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CONTRASTIVE PRAGMATICS 2 (2021) 227–257

CONTRASTIVE
PRAGMATICS
A Cross-Disciplinary Journal
brill.com/jocp

Turn-Taking and Disagreement: A Comparison of American English and Mandarin Chinese

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Abstract

This study compares turn-taking and disagreement behaviors in spontaneous conversations in American English and Mandarin Chinese. The English and Chinese speakers observed some turn-taking rules and employed weak disagreement, but differed in the deployment of extended concurrent speech and strong disagreement. Analysis of the Chinese speakers' reactions reveals nothing negative. This was confirmed by the Chinese speakers' viewpoints that were explicitly stated in follow-up interviews, which signal that they perceived the practice of extended concurrent speech and strong disagreement in the collected conversations as politic. Furthermore, the similarities and differences between the speakers' turn-taking and disagreement behaviors appear to be constrained by contextual factors. This discloses the interplay of context, practice, and perception. These findings can raise our awareness of potential issues that might occur in intercultural encounters and the importance of understanding cross-cultural pragmatic differences to avoid miscommunication.

Keywords

turn-taking – disagreement – context – practice – perception – English – Chinese

1 Introduction

The importance of studying the linguistic realizations of speech behaviors in American English versus Mandarin Chinese cannot be overemphasized in the world as it currently exists. Given the present state of trade and diplomacy between the U.S. and China, the potential for misjudgment is ever-present. A lack of knowledge about pragmatic norms in American English and Mandarin Chinese has the potential to lead to misperceptions and misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication between American and Chinese people. It might cause one group to devalue the other group's world views (Corson, 1995), hurt their "self-esteem and group esteem", and "have serious repercussions in situations of world conflict" (Boxer, 2002: 154). Or worse, lack of awareness of pragmatic mismatches may be one reason for discrimination and stereotyping (Gumperz, Jupp and Roberts, 1981; Chick, 1996; Bilbow, 1997) which could severely affect people's lives (Erickson and Schultz, 1982). It can even entail the peril of "alienation" because American and Chinese people "come from distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds" (Boxer, 2002: 162). Therefore, contrastive pragmatics (Clyne, 1994) is paramount, as Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) assert.

Let us provide a few examples here: 1) It has been said that Chinese speakers are inclined to reject invitations or gifts several times to minimize the cost to others (Gu, 1990) before finally accepting; 2) They tend to say 'suíbiàn 随便.' (It's up to you.) to show thoughtfulness after being asked what they would prefer; 3) They give up their seats to people who are more senior in age or social status to demonstrate respect; 4) In some regions of mainland China, it is common to hear greetings among acquaintances or friends such as 'qù nǎr 去哪儿?' (Where are you going?) on the street, 'chī le ma 吃了没?' (Did you eat?) around mealtimes, or 'xià bān le 下班了?' (Have you just got off work?) at the end of the working day when returning home; 5) It might not seem outrageous to receive comments from friends on weight gain, strong suggestions from acquaintances, or questions from strangers about age, marital status, or income. However, these behaviors can appear anomalous to English speakers (e.g., Spencer-Oatey, 2008). As Kádár (2019) states, "the Chinese are often either represented (or represent themselves) as 'super-polite' or as surprisingly rude by Western standards" (p. 203).

In this paper, we examine some similarities and differences between American English and Mandarin Chinese speakers with regard to two speech behaviors: 1) turn-taking, and 2) disagreement. We examine both turn-taking and disagreement at the same time because few prior studies have established a close connection between them. For instance, expressing disagreement can

interrupt turn-taking, according to Kern's (2009) research on Japanese speakers; and strong disagreement can cause long overlapping, based on Zhu's (2019) findings about Chinese speakers. Both behaviors are relevant to rules of conversation and (im)politeness. Claims have been made that violations of turn-taking mechanisms or disagreement rules are deemed problematic (Schegloff, 2000) or dispreferred (Pomerantz, 1984) in English, although they can be polite in Chinese (e.g., Zhu, 2014a, 2016, 2017a). It has also been assumed that for the purpose of harmony maintenance, Chinese people tend to avoid speech behaviors such as overlapping with seniors (e.g., Lin, 1939) or direct disagreement with higher-status interlocutors (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 1988). Discrepancies in the previous research findings motivate us to reinvestigate these assertions by using empirical data, rather than native-speaker intuitions, relating to both American English and Mandarin Chinese spontaneous conversations among non-familial, relatively equal-status speakers in everyday life.

2 Turn-Taking

Turn-taking refers to a change of speaker in ordinary conversation. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) present what they deemed to be fourteen facts of turn-taking in any conversation. Of these turn-taking mechanisms, what is most relevant to this study is that people tend to follow the rule of one party at a time to avoid overlapping. Brief overlaps might occur at a transition-relevance place unintentionally and are considered to be "errors and violations" (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974: 701) that should be resolved in fewer than three syllables from the first speaker's utterance completion place (Schegloff, 2000). This minimizes the emergence of long simultaneous speech of more than three syllables from a transition-relevance place.

However, in reality, overlapping might not occur at a transition-relevance place. It can last longer than three syllables and hence transgresses Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) orderly turn-taking rules (e.g., Zimmerman and West, 1975). Long overlapping that is initiated by the next speaker more than three words from the current speaker's utterance completion place is called "extended concurrent speech" (Zhu, 2016: 638). In English, three words could be three monosyllabic words or three multisyllabic words. In Chinese, three words are three *cí* 词 (words) instead of three *zì* 字 (characters). A Chinese character does not necessarily represent a Chinese word. For instance, *biānfú* 蝙蝠 (bat) is one *cí* 词 (word) that has two *zì* 字 (characters) and *dúshū* 读书 (to read books) has two *cí* 词 (words) each of which has one *zì* 字 (character). Following Schegloff (2000), extended concurrent speech, a rarely explored turn-taking

feature, would have been deemed potentially problematic because it is not terminated prematurely before the third syllable of overlapped speech in English.

