

## The functions of *actually* in a corpus of intercultural conversations

### *Abstract*

*Using a corpus of naturally occurring conversations between native and non-native speakers of English in Hong Kong, we examine the use of actually in intercultural conversations. The frequencies with which the two groups of speakers use actually and the functions it performs are compared and contrasted. Our findings suggest that Hong Kong Chinese speakers of English use actually far more frequently than native speakers of English. The patterns of usage are remarkably similar in certain respects but there are differences in use and in the position actually occupies in utterances which in turn can affect the way that it functions. Explanations are offered for the differences in usage between the two groups of speakers.*

*Keywords: actually; corpus, naturally-occurring conversation, discourse analysis; discourse marker, Hong Kong; intercultural communication*

### **Introduction**

This paper reports on a project investigating the nature of spoken English in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong when members of the local Cantonese-speaking population talk with an interlocutor whose mother tongue is not Cantonese, they usually do so through the medium of English. For the researcher, this basic fact of life adds layers of complexity to any analysis of spoken discourse in such an intercultural setting. It cannot be assumed,

for example, that a description of native speaker/native speaker English discourse will necessarily hold good for spoken discourses between non-native speakers and native speakers of English in the context of Hong Kong, or elsewhere for that matter. All of the data used in this paper comprise English conversations between mother tongue speakers of Cantonese and native speakers of English. This mix of native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) makes it possible to compare their respective conversational behaviour in a shared intercultural context.

It was apparent from our preliminary studies of our data that the NNS use certain discourse items more, or less, frequently than the NS and, on occasion, for different discourse functions. The NNS in our data seemed to be using *actually* three times more frequently than the NS and so further analysis was conducted to examine the frequency, distribution and discourse functions of *actually* in the data. Specifically, we sought to address the research questions below:

- 1 What are the discourse functions of *actually* in NS/NNS conversations?
- 2 What are the differences and similarities, if any, in the NS and NNS patterns of usage of *actually*? How might these be accounted for?

### **Macro functions and core meaning of *actually***

*Actually* has two macro functions in spoken discourse. The first macro function of *actually* is its employment by speakers as a discourse marker. The second of these functions is to convey propositional content as a 'content disjunct' (Quirk et al 1985: 620-627). When functioning in this way, the speaker uses the adverbial *actually* to

comment on the truth value of what he/she is saying in a particular context as an intensifier, or it is used to hedge an unexpected or surprising comment or topic.

It is argued (see for example, Östman, 1981:16-19; Watts, 1988: 251-255; Tognini-Bonelli, 1993: 210; Lenk, 1998: 188) that lexical items such as *actually* have a core semantic meaning when used to convey propositional content, what Östman (1981: 17) terms “prototypical meaning”, which still pertains when they are employed by speakers as discourse markers. Thus, a speaker’s choice of a particular discourse marker is not random, rather it is based on the particular sub-functions of the discourse marker which in turn are related to its core semantic meaning. In the case of *actually*, the core semantic meaning has been examined in a number of studies and in one of these, (Watts, 1988: 254), it is described as “something like genuine, real, basic” and Watts (1988: 251) argues that the pragmatic meaning of *actually* when used as a discourse marker can be derived from and is “more important than” this core semantic meaning. Thus *actually*, when used as a discourse marker, guides topic development by relating the assumptions the speaker is making to assumptions previously made or held (Watts, 1988: 251). Similarly, Tognini-Bonelli (1993: 204) in her corpus-based study of *actually* suggests that it has a global function of “changing the interpretative angle with respect to the state-of-the-text”. In other words, speakers often use *actually* to emphasize differentiation between two elements in the discourse. In another study of *actually* in NS conversations, Lenk (1998: 188) observes that the core function of *actually* when used as a discourse marker is derived from the ‘etymology of the word *actual*’. It should be noted that others have made similar observations, for example Schwenter and Traugott’s (2000) study of *in*

*fact*. They note that, as a ‘pragmaticalized adverbial’, *in fact* is used in ‘two domains: ... epistemic sentence adverb and ... additive discourse marker’ (Schwenter and Traugott, 2000: 7).

The link between *actually*’s propositional meaning and the way that it functions as a discourse marker is probably a result of a diachronic process during which *actually* has undergone the process of ‘historical delexicalisation’ (Partington, 1993: 182-183). In any event, a synchronic description of *actually* results in a core meaning along the following lines:

The speaker seeks to emphasise the truth value and/or the perceived relevance of what is being said.

