'*I don't think*' vs '*I think + not*'

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Abstract

This paper explores an overlooked yet intriguing phenomenon: the different preferences of first language (L1) and second language (L2) groups in the use of *I don't think* and *I think + not*. Based on naturally occurring data from linguistically and culturally contrastive groups of American English speakers, Chinese and Persian English speakers, this study finds that *I don't think* highlights the speaker's opinion, and *I think + not* focuses on the content conveyed. There is a correlation between the negative power and the distance between *I think* and the negative marker: the closer the two, the stronger the negativity. While *I don't think* has more negativity force, *I think + not* has more mitigating weight and can be employed as a politeness strategy. The L1 speakers differ from the L2 speakers but are closer to the Chinese than the Persians; the striking variations occur between the L1 speakers and the Persians. The Persians are found to be the most indirect; the Chinese are more direct than the Persians but less direct than the L1 speakers. The differences between L1 and L2 groups relate to the first-language transfer and cultural influence. This study implies that different varieties of English use need to be addressed in language teaching.

Keywords:

I don't think, L1 and L2, negation, epistemic phrase, *I think*, ESL/EFL

1 Introduction

Epistemic phrases (e.g. *I think*) are used diversely in cross-cultural communication (Zhang and Sabet 2016). The present study focuses on the negative forms of *I think*: *I don't think* and *I think + not*. There are abundant studies on the use of *I think*, but not many on *I don't think* and *I think + not*. This study provides insights into the use of *I don't think* vs *I think + not* by examining data collected from three linguistically and culturally contrastive groups: L1 speakers of American English (L1S), Chinese English speakers (CES), and Persian English speakers (PES).

The expressions *I don't think* and *I think + not* fall under the umbrella term 'negation' including negative words such as *no*, *not*, *neither*, and *never*. Thornbury's (2006) classification of negation consists of markers which contradict the meaning of a sentence or part of it:

- *Not*-negation: It is *not* predictable.
- *Not* + time or quantity expression: *Not* many people turned up at the party.
- Negative determiner *no*: *No* mail today.
- Negative pronoun: *No*body knows that.
- Negative affix: A use*less* handout was given to me.
- Other negative word: I will *never* forget such a nice day.

The main focus of this study is the use of *not* when clustered with *I think*. Sabet and Zhang (2015) and Zhang and Sabet (2016) have briefly looked at *I don't think* vs *I think* + *not*, and found that *I don't think* manifests a speaker-centred tendency and the speaker's assertiveness; conversely, *I think* + *not* indicates a listener-centred tendency and the speaker's tentativeness. Further work is needed to expand the existing literature and present a fuller picture of this overlooked yet intriguing phenomenon. This study intends to find out, from empirical evidence, the linguistic behaviours of L1 and L2 groups in the use of *I don't think* and *I think* + *not*, and the factors underlying their varied uses. This paper consists of the following sections: review of the existing literature, methodology, data analysis, discussion and conclusions.

2 Previous Studies

There have been abundant studies of negation in English, but specific and focused work on *I don't think* is limited. Swan (1995: 354) states that to introduce negation with words such as *think*, *believe*, *suppose*, and *imagine*, we usually make the first verb negative, but not the second one (except for *I thought* + negative); for example, *I <u>don't think</u> you have met my wife*. There is another form of the negation: *<u>I think</u> you have <u>not</u> met my wife*, where the negative word *not* is placed not before the first verb (*I think*) but before the second verb (*met*). Swan perceives that the former is more natural than the latter, which is confirmed by an online analysis of the frequency

of *I do not think you* ... vs *I think you do not* …, based on Michel et al.'s (2011) Google Books Ngram Corpus[1] (written data) as shown in Figure 1.1.