Overlapped speech in Mandarin Chinese has received less attention than in English. By using Chinese data, some scholars have discussed turn-taking (e.g., H. Liu, 1992, 2004; Wu, 1997, 2014; Gu, 1999; Liu, 2007; Yang, 2011; Gao, 2012; Li, 2014; Ma, 2014) and interruptions in different discourses (e.g., Ulijn and Li, 1995; Li, 1999, 2001; Liao, 2009). H. Liu (2004) and Kuang (2005) tease out the types of interruptions in Chinese. Interruption can lead to overlapping if none of the speakers cease talking. Kuang (2006) presents different types of overlapping, causes of overlapping, and solutions to overlapping, assuming that long overlapping is problematic. In contrast, Zhu (2016) finds that one type of overlapping – extended concurrent speech for floor taking or topic switching – could serve to build, maintain, or enhance interactants' rapport in the everyday talk she collected. The interactants appeared to deem extended concurrent speech for floor taking or topic switching to be an appropriate communicative act, rather than problematic, in post-interaction interviews (Zhu, 2017a, 2017b).

3 Disagreement

It is natural for people to express opinions in a conversation, and possible responses are either silence, agreement, or disagreement. In this section, we focus on disagreement because, like overlapping that may be interruptive, it is potentially construed as negative speech behavior. Disagreement is reactive, oppositional, and has varying levels of weakness and strength. It is the current speaker's response in interactional communication to the previous speaker's proposition that is verifiable (Takahashi and Beebe, 1993) or untrue (Sornig, 1977; Rees-Miller, 2000). Disagreement does not emerge without an advanced point of view or antecedent verbal (or non-verbal) action. With a proposed point of view or action, though, the current speaker can communicate dissent by delivering differing perspectives (Sifianou, 2012), conflicting stances (Kakava, 1993), disputable positions (Schiffrin, 1985), or contrasting viewpoints (Bardovi-Harlig and Salsbury, 2004).

Just like challenges, accusations, threats, and insults, disagreements can be weak and indirect when preceded by pauses, hesitation markers such as *uh*, repetition of previously-mentioned words, hedges such as *well*, partial agreements such as *it's true that ...*, concessions such as *yeah* or *you're right*, delaying devices, or repair initiators that can soften their tone of voice. A disagreement can also be strong and undeviating if it is "directly contrastive with the prior evaluation. Such disagreements are strong inasmuch as they occur in turns

containing exclusively disagreement components, and not in combination with agreement components” (Pomerantz, 1984: 74). That is, strong disagreement and weak disagreement “differ in their relative capacities to co-occur with agreement components” (Pomerantz, 1984: 74). The level of weakness or strength of a disagreement varies on a continuum from weak to strong disagreement.

Many scholars (e.g., Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983; Pomerantz, 1984; Brown and Levinson, 1987) have argued that people tend to mitigate disagreement by means of pauses, hesitation markers, repetition of previously-mentioned words, hedges, concessions, partial agreement, delaying devices, or repair initiators in non-self-deprecation cases. Weak disagreement is preferred over strong disagreement because weak disagreement can make people feel more comfortable and satisfied psychologically, whereas strong disagreement has the potential to come across as rude, face-threatening, or offensive (e.g., Beebe and Takahashi, 1989; Kotthoff, 1993). Therefore, politeness can be achieved by maximizing agreement and minimizing disagreement between self and other. There seems to be a widespread tendency for people to attempt to avoid disagreement by expressing regret, “pretending to agree”, “displacing disagreement”, “telling white lies”, or “hedging opinions” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 117–122).

In terms of research on (im)politeness in Chinese (e.g., Kádár, 2007, 2008, 2012a, b; Kádár and Pan, 2012; Pan and Kádár, 2012; Kádár, Haugh and Chang, 2013), very few studies have focused on strong disagreement in non-familial mundane conversations. Some studies on Chinese interaction have shown opt-out or weak disagreement to be favored by Chinese speakers for the purposes of maintaining harmony (Bond, 1986; Ting-Toomey, 1988) or avoiding confrontation with people of higher status (Du, 1995; Pan, 2000a; S. Liu, 2004). Ran (2010) explains that direct opposition in Chinese, which contains the structure 不/没有 ... (No./There isn't ...), or utterance-initial words, such as 不行 (It's not OK), 不对 (This isn't right), 不是 (No, it isn't), and 不许 (No, you can't), can easily cause addressees to have negative feelings and reactions, such as dissatisfaction or anger; it might also result in other antagonistic responses, such as objection and protest; therefore, it is face-threatening and impolite.

Nevertheless, the claim about the universality of disagreement has its pitfalls due to individual, regional, and cross-cultural differences (Clyne, 2006) in the realization of disagreement or the perception of (im)politeness (Chen, 1996; Yu, 1999, 2003; Marco, 2008). Preference for conflict avoidance or weak disagreement varies across cultures (Schiffrin, 1984) and in differing contexts. For instance, after a cultural examination of Jewish people of equal status, both Schiffrin (1984) and Katriel (1986) conclude that disagreement can act as a form

of sociability that works to build solidarity, instead of a dispreferred action that threatens social interaction. Likewise, Kakava (2002) discovers that modern Greeks express strong disagreement for solidarity building, while also doing so to create collaborative perspectives (Georgakopoulou, 2001). Zhu (2014a) reveals that strong disagreement in mundane conversations could contribute to the maintenance and enhancement of Chinese face and interpersonal relationships.

4 A Model of Context, Practice and Perception

We employ Zhu's (2019) model of context, practice, and perception to account for turn-taking and disagreement in the next section, focusing on the socio-cultural context, interactional context, and personal context of the study as well as how these contexts constrain the participants' practice and perceptions of turn-taking and disagreement behaviors. The following chart displays the interdependent relationships of context, practice, and perception in general.

