Agreement and Disagreement
in
Conversational Discourse
and
ESL/EFL Materials

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Some ESL/EFL notional/functional materials claim that they are presenting English as it is spoken by native speakers in informal social and/or business exchanges. The speech function, agreement/disagreement is an important function for learners to acquire, but are they, in fact, acquiring this function (or any function) as native-speakers use it? An empirical investigation into the nature of agreement/disagreement as it appears in naturally occurring, adult, native speaker conversation was carried out to determine the validity of such claims. Agreement/disagreement occurring in the conversational data was analyzed, defined and classified. The findings were then compared with two ESL/EFL notional/functional textbook treatments of the same function. This paper describes the sources of the data base, defines and classifies agreement/disagreement as found in that data, and presents the results of the comparison of those findings with the two textbooks. It
concludes with the implications this type of research has for both the ESL/EFL teacher and materials writer.

The speech function agreement/disagreement is an important function for both EFL and ESL learners to acquire. In some cultures, such as Japan, the overt expression of this function is avoided because it may lead to an uncomfortable open confrontation and a loss of face for one or both parties. On the other hand, native speakers of English verbally express agreement/disagreement. In fact, within some contexts such as business negotiations and other instances of social conversation, native English speakers become confused and even uncomfortable when the other party does not agree or disagree with the suggestions and ideas put forth. Therefore, learners, such as the Japanese, who most often use English within business and social contexts, have a special need to know how to express the function. And moreover, because it is a function with which they naturally feel uncomfortable, it is especially important that they become familiar with forms which are common to native speaker use.

Many of the recent notional/functional ESL/EFL materials claim to teach English as it is spoken by native speakers of the language. A desire to verify these claims prompted the empirical investigation into the speech function agreement/disagreement reported on in this paper. Agreement/disagreement as it naturally occurred in native-speaker conversation was analyzed, defined, and classified. The findings thus obtained were compared with two notional/functional ESL/EFL textbook treatments of the same function.
The Data Base

The empirical data base for the analysis came out of native speaker conversation which occurred naturally and was collected surreptitiously (as far as this was possible). Face-to-face interactions included service encounters, informal meetings and discussions, a TV discussion/interview, a party, conversations among friends and acquaintances, overheard conversations in public places, and intra-family interactions. Non face-to-face interactions were of radio talk-shows and telephone conversations between friends, acquaintances and adversaries.¹ The

¹Much of the telephone conversation data was collected and transcribed by Christine Winskowskis.

collection of data was thus limited to informal business and social interactions of the type a non-ESP conversation oriented notional/functional textbook might present. These interactions were mostly obtained by tape recording conversation wherever it was encountered, although some examples were written down when they were observed. At the same time, relevant sociolinguistic data, such as the number, age, sex, status, relationship, and role of the interlocutors, the location, the situation and the event were noted down. Unfortunately, these data did not appear to affect the results as much as anticipated.²

²This may be due to a number of different causes. The ranges between the variables were not wide enough. The number of conversations
was not sufficient. Most of the data came from the efforts of only one researcher so that the range of collection was limited. Wider ranges within the variables and of types and number of conversations would probably reveal significant relationships between the occurrence of this function and certain of the sociolinguistic factors. More research is needed in this area.

The data collection resulted in approximately 950 minutes of recorded conversation among adult native speakers. These recordings then yielded 119 examples of agreement and 44 examples of disagreement. In addition 18 examples of agreement and 4 examples of disagreement were gathered by writing down specific examples when they were encountered. Following transcription, the data were analyzed and a framework established for classifying this function.

The Definition

The function agreement/disagreement occurs as an optional second pair part of an adjacency pair (two related utterances sequentially produced by different speakers, e.g., one speaker's question followed by the next speaker's answer). As such, agreement/disagreement is a response move to an initiation move made by a prior speaker. And the nature of the first pair part must be described in order to describe the nature of the second pair part and the relationship between them.

In order for agreement/disagreement to follow as a second pair part, the first pair part must be the first speaker's assessment of some referent. That is, the first speaker must assign some kind of personal
judgment to the referent as in

Mr. Reagan is a fool.

Mr. Reagan is the referent and a fool is the speaker's personal assessment of him. This type of initiation move was named an Opine. ³

³Opines are utterances which assign a referent some degree of certainty/uncertainty or some quality or characteristic with or without a positive/negative value judgment.

It's probably going to rain.

That's a beautiful dress.

Agreement/disagreement cannot follow an utterance in which the speaker only reports some factual knowledge or information about a referent as in

Mr. Reagan will run again for reelection.

This type of initiation move was named a Reportative. ⁴

⁴Reportatives do not assign a referent any degree of certainty/uncertainty or any quality or characteristic with or without a positive/negative value judgment.