In her study of the use of *actually* in British and North American English conversations, Lenk (1998: 157) found that the British conversationalists used *actually* to convey propositional content 44.6% of the time while for the North Americans it was 56.06%. In our study of NS/NNS conversations a similar spread was found; the NS used *actually* to convey propositional content 47.05% of the time and for NNS the figure was 46.3%. Thus for both sets of speakers in our data, the two macro functions of *actually* are quite evenly split with a little under half of the occurrences used to convey propositional content and the remainder being employed as discourse markers. The propositional usage of *actually* is assessed in terms of its use by speakers as a ‘verbal intensifier’ in both pre- and postmodifying positions (Lenk, 157-160).

We will look in more detail at the micro functions *actually* performs in intercultural conversations in the remainder of the paper and it will be seen that all of its functions are related to some extent to this core meaning.

### **Methods and materials**

This study follows in the tradition of corpus-based approaches to the study of discourse in that it is based on empirical data drawn from a collection of similar spoken discourse types, namely conversations. The conversational data examined in the present study were a representative cross-section of the Hong Kong Corpus of Conversational English (HKCCE)<sup>1</sup>. The HKCCE comprises 50 hours of transcribed conversations between Hong Kong Chinese speakers and speakers of other languages, the vast majority of whom are native speakers of English (see Cheng and Warren, 1999 for details of this corpus).

Certain factors were considered when data were drawn from the HKCCE for the present investigation of *actually*. First, we were concerned to base our findings across a number of conversations and participants in order to minimize the effects of the idiosyncratic use of *actually* by particular individuals. The findings were based on 29 different conversations involving a total of 76 participants (34 NS and 42 NNS). These conversations amounted to approximately 10 hours or 84,000 words of data. Second, the conversations should be balanced in terms of the total words spoken by the two sets of speakers. In our data, 41,000 words (48.8%) were spoken by NS and 43,000 (51.2%) by

NNS, enabling us to make direct comparisons in terms of frequencies of occurrence and patterns of usage. Third, the participants are all adults and were friends and/or colleagues of each other and of perceived equal status. Fourth, all of the Hong Kong Chinese participants were born and brought up in Hong Kong and have not lived overseas

### **Micro functions of *actually***

We have described the two macro functions of *actually* earlier and in this section we examine and exemplify its micro functions in our data. First, however, we review the findings of others in the field with regard to the micro functions of *actually*.

In the literature, typically *actually* is mentioned only briefly and only in terms of one or two of its functions in relation to the position it occupies in the utterance. Levinson (1983: 87-88), for example, states that *actually* is one of a number of words and phrases that when used at the start of an utterance indicate a relationship between the utterance in which it occurs and the preceding discourse. According to Levinson (1983: 88), words like *actually* seem to indicate, “often in very complex ways, just how the utterance that contains them is a response to, or a continuation of, some portion of the prior discourse”. Levinson goes on to say that words like *actually* have yet to be fully described but suggests that they could be described as ‘maxim hedges’ (Levinson, 1983: 162) “that indicate for recipients just how the utterance so prefaced matches up to co-operative expectations”. The function of *actually* in utterance final position is discussed by Sinclair and Brazil (1982: 110-111) who suggest that *actually* performs a social function by “insinuating an element of generalized togetherness” and by “emphasizing the *us* aspect

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<sup>1</sup> The HKCCE is a sub-corpus of the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English currently being compiled by a research team based in the English Department of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The Corpus also

of the relationship and the unspoken exclusion of others” (Sinclair and Brazil, 1982: 111). Similarly, Krishnamurthy (1987) describes *actually* as belonging to a group of words and phrases which indicate the relationship of the speaker or writer to the discourse. Thus *actually* when utterance initial typically signals politely that what is to follow corrects or contradicts what has gone before (Krishnamurthy, 1987: 70).

While the above descriptions characterize the kinds of brief mention given to the use of *actually* in studies of NS spoken discourse, there have been more detailed studies of *actually* which have established a range of discourse functions in relation to its syntactic position, utilizing corpora of NS conversational data. One of these was a corpus-based study conducted by Aijmer (1986: 122-8) who made use of the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English and a corpus of written English, the Lancaster-Oslo Bergen Corpus, to compare the role of *actually* in both written and spoken data. Aijmer (1986: 119-120) notes that in the written and spoken corpora she analyzed, *actually* occurred ten times more frequently in spoken discourse than in written discourse. She also observes that the frequency of *actually* in spoken American English is approximately half this (Aijmer, 1986: 120), and cites Ilson’s (1985: 174) claim that the use of *actually* as a modest and polite means of contradicting or amplifying is more commonplace in spoken British English. These findings are partially confirmed by Lenk (1998) who also compared British and American speakers. This use of *actually* as a means of mitigating loss of face is returned to later in the paper. Aijmer (1986: 121) further notes that *actually* does not appear to be used with imperatives and is rarely used in interrogatives. She concludes that *actually* can be used in conversation to maintain social relationships by creating

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consists of a sub-corpus of Hong Kong academic English and one of Hong Kong business English.

contact with the hearer(s), signaling a break in the discourse topic, and organizing the real-time planning of the discourse (Aijmer, 1986: 128-129).