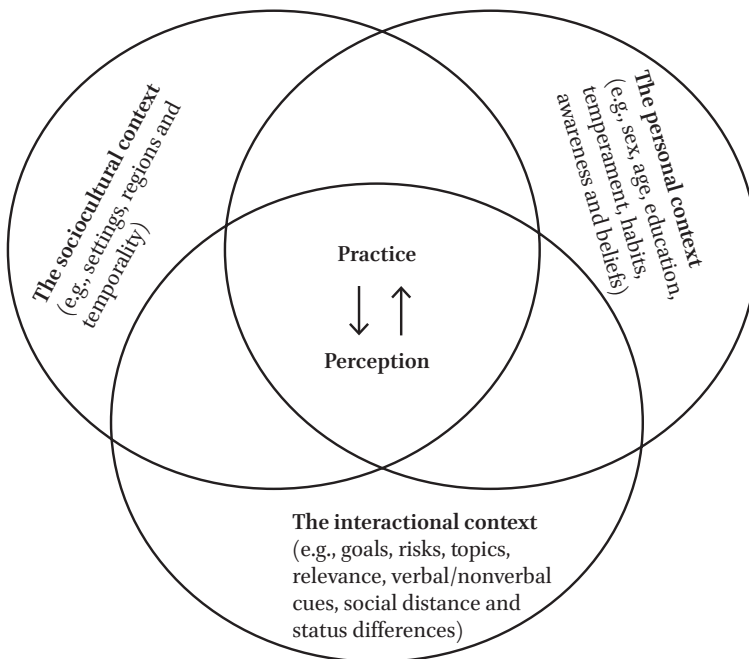


FIGURE 1 A model of context, practice, and perception
ZHU, 2019: 14

Figure 1 shows that context, practice, and perception are interdependent on one another. Context comprises the sociocultural context, the personal context, and the interactional context. Specifically, the sociocultural context involves macro-level factors such as the setting, the region, and temporality. The personal context includes individual traits such as sex, age, education, temperament, habits, awareness, and beliefs. The interactional context refers to interactional goals, risks, conversation topics, relevance, interactants' verbal/nonverbal cues, social distance, and status differences. All these contextual factors constrain how people practice and perceive communicative acts. People's habitual practice of communicative acts can help them develop their perceptions of the (in)appropriateness of communicative acts. In turn, these perceptions can help them decide when, where, and how to practice communicative acts.

Consider the sociocultural context of turn-taking or disagreement. How one of these two speech behaviors is realized varies across time and space and in different settings. When and where does it occur? Is it at a formal event? Or is it in an informal conversation? Interactants tend to observe their environment before joining a conversation, let alone conducting extended concurrent speech or expressing strong disagreement. Their different status can result from differences in age, sex, social class, rank, and education, which would cause some adjustment in their turn-taking or disagreement behavior especially in formal settings, although the effect might be blurred in mundane conversations in informal settings. Disagreement employed in mundane conversations in informal settings differs from that which emerges in other formal contexts such as army training (Culpeper, 1996), traffic disputes (Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann, 2003), TV shows (Gruber, 2001; Culpeper, 2005), news interviews (Clayman, 2002), mediation sessions (Jacobs, 2002), committee meetings (Kangasharju, 2002), or other contexts (e.g., Pan, 2000a, b; Marra, 2012). Interactants' lack of awareness of the sociocultural context can affect how they deploy verbal/nonverbal cues to take turns or express disagreement properly in social interactions.

The personal context of the interactants makes a huge difference in the practice and perception of turn-taking or disagreement. Are speakers female or male? Are they highly ranked? Are they well-educated? Do they have affable personalities? Do they adopt the convention of talking simultaneously with others or disagreeing directly? Are they aware of the norms of turn-taking and disagreement? What do they believe in terms of (im)polite behavior? If they have formed the habit of using extended concurrent speech or strong disagreement, do they have difficulty dropping it? If they are unaware of alternative norms of turn-taking and disagreement, or if they believe in

the appropriateness of their own speech behavior, is it possible for them to change their habits? Interactants' individual traits can shape their practice and perception of communicative acts. This has been well discussed in prior research on speaking turns (e.g., Swacker, 1979) and disagreement (e.g., Walkinshaw, 2007).

Additionally, the interactional context, including goals, risks, topics, relevance, verbal/nonverbal cues, social distance, and status differences, influences the interactants' practice and perception of communicative acts. Interlocutors normally have interactional goals (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) that restrict their speech behavior, such as how to disagree with unequal-status interactants. As might be expected, it has been shown that higher-status interactants tend to disagree with lower-status interactants more directly (Walker, 1987; Fairclough, 1989; O'Donnell, 1990; Locher, 2004), whereas lower-status interactants are more likely to opt out of disagreement or use only weak disagreement (Du, 1995; Pan, 2000a; S. Liu, 2004). But in equal-status situations, if the interactants' goal is simply to socialize, they might enact disagreement without hedges or produce long overlapping, as Zhu (2014a, b, 2016) demonstrates. If interactants perform communicative acts in certain routine ways, it can initiate the perception of these acts as normal and appropriate. This is the case because practice and perception might be linked through "the mechanism behind the often observed behavior mimicry and consequent empathic understanding within social interactions" (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999: 905).

5 Method

In this purely qualitative study, we employ interactional sociolinguistic methods to compare and contrast the two communicative acts that are the focus here – turn-taking and disagreement – in American English and Mandarin Chinese. Interactional sociolinguistic methods are "interpretive methods of discourse analysis", which are used "to gain detailed insights into the many communicative issues that arise in today's social environments, by means of systematic investigation of how speakers and listeners involved in such issues talk" (Gumperz, 2006: 724). This might be one of the earliest approaches to advocate the use of video-taped data in order to incorporate both verbal and non-verbal behavioral features into an investigation and to conduct a micro-level analysis of "the subtleties of miscues" that are "captured in taped interactions" (Boxer, 2002: 152). Watts (2003) also maintains that contextual cues are crucial for interpreting whether certain behavior is appropriate or not. Interactional sociolinguistic analysis looks into both central linguistic

features and marginalized contextualization cues, and situates inferences in contexts. Accordingly, its research scope can be extended from minute details of linguistic features to large social/contextual implications.

By employing interactional sociolinguistic methods, we examine two datasets – mundane conversations in American English and those in Mandarin Chinese. The first dataset consists of approximately ten hours of audio-recorded conversations by thirty American English speakers. The second dataset is comprised of another ten hours of video-recorded conversations by thirty-four Mandarin Chinese speakers. For the English conversations, two project assistants were hired to collect the data a couple of years ago in a mid-western American city. Provided their English-speaking friends or acquaintances were willing to participate in the project, the researchers asked them to record their everyday conversations in their own social circles. The researchers did not take part in any of the English conversations. For the Mandarin Chinese conversations, the first author was invited, several years ago, by acquaintances or friends to attend informal social events, such as a social meal at a restaurant, a tea party in a condominium, and a social community gathering, in a southeastern city in mainland China. She asked for permission to record the events as research data. She told the participants that the aim of her project was to investigate people's communication style in everyday life and that they should speak in the same way that they normally did. For the majority of the time, she stayed out of the conversations, and was only occasionally drawn into them. Although the recording might have caused the observer's paradox (Labov, 1972), the participants seemed to forget the existence of a recorder as they became increasingly engaged in their conversations. The participants completed a form detailing their demographic information after their conversations had ended. The conversational data were transcribed following Schiffrin's (1987) conventions.

