Abstract: This paper examines the expressions of disagreement in task-based conversations between American English speakers of equal or unequal status. Kim (2017), based on the same data set, found that in both Korean and American groups, the [S-S] pairs produced more disagreements and used more strengthened expressions than the [T-S] pairs. Considering that the United States is an egalitarian culture (Hofstede, 1980), this study explores in more detail how power affects the way American speakers disagree with each other. The data consist of 20 English pairs interacting with each other while arranging a series of 15 pictures. Half of them were [T-S] pairs and the other half were [S-S] pairs. The results show that the most common form of disagreement was mitigated declaratives in both groups, followed by interrogatives. However, the [S-S] pairs preferred to use wh-questions, mostly to challenge the prior claim by the addressee whereas the [T-S] pairs were likely to use mitigating yes-no question repeats as an indirect way of disagreement. Also, the [S-S] pairs had a tendency to use strong expressions, such as no, wait, emphatic and attention-getting expressions whereas the [T-S] pairs used more mitigating or self-deprecating devices. These results suggest that American speakers are sensitive to the relationship with the interlocutors.

Key Words: Disagreement, Power, Distance, English, Task-based Conversation

Power and Disagreement Expressions in English Task-Based Conversation*

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I. Introduction

Disagreement has been often discussed, as opposed to agreement, as a negative act to be avoided or mitigated. Disagreement is considered as a ‘face-threatening act’ in the face and politeness framework (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and is often related to ‘conflict’ that might affect the relationship between the interactants (Rahim, 2011). In conversation analysis literature, disagreement is viewed as dispreferred in relation to the notion of preference (Pomerantz, 1984).

On the other hand, there have been researchers who claim that disagreement is not an a priori negative act (Sifianou, 2012), and can be a “necessary part of the process of reaching agreement (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997: 193)” and as such a mundane phenomenon in both everyday and workplace contexts (Angouri, 2012). For instance, disagreement can be the norm or a highly desirable act, such as in negotiation processes (Ehlich and Wagner, 1995) and problem solving situations (Fisher, 1974; Cosier and Schwenk, 1990; Haggith, 1993; de Dreu and van de Vliert, 1997; van de Vliert, 1997; Angouri, 2012). Kakava (2002) and Schiffrin (1984) also argue that disagreement can create intimacy and solidarity depending on the context.

Noting the positive and negative functions of disagreement, some researchers introduced terms that distinguish them in the literature: disagreement as the ‘norm’ vs. disagreement as a negatively ‘marked’ act (Angouri, 2012: 1565), cognitive vs. affective conflict (Amason and Schweiger, 1994), task vs. affective conflict (Mortensen and Hinds, 2001), and so on.

This paper attempts to examine the expressions of disagreement in task-based conversations between female American English speakers of equal or unequal status. According to Kim (2017), based on the same data set, both Korean and American speakers showed a similar tendency; in both groups, the student–student [S–S] pairs produced more disagreements and used more strengthened, unmitigated expressions than the teacher–student [T–S] pairs. Thus, power, irrespective of culture, seemed to have a significant effect on how people disagree with each other. However, the results seemed a little bit odd because, compared to Korea, the United States, being