In another study, Sinclair, *et al* (1995: 19-20) examined the Bank of English Corpus and describe a total of five functions for *actually* as used by NS. To summarise these functions, *actually* can be used to indicate that a situation exists or happened; to emphasize something that it is true or correct; to correct or contradict someone; to express an opinion that other people might not have expected from you in a polite way; and to introduce a new topic into the conversation (Sinclair, *et al* , 1995: 19-20).

When *actually* is used to convey propositional content, according to Lenk (1998: 158-159) it can function in one of two ways: it is synonymous with *really* or *in fact* and it can provide additional emphasis to a verb's denotative meaning. In its discourse marker role, Lenk (1998: 184) states that *actually* has three functions: opinion marker, objection/correction marker and topic shift marker.

The notion of 'delexicalisation' (see for example, Sinclair, 1987; Partington, 1993), or what others term 'grammaticalization' (see for example, Hopper and Traugott, 1993), partially accounts for the kinds of words and phrases which do not contribute much in the way of propositional content or information to the conversation and so appear to be meaningless, but perform a variety of important discourse interactional functions. These words and phrases which include *actually*, *well*, *you know*, *oh*, *OK*, *right*, etc. are particularly common in conversations and are generally referred to as discourse markers (see for example, Schiffrin, 1987).



Although *actually* is commonly used by conversationalists, it has received less attention than other discourse markers, most notably the ubiquitous *well*, in the literature (for *well*, see for example, Svartvik, 1980; Schiffrin, 1985; Jucker, 1993). Indeed, Fraser (1990), for example, questions the status of *actually* as a discourse marker at all, doubting whether or not it signals sequential discourse relationships although in the study by Crystal and Davy (1975: 90), *actually* is cited as an example of a ‘connective’ whose function is to diminish or retract the whole or part of the meaning of the preceding utterance or part of the same utterance. As our understanding of how conversations work has grown, *actually*, as a discourse marker, has come to be seen as performing a range of functions from the “syntactically significant to the interactively expressive” (Stenström, 1986: 149). *Actually* is described, for instance, by Holmes (1990: 201) as a pragmatic particle acting as an intensifier or booster and by Stenström (1994: 128-130) as a kind of hedge when it is used to present a personal point of view which is face threatening. That *actually* can be used by speakers to both emphasize and mitigate says something about its versatility and helps to explain why it is so commonplace in conversations.

We have found examples of *actually* functioning in seven ways as a result of examining all of the instances of *actually* in our data. All of these functions cover those discussed elsewhere in the literature dealing with NS usage (i.e. Aijmer, 1986; Watts, 1988; Tognini-Bonelli, 1993; Stenström, 1994; Sinclair, *et al*, 1995; Lenk, 1998). In other words, we found no new functions for *actually* in our data. In our data, we did not find instances of *actually* initiating a turn as a connective (Aijmer, 1986: 122-123). The seven

functions of *actually* are listed below. The first two are used when *actually* is employed to convey propositional content and the other five are functions performed by *actually* when it is used as a discourse marker.

1. Indicate a situation exists or happened
2. Emphasise something unexpected is true or correct
3. Mitigate correction, rephrasing or contradiction
4. Introduce a new topic or sub-topic
5. Act as a filler
6. Introduce or mitigate a point of view
7. Imply a sense of solidarity, friendliness and intimacy

In the following sections, the seven functions performed by *actually* in the HKCCE are explained and illustrated with examples taken from the data. All the examples, which were drawn from the conversations in our data, show the NNS using *actually* in their utterances.

### **Propositional usage of *actually***

In our data, *actually* can function in one of two ways when speakers use it to add propositional content to their utterances.

#### *Indicate a situation exists or happened*

When used to indicate the fact that a situation exists or happened, *actually* could be replaced by *in fact* or *really*. In example (1), on lines 1 and 13 speaker *a* uses *actually* to

indicate the reality of his situation regarding his travel plans as opposed to some hypothetical or imaginary situation.