We are not trying to make overgeneralizations when comparing the two datasets. The selected examples in the next section are only representative of the collected data, to which our findings are limited. Since both datasets contained turn-takings initiated by questions, brief overlaps, and weak disagreement, we randomly selected examples of these from the different English and Chinese conversations that were collected. For examples of extended concurrent speech and strong disagreement, we chose examples of the Chinese conversations from between a number of different speakers to ensure as wide a coverage of participants as possible.

We are attempting to uncover the participants' implicit perceptions by analyzing their responses to prior utterances in ongoing conversational interactions. During the conversations, the participants appear to make assessments

about each other and respond accordingly, in keeping with Mori's (1999) suggestions. In many cases, assessments of (im)politeness are conducted "on the spot", as interactants draw from certain sets of expectancies in co-constructing interaction in localized, situated contexts (Kádár and Haugh, 2013: 137). If they assess the current speaker's words as appropriate and inviting, they may well enjoy their conversation and actively contribute to it; otherwise, they are likely to show signs of unhappiness or respond negatively (Culpeper, 1996, 2005; Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann, 2003; Culpeper et al., 2010; Langlotz and Locher, 2012).

In addition, we interviewed some of the Chinese speakers for their explicit perceptions of extended concurrent speech or strong disagreement. The interviewees we selected were: 1) the speaker whose speech was overlapped or disagreed with, and 2) the speaker who commenced extended concurrent speech or strong disagreement. They were asked whether they were aware of anything abnormal after watching a clip portraying an instance of extended concurrent speech or strong disagreement. They were invited to evaluate the (in)appropriateness of each instance and explain why they thought it appeared that way. Each person was interviewed individually and was promised anonymity to encourage him/her to talk more freely. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes and was conducted in Chinese. The data were first transcribed into Chinese and then translated into English. Since we did not locate extended concurrent speech or strong disagreement in the English conversations, we did not interview the English speakers.

6 Results and Discussion

6.1 *Turn-Taking in English and Chinese*

It is safe to say that both the English and the Chinese speakers followed some of Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) turn-taking rules in the collected English and Chinese conversations. For instance, 1) the speakers alternated; 2) turn order, turn size, and the number of parties varied; 3) the length and content of a conversation and the distribution of turns were not predictable; and 4) the speakers also provided prosodic, lexical, and syntactic cues such as rising tones, the pronoun *you*, or questions to initiate turn-taking.

Excerpts (1) and (2) are examples in English and Chinese, respectively. In Excerpt (1), Ellen, female, and Yasmin, female, are elementary school teachers in their late twenties. They are acquaintances meeting up to socialize. They ask questions to get to know each other better, which naturally leads to turn exchanges.

Excerpt (1) (Traveling)

- 1 →Ellen: Have you been to Chinatown in New York City?
 2 Yasmin: No, I've never even been in New York.
 3 Ellen: Oh, it's so cool.
 4 →Yasmin: It's cool?
 5 Ellen: Yes, it's really cool.
 6 →Yasmin: What's it like?
 7 Ellen: It's in a tricky part of town because all of
 New York is a grid except down in that part of Manhattan,
 so it's a little tricky ... When I lived in Japan I loved to
 walk through the supermarkets just because here we have
 meat, rows of meat and there it's fish. What was so interesting
 about Chinatown in New York is there's so many dried things
 and roasted things hanging in the window that I didn't even
 know what half of them were @@.
 8 →Yasmin: In Chinatown, right?
 9 Ellen: Yes.
 10 →Yasmin: I was only briefly in Japan. How different is_
 Have you been to China?
 11 Ellen: I haven't been to China. I've been to Korea. I'd love
 to go. I would love that. I lived in Japan for two years.

At turn 1, Ellen is curious about Yasmin's travel experiences, so she initiates this sequence with the question *Have you been to Chinatown in New York City?* This interesting topic turns Yasmin into an avid questioner. She does a confirmation check with *It's cool?* at turn 4 and another one *In Chinatown, right?* at turn 8. She also seeks information with the question *What's it like?* at turn 6 and another one *How different is_ Have you been to China?* at turn 10. The pragmatic strategy of asking questions can actively engage interactants in a conversation and give them equal rights to express ideas (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Given that the context is ordinary social conversation that entails pure interactional talk, we must note that this kind of 'small talk' questioning affects back and forth turn-taking.

In a similar way to the English conversations, the Chinese conversations also featured questions as an initiator of turn-taking. In Excerpt (2), Lu, Xiu, Shi, and Jian graduated from the same university fifteen years previously and have been busy building their families and careers. Now they are in their mid-thirties. Lu, male, is a diplomat working for the Chinese government. Xiu, female, is an English teacher in a private college. Shi, male, is an international business manager. Jian, female, is a Ph.D. student of linguistics. Their first

reunion took place in the Chinese city where the data were being collected and their reunion was recorded.

Excerpt (2) (Lulu)

- 1 →路: 你现在住在回龙观?
 2 秀: 我住在回龙观。
 3 →路: [什么时候买的房?]
 4 →石: [那是经济适用房吗?] 买的是吗? 好像不错诶,
 能买到经济适用房, 我想买都买不着。
 5 →路: 你是哪年买到的啊?
 6 剑: 她好早买的。
 7 秀: 99 年, 00 年买的。
 8 石: 哦, 那是买得早, 那时候便宜。
 9 →路: 你是哪一年到 [北京的啊?]
 10 →石: [一千多块] 钱吧?
 11 秀: 99 年就去了。

- 1 →Lu: Do you live in Huilongguan now?
 2 Xiu: Yes, I do.
 3 →Lu: [When did you buy your house?]
 4 →Shi: [Is that affordable housing?] The one you
 bought? It would be great if you could get an
 affordable house. I couldn't even if I wanted to.
 5 →Lu: When did you buy it?
 6 Jian: She did it a while ago.
 7 Xiu: In 1999 or 2000.
 8 Shi: Oh, that was early. And it was cheaper then.
 9 →Lu: When did you move to [Beijing]?
 10 →Shi: [A thousand] and more?
 11 Xiu: In 1999.

The recording shows that in this restaurant social setting, the interactants try to catch up by asking numerous questions. Their interactional goal of resuming their relationships over a social meal is typical of Chinese culture. As Bian (2001) mentions, Chinese people like to expand their social networks through various activities such as social dining. In excerpt (2), Lu asks questions at turns 1, 3, 5, and 9, and Shi asks questions at turns 4 and 10. These questions can help them fill in their knowledge gaps regarding when Xiu moved house and where she is currently living. It is interesting to see that Shi often overlaps with Lu (turns 4 and 10) when directing his questions to Xiu, but Xiu answers Lu's

questions more often. This might be due to the fact that she is sitting closer to Lu and hears him more clearly.