Mr. Brown is 46 years old.

There are many western restaurants in Tokyo.

Agreement occurs as the second pair part following an Opine⁵ when the
The researcher is indebted to Dr. Jack Richards for suggesting the existence of Opines and Reportatives.

speaker assigns the same assessment to the referent as that of the previous speaker. Disagreement occurs when the speaker assigns a different or a qualified assessment to the referent. So, in both cases, the two speakers' referent remains the same, only the assessment of it changes in the case of disagreement.

The Classification

The examples of agreement/disagreement were classified into six types, three types of agreement and three types of disagreement.

Agreement  Disagreement

most polite  least polite

Equal  Scaled-down  Qualified  Opposite/  Opposite/
Upgraded  Different  Different

with
without

Softener  Softener

Table 1 lists the six types of agreement/disagreement and the number of examples which occurred in the data (in brackets). Listed under each type are the three most frequently found forms of that type together with an example of each form.

The six types of agreement/disagreement were determined by comparing the second pair part, i.e., the response, to the first pair part, i.e., the initiating move.
Equal refers to equal levels or degrees of assessment in each of the two pair parts of the adjacency pair. The most frequent form of an Equal response is the Agreement Token only, realized as Yeah. When a response consists of only a Token, it is a Token Only response.

A: That’s beautiful.
B: Yeah.

The second most frequent form of Equal which occurred was the Verb of Supposition and/or Ellipsis. Verbs of supposition are such verbs as suppose, think, believe and feel. A response with a verb of supposition with or without an ellipted repetition of the previous speaker’s assessment might be, I believe so, or That’s what I think. The third most frequently occurring form of an Equal was Direct Repetition.

A: That’s beautiful.
B: It is beautiful.

Equal assessments were the most frequently occurring type of second pair parts found in the data totalling 80. This type of agreement places the speakers in equal positions, and it was therefore considered the most polite.

Upgraded refers to a more intense or higher level/degree of assessment in the second pair part than in the first pair part. A response with an Added Intensifier, such as very or exceedingly, occurred as the most frequent form of an Upgraded.

A: That’s beautiful.
B: It’s very beautiful.
The second most frequently occurring form was a Token with Support/Upgrading.

A: That's beautiful.
B: Yeah, really.

The third most frequently occurring form was a Raised Degree of Certainty.

A: I suppose it will be crowded.
B: It probably will be.

Probably shows more certainty on the part of the speaker than I suppose. Upgraded assessments were the second most frequent type of response to an Opine, totalling 38. Because this type of agreement indicates that the speakers hold slightly different levels of assessment, it is thought to be a bit less polite than the Equal.

Scaled-down agreement refers to a response with a lower level/degree of assessment in the second pair part. The most frequent form of this type was a More Moderate Term of Evaluation.

A: That's beautiful.
B: It's nice.

Nice indicates a more moderate evaluation than beautiful. The second most frequent form was a Decreased Level of Certainty.

A: You know that perfectly well.
B: I guess so.

The third form was a Redirection of a Positive Evaluation which often occurs as a response to a compliment.

A: That's a beautiful dress you're wearing.
B: My mother got it for me.
The responsibility for the beauty of the dress is directed away from the wearer and is redirected to the mother. The **Scaled-down** type of agreement occurred 19 times. In addition to being a slightly different assessment from that in the first pair part, it actually downgrades the level so that this is the closest form of agreement to disagreement. For this reason, it is considered the least polite of the three types of agreement.

**Qualified** refers to the **I agree, but, or Yes, but** type of response. This always begins with some type of agreement, **Equal, Upgraded** or **Scaled down**. This initial agreement is then followed by some qualification placed upon that agreement usually as some form of explanation or as an exception to the previous speaker's assessment. Most frequently, this type appeared as an **Opine but Opine**.

A: That's beautiful.

B: It is beautiful, but it's very bright.

The next in frequency of the **Qualified** were **Ellipted Forms**. These are forms that begin with **But** or an agreement token followed by **but** plus the qualification.

A: That's beautiful.

B: Yeah, but it's very bright.

or simply

B: But it's very bright.

The third most frequently occurring form of **Qualified** was a **Reportative but Opine**.

A: That's beautiful.

B: I agree, but perhaps it's a little bright.
The **Qualified** response was the most frequent type of disagreement occurring 21 times. Because it begins with agreement, it indicates a friendly attitude towards the previous speaker thereby reducing the threat of the disagreement which results. It is therefore considered the most polite form of disagreement.