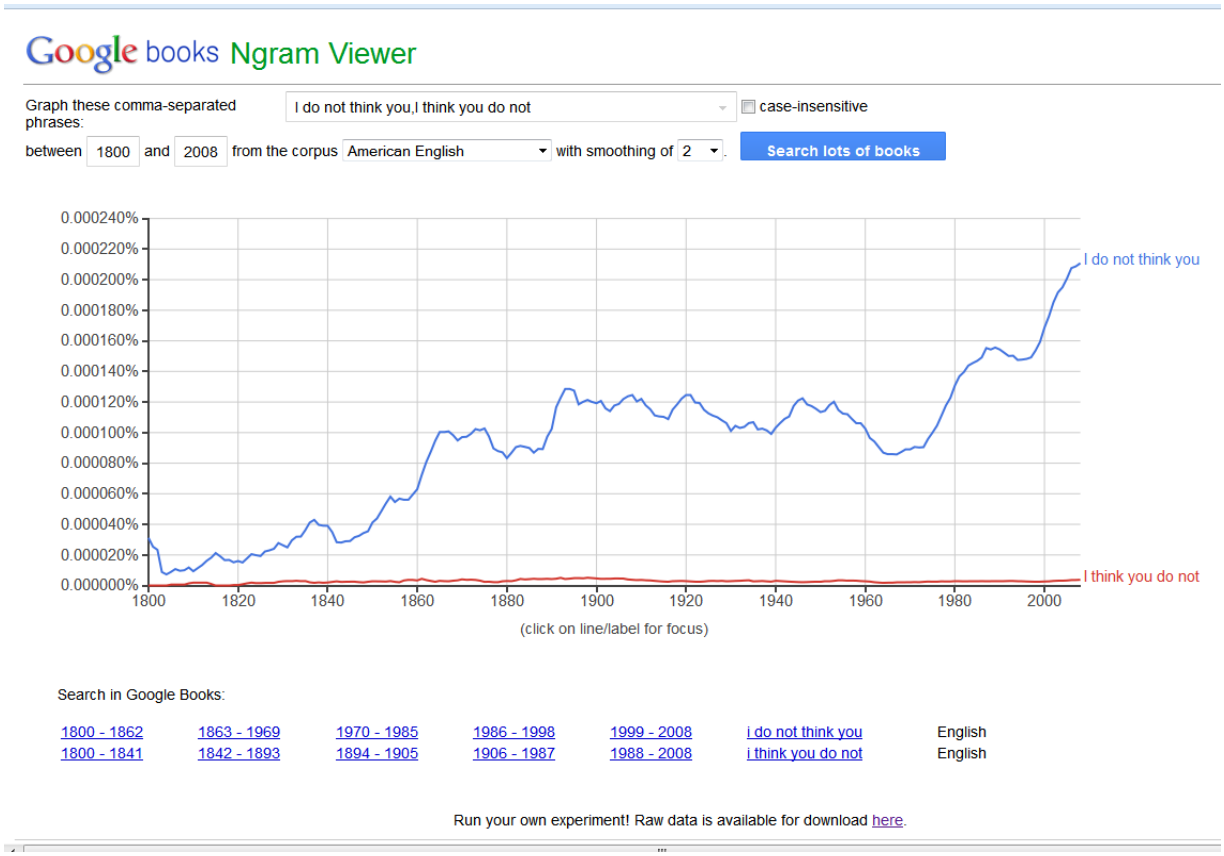

Figure 1.1 Distribution of *I do not think you* and *I think you do not*
(Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer, July 30, 2015)

Figure 1.1 shows that *I do not think you* … occurs much more frequently than *I think you do not* … in written American English, which provides some background information for this study where spoken American English has been chosen for analysis. It also reveals that over the years, the tendency to use *I do not think you* … has steadily increased, while *I think you do not* … has

[1]Google Books Ngram Corpus (https://books.google.com/ngrams) is a corpus of half a trillion words, developed by Google from the scanned copies of books. It investigates online books from 1800 up to 2008 for inquiries on the use of small sets of phrases.

remained minimal. In written American English, *I don't think* is substantially preferred to *I think + not*, which will be compared with the trend identified in this study where spoken data is analysed.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983) conducted a study on negation, derived from Klima's (1964) tag-question experiment. Using the examples below, they verify two kinds of negation: at the sentence level and at the phrase level.

John is not at home, *is he?*

No sailors are on the ship, *are they?*

Michele has decided to not pay taxes this year, *hasn't she?*

Harry is uncoordinated, *isn't he?*

(Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1983: 95)

Klima (1964) finds that the first two examples are instances of sentence-level negation (syntactically negative sentences), whereas the last two are not. The first two, with a positive form of tag question, consist of negative words (*not* and *no*) negating the whole sentence. The last two, with a negative form of tag question, have negative words (*not* and *un-*) that negate phrases only (*attend* and *happy*) rather than the whole sentence. Similarly, in this study *I don't think* is a sentence-level negation and *I think + not* is a phrase-level negation.

Sentence-level negation can be problematic for lower-level learners of English, as negative particles appear in different sentential positions in different languages (Celce-Murcia and

Larsen-Freeman 1983). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman also find that the possibility of multiple negations in a single sentence in different languages can be problematic; for example, 'She did*n't* say *no*thing to *no*body' may be a standard form in some languages but is not compatible with the negation rule in English. They find that another problem for L2 speakers of English in using negative particles originates from the lack of distinct equivalents in their L1, to express *not* and *no*. The use of contracted forms (e.g. *isn't*) can also cause confusion for L2 speakers, as they may not have an equivalent in their first language.

Zhang and Sabet (2016) investigate *I don't think* + affirmative (type I) vs *I think* + negative (type II), and their data reveal that the L1 speakers (of American English) use only type I. Type II is mostly preferred by PES, while CES sit in the middle, using both types. This result confirms Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's (1983) claim: L2 speakers may have difficulties in using *I don't think* type of sentence-level negation. Below are examples of the two types.

Example 1: L1 English speakers use type I (L1:1)

Context: This is a discussion between two L1 speakers (S1 and S2 below, and hereafter) regarding the press not taking the required measures to prevent an incident. L1:1 stands for L1 corpus, conversation 1; # 61 below indicates speaking turn number, and hereafter. All numbers are original ones quoted from the corpus.

61 S2: The press has already put heat on'em they're putting heat on themselves. <u>I don't think</u> it's necessary.

62 S1: Well they're obviously not having enough heat put on them because it keeps happening.

S2 puts more emphasis on his/her personal view by using *I don't think*. This mirrors the L1 speaker's speaker-oriented approach in communication, in which the speakers' view is highlighted by *I don't think*. L2 speakers, in contrast, prefer *I think* + *negative*; especially PES as shown in the following example.