Also, the English speakers often selected the next speaker or let a particular party self-select the next turn in which to speak. In the second case, overlapping sometimes occurred, but it normally ended before the third syllable of the overlapped words.

Excerpt (3) is an instance where brief overlapping appears in the English conversations. In this excerpt, Nancy and Belle, in their early twenties, are two female college students from different departments. They became acquainted after taking some of the same classes. They sometimes lunched together in a residential dining café on campus. Here, they are talking about travel plans for the upcoming summer vacation. After Belle mentioned her plan to visit her relative in San Diego, Nancy became curious about the cost of a flight ticket and initiated a conversation about it.

Excerpts (3) (Flights)

- 1 Nancy: What is expensive for a flight to get to?
- 2 Belle: It's just flying. [@@]
- 3 →Nancy: [@@] Just flying.
- 4 Belle: @@
- 5 Nancy: But what's like uh normal, like [range] =
- 6 →Belle: [Oh.]
- 7 Nancy: = for a ticket? 'cause [I don't]
- 8 →Belle: [I don't] I feel like_I don't know.
@ I'm really confused on this, 'cause it's [like] =
- 9 →Nancy: [Okay.]
- 10 Belle: = 300? But I thought that was for both things
'cause I put down [two] =
- 11 →Nancy: [Oh.]
- 12 Belle: = people and [then] =
- 13 →Nancy: [Yeah.]
- 14 Belle: = it went to like 700 by the end, and I'm really confused
whether that's like_ I don't know what's going on.

In this short dialogue, we can see many brief overlaps, including turns 5–6, 7–8, 8–9, 10–11, and 12–13. None of these overlaps go beyond the third syllable of the overlapped words. Also, the interactants often use backchannels that briefly overlap with a couple of the current speaker's words, such as *oh*, *okay*, and *yeah*, to demonstrate good listenership (McCarthy, 2002) and support (see turns 6, 9, 11, and 13). When the next speaker unexpectedly cuts off the current

speaker with meaningful concrete words (turn 8), the current speaker stops talking and gives up the floor to avoid long overlapping (turn 7). All these evidently support Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) assertions about turn-taking mechanisms.

The Chinese conversations also contained many instances of brief overlapping. In Excerpt (4), Mei is a male engineer, in his early twenties, who works for a biotechnology company and plans to pursue a master's degree in Germany. Jia is a female college English teacher in her mid-thirties. They have been acquaintances for many years, although they do not socialize with each other very often due to their busy jobs. As Jia has shared her study-abroad experiences with Mei so that he can be well prepared for his graduate program and new life in Germany, he has invited Jia to a dinner at a restaurant to express his gratitude and bid her farewell.

Excerpt (4) (Xiaowei)

- 1 枚: 呃, 我不知道你喜欢吃什么样, 哪种口味 [的菜。]
 2 →佳: [噢, 你] 点什么都行, 我不是很挑的, 我吃东西不挑剔。
 3 枚: @@ 那个, 拿一个, 武昌鱼那种你吃不吃不吃得惯, 那种_
 4 佳: 呃, 呃, 鱼哈?
 5 枚: 呃, 鱼。
 6 佳: 我吃得惯, 就是骨头太多, 我好像好久不吃 [有骨头] 的东西。
 7 →枚: [哦。]
- 1 Mei: Uh, I have no idea what you like to eat, what [flavor]
 2 →Jia: [Oh, you] can order anything. I'm not picky. I'm not picky in terms of food.
 3 Mei: @@ Well, take one_ Wuchang fish. Can you eat that_
 4 Jia: Uh, fish?
 5 Mei: Uh, fish.
 6 Jia: I can eat fish. It's just that fish has too many bones. It's been a while since I've eaten things [with bones.]
 7 →Mei: [Oh.]

As we can see from Excerpt (4), Mei and Jia, for the majority of the time, take turns speaking. Occasionally, they briefly overlap. At turn 2, Jia seems to predict the end of Mei's speech a little earlier and starts her turn before he finishes his last words. This is a typical example of what Schegloff (2000) calls "terminal overlaps" (p. 5). At turn 7, Mei acknowledges that he has heard Jia and knows

what she wants by using the backchannel *oh*. This type of overlapping is very common in natural conversations. It indicates the listener's understanding of the speaker and the interactants' compliance with Grice's (1975) cooperative principle.

When it comes to the production of another type of overlapping – extended concurrent speech – the English and Chinese speakers behaved rather differently. While we did not find any instances of extended concurrent speech in the English conversations, in the Chinese conversations we noticed the employment of extended concurrent speech as a pragmatic strategy for active involvement or passionate contribution that can help maintain or enhance interpersonal relationships (Zhu, 2016).

Excerpt (5) is an example of this. Jiao, female, is a full-time Ph.D. student of linguistics in her early thirties. Kang, male, is a part-time Ph.D. student of chemistry in his late twenties. They are strangers who were invited to dinner by a common friend. Prior to this part of the conversation, Kang had mentioned his part-time job with an Education Abroad Consulting company, which initiated a discussion about his payment.

Excerpt (5) (Dinner Ganz)

- 1 娇: 那你_那个_它_像你那种公司的话,
它给你年薪啊? 还是给你_就说=
- 2 康: = 月薪, 因为基本工资也就是三四千块钱吧, 这么高,
但是奖金会很高, 你客户多, 奖金 [是你工资的好几倍。]
- 3 →娇: [客户越多, 奖金越高,]
那客户的话, 怎么付钱啊?
他是给你什么钱哦, 是按小时计算吗?
- 4 康: 客户是给公司钱, 他一次性的 ...
-
- 1 Jiao: Then you_then_it_ like your company,
does it pay you annually or =
- 2 Kang: = Monthly payment, because the base salary
is as much as three or four thousand. But your
bonus will be higher if you get more customers.
It can [be several times your salary.]
- 3 →Jiao: [The more customers, the higher the bonus.]
Then how do customers make payment? What money
do they give you? Hourly wage?
- 4 Kang: Customers pay the company.
They make a one-off payment ...