- (1) a: NNS male<sup>2</sup>                      B: NS male
- 1 a: I want to go a bit earlier if I er if I *actually* go because ( ) er but this morning I check the  
2 flight twenty-fourth flights it seems to be already sold out  
3 B: already sold  
4 a: for for for BA  
5 B: sold out oh yea  
6 a: yea for BA but I may check [another  
7 B: [( ) Virgin yea  
8 (pause)  
9 and you can always go er ( ) there are really ( ) there are many airlines going one  
10 stop but the trouble is you have one stop in Singapore KL or Bangkok ( )  
11 a: but firstly I have to check the time with my wife first  
12 B: mmmm mmmm  
13 a: see whether I can *actually* leave Hong Kong by that time  
14 (pause)

*Emphasise something unexpected is true or correct*

In example (2) below, speaker c, on line 6, is discussing a problem of water leaking into the hearer's office and uses *actually* to emphasise the unexpected information that this is not a problem unique to the hearer, but rather a general problem for all the offices facing in the same direction.

- (2) A: NS male      b: NNS male      c: NNS male
- 1 c: so you love this water fun and so you have it all the time  
2 b: ((laughs))  
3 A: I mean I am in that environment  
4 c: it is but I feel er astonished to see that the cracks is very poor workmanship ( ) these two it is  
5 a new one I don't I don't suppose to see such kind of leak that are found in everywhere you  
6 are not the only one suffered *actually* all people facing this good view office have the same  
7 problem  
8 b: but my office just a few only two rooms ahead of this one doesn't have this kind of problems

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<sup>2</sup> Speakers are identified by upper or lower case letters. The former are for NS and the latter NNS.

### *Actually* as a discourse marker

Below we describe the five functions of *actually* when it is used by speakers in our data as a discourse marker.

#### *Mitigate correction, rephrasing or contradiction*

In example (3), *actually* is used by speaker *a* on line 1 to indicate self-correction and has the effect of indicating the cancellation of *they can* and starting again with *you can*.

- (3) a: NNS female                      B: NS male
- 1 a: I like the one in Brisbane the food court ( ) they can *actually* you can choose the flavor you  
2 want  
3 B: mm

*Actually* can also be used by speakers to mitigate the correction or contradiction of other speakers as is the case in example (4):

- (4) a: NNS male    B: NS male    c: NNS male
- 1 a: one for etask one for others  
2 B: right  
3 c: *actually* nothing to do with etask group when while they do[n't have the call  
4 B: [etask is more  
5 simple of a function because all you have to do is to bring the system up right  
6 c: right

On line 3, speaker *c* contradicts what speaker *a* says on line 1 and we can see the way in which *actually* is performing two functions at the same time. It is acting as a connective linking what has been said with what is about to be said and it acts to mitigate the face-threatening act of speaker *c* disagreeing with the other participants.

*Introduce a new topic or sub-topic*

On lines 1-4 of example (5), speakers *a* and *B* are talking about what they are going to eat and then on line 6 speaker *a* employs *actually* to indicate that she is changing the topic from the menu to the level of noise in the café.

- (5) a: NNS female                      B: NS male
1. a: you can have the tea set and you can have the drink erm a cake and what else ( ) and a scoop
  2. of yogurt or ice-cream ( ) yea
  3. B: how come you know so well all the items on the tea set
  4. a: because I am a Häagen-Dazs
  5. B: ((laughs))
  6. a: *actually* here is quite noisy
  7. B: yea because you go to Häagen-Dazs every day ( ) is that why
  8. a: I don't know la

*Act as a filler*

Of the studies describing NS usage of *actually*, only Aijmer (1986) and Stenström (1994: 69-70) give 'filler' or 'verbal filler' as a function. Stenström states that it is used in combination with 'pause fillers' such as *er* and *um* or with other verbal fillers such as *well*, *I mean* and *you know* "in the planning area at the beginning of the turn" (Stenström 1994: 69-70). Finding examples of *actually* functioning as a filler was particularly problematic because it was not easy to find instances where the speaker is definitely employing *actually* as a turn-holding device while he or she is planning what to say next. On balance, however, we wish to include this function of *actually*. The alternative is to leave such instances as 'unclassifiable' as it is not possible to classify them as belonging to one or more of the other functions. In both of the examples below we have found speakers having problems formulating their utterances in real-time at the beginning of their turns.