Example 2: PES use type II (P:6)

Context: This is a discussion between two PES. They are discussing the different steps needed for a society to make progress. P:6 stands for Persian corpus, conversation 6, and hereafter.

463 S2: I think every person must have strong position to change themselves. I must try to change myself and I improve my culture. <u>I think</u> we <u>cannot</u> improve others' cultures, <u>cannot</u> change others. We can just make some rules and, huh, and encourage people to respect that rule and just this. I, <u>I think</u> by force, we <u>cannot</u> change people.

464 S7: We must make aware people to know and understand beds of rules. Just advantages of rules not just thinking about themselves. We must be aware to think about others, other persons. (Note: 'beds of rules' means 'body of rules')

As opposed to the L1 speaker in Example 1, the L2 speaker (S2) in Example 2 puts emphasis on the content, the clause after *I think*. S2 uses the negative proposition to emphasise the inability to improve others' culture or change people, thereby de-emphasising the force of *I think*.

According to Sabet and Zhang (2015) and Zhang and Sabet (2016), *I don't think* is more assertive than *I think* + *not*, as it highlights the speaker's view, revealing a speaker-centred approach. *I think* + *not* is more listener-centred by focusing on the content which feeds the listener with information; it places the main emphasis on the negative proposition rather than on the speaker. They find a trade-off occurring in the use of the two types: type I highlights the speaker's view but de-highlights the subsequent proposition, while type II de-highlights speaker's view but highlights the subsequent proposition. They conclude that *I don't think* + affirmative clause is more direct and assertive, while *I think* + negative clause is indirect and less authoritative (Zhang and Sabet 2016). PES appear less confrontational than the L1 speakers who seem more confident in the claim they make; CES alternate between assertiveness and indirectness. Zhang and Sabet's works are among the few studies to touch upon the use of *I don't think* and *I think* + *not*, but have yet to provide an in-depth and comprehensive account of the two constructs. The present paper aims to fill this gap by giving a fuller picture of how L1 and L2 speakers employ the two constructs in real-life communication.

This study takes a speaker- and content-oriented combinational view: *I don't think* may highlight speaker's opinion more than *I think* + *not* does, and *I think* + *not* may express doubt less directly towards the proposition in question than *I think* + *not* does. In other words, type I expresses direct negation, and type II indirect negation.

3 Data

The data used in this study consist of three groups: L1S, CES and PES. The combination is rare and adds a valuable resource in considering the use of *I don't think* and *I think + not*.

The data collection adopts purposive sampling by pre-defining three groups of participants to suit the objectives of the study. The L1 speaker data includes tutorials and short lectures in classroom settings with teacher/student and student/student interactions, selected from the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE). The two L2 data sets, of Chinese and Persian English speakers at upper-intermediate to advanced proficiency levels, were collected from classroom interactions comparable with the L1 data. A similar total number of words was chosen in each data set, about 50,000 words per data set, or about 150,000 in total. The data sets were also kept comparable by including nearly the same number of participants in each group; around 70 members per group, totalling nearly 210. The L1 data consist of classroom interactions on social issues. To ensure that the three data sets were comparable, similar topics were selected for discussion in the L2 classes. The Chinese data were collected at a Shaanxi university in central China, and the Persian data in a language school in Lahijan, a northern city of Iran.

Prior to the data collection, a one-hour pilot study was conducted in Iran to check the process and quality of the recording. The outcome showed that everything worked well and no further refinement was needed. The data analysis was conducted using concordance software by Wordsmith Tools.

The data examination was carried out at two levels: super-sentential and sentential. The former provides a picture of language use at a macro level, and the latter at a micro level.

3.1 Super-sentential analysis

Table 3.1: Components of super-sentential analysis

Item	Category
Action	Agreement, disagreement, or disagreement + explanation
Utterance	Short or long utterance
Number of parties	Two or multiple speakers interacting
Discourse marker	Presence or absence of discourse markers

Table 3.1 shows that the super-sentential analysis involves investigating what the speaker is doing globally when using *I don't think* and *I think + not*. The first unit to examine is action which refers to what the speaker is doing (agreeing, etc.) through the sentence that contains one of the negative forms under study. In terms of the length of the utterance, a short utterance refers to a single clause (dependent or independent) and a long utterance to more than one clause. The number of parties refers to interactants involved in the interaction containing either phrase. The more speakers involved, the more interactive the discourse becomes. The existence of a discourse marker (e.g. *you know, em*) anywhere in an utterance where *I don't think* or *I think+ not* occurs is looked at as well, providing a more dynamic interpretation of the purpose of the use of the two phrases. For this category, Schiffrin's (1987) definition of discourse markers as "linguistic, paralinguistic, or nonverbal elements that signal relations between units of talk by virtue of their syntactic and semantic properties and by virtue of their sequential relations as initial or terminal brackets demarcating discourse units" (p. 40) has been adopted.

Taking ‘action’ in Table 3.1 as an example, agreement occurs where the speaker resorts to *I don’t think* to bring his/her statement in line with another speaker as in Example 3.