Before Kang completes his explanation about his salary and bonus (turn 2), Jiao cuts in with 客户越多, 奖金越高 (The more customers, the higher the bonus) (turn 3) which overlaps extensively with Kang's 是你工资的好几倍 (be several times your salary) (turn 2). Jiao successfully takes the floor away from Kang who, however, does not want to relinquish it until he has finished speaking. The instance of extended concurrent speech is not terminated prematurely or repaired immediately as Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) suggest. Kang reacts to it by continuing to explain how he gets paid by the company, the latter being paid by customers before offering any services, which indicates that the extended concurrent speech sounds normal and appropriate to him. The two interactants build the conversation upon each other's contribution, respond to prior utterances without any gapping, and develop ideas vigorously.

After watching the above conversation clip, Kang remarked:

I didn't notice anything abnormal in our chat. Yes, we spoke simultaneously, like people always do over informal social meals. But it didn't stop us from communicating. We are both graduate students who were happy to get to know each other by sharing our personal experiences. I was very passionate in telling her about my part-time job. Of course, we talked over the top of each other sometimes. If she cut into the conversation, it meant that she was being attentive. It was not a big deal to be interrupted.

Jiao expressed her opinions in the follow-up interview:

Since we were meeting for the first time, I was very curious and asked him lots of questions. When he introduced his part-time job, I was eager to contribute to our conversation by making comments or expressing opinions where they were relevant. If I had waited, I might have forgotten what I initially wanted to say. I wasn't aware that I often interrupted him. But I don't think he cared about that because it was just an informal conversation instead of a formal meeting where you're required to follow an order to take turns. We didn't worry about any consequence of what we talked about and how we talked.

6.2 *Disagreement in English and Chinese*

A close look at the conversational data reveals that the English speakers appeared more agreeable than confrontational in all of the collected conversations. They were inclined to preface disagreement with a pause, concession,

hedge, or other type of softeners. Take Excerpt (6) as an example. Larry, a man in his early twenties, has recently graduated with a bachelor's degree. Nicole, a woman in her mid-twenties, had graduated from college several years previously. They are alumni of the same university and have been friends for a few years. Prior to this part of the conversation, Nicole had updated Larry on the progress she was making with job and school applications.

Excerpt (6) (Application)

- 1 Larry: So, if you get this Women's Organization thing, they could give you a recommendation.
- 2 →Nicole: Yep, well, no. 'cause I already have all of my recommendations all set.
- 3 Larry: Okay.
- 4 Nicole: Um, because it's like real_ honestly, they're pretty stacked up like, they're all Ivy League like, alumna, and they're all like, amazing.
- 5 Larry: Okay.

After Larry attempts to associate Nicole's letter of recommendation with her job application to a women's organization (turn 1), Nicole deploys a concession *yep* and a hedge *well* before she adamantly says *no* to express dissent (turn 2). In addition, she follows this with more explanations (turns 2 and 4) to reduce the impact of the dissent, which is well-received by Larry who says *Okay* (turns 3 and 5). This example supports the arguments of many scholars about the preference which English speakers have for mitigating disagreement with pauses, hesitation markers, repetition of previously-mentioned words, hedges, concessions, partial agreement, delaying devices, or repair initiators (e.g., Leech, 1983; Pomerantz, 1984; Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Similarly, weak disagreement occurred in the Chinese conversations, as shown in Excerpt (7) below. Changyu, male, is an automotive engineer. Jiang, female, is a college teacher. They attended the same junior and high schools and are in their mid-thirties. On the day of data collection, they met at their high school classmate reunion and chatted about their lives and other absent classmates. In the following dialogue, Changyu and Jiang discuss one of their former classmates, Nan, who has moved to the U.S.

Excerpt (7) (Changyu)

- 1 昌语:她老公,她老公还蛮后生相的。
- 2 奖:嗯,她老公比她小三岁,好像。
- 3 →昌语:三岁啊?有这么厉害?好像一岁吧?

- 4 奖: 是一岁吗? 我觉得是小三岁好像。我不知道, 也许我搞成另外一个人了。
- 1 Changyu: Her husband, her husband looks young.
- 2 Jiang: Um, her husband is three years younger than her, maybe.
- 3 →Changyu: Three years? Such a huge difference? Maybe one year?
- 4 Jiang: Is it one year? I thought it was three years, maybe.
I don't know. I might have mistaken her for another person.

After Jiang mentions that Nan's husband is three years younger than her (turn 2), Changyu tries to deliver an opposing view by gently asking a series of questions 三岁啊? 有这么厉害? 好像一岁吧? (Three years? Such a huge difference? Maybe one year?) (turn 3). The rising tone of polar questions, which sound less assertive than outright statements, the utterance-final particles 啊 and 吧, and the lexical choice of the epistemic modality marker 好像 (seem) can all weaken the force of disagreement and make it more appropriate and acceptable to the listener. In response, Jiang starts to doubt her memories and acknowledges that she might have confused Nan with another person (turn 4). This finding endorses Bond's (1986) and Ting-Toomey's (1988) assertions that Chinese speakers strive to maintain interpersonal harmony, which can be achieved by opting out of disagreement or employing weak disagreement (e.g., Du, 1995; S. Liu, 2004; Pan, 2000a).

Nonetheless, what cannot be ignored is that the Chinese speakers often deployed strong disagreement to demonstrate their firm standing, although we did not discover any instances of strong disagreement in the English conversations. For example, in Excerpt (8), Xi and Jiu strongly disagree several times during their discussion about networking. Xi is a female English teacher at a private college and Jiu is a female English teacher at a public college. They attended the same college and lived in the same dorm for four years. They have stayed in touch by phone and have met up occasionally since their graduation.

Excerpt (8) (Xiu6)

- 1 希: 你看我就是社会适应能力不行。
- 2 →玖: 你还社会适应能力不行? 你不挺好的嘛?
- 3 →希: 不行, 我跟你讲, 我一般的朋友交往没
问题, 就大家都觉得我还挺不 [错的,] =
- 4 玖: [嗯。]
- 5 希: = (coughs) 也挺爱学习的, 然后呢, 这个人呢,
也不是, 呃, 也不是坏人。[但] =
- 6 玖: [嗯。]

- 7 希: = 是一到那种社会关系, 我就不行了, 同事,
(coughs) [单位, 上下级, 看不透。]
- 8 →玖: [不要你搞什么关系] 在学校里。
- 9 →希: 当然要搞关系, 你在_像中国这种学校,
(coughs) 除非你有很大的本事, 你就是有再大的
本事, 你都要搞一点关系 ...
- 10 玖: 哦。
- 1 Xi: You see, I lack social adaptability.
- 2 →Jiu: You lack social adaptability? Aren't you good at that?
- 3 →Xi: No. Let me tell you something. I can interact with
ordinary friends and they think I'm not [bad.] =
- 4 Jiu: [Um.]
- 5 Xi: = (coughs) I also love studying. And as a person,
I'm not, uh, I'm not a bad person. [But] =
- 6 Jiu: [Um.]
- 7 Xi: = once it's networking, I cannot, I cannot figure out
colleagues, (coughs) [departments, status differences.]
- 8 →Jiu: [You don't need to network] at school.
- 9 →Xi: You definitely should network when you are
at a Chinese school, (coughs) unless you have extraordinary
skills. Even so, you have to network ...
- 10 Jiu: Oh.