- (6) A: NS male                      b: NNS male
1. A: you won't buy a parking space for that in Hong Kong

- 2 b: you can't er *actually* you can't er ( ) I mean for a parking space it cost more than fifty-five  
 3 hundred thousand now four hundred thousand to five hundred thousand dollars paying on  
 4 arrears  
 5 A: to park your car

(7) A: NS female                      b: NNS female

- 1 A: oh I thought it was after the probation  
 2 b: well *actually* for some normal well they are I have no idea how come our company the those  
 3 kinds of the labor legislation all those laws is not the same  
 4 A: I'm sure in my contract it said after probation  
 5 b: really

Both of these examples match the description of *actually* functioning as a filler given by Stenström above. In example 6 *actually* on line 2 is used in combination with the pause filler *er* and another verbal filler *I mean* as the speaker makes a hesitant start to his turn. In example 7 *actually* is again used as a filler in combination with *well*. As Stenström (1994: 69) points out, such uses of *actually* seem only to be explained by speakers employing it as a stalling device at the start of the turn “where the rough planning of the entire utterance takes place.”

As stated earlier, this function of *actually* is not widely accepted but we have evidence in our data of it being employed in precisely the way that Stenström describes, although the evidence of this form of use comes only from the NNS in our data, a fact which we will return to later.

#### *Introduce or mitigate a point of view*

The speakers in example (9) are discussing what alcohol to buy for an upcoming party. Speaker *a*, on line 9, mitigates his personal point of view by ending his turn with *actually*. It could be argued that once again *actually* in this example is doing two things

at the same time; and that is, it also implies a sense of solidarity, friendliness and intimacy (see next function below).

- (9) a: NNS male      B: NS male      C: NS male      D: NS male
1. a: so what kind of wine we want for the Christmas party like er red wine white wine and
  2. B: was that wet wine ((laughs))
  3. a: yes that's what we prefer ((laughs))
  4. C: red wine white wine and is there rose ( )
  5. a: what's it
  6. C: rose
  7. B: we're going to get pink champagne champagne you'll see the =
  8. D: = yes cham[pagne or
  9. a: [I think we should start stocking up now *actually*

*Imply a sense of solidarity, friendliness and intimacy*

Example 10 is one of the two examples in our database of NNS using *actually* to signal a sense of solidarity, friendliness and intimacy.

- (10) A: NS male      B: NS male      c: NNS male
1. A: I reckon we need a fifteen or twenty pounder
  2. B: do you reckon
  3. A: but I am certain that amount
  4. B: I don't know if it will fit
  5. ((laughs))
  6. c: that's true *actually*
  7. A: cos our box is quite small

On line 6, speaker *c*'s use of *actually* at the end of his turn, in which he agrees to what has been said by speaker *B* on line 4, functions as an indicator of solidarity with the previous speaker.

### **The frequency and patterns of usage of *actually* in Hong Kong conversational English**

When the 122 instances of *actually* were examined in terms of their corresponding functions, it was noted that sometimes one occurrence of *actually* performs more than

one function at a time. This phenomenon has also been observed by researchers looking at NS spoken discourse (see for example Östman, 1981: 24-25 and Lenk, 1998: 183). As a result of this doubling up of functions, 126 functions (34 by NS and 92 by NNS) were recorded. Table 1 below presents the frequency of use of *actually* produced by the two groups of speakers in performing the eight functions discussed above. We were not only interested in whether or not one set of speakers uses *actually* more frequently, we also wanted to analyse the pattern of usage to determine whether particular functions are favoured by NS or NNS.

Table 1. Frequency of use of *actually* by NS and NNS according to discourse function

FUNCTION	NS Count	NNS Count
<b>PROPOSITIONAL</b>		
1 Indicate a situation exists or happened	11	34
2 Emphasise something unexpected is true or correct	5	16
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>DISCOURSE MARKER</b>		
3 Mitigate correction, rephrasing or contradiction	4	15
(i) Mitigate self-correction, rephrasing or self-contradiction	2	5
(ii) Mitigate the correction, rephrasing or contradiction of others	2	10
4 Introduce a new topic or sub-topic	4	12
5 Act as a filler	0	6
6 Introduce or mitigate a point of view	4	6
7 Imply solidarity, friendliness and intimacy	5	2



Not possible to classify due to Incomplete utterance	1	1
Sub-total	18	42
TOTAL	34	92

The analysis has indicated that there are differences and similarities in the usage of *actually* between NNS and NS English. The most striking difference between the two sets of speakers is simply the frequency with which *actually* is used. The NNS use *actually* almost 3 times more often than the NS, making *actually* a potential candidate as a distinguishing feature of Hong Kong English compared with other varieties of English should further research confirm our findings. It appears from our study that the NNS in Hong Kong use *actually* in situations where NS do not and, presumably, use it in preference to other discourse markers or other means of conveying *actually's* core semantic meaning. Possible reasons for the higher frequency of *actually* in Hong Kong conversational English will be explored later in the paper.

