Discourse Markers in Cross-Cultural Conversation

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It is a great pleasure to offer this tribute to Professor Leslie M. Beebe and to help celebrate her vital contribution to the field of cross-cultural pragmatics (CCP). There is no denying that Professor Beebe stands as a distinguished scholar in the field. Anyone who wishes to conduct research on second language (L2) pragmatics would not be able to begin without learning of or citing her work. Among her contributions to the field, I would first like to ponder her groundbreaking call for serious attention to L2 pragmatics as early as the mid-1980s, a time when pragmatics was a neglected area in second language acquisition (SLA) research and L2 pedagogy. In a number of scholarly papers and at conferences, she suggested that "the social rules of speaking" are "basics, not frosting on the cake" (Beebe, 1995, p. 4). Professor Beebe is acknowledged among SLA researchers as one of the earliest linguists who was deeply concerned with cross-cultural misunderstandings (which often lead to unfortunate and offensive cultural stereotyping) resulting from a lack of pragmatic competence.

Also of great importance to the field was Professor Beebe's contribution to establishing a solid link between pragmatics and SLA by introducing the concept of *pragmatic transfer*. In the late 1980s, by showing that L2 learners often refer back to rules of speaking from their first language (L1), she successfully demonstrated cross-linguistic influence at the level of pragmatics (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989a; Beebe & Takahashi, 1989b; Beebe, Takahashi, & Ulis-Weltz, 1990). Motivated by her seminal work, the research focus of L2 pragmatics began shifting from CCP to interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), moving beyond the comparison of L1 and L2 pragmatic conventions towards the understanding of the developmental stages that L2 learners go through. Since that time, pragmatics has rapidly grown into a legitimate area of research in the study of SLA. It is now widely accepted that pragmatics is indispensable in helping researchers to understand how L2 learners acquire and use the target language in a meaningful and appropriate manner.

Professor Beebe's knowledge of and enthusiasm for *language-and-culture* (Byram & Morgan, 1994) has immensely influenced both my coursework and dissertation study. Thanks to her, I gained an appreciation for the way that cultural and social motivations can provide an important basis for understanding linguistic behavior. This recognition has led me to write my dissertation on cross-cultural conversations. In one of the chapters in my dissertation, I strive to explain cross-cultural differences and the interactional consequences of these differences in accomplishing the speech act of disagreement. In doing so, I focus on specific and observable linguistic behavior, specifically, the use of discourse markers (DMs) by Korean L2 learners and native speakers of American English in everyday, face-to-face conversation. In a preliminary analysis of my data, I found a noticeable cross-cultural difference in the use of the DM *but*. In fact, it is a widely accepted view that East Asian cultures are oriented toward avoiding nonalignment with others. However, as Beebe and Takahashi (1989b) aptly point out, it is too simplistic and risky to determine cultural constraints on language use in polarizing terms (e.g., positive politeness vs. negative politeness, and direct language vs. indirect language). Warning against a dichotomous approach to cross-cultural communication, the researchers underscore contextual dimensions in

language use. Specifically, they demonstrate status effects on the level of directness of disagreement by Japanese learners of English.

Here, I wish to present an analysis of two excerpts from my data, following Beebe and Takahashi (1989b). Excerpt 1 illustrates a representative case of non-native speakers' (NNS) use of *but* to disagree with his native speaker (NS) friend.

Excerpt 1: Nanotechnology
((The participants are talking about the NNS's area of research, nanochemistry.))

1		NS:	Somehow (applying) nanotechnology to, uh, drug design or drug
2			discovery, maybe you could get a job at a pharmaceutical
3			company.
4	→	NNS:	**But**, for nanotechnology or nanoscience, it's still- academia is
5	→		much better to get a job.
6		NS:	Yeah, I mean it's such a new field.
7		NNS:	Yeah.
8		NS:	Yeah.
9		NNS:	So (unintelligible), you know, I remember someone saying that,
10			you know, industry or the company cannot invest that- lots of
11			money [in that nanofield because, you know, they don't know=
12		NS:	[Yeah.
13		NNS:	=when the law will change.
14		NS:	Yeah.
15		NNS:	So, you know, sort of nanoscience, you know, or law is changing
16			a lot.