Example 3 (L1:1)

Context: This is a conversation between two L1 speakers who are talking about whether media should have been granted permission to publish the photographs of some convicts.

12 S1: Cuz wherever they're living, you know let's say they're living in some town somewhere in England, once you publish the photograph anybody in the town that, sees that person on the street is gonna know who they are. [S2: right] then you might as well publish their name because it, it then becomes public knowledge.

13 S2: Yeah, <u>I don't think</u> that they've been, um press has been, granted access to them [S1: mhm] so I don't know if people know it.

(Note: [ ] overlapping speech)

Speaker 1 in turn 12 is referring to the potential hazards of revealing identities of two convicts in the media. S/he first points to publishing their photos and then reinforces his/her criticism by adding one more negative act by the media, publishing their names. S2 is in agreement with S1 and commences to express his/her agreement by interjecting S1 in turn 12 and begins turn 13 with an agreement marker *yeah* and continues to support S1’s criticism by using *I don’t think* to say that revealing identities might be an illegal act.

Example 4 (Ch:7)

Context: This is a conversation between four CES regarding what the teaching job involves and what is required to be a good teacher. Ch:7 stands for Chinese corpus, conversation 7, and hereafter.

150 S2: Three Ps. Patience, passion, and performance.

151 S1: What about you?

152 S8: Yes, patience is an important factor. Many students pay more attention to you, in your class. Therefore your class is efficient I think. I think this is very important.

153 S7: <u>I think</u>, huh, <u>I don't think</u> patience is a very important thing because I think patience is a temporary thing which cannot exist long. I think we should choose what we like, and what we love. Yes, it is the most important.

In Example 4, S7 in turn 153 shows a self-initiated repair by shifting from *I think* to *I don't think* which indicates that the speaker changed his/her mind about what s/he wanted to say. It seems the first version has been treated as a problem or a trouble source that s/he tries to repair in the second version. *I don't think* in turn 153 is used to express disagreement with S8. S/he then suggests a reason for his/her disagreement, in that patience is short-lived before continuing with an alternative, which is passion. The speaker here uses *I don't think* for disagreement + explanation. *I think* in the start of turn 153 is a discourse marker (Aijmer 1997, Holmes 1990), indicating a self-initiated repair.

Example 5 (L1:1)

Context: This is a conversation between three L1 speakers regarding a photograph published in the media.

458 S1: Good, so that was, that was published, the same time as the [S3: mhm] controversial photograph right? Were any others, not published at the same time but later? [S12: yeah the,] yeah?

459 S2: Well this first one, the Ohio University one, I'm not sure if it, I don't think it was on the same day, but, there was um, editor explains use of photo in the opinion page so it wasn't where the picture was [S1: mhm] but,

460 S3: It was the next.

In Example 5, S2 in turn 459 is replying to S1's question. S/he begins the turn with a discourse marker, *well*, showing some degree of hesitation and uncertainty about the answer. *Well* functions here as a turn-initial component, used to take a turn to reply to a polar question in turn 458. The answer is expected to begin with 'yes' or 'no' as a relevant answer, but as can be seen in turn 459, it begins with *well*, which shows a different polarity and signals dispreference (Pomerantz 1984; Schegloff and Lerner 2009). The speaker then continues with a different polarity in which s/he expresses uncertainty by *I'm not sure* and leaves the sentence incomplete. S/he tries to carry on with an explanation that begins with *I don't think*, followed by the answer. S2 refers to where the explanation regarding the use of photo appeared.

Example 6 (Ch:7)

Context: This is a conversation between three CES regarding a movie.

66 S2: In this film a lot of students always make troubles to the teacher and sometimes they put some glue, on the, the chair and the teacher sits on it. I think that's terrible. What do you feel of that?

67 S6: I think not almost all students can do that, only, only a small part.

68 S2: Do you think you like it?

69 S6: Huh, I think, huh. First I will, I will teach them, teach him or teach her, huh, and speak with him and I will try to know what he always thinks and why, why did, why did he do that. Maybe, huh, maybe gradually he will not, treat, not do that thing.

70 S1: I think every student does not want to hurt their teachers. Maybe they are, haven't been paid attention to. Maybe by doing this, they want to attract their, others' attention and originally they want to regard their teachers. This can have immediate effects on the person's life. So we should admit that if we want to become a teacher, it is a kind of later job. That's all for me.

S2 in turn 66 makes reference to one of the probably most viewed scenes in the movie in which students make fun of the teacher and ridicule him. S/he then asks student S6 for his/her comments. S6 in the next turn tries to avoid overgeneralisation by using *I think* + *not* coupled with a hedging expression: '*I think not* almost all students'. The attempt to avoid overgeneralisation is once again reinforced in the same sentence by emphasising the smallness of

the number of students who commit such offences against their teachers ('only, only a small part'). S1 begins her turn (70) with a comment using *I think* + *not*. What seems noticeable is that both such cases (turns 67 and 70) occur at the very beginning of each turn. Example 6 presents two instances of *I think* + *not* by the L2 speakers, which is not used by the L1 speakers in the data.