We were interested to determine whether there is simply a three times higher use of *actually* across all of the functions or whether there are also differences in the functions the two sets of speakers use *actually* for. While there is a clear difference in the overall frequency of use in our data, there are nonetheless similarities in terms of some of the eight functions of *actually* when it comes to the patterns of use of this discourse marker by NS and NNS. In this regard, functions 1, 2 and 4 are similar in terms of following the overall pattern of usage, i.e. NNS using *actually* three times more often than NS. In other

words, the NNS use *actually* approximately three times more often than the NS. This is not the case, however, for functions 3, 5, 6 and 7.

When functions 3 and 6 are compared, NS are inclined to use *actually* more often when the utterance is self-oriented whereas NNS tend to use *actually* more frequently when the utterance is other-oriented. Therefore, when mitigating self-correction, rephrasing or self-contradiction (function 3i) and introducing or mitigating a point of view of their own (function 6), NS use *actually* only 2 times (as opposed to 5 for NNS) and 4 times (as opposed to 6) respectively. NNS, however, use *actually* more frequently (10 as opposed to 2 instances for NS) when mitigating the correction, rephrasing or contradiction of others (function 3ii).

One possible explanation for these differences is that they are a result of manifestations of politeness behaviors by the two groups of speakers, which in turn are motivated by their respective face constructs. The Western face (Goffman, 1955; Brown and Levinson, 1987) is characterised as a public self-image comprising positive face and negative face. Positive face stresses an individual's want to be appreciated and approved of by others and negative face refers to an individual's want to be unimpeded by others and to his or her claim to freedom of action (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61). The Chinese concept of face, as discussed in Mao (1995: 212-219), is different from the Western one and refers to an individual's concern about his or her image and reputation being achieved, respected and positively evaluated by others through interaction with them. The desire to achieve such a reputable image will further influence the individual's

politeness behavior. The image projected by the Chinese is one of “a humble participant” who primarily seeks “accommodation with or recognition by others” (Mao, 1995: 217-218) but not one who desires to be liked by others. This may partly explain why NS in our data use *actually* more often to denote solidarity, friendliness and intimacy than NNS.

Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness model assumes that people’s language behavior is, in most contexts, inherently face-threatening, and that various linguistic strategies are employed to protect and enhance each other’s face. Evidence exist from studies of NS use of discourse markers that there are links between their employment by speakers and face-saving/politeness behaviour. In her study of British and American NS, Lenk (1998: 183-184) points out that the three discourse marker functions she describes for *actually* (i.e. opinion marker, objection marker and topic shift marker) fit well with Östman’s (1981: 4-7) three interpersonal levels on which all discourse markers (or ‘pragmatic particles’ as Östman terms them) function, i.e. face-saving, politeness and implicit anchoring respectively.

In the case of introducing or mitigating a point of view, the NS in our corpus may have used *actually* as a negative politeness strategy - ‘hedge’ - (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 131) which appeals to the hearer’s desire of not to be impeded or put upon. In the case of the NNS, however, they seemed to be more concerned when their utterances were directed towards others and therefore may have also used *actually* as a mitigating device in order to be polite, to avoid having a head-on contradiction or correction of others, hoping to claim and enhance a reputable image for themselves. Therefore, it can be said

that the motivating force behind the use of *actually* by NNS was different from that of the NS due to the different ways face is conceptualized by the two cultures. We are not claiming that one group exclusively uses *actually* for one function or another on the basis of cultural notions of face, our data refutes this, rather we are arguing that there are discernible patterns of usage.

In the case of function 5, the NS in our data do not use *actually* as a filler at all, but the NNS use *actually* for this function 6 times. When used in this way, *actually* is at times used by NNS in combination with other fillers. This particular usage of *actually* by NNS may be indicative of a higher occurrence of fillers generally resulting from real-time interactional problems and needs to be investigated further.

Function 7 - to imply solidarity, friendliness and intimacy - is the only function for which the NS in our data have a higher frequency (5 instances) than the NNS (2 instances). There seems to be a clear difference in usage in our corpus for this function and a possible explanation for this is offered in the next section of the paper.

### **The positioning of *actually* within the utterance**

All of the instances of *actually* were further analyzed in terms of their syntactic positioning in relation to their discourse function. According to Aijmer (1986), *actually* can occur in utterance initial, medial, post-head and end positions, and all of these possible positions for *actually* can be found in our data for both NS and NNS. Basically, she argues that in spoken discourse *actually* can be a 'constituent' in an utterance in



line 13 of example (12), speaker *b* repeats the question she first asks on line 1 and adds *actually* for emphasis.