((The NNS takes a lengthy turn to support his claim.))

In lines 1-3, the NS offers a positive assessment of the NNS's job prospects in his chosen industry. It is known from a previous exchange that the NNS's area of research (nanochemistry) is getting much attention as a cutting-edge technology. The NNS, however, disagrees with the NS's assessment, claiming that academia is still a better choice ("But, for nanotechnology or nanoscience, it's still- academia is much better to get a job," line 4). The NNS's disagreement is prefaced by *but* which marks the NNS's move as exceedingly overt and oppositional. In many other excerpts, I find that NS disagreement turns were likely to be prefaced by *well* rather than *but* in the same situation. The function of *well* in these NS disagreements is to warn the addressee that he or she might not like what is coming. Therefore, *well* signals the speaker's face concerns towards the addressee (i.e., I'm sorry to say this, but…). In contrast, *but* lacks such an interactional meaning. The NNS's correction in this excerpt is not only unmitigated but the illocutionary force is even strengthened by the adversative pragmatic tone (Beebe & Waring, 2004) conveyed by the turn-initial *but*. A *well*-prefaced disagreement never occurs in NNS disagreements in my corpus. Interestingly, a *but*-prefaced disagreement never occurs in NS disagreements (except in argumentative exchanges where more than two oppositional moves are involved). Excerpt 2 illustrates a representative case of NS use of *but* to disagree.

Excerpt 2: Flies
((The NS and NNS are the same participants as those in Excerpt 1. The NNS has just initiated a new topic, noticing bees around their table.))

1		NNS:	I saw lots of bees around, you know, like this and in my country we
2			have like flies.
3			So flies like, you know, is only around that garbage can or whatever.
4		NS:	Right.
5		NNS:	But here, like all the bees are around the garbage can, so like-
6		NS:	Yeah, there's a lot of bees around.
7		NNS:	And I haven't seen like, you know, flies at all at that time.
8	→	NS:	Yeah, we have a lot of flies, too.
9	→		**But** I'd rather have a fly because a fly can't sting you.
10		NNS:	Mm hmm.
11			And did you like- you had some accidents at that moment, you
12			remember or- I don't know.
13			It was during the orientation for International British students and,
14			you know.

In this excerpt, the NNS compares annoying insects in America and Korea, telling the NS that he has seen a lot of bees around garbage cans but no flies ("And I haven't seen like, you know, flies at all at that time," line 7). The NS disagrees with the NNS, saying, "Yeah, we have a lot of flies, too" (line 8). The NS's disagreement is explicit and blunt just like the NNS's in Excerpt 1 above. However, the up-front disagreement is immediately followed by a bid for emotional alignment in line 9 ("But I'd rather have a fly because a fly can't sting you"). By contrasting his disagreement with a supportive remark prefaced by *but*, the NS mitigates the force of his intellectual disagreement through providing emotional alignment (i.e., Bees are not welcome to me, either). The NS's supportive move appears to be effective, as the NNS is encouraged to go on with arguing how bees can be problematic, reporting on an accident where a fellow student got stung on his tongue.

Although the NNS in Excerpt 1 certainly has the DM *but* at his disposal, he uses the marker only on the referential level, to juxtapose two contrasting ideas. As *but* is used in a turn-initial position, it functions to reject the NS's elaboration bluntly and directly. In contrast, the NS in Excerpt 2 uses the marker as a useful linguistic resource to tactfully present himself as a cooperator (Brown & Levinson, 1987) who cares about her friend's face, rather than as a corrector asserting a superior knowledge. *But* in the NS's disagreement carries a concessive rather than corrective tone. Beebe and Takahashi (1989b) note that in SLA, "face-threatening acts are particularly important to study because they are the source of so many cross-cultural miscommunications" (p. 199). In face-threatening situations, what L2 learners need is not only the necessary linguistic means but also the ability to use those means in a socially effective manner.

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APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION NOTATIONS

.	sentence-final falling intonation
,	continuing intonation
-	abrupt cutoff or interruption, self-correction
=	continuing utterance of the same speaker
[	overlapped talk
(words)	uncertain transcription
((words))	comments on background or participant behavior
→	line of interest
bold	feature of interest

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