3.2 Sentential analysis

Table 3.2: Components of sentential analysis

Semantic relations	*I don't think*: result, contrast, reason, blank (dummy) *I think* + *not*: result, contrast, reason, self-explanation
Position	Pre- or post-position

Table 3.2 shows how sentential analysis is conducted for the use of the two constructs. As can be seen, the two are similar in the semantic relations they occur in, except for the last one as in the Table. Some idiomatic expressions such as *I don't think so* serve none of the other purposes, so they are classified as blank (dummy).

Example 7 (Ch:1)

100 S2: Yeah, that's what I thought. Uh, but <u>I don't think</u> my aunt would have been very pleased. Anyway, what about this one?

In Table 3.2, contrast occurs where the speaker employs one of the two negation forms to make a contrastive statement as in Example 7.

Example 8 (P:7)

156 S2: No, because I don't think it is going to work. Believe me children are much, much harder than you think. They will do.

Reason refers to the use of either form in a sentence in which the speaker is giving a reason for something as in Example 8.

It needs to be noted that self-explanation refers to a case where the speaker is emphasising their own opinion by different means, one of which can be the use of 'in my opinion' in the same sentence, while explanation refers to a more general or neutral case of commenting on a phenomenon.

The analysis in this study also deals with position comparison: pre-position and post-position of *I don't think*. When *I don't think* appears prior to the clause that expresses the semantic relation, it is called pre-position; otherwise it is in a post-position. Pre-position or post-position is not simply a syntactic position in the sentence. It is analysed relative to the semantic relation of *I don't think*: occurrence before or after the purpose which it is used for. For instance, in Example 8, the use of *I don't think* displays post-position because *I don't think* appears within the 'because (dependent)' clause that is used to give a reason.

4 Data analysis

Table 4.1 *I don't think* vs *I think + not*

	I don't think	*I think + not*
L1S	22	0
CES	19	25
PES	6	19

(Zhang and Sabet 2016: 344)

Table 4.1 shows that *I think + not* is preferred to *I don't think* by the L2 groups, and particularly by PES, but L1 speakers do not use it at all. The difference between the three groups is statistically significant (χ^2[d.f.2, n = 91] = 29.511, p<0.001). Kärkkäinen (2010) finds that *I don't think* is one of the most frequent epistemic phrases in spoken American English, which is confirmed in this study, too. L2 speakers use *I think + not* more; they might take *I think* as a readily accessible discourse marker to make up for communicative stress and low proficiency (Wang and Zhu 2005). *I think* can also help to buy time and do self-repair (Wu, Wang and Cai 2010), and to express negation at the same time; L2 speakers apparently find *I think + not* more versatile than *I don't think*, as indicated in Table 4.1.

4.1 Super-sentential analysis

Table 4.2: Super-sentential analysis

Item	L1S		CES		PES	
	I don't think N=22	*I think not* N=0	*I don't think* N=19	*I think not* N=25	*I don't think* N=6	*I think not* N=19

Agreement Disagreement Dis + explanation	3 (14%) 4 (18%) 15 (68%)	0	3 (16%) 7 (37%) 9 (47%)	4 (16%) 3 (12%) 18 (72%)	0 (0%) 4 (67%) 2 (33%)	1 (6%) 14 (74%) 4 (21%)
Long utterance Short utterance	10 (45%) 12 (55%)	0	8 (42%) 11 (58%)	16 (64%) 9 (36%)	1 (17%) 5 (83%)	5 (26%) 14 (74%)
Two parties Multiple parties	8 (36%) 14 (64%)	0	6 (32%) 13 (68%)	2 (8%) 23 (92%)	1 (17%) 5 (83%)	4 (21%) 15 (79%)
Discourse markers No discourse markers	10 (45%) 12 (55%)	0	13 (68%) 6 (32%)	4 (16%) 21 (84%)	2 (33%) 4 (67%)	4 (21%) 15 (79%)

Note: *The frequencies here are useful for demonstrating the preference tendency of the three groups, which are considered as guidelines rather than rules. There are no statistics provided, because the low counts may produce less meaningful statistical results. This applies to the following tables as well*.

As Table 4.2 shows, *I don't think* is used mostly for disagreement + explanation, except among PES who prefer to use it for simple disagreement without explanation. The data indicate that when the negative expression is used, disagreement + explanation is required mostly by the discourse, which is in line with Pomerantz (1984). This pattern also tends to be in short utterances and with multiple parties; again explaining requires more interactive discourse. Up to this point, all three groups have been largely similar, but a difference occurs in whether or not *I don't think* is used with discourse markers. L1S and PES seem indifferent in their preference, but CES show a significant preference for using the marker. This suggests that by using discourse markers with *I don't think*, the Chinese tend to, for example, mitigate more than the other two groups.

In terms of *I think + not*, a significant contrast emerges between the L2 groups. CES and PES use the expression mostly where there are multiple parties involved, and with discourse markers to serve functions such as stalling to search for words (Example 9). However, the two L2 groups

differ from each other as well, with the Chinese using *I think* + *not* more for disagreement + explanation in long utterances, and PES employing it more for disagreement with no explanation and in short utterances. It seems logical that when one explains, more text is needed than when expressing a disagreement without explanation.

Example 9 (Ch:8)

Context: This is a conversation between two CES over four turns. They are talking about a character in a movie.