**Opposite/Different** second pair parts are just that, they refer to second assessments which are totally different from or are opposite to that of the previous speaker's. **Softeners** are uncertainty markers, e.g., perhaps, I think or possibly. Softeners also occur as accountings for the disagreement, i.e., expressions which give some reason for the disagreement. Softeners, in general, serve to reduce the speaker's commitment to his assessment thereby reducing the force of the different assessment or disagreement.

The most frequent form of an **Opposite/Different with Softener** was an **Explicit Negative with Accounting**.

A: That's beautiful.
B: No, it's not beautiful because it's too bright.

The second most frequent form was the **Explicit Negative with an Uncertainty Marker**.

A: That's beautiful.
B: No, perhaps it's not beautiful.

An **Accounting Only with or without an Antonym** occurred as the third most frequent form.

A: That's beautiful.
B: It's too bright.
Occurring 19 times, the **Opposite/Different with Softener** was the second most frequent type of **Disagreement**. A response which expresses an opposite or different assessment without any initial expression of agreement places a strain on the relationship between the speakers making it less polite than the **Qualified**. However, an accounting or expression of uncertainty reduces the force of this disagreement and so of the impoliteness.

The third and final type of disagreement was the **Opposite/Different without Softener**. Of these, an **Explicit Negative without Accounting or Uncertainty Marker** was the most frequent form.

A: That's beautiful.

B: No, it's not beautiful.

or

No, it's ugly.

The next most frequent form was a **Disagreement Token**.

A: That's beautiful.

B: Huh, uh.

or simply

(shaking the head, no)

The third most frequently occurring form was an **Entirely Different Assessment**.

A: That's beautiful.

B: It's strange.
The Opposite/Different without Softener occurred only eight times in the entire corpus of data making it the least frequent type of the six types of agreement/disagreement. This is considered the least polite form of agreement/disagreement because there is nothing to reduce or soften the force of the disagreement and so therefore of the impoliteness.

The Comparisons

The treatments of the function agreement/disagreement which appeared in two well-known ESL/EFL notional/functional textbooks were classified according to the system described above for the natural conversational data. Table 2 gives the frequencies and percentages of occurrence for each of the classified types as they appeared in the conversational data and in each of the textbooks.

It can be seen that in the conversational data agreement occurred 74.05% of the time while in Textbook I it occurred 20% of the time and in Textbook II, it was only 10%. On the other hand, Disagreement which occurred only 25.95% in the natural conversations, occurred 54.55% in Textbook I and 61.54% in Textbook II. Learners using these textbooks certainly receive more exposure to and practice with forms of disagreement than with agreement. Therefore, it is possible that they could get the mistaken impression that disagreement is much more common among native speakers than it actually is.

The types of agreement/disagreement appearing in the textbooks also show some discrepancies in occurrence as compared with the conversational data. Under agreement, Textbook I gives three examples of Equal and one each of Upgraded and Scaled-down. However, all five of these forms are
examples of forms which occur very infrequently in the conversational data, i.e., none of them are among the forms listed in Table 1, all are among the category, **Other Forms**. Learners using this textbook would be acquiring forms which occur only infrequently in native speaker conversation.

Textbook II presents twice as many forms of agreement as Textbook I, i.e., ten as opposed to five. However, only 40% of them are **Equals** while in the conversational data 58.39% of all agreement forms are **Equal**. More positive is the fact that half of both the **Equal** and **Upgraded** forms in Textbook II were among the most frequent forms occurring in the native speaker data. Learners using this textbook would be acquiring some forms which actually do occur with some frequency among native speakers.

As for politeness, learners from either of these textbooks would probably appear polite in most cases, although those from Textbook I would be employing less common forms.

Under disagreement, Textbook I gives six examples. However, none of these are among the **Qualified** type which is the most frequent as well as being the most polite type of disagreement occurring in the native speaker data. Actually, two of the examples in this textbook would not have been included as disagreement in the conversational data, and all of the four remaining examples express **Opposite** assessments. The two softeners which appear are very weak uncertainty markers. In addition, these four examples were among the **Other Forms** of infrequently occurring forms in the conversational data. Learners using this textbook would be
acquiring forms which were neither frequent nor polite among native speakers. Moreover, they would not be getting any exposure to the Qualified type of disagreement which is the most common and the most polite type used by native speakers. Furthermore, they would not be acquiring the practice of giving accountings for their differences of opinion.

The treatment of disagreement in Textbook II appears a bit better than that of Textbook I. Again, as with agreement, more actual examples are presented, i.e., 16 as opposed to six. Moreover, half the examples were of the Qualified type and half were of the Opposite/Different with Softener type. Six of the eight examples under the Qualified type were among the most frequently occurring form, i.e., the Opine but Opine, under the Opposite/Different with Softener type, six of the eight examples given were among the forms of Explicit Negative with Uncertainty Marker, the second most frequently occurring form in the native speaker data. Although the learners still would not have any exposure to accountings, they would acquire uncertainty markers which are both strong and frequently used by native speakers.