At this meeting, Xi talks about her lack of social adaptability, which, however, meets with Jiu's blunt disagreement (turn 2). The disagreement is enacted in the form of rhetorical questions that do not expect answers, which, in this case, makes the tone of this disagreement stronger than mitigated disagreement. Xi vehemently opposes Jiu's point of view with 不行 (No) at turn 3. While Xi is elaborating on her position regarding her own abilities (turns 3, 5, and 7), Jiu delivers another token of strong disagreement 不要你搞什么关系 (You don't need to network) at turn 8. This then leads to Xi's second strong disagreement 当然要搞关系 (You definitely should network), which is followed by her long presentation of the importance of networking in China (turn 9). Apparently, Xi and Jiu co-construct strong disagreement and make it the norm in their interaction. Xi responds to Jiu's strong disagreement at turns 2 and 8 with another strong disagreement at turns 3 and 9. After several rounds of strong disagreement, Jiu compromises with 哦 (Oh) at turn 10. The two interactants do not react to strong disagreement with negative evaluations, as they would have done if they had considered it to be impolite (Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann, 2003).

In the interview, Xi explained her viewpoint:

We've known each other for a while although we don't hang out very often. But when we try to catch up, that is the way we talk. I didn't even notice we hadn't softened our disagreement before you pointed it out. I don't believe it was inappropriate for her to disagree with me directly. She just didn't hide her opinions and I didn't either, which means that we have a good relationship. We got excited about our discussion and we butted heads. So, what? Plus, we were talking about unimportant things, which shouldn't hurt anyone's feelings.

Jiu also shared her perspective as follows:

I guess we are two extroverts. Typically, we don't hold back our opinions in informal conversations. We would if we were talking to seniors or to our bosses. But as old friends, we felt comfortable disagreeing with each other directly without causing offence or taking offence. I had confidence in our solid relationship. So, I honestly presented my opinion whenever it was relevant, even though it was contradictory to hers. I might have cut her off sometimes because I couldn't wait. That might be one of my many habits – speaking my mind right away.

6.3 *Discussion*

Pan (2000b) is correct in stating that researchers “should not neglect contextual constraints on the function of each dimension” (p. 145). Contextual factors can affect how closely people follow certain types of norms. Hereinafter, we employ Zhu's (2019) model of context, practice, and perception to account for the aforementioned findings. The broad sociocultural contexts of the collected conversations are contemporary U.S. and mainland China, where linguistic forms and interactional norms can differ from what they were historically. The English conversations took place at apartments (Excerpts 1 and 6) or cafés (Excerpt 3) in a midwestern American city, whereas the Chinese conversations occurred at restaurants (Excerpts 4 and 5), condominiums (Excerpt 8), or community centers (Excerpts 2 and 7) in a southeastern Chinese city. Both are medium-sized cities, which do not have an international reputation like New York or Beijing. All conversations occurred in informal settings, where the participants were not overly concerned about the consequences of the conversations. The ways in which the participants took turns and expressed disagreement were undoubtedly constrained by macro-level factors including temporality, the region, and the setting (Zhu, 2019).

Shaped by similar sociocultural contexts, the English and Chinese conversations share some commonalities. For example, the participants took turns speaking and provided linguistic/non-linguistic cues to start new turns (Excerpts 1 and 2). The number of participants engaging in each conversation altered according to the context. Their conversations differed in length and content, and varied in the order, size and distribution of turns. The participants also briefly overlapped with each other (Excerpts 3 and 4) to manifest active listenership (Knight, 2011). These commonalities apparently reflect some of Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) turn-taking rules. With regard to disagreement, both the English and Chinese speakers employed weak disagreement (Excerpts 6 and 7). The main reason for this finding is that weak disagreement can sound more polite, while strong disagreement might sound more forceful and thus hurt the addressees' feelings.

Furthermore, the interactional context (Zhu, 2019) of the collected conversations, such as interactional goals, risks, topics, relevance, verbal/nonverbal cues, social distance, and status differences, seemed to have influenced the participants' practice of turn-taking and disagreement. For example, all the participants met to socialize with each other, maintain their friendships, or enhance their relationships. They conversed about non-controversial, low-stakes topics that revolved around the trivialities of everyday life, such as traveling (Excerpt 1), residence (Excerpt 2), flights (Excerpt 3), fish (Excerpt 4), salary (Excerpt 5), an application (Excerpt 6), age (Excerpt 7) and social adaptability (Excerpt 8). If the topics had been contentious and high-risk, they might have taken turns or dissented in a different way. The choice of topic affects people's informal reasoning in everyday arguments (Kuhn, 1991). The English speakers were friends (Excerpt 6) or acquaintances (Excerpts 1 and 3), while the Chinese speakers were friends (Excerpts 2, 7, and 8), acquaintances (Excerpt 4), or strangers who joined the conversations through common friends or acquaintances (Excerpt 5). The participants were "on an equal footing to express different points of views" (Angouri and Locher, 2012: 1550). The impact of a status difference that might have resulted from differences in age, sex, social class, rank, or education was undoubtedly mitigated by the nature of mundane conversations in informal settings. The participants' relatively equal status probably played a prime role in the realization of their turn-taking and disagreement behaviors.

To be more specific, the English and Chinese speakers differed in the deployment of extended concurrent speech. The English speakers did not produce extended concurrent speech in their conversations, which indicates that they tried to avoid long overlapping by observing Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) turn-taking rules. But these rules are not necessarily universal. The

Chinese speakers produced extended concurrent speech (Excerpt 5). One major reason for this observation could be their high involvement style (Tannen, 1985, 2005, 2007). This high involvement style might have been conditioned by contextual factors such as the informal setting, low-stakes topics, relatively equal status, or short social distance that allowed them to relax and actively engage in the conversations whenever they believed that their contributions were relevant to ongoing topics.