282 S1: So what is, what about your feelings?

283 S3: <u>I think, I think</u> that man, <u>I think</u> that man actually <u>is not</u> normal, is not normal.

284 S1: Abnormal.

285 S3: Abnormal. Yeah abnormal.

This example begins with S1 asking S3 about her feelings toward one of the characters in the movie. In the next turn (283), S3 begins her sentence with *I think, I think* which indicates she is trying to buy time to find a word to describe the man. The second *I think* is followed by the subject 'that man', but the speaker still seems unsure of the words and makes another attempt. The third *I think* is where she finds the word which expresses what she means. The word search process is confirmed when she immediately accepts the suggested word by S1 in the next turn (284).

In comparing *I don't think* vs *I think + not*, the most consistent pattern in all three groups is a preference for using the expressions in discourses with several parties. Other consistent patterns are: 1) that all groups prefer to use them without discourse markers, except CES when they use *I don't think*; and 2) that they all use them in short utterances, except CES who prefer long utterances when using *I think + not*. The greatest difference is that L1S and CES use the two expressions mostly for disagreement + explanation, but PES use them much more for disagreement without explanation. This does not mean PES are blunt when disagreeing; in fact they express negation in a mitigated fashion by using very few *I don't think* and much more *I think + not* – the latter is viewed as less assertive (Sabet and Zhang 2015).

The L2 groups make more concentrated use of *I think + not* than *I don't think*, and PES do not use *I don't think* for agreement at all. Around three fourths of the uses of *I think + not* concentrate around one item only: 72 per cent (18 occurrences) for disagreement + explanation by CES and 74 per cent (14 occurrences) for disagreement by PES. PES prefer to disagree by using *I think + not* much more than *I don't think*, perhaps because they find *I think + not* can be used to highlight the content. Another possibility is that *I think + not* indicates less confrontational negation, 'disagreement or criticism is implied rather than explicitly stated' (Sabet and Zhang 2015: 160). In contrast, L1 speakers' directness and assertiveness in disagreeing is expressed by *I don't think*, where the focus is more on the speaker rather than the content.

In terms of the length of utterances, both L1S and CES use long and short utterances at similar rates when using *I don't think*. PES, by contrast, are less even: 83 per cent short utterances, 17

per cent long utterances for I *don't think*, versus 74 per cent short utterances and 26 per cent long utterances for *I think+ not*.

The super-sentential analysis presented in Table 4.2 demonstrates that there are similarities and differences among the three groups across the board. Given their preference for *I think + not* pattern, L2 groups seem more indirect and less authoritative (Chan 2013; Zhang and Sabet 2016), and focus more on the content rather than the speaker. This is because *I think* has the function of mitigating face threat (Aijmer 1997; Brown and Levinson 1987).

4.2 Sentential analysis

As opposed to the super-sentential analysis in Section 4.1, this section discusses the use of *I don't think* and *I think + not* at the sentential level.

Table 4.3: Sentential analysis

Group	*I don't think*				Group	*I think + not*			
	Result	Contrast	Reason	Blank		Result	Contrast	Reason	Self-explanation
L1S (N=22)	3 (14%)	10 (46%)	5 (23%)	4 (18%)	L1S (N=0)	0	0	0	0
CES (N=19)	1 (5%)	7 (37%)	9 (48%)	2 (10%)	CES (N=25)	5 (20%)	6 (24%)	2 (8%)	12 (48%)
PES (N=6)	0	0	4 (67%)	2 (33%)	PES (N=19)	0	9 (48%)	5 (26%)	5 (26%)

Table 4.3 shows a discrepancy between L1 and L2 groups' use of *I don't think* and *I think + not* at the sentential level. CES are the only group to consistently use both expressions for all the purposes listed in Table 4.3: result, contrast, reason, blank, and self-explanation. The other

groups are less versatile, using them for fewer purposes and in a more concentrated manner. Under the category of 'blank', all three groups used *I don't think so*, but none used *I think not*. This supports Swan's (1995: 354) observation in that *I don't think so* is a short answer; it is more common than *I think not* (rather formal).

PES do not use the two expressions to convey results and present no case of *I don't think* as contrast either. This confirms PES' inclination to use a less assertive language (Zhang and Sabet 2016), which is reinforced by their opting for *I think + not* to express all instances of contrast. As the contrast possibly involves a kind of confrontation, they prefer to use *I think + not*, which places less emphasis on the speaker's view and instead highlights the negative clause. L2 groups mostly prefer *I don't think* for giving reasons. L1 speakers pick *I don't think* mainly to show contrast, which is not used at all by PES, who may find it too assertive to use in a classroom context. Reason is predominantly served with *I don't think* by CES.

As Table 4.3 shows, a significant difference between *I don't think* and *I think+ not* is the function of self-explanation for the latter only. Self-explanation refers to the speaker expressing personal views and giving further explanations (Shen 2008). Self-explanation occurs most frequently in CES data, possibly because these speakers feel a strong need to explain why the negation is used.

To sum up, the findings illustrated in Table 4.3 reveal that CES were more versatile than the other two groups in using *I don't think* and *I think+ not* for all the semantic relations listed; neither of the other groups used the full set. Zhang (2011, 2015) finds that vague/elastic words

are stretched to a degree that context demands; in this study the Chinese use the expressions more elastically and diversely. While L1S and PES stretch the expressions to some degrees, CES stretch them more extensively.