(12) A: NS male                    b: NNS female

1. b: what would you like (.) do you want it or not
2. A: mm
3. b: do you *actually* want it or not
4. A: no

### *Post-head position*

The post-head position is between a main clause and a subordinate clause, or between the head and a modifier. According to Aijmer (1986: 127), in this position *actually* may provide a social function by “marking friendliness and intimacy” and can also function as a filler or to express a personal opinion. In example (13), speaker *b* uses *actually* as a post-head modifier to indicate solidarity or to establish rapport with speaker *a*.

(13) a: NNS male                    b: NNS female

1. a: it depends on the workmanship
2. b: oh
3. a: depends on the workmanship
4. is it due to the wall (.) the wall (.) the cracks is in from the wall
5. b: ah yes you could see it *actually* from this hole up you could see that there is er cracks over
6. there that’s how the water seeped in when you have the wind pressure .

### *End position*

In utterance end position, *actually* serves to establish solidarity or intimacy (Aijmer, 1986: 125) by indicating that what the speaker has said is shared knowledge between the participants. This is what Sinclair and Brazil (1982: 111) describe as an insinuation of togetherness on the part of the speaker and what Edmondson and House (1981) term the cajoling function of *actually*. In end position, *actually* is often used when what has been said is a personal view on the topic, or when a correction or addition has been made by the speaker. In example (14), the speakers are discussing the purchase of a turkey and

speaker *c* uses *actually* at the end of his utterance on line 6 to express solidarity with what speaker *B* says on line 4.

(14) A: NS male      B: NS male      c: NNS male

1. A: I reckon we need a fifteen or twenty pounder
2. B: do you reckon
3. A: but I am certain that amount
4. B: I don't know if it will fit
5.     ((laughs))
6. c: that's true *actually*
7. A: cos our box is quite small

In Table 2 below, the 122 occurrences of *actually* were categorized according to the position they occupy in the utterance. Out of the 122 instances of *actually*, 30 (24.6%) are produced by NS and 92 (75.4%) by NNS. In other words, NNS use *actually* as a discourse marker three times more often than NS, bearing in mind that the proportion of talk between NS (48.8%) and NNS (51.2%) in the 10 hours of conversational data is very similar.

Table 2 . Frequency of use of *actually* by NS and NNS according to position in utterance (Total frequency of occurrence = 122)

Position of <i>actually</i> in utterance	NS Count	NNS Count
<b>PERIPHERAL</b>		
1) Initial	5	34
2) Post-head	5	21
3) End	5	2
<b>CONSTITUENT</b>		
Medial	15	35
Sub-total	30	92

Again, there are similarities and differences between the two sets of speakers when it comes to the positioning of *actually* in their utterances. We find that although NS use *actually* three times more often overall, in terms of the position occupied by *actually* the picture is more complex. For both NS and NNS, the medial position is the most prevalent position in which *actually* occurs (15 and 35 instances respectively). In this position in an utterance, *actually* is mostly used for emphasis and/or to indicate that a situation exists or has happened (i.e. its propositional functions). The NNS are also far more likely to use *actually* at the start of their utterances (34 as opposed to 5 instances by NS). The use of *actually* in the post-head position is four times higher for NNS (21 instances) than for NS (5 instances), and the higher frequency for NNS might be partly accounted for by their use of *actually* in this position as a filler. The use of *actually* in utterance end position is almost the mirror image of the overall pattern of use because it is more common among NS (5 instances) than among NNS (2 instances). This reversal of what is generally found in our data is linked to the more frequent use of *actually* as an indicator of solidarity, friendliness and intimacy by the NS. It appears from our findings at least that *actually* is used relatively less often by NNS as a means of enhancing or implying friendliness and this is worth investigating further. It would be interesting to examine whether this element of interpersonal relationships is generally attended to less by NNS than NS because NNS are pre-occupied with communicating in a foreign language and so it is in effect subordinated, or whether they are using other devices for the purpose of sustaining interpersonal relationships.



The kinds of differences we have discussed in this section might be classified as colligational in nature. Hoey (1998: 4) defines 'colligation' as "the grammatical and positional preferences of a word as opposed to the lexical preferences", the latter being collocation. Hoey (1998: 4), in his study of written texts, notes that a word or phrase's colligations "include preferences for textual positions as well as sentential ones". In our examination of the positioning of *actually*, we have seen that the colligations of *actually* are different between NS and NNS both in terms of the overall frequency and the position *actually* occupies at utterance and discourse level. We would like to investigate this further to determine whether these differences have a cumulative effect of producing strain for the hearer and perhaps causing intercultural communication problems between the NNS and NS.

