of a disaffiliative response, and how their responses differ based on whether the disaffiliation was produced in a dispreferred or preferred format. If I were to conduct a follow-up study, I would gather more instances of disaffiliation and analyze the responses from the other participants rather than the disaffiliative responses themselves. In general, the topic of disaffiliation should be given more attention. Affiliation and disaffiliation are not only relevant to the flow of a conversation but also to the development of interpersonal relationships.

### **Teaching Implications**

The topic of disaffiliation is one that is often overlooked in the language classroom but must be given more focus as it is highly relevant to the daily lives of English language learners. Through the analysis of the three excerpts, various disaffiliative practices employed during natural, everyday conversations were identified. These conversations were not designed to elicit disaffiliation; they were merely everyday interactions during which disaffiliation naturally occurred. Students will inevitably encounter a situation where they are faced with the need to express disaffiliation, or are the participant being disaffiliated with. Regardless, the skill to identify disaffiliation during interaction and resolve it is necessary for all speakers of English. However, this skill is not often developed during language class. This results in many students believing in the common misconception that English is straightforward and direct, even in expressions of disagreement. Although this can be true for some speakers of English, in actuality, disagreements are not always clearly identifiable. For second-language learners, this is difficult to distinguish as they might not be fully knowledgeable about the pragmatics and nuances of the language. This gap in their knowledge can negatively affect the interactions they will have with native speakers and even other language learners. To allow for smoother conversations and successful interactions, students should learn about and experience disaffiliation in the classroom. This will help them form a new perspective of English, develop their communicative competence, and allow them to have more natural conversations.

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