Table 4.4: *I don't think* in pre- and post-positions

Group	Pre-position (*I don't think …*)	Post-position (*… I don't think*)
L1S (N=22)	12	10
CES (N=19)	11	8
PES (N=6)	0	6

Table 4.4 displays the position of *I don't think*: both L1S and CES prefer the pre-position, but PES prefer the post-position exclusively. Example 10 illustrates a post-position of *I don't think* at the super-sentential level:

Example 10 (Ch:7)

Context: This is a conversation between two CES regarding future careers.

17 S3: Yes, I think, huh, opportunity. Huh, huh. Yes there is opportunity if you, if you want to.

18 S2: In fact, I don't love university, because <u>I don't think</u> it's got safety and I have to consider for myself. That's the point. Maybe some other countries.

19 S3: I think if, huh, I think many people want to say, want to go to America, but if I have a chance, I will choose England. But, huh, I don't know you are (xx)? I think America in, in, England, there are traditional cultures that influence English I think.

(Note: (xx) indicates indecipherable)

The finding suggests that PES avoid putting *I don't think* in the dominant position (i.e. pre-position), in contrast with the other two groups who prefer it in the post-position. The post-position *I don't think* seems to be less speaker-oriented than the pre-position. It can be likened to the clause final position *I think* in expressing an afterthought, which is less strong as a speaker's attitudinal marker than when in clause initial position (Aijmer 1997; Zhang 2014).

The data support the view that there is a correlation between the force of negation and the distance between the negative marker and the component it negates: the closer the two, the stronger the negativity involved (Horn 1978). In this study, the correlation seems to be between *I think* and the negative marker: *I don't think* shows the nearest distance between *I think* and *don't*, so it has stronger negative force than *I think* + *not* where the two elements are not as close. The findings reveal similarities and discrepancies between the three groups: for example, L1S tend to choose the stronger negative form of *I don't think* and L2 groups, especially PES, tend to choose the weaker negative form of *I think* + *not*.

5 Discussion

The findings of this study are not in line with some of the existing works on the topic. For example, Swan (1995) states that *I don't think* is more natural than *I think* + *not*, also supported by data from Google Books Ngram Viewer (see Figure 1.1). However, this study shows that while this might be the case for L1S, the L2 groups preferred using *I think* + *not*. This section discusses the factors that affect how the three groups perform in using *I don't think* and *I think* + *not*.

5.1 L1 vs L2 groups

Table 5.1 Closeness between the three groups

	Similar	Different
Frequency	*I don't think* L1S and CES	*I think + not* L1S vs CES/PES
Position	*I don't think* (pre-position) L1S and CES *I don't think* (post-position) L1S and CES (slightly similar)	
Super-sentential Level	*I don't think* L1S and CES	*I think + not* CES vs PES
Sentential Level	*I don't think* L1S and CES (slightly similar)	*I think + not* CES vs PES

Table 5.1 shows that overall L1S were closer to CES than to PES. However, in terms of the frequency of *I think + not*, the L1 and L2 groups were very different, and the two L2 groups also differed when it came to frequency and specific ways of using *I think + not* at sentential and super-sentential levels. In the majority of cases, the greatest differences were found between L1S and PES, while CES tended to sit between these extremes. The data in this study further strengthen the finding of Zhang and Sabet (2016) that L1 and L2 groups use the two expressions differently to some extent, as illustrated in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 The closeness of the three groups

Figure 5.1 shows that L1S were situated at one end of the spectrum and PES at the other, while CES occupied the middle position. That is, L1S are closer to CES than to PES and similarly PES are closer to CES than to L1S (Zhang and Sabet 2016).

5.2 Relevant factors

The expression *I don't think* carries higher degree of negativity than *I think + not* (Horn 1978). L1S who use *I don't think* exclusively are more assertive than PES who use more *I think + not*; CES appear to be less assertive than L1S but more assertive than PES (Zhang and Sabet 2016). This study also argues that *I think + not* differs from *I don't think* in that the former focuses more on the content than on the speaker, whereas *I don't think* focuses more on the speaker than on the content.

The factors that may influence the different uses of the expressions among the three groups include linguistic and cultural perspectives. A number of studies report the influence of a first language on second-language use (Nikula 1997; He and Xu 2003; Wang and Zhou 2005; Wu et al. 2010; Liu 2013; Sabet and Zhang 2015; Zhang and Sabet 2016). The influence of a first language can be both positive (favouring language learning) and negative (impeding language learning). In both Chinese and Persian languages, the equivalent of *I don't think* seems to be used less frequently than the milder *I think + not*. This may contribute to their preference for the latter, as an instance of first-language transfer.