#### **Comparisons between NS and NNS in the use of *actually*, *really* and *well***

In attempting to explain the higher frequency of *actually* used by NNS in our data for seven of the eight possible functions and for three of the four possible positions that *actually* can occupy in the utterance, we have considered two possible explanations. The first explanation is that NNS are, for possible cultural reasons, choosing to use *actually* for its core semantic properties more often than NS, and this would need to be verified by investigating whether NS are simply using other means to achieve the same end. The other possible explanation is that NNS are not performing the functions related to *actually* more frequently than NS, but rather NNS have chosen to use *actually* to perform functions in preference to other discourse items which are used by NS to perform the same or very similar functions.

To verify either of these explanations would require a different analysis of our corpus from the one reported here. However, we would like to report on a preliminary analysis of the relative frequencies of three discourse items, *actually*, *really* and *well*, in our database which lends support to the second of our explanations. We chose to look at the frequencies of *actually*, *really* and *well* because they share overlapping functions and we felt that if NS are using *really* and *well* more frequently than NNS, then there could be grounds for pursuing the second of our tentative explanations. *Really*, for example, is used for emphasis. It can indicate that a situation exists or happened; it can be a filler; and it can be used in utterance final position to serve a similar social function to that of *actually* (Stenström, 1986). In the case of *well*, it shares a number of similar functions with *actually* including acting as a mitigating device, a filler, and introducing a new topic or point of view (Leung, 1996).

Table 3 presents the frequencies of occurrence of *actually*, *really* and *well* in the data.

**Table 3. Frequency of use of *actually*, *really* and *well* by NS and NNS**

	NS	NNS	TOTAL
<i>actually</i>	30	92	122
<i>really</i>	70	44	114
<i>well</i>	101	24	125
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>361</b>

Table 3 shows that *actually*, *really* and *well*, are used 361 times and that the ratio of use of these discourse items for NS and NNS is 5:4. We already know that the NNS use *actually* three times more often, but what is interesting is that this overall pattern of usage is reversed for *really* and *well*. *Well* is used four times more often by NS; and *really* is

used 60% more frequently by NS. There is a danger of jumping to conclusions based on these preliminary findings, and in so doing, excluding other possible explanations, but we intend to fully investigate whether the NNS in our database used *actually* in situations where NS might have instead chosen to say *really* or *well*.

### **Conclusions**

Our study has shown a much higher occurrence of the discourse item *actually* among NNS than NS and we suggest that this could constitute a distinguishing feature of Hong Kong English compared with other varieties of English. It should be noted that while there is widespread recognition of and research into other international varieties of English, this is still not the case for Hong Kong English. The very existence of a Hong Kong variety is debated (see for example, Bolt, 1994: 22) and, if it does exist, it may well disappear before it has been fully described as English may be surpassed by Putonghua (i.e. Mandarin, the national language of China) as the language of politics, law and administration in Hong Kong (Bolton, 1992: 7).

We have found *actually* performs seven different micro functions across the two macro functions of *actually*. Also, the pattern of usage by NS and NNS is consistent with the overall frequency of use for three of these functions: indicate a situation exists or happened; emphasise something unexpected is true or correct; and introduce a new topic or sub-topic. NNS use *actually* approximately three times more often than NS to mitigate the correction, rephrasing or contradiction of others; and to act as a filler. When they do use *actually*, NS are more likely to use it to mitigate self-correction, rephrasing or self-

contradiction; introduce or mitigate a point of view; and to imply solidarity, friendliness and intimacy. The notion of face has been suggested as a possible motivating force behind the differing uses of *actually*. Face is conceived differently by the two groups of speakers; and in this particular context, *actually* tends to be used by NS in self-oriented utterances and by NNS in other-oriented utterances. Future research needs to be conducted to find out the extent to which other forces such as gender and level of intimacy between the participants are at play.

Based on the model proposed by Aijmer (1986), we also analysed the positioning of *actually* in the utterance by NS and NNS. NNS use *actually* in utterance initial position almost seven times more often than NS and this pattern of usage is reversed for end position usage of *actually* with the NS using *actually* almost three times more often. These differences are linked to the different functions NS and NNS tend to use *actually* for, which are partly determined by the position *actually* occupies in the utterance. We tentatively explored the possibility that NS use other discourse items, such as *well* and *really*, in situations where NNS use *actually*. Our initial findings offer some credibility to this explanation, but further research needs to be carried out to check the validity of this claim. Further research is also required to explore other possibilities for explaining the differences we have found such as L1 (Cantonese) transfer, or that the NNS have a more limited repertoire of discourse items at their disposal to perform certain functions. It would also be useful and important to investigate the impact the differing usage of *actually*, and other discourse items, has on intercultural communication.

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