Learners using Textbook II would have a better chance of using forms which are more polite and are more commonly used when native speakers disagree among themselves. Learners from Textbook I would almost certainly appear direct and blunt, and in some situations actually impolite, in their expression of disagreement.

In Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been two-fold: 1) to present a description of the speech function, agreement/disagreement, which resulted
from an empirical investigation of naturally occurring, adult, native speaker conversation, and 2) to compare that description with the treatment of the same function in two ESL/EFL notional/functional textbooks which claim to be teaching English as it is actually spoken by native speakers. The results of this study show that the claims made by these two textbooks cannot be validated by native speaker data.

These results indicate three things. 1) More empirical research is needed into what native English speakers actually say and do with their language. 2) The findings of such investigations should be applied to the writing of ESL/EFL materials. Native speaker intuition alone is inadequate for the preparation of ESL/EFL materials which claim to be teaching English as it is spoken by native speakers. 3) Teachers, especially in EFL situations, must exercise great care in the selection and use of textbooks and materials for their classes.

It is hoped that this paper will make both ESL/EFL teachers and materials writers aware of the importance of empirical research into conversation.
REFERENCES


Table 1. Forms and Frequencies from the Conversational Data Listed by Categories of Politeness

AGREEMENT (137)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equal (80)</th>
<th>Upgraded (38)</th>
<th>Scaled-down (19)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1) Token only (34)</strong>&lt;br&gt;A: That's beautiful.&lt;br&gt;B: Yeah.</td>
<td><strong>1) Added Intensifier (9)</strong>&lt;br&gt;A: That's beautiful.&lt;br&gt;B: It's very beautiful.</td>
<td><strong>1) More moderate term of evaluation (7)</strong>&lt;br&gt;A: That's beautiful.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2) V of Supposition and/or Ellipsis (15)</strong>&lt;br&gt;A: That's beautiful.&lt;br&gt;B: I think so too.</td>
<td><strong>2) Token with Support and/or Upgrading (9)</strong>&lt;br&gt;A: That's beautiful.&lt;br&gt;B: Yeah, really.</td>
<td><strong>2) Decreased degree of certainty (4)</strong>&lt;br&gt;A: You know that perfectly well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3) Direct repetition (14)</strong>&lt;br&gt;A: That's beautiful.&lt;br&gt;B: It is beautiful.</td>
<td><strong>3) Raised degree of certainty (7)</strong>&lt;br&gt;A: I suppose it will be crowded.&lt;br&gt;B: It probably will be.</td>
<td><strong>3) Redirection of positive evaluation (3)</strong>&lt;br&gt;A: That's a beautiful dress you're wearing.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other Forms (17)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Other Forms (13)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Other Forms (5)</strong></td>
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### Table 1. (Continued)

**DISAGREEMENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualified (21)</th>
<th>Opposite/Different with softener (19)</th>
<th>Opposite/Different without softener (8)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Opine but Opine (11)</td>
<td>1) Explicit negative with accounting (7)</td>
<td>1) Explicit negative without accounting or uncertainty marker (4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>B: It is beautiful but it's very bright.</td>
<td>B: No, it's not beautiful because it's too bright.</td>
<td>B: No, it's not beautiful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Ellipted forms (7)</td>
<td>2) Explicit negative with uncertainty marker (4)</td>
<td>2) Token without accounting or uncertainty marker (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: Yeah but it's very bright.</td>
<td>B: No, perhaps it's not beautiful.</td>
<td>B: Huh uh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Reportative but Opine (2)</td>
<td>3) Accounting with/without Antonym (4)</td>
<td>3) Different without accounting or uncertainty marker (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: I agree, but perhaps it's a little bright.</td>
<td>B: It's too bright.</td>
<td>B: It's strange.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Forms (1)</td>
<td>Other Forms (4)</td>
<td>Other Forms (0)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: The bracketed numbers indicate the number of times the form occurred in the data.
Table 2. Comparative Frequencies of Occurrence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Most Polite</th>
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<th>Least Polite</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agreement</td>
<td>Disagreement</td>
<td></td>
<td>Number of Examples</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Upgraded</td>
<td>Scaled-</td>
<td>Opposite/Different with softener</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>38</td>
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<td>137</td>
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<td>27.74%</td>
<td>15.33%</td>
<td>74.05%</td>
<td>43.75%</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>20.0%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>45.45%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>38.46%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
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