The preference for *I think* + *not* may relate to the more common use of *I think* (equivalent) and the less common use of *I don't think* (equivalent) in the first language of both L2 groups. The frequent presence of *I think* in the first languages of both L2 groups encourages the use of *I think* in English. For example, Chinese *wo xiang/juede* (*I think*) appears in clause initial, clause medial and clause final positions, and can function as an epistemic or discourse marker. Under the influence of their first language, CES in this study used more *I think* + *not* and its clusters than the other two groups, as shown in Table 4.2. Similarly, PES find the English *I think* an equivalent of the frequently used *fekr* (*mi*) *konam* in Persian, which probably contributes to the fact that PES in this study preferred *I think* + *not* over *I don't think*.

Cultural factors also played an important role in the use of *I don't think* and *I think* + *not* in this study. The popularity of *I don't think* among L1S and *I think* + *not* among the L2 groups may be explained through the lens of culture. Sabet and Zhang (2015) and Zhang and Sabet (2016) find that *I don't think* + affirmative clause is more speaker-centred, while *I think* + negative clause is less speaker-centred; L1 speakers therefore tend to sound more assertive and direct, and PES less confrontational and less authoritative. Sabet and Zhang also see a trade-off between the two patterns: in *I don't think*, when the speaker is highlighted, the affirmative clause is less emphatic; in *I think* + *not*, when the speaker is less stressed, the negative clause is highlighted. Given that L2 speakers prefer to be indirect and less assertive, they are likely to view *I think* + *not* as in line with their preferred communicative strategy. Aijmer (1997: 20) states, *I think* is used 'to soften speech acts', and the data in this study support Aijmer's claim from the perspective of the negative form of *I think*.

Speakers' cultural trends manifest in their language use. In this study, PES prefer to be indirect by adopting a content-centred (rather than speaker-centred) approach, making abundant use of *I think + not*. This is in line with the view that PES prefer to express disagreement or criticism indirectly through softened statements (Behnam and Niroomand 2011). The same applies to the Chinese culture: Chinese are perceived to avoid confrontation and to engage in face-saving (e.g. Chan 2013). There is a correlation between the personal view (the speaker's view) and the negative proposition, in that 'when personal status rises, the negativity of the proposition falls; and when the negativity of a proposition grows, personal status decreases' (Sabet and Zhang 2015: 180). The indirectness preferred by PES is shown in this study, where PES preferred to express disagreement by *I think +not* to sound less confrontational, while the L1 speakers preferred to be direct in expressing disagreement assertively, using *I don't think* exclusively.

PES are not keen to use *I don't think* to express contrast, preferring to downplay their own views when referring to contrast and choosing to put emphasis on the negative proposition as a politeness strategy; whereas L1 speakers prefer to express contrast by the assertive *I don't think*, highlighting the speaker's view. The main purpose why PES use *I don't think* is to express reasons, which does not seem to involve sensitivity with regard to the speaker's view or negative proposition. L1S' dominant use of pre-position *I don't think* also shows that they tend to emphasise the speaker's view; PES use exclusively post-position *I don't think* which appears less assertive. Despite using an assertive expression in *I don't think*, PES use it in a position that mitigates its assertiveness. This again shows PES' inclination for indirectness, while L1S and CES use the expression more in pre-positions, thus appearing more assertive than PES.

6 Conclusions and implications

This research expands the existing literature on *I don't think* + positive clause and *I think* + negative clause through sentential and super-sentential analyses. The findings reveal a dynamic and diverse relationship among L1S, CES and PES; the main tendency is that L1S and L2 speakers are different. L1S use *I don't think* exclusively and do not use *I think* + *not*; the latter is what L2 groups prefer. L1S are closer in use to CES than to PES, meaning that the most contrasting usages are seen between L1S and PES. The findings show that L1S are more direct than CES, who are, in turn, more direct than PES. There is a correlation between the negative power and the distance between *I think* and the negative marker. While *I don't think* has more negativity force than *I think* + *not*, *I think* + *not* has more mitigating weight than *I don't think* and can be employed as a politeness strategy.

This study suggests that linguistic and cultural factors contribute to the use of *I don't think* and *I think* + *not*. The frequent use of *I think* equivalents and infrequent use of *I don't think* equivalents in Chinese and Persian may contribute to CES' and PES' preference for *I think* + *not*, the form less preferred by L1S. The cultural preference of the speakers also seems to manifest in the way they use *I don't think* and *I think*+ *not*. PES' content-centred approach is attended to by the frequent use of *I think* + *not*. *I think* does not highlight the negative indication of the speaker, but places the emphasis on the proposition coming after it, making the tone less direct and less assertive. L1 speakers' preference for directness and assertiveness is concentrated in their exclusive use of *I don't think*, an expression that places emphasis on the speakers' negative view

and creates a more direct and assertive tone in their communication. CES use both forms, but their preference for being indirect led them to prefer *I think + not* to *I don't think* in this study.

This study also suggests that when it comes to *I don't think* versus *I think + not*, CES show most elasticity in the use of the two expressions, taking advantage of the full range of their purposes and positions rather than showing a preference for one version only, as do L1S and PES. The Chinese attach more roles to *I don't think* and *I think + not* than L1S and PES do.

This study demonstrates the rich use of *I don't think* and *I think+ not* in cross-cultural communication. It shows that despite the fact that these expressions are treated contrastively by the L1 and L2 speakers, both expressions play important and diverse roles in communication. The implication of this study is that different varieties of English need to live side by side with the different linguistic and cultural norms of their speakers.

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