The English speakers also differed from their Chinese counterparts in that the latter enacted strong disagreement in addition to weak disagreement. The English speakers did not use any strong disagreement, which supports prior research findings based on English data (e.g., Leech, 1983; Pomerantz, 1984; Brown and Levinson, 1987). In contrast, the Chinese speakers did not refrain from presenting conflicting stances directly (Excerpt 8). As Goodwin, Goodwin and Yaeger-Dror (2002) advance, conflicts “may serve to initiate friendships rather than thwart them” in a different culture or context (p. 1625). Disagreement in Chinese “shows not only the intimate relationship among the speakers but also their strong desire to maintain a sincere and independent self within the interactive frame” (Kuo, 1992: 402). Directness in Chinese could indicate upfront sincerity and solidarity (Lee-Wong, 1994). The ostensibly negative effect of strong disagreement might have been alleviated by the speakers’ flat tone, low pitch, and soft volume (Zhu and Boxer, 2013). These observations are aligned with the findings of prior research on the sociability function of disagreement employed by Jews (Schiffrin, 1984; Katriel, 1986) and Greeks (Tannen and Kakava, 1992; Georgakopoulou, 2001; Kakava, 2002).

Finally, the personal context (Zhu, 2019) of the participants must have guided their practice and shaped their perceptions of turn-taking and disagreement behaviors. Culpeper (2005) convincingly argues that research participants are the best evaluators of (im)politeness whose judgments could lead to varying reactions and affect the dynamic of conversational interactions. When the participants in this study completed their conversations courteously after extended concurrent speech or strong disagreement was enacted, it would suggest that they perceived the act as politic, if not polite. If they had perceived an act of strategic impoliteness, they would have responded with negative comments, emotionally loaded words, or signs of distress (Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann, 2003). This interpretation was corroborated by the interviewees, who explicitly said that they were not aware of anything abnormal in the Chinese conversation clips that contained extended concurrent speech or strong disagreement. They mentioned the effects of the sociocultural context, such as the informal setting, the interactional context,

such as equal status, short social distance, mundane topics, low stakes, and relevance, and the personal context, such as eager personalities, beliefs, awareness, and habits, on their production and views of extended concurrent speech and strong disagreement.

The findings of this study demonstrate a vital link between context, practice, and perception. The various contextual elements seemed to have made extended concurrent speech or strong disagreement in Mandarin Chinese another “type of practice that is open to evaluation as face-threatening, yet appears difficult to characterize as either polite or impolite” (Chang and Haugh, 2011: 2961). Indeed, which type of practice is “‘optimum’ depends partly on pragmatic contextual variables and partly on culturally-based sociopragmatic preferences” (Spencer-Oatey and Jiang, 2003: 1635). After the Chinese speakers had been exposed to frequent extended concurrent speech or strong disagreement, they did not expect turn-taking to be orderly or disagreement to be mitigated in certain contexts. This understanding would form the basis of the speakers’ perceptions and expectations of turn-taking or disagreement that, in turn, could lead to the performance of the two speech behaviors in similar contexts.

The similar and disparate behaviors of the English and Chinese speakers in terms of turn-taking and disagreement imply that the “ways of constructing conversations between two people from different cultures may have similarities and differences” from the “ways in which they converse with members who share their cultural backgrounds” (Austin, 1998: 327). Boxer (2002) rightfully posits that “individuals from two societies or communities carry out their interactions (whether spoken or written) according to their own rules or norms, often resulting in a clash in expectations and, ultimately, misperceptions about the other group” (p. 151). Consequently, this other group would be deemed improper and even rude, although their speech behavior is normal and appropriate in their native society. In other words, communication between people from different cultures runs the danger of being ineffective, and their interpretations of others’ intentions incorrect, due to the assumption that people share the same linguistic rules and pragmatic norms. Therefore, although we tend to rely on “implicit understandings and cultural patterns to create and understand messages in conversation” (Austin, 1998: 327), we should develop awareness of different pragmatic norms outside of our comfort zone and acquire knowledge of how to communicate appropriately with people from another society.

7 Conclusion

This study compares the turn-taking and disagreement behaviors of the English and Chinese speakers who participated in spontaneous conversations in American English and Mandarin Chinese, respectively. The non-familial equal-status speakers observed some of Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) turn-taking rules but differed in the deployment of extended concurrent speech. They employed weak disagreement to lessen the force of disagreement but differed in the deployment of strong disagreement. Analysis of the Chinese speakers' reactions to extended concurrent speech and strong disagreement reveals nothing negative. This was confirmed by the Chinese speakers' viewpoints that were explicitly stated in the follow-up interviews, which signal that they perceived the practice of extended concurrent speech and strong disagreement in the collected spontaneous conversations in informal settings as politic, rather than impolite. In addition to these perceptions, the similarities and differences between the English and Chinese speakers' turn-taking and disagreement behaviors appear to be constrained by macro and micro contextual factors. This discloses the interplay of context, practice, and perception (Zhu, 2019). Also, the findings support Chen, He and Hu's (2013) conclusion regarding the existence of both similarities and differences on different levels in the realization of the requesting behavior of speakers from different cultures. This study can raise our awareness of the potential issues that might occur in intercultural encounters and the importance of understanding cross-cultural pragmatic differences to avoid miscommunication. It is a meaningful addition to studies on contrastive pragmatics.

Future research could conduct a quantitative study comparing turn-taking or disagreement in English and Chinese conversations in informal settings to determine whether these similarities or differences are statistically significant. It could also compare turn-taking or disagreement in spontaneous conversations in formal settings to determine whether the formality of settings has an impact on the realization of turn-taking or disagreement by English and Chinese speakers. Investigations along these lines would enrich empirical studies that use authentic data to explore real-life pragmatic behavior. They could also enhance the understanding of intercultural communication between English and Chinese speakers.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Jun Wang and Xuanchen Zhu for their help with the collection and transcription of the conversations. We are also grateful to

the editors and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on earlier versions of this paper. Any remaining errors are our own.

Transcription Conventions (Adapted from Schiffrin, 1987)

[]	Overlapping utterances
=	Contiguous utterances after an interruption
...	Omission
–	A short untimed pause
@	Laughter
<i>italics</i>	Emphasis
(coughs)	Characteristics of the talk
(indistinct)	Items in doubt

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