

3. AGREEING/DISAGREEING

This may be a matter of agreeing or disagreeing with an opinion expressed; of agreeing or disagreeing that something is a fact; or of agreeing or refusing to agree to a course of action.

A. Agreeing or disagreeing with an opinion expressed

Unemphatic agreeing is expressed by Yes or No; [That's] right; I agree; I know; I take the same view; That's what *I* think (*slight emphasis on I*); You're probably right; You may well be¹ right; Very likely; Very true; I'm sure you're right (*may be doubtful or tactful agreement*); I agree with you up to a point; Mmmm. . . ; I'm afraid you're right (*reluctant agreement*); I have to agree with you (*reluctant agreement*). Nodding the head may accompany any of these expressions.

Examples

(*Acquaintances conversing at the social security office*)

– It's time we had a new government.²

– I agree.

(*Two friends*)

– He's rather difficult to get on with,³ I believe.

– Oh, I know, I know.

(*Student conversation*)

– The library isn't open late enough.

– No, it isn't.⁴ (*No is normal in response to the negative here, but Yes would be unusual.*)

(*Acquaintances conversing*)

– Car-drivers should wear seat-belts all the time, and passengers too.

– That's what *I* think.

(*Two friends*)

– She's really very nice.⁵

– Mmmm. . . . (*Strength of stress, and kind of intonation, indicate the degree of agreement.*)

(*At a public meeting: speaker and member of the audience*)

– The wearing of seat-belts should be [made] compulsory.⁶

– Hear, hear!⁷ (= We agree; We support the motion.)

(*Charity fund raiser*)

– People will buy a ticket if they think there's a chance of winning a prize, but they won't if they don't.

– Very true.

More emphatic agreement often makes use of words and phrases such as Absolutely; Exactly; Precisely; That's/You're absolutely right; I thoroughly agree;⁸ I do agree with that⁹ (with some emphasis on do); I completely/strongly¹⁰ agree or I agree completely;¹¹ I think exactly the same (way); I agree very strongly;¹² I couldn't agree more;¹³ You're/That's dead right;¹⁴ You can say that again; Not half¹⁵ (*the last three more colloquial than the others*). I concur (*formal, not common*); Agreement has been reached (*formal*). The colloquial phrase You're telling me is very common, with strong stress on you're and me; it conveys emphatic agreement with a suggestion that the speaker already knew that whatever had been said or hinted at was very true.

Examples

(Friends conversing)

- Prices and wages should be frozen at their present level.
- I couldn't agree more.¹⁶

(Tutors or parents)

- If he'd worked regularly¹⁷ he wouldn't have failed the exam.
- I completely agree.

(Shoppers)

- I think the price is unreasonable.
- You're dead right.¹⁸

(Diners)

- Don't you think this is rather a¹⁹ good restaurant?
- Absolutely. (*Colloquial*.²⁰)

(Friends or acquaintances talking about a car someone has recently bought)

- Isn't that rather a lot to pay for a ten-year-old car in not very good condition?²¹
- You're telling me. He must be mad (*or: crazy*).²²

(Car driver to his passenger, as they come to a flooded road)

- They seem to have had a little rain round here.
- You're telling me.

(News reports)

- Agreement has been reached on every point and the strike will be called off at midnight.

- The two sides have come to an agreement.

Disagreement is expressed by: No, I disagree; I don't/can't agree; I don't think so; [I'm afraid] I take another view;²³ I can't go along with that; You're wrong; I don't see it quite that way. Colloquially: Oh, come on; You must be joking. Rather formally: I find that hard to believe!; I venture to disagree;²⁴ I oppose the motion; I feel I must disagree. Formally: With respect, I believe you're mistaken; I really can't accept that. Surprised, indignant: Do you really mean what you say?²⁵ Shaking the head also conveys disagreement.

*Examples**(Acquaintances)*

- It's time we had a new government.²⁶
- I can't agree [with you].²⁷

(Acquaintances)

- A lot of people think we need a new town hall.
- Well, I'm afraid I can't go along with that.

(Friends)

- Let's go there by car.
- You must be joking. Don't you know what the roads are like?

Gentle disagreement may be expressed by: Are you sure that's right?; I'm not sure I'm with you²⁸ on that; On the contrary. . . ; On the other hand. . . ; That's hard to believe; Yes, but don't you think. . . ?; I don't see it that way.

(Neighbours)

- The strikers have gone back to work.
- Are you sure that's right?

Various phrases are available to indicate the possibility of tactful disagreement, e.g. Do you really think so?; Well, that's one way of looking at it; I can see your point of view, but surely. . . ;²⁹ You could say that, but. . . ; That can't be right; That's not a [very] good idea; That's not true; Are you sure that's right? I don't see it that way; Oh, come now (*colloquial, very common*); Isn't there perhaps another possibility?; Wouldn't it be better to. . . ?

*Examples**(Strangers in a crowd)*

- He should be arrested.
- Oh, come now! (*or: come on!*)³⁰ That's going too far!

(Acquaintances)

- Dogs should be prohibited (*or: shouldn't be allowed*)³¹ in big cities.
- Do you really think so? (=I disagree.)

Such phrases may also, of course, depending on the context of use, have their surface meaning, in which case they would not necessarily indicate disagreement.

More emphatic expressions of disagreement include: I disagree totally;³² I completely/strongly/thoroughly/utterly/wholly disagree; I don't think so at all; I don't see it that way at all; You've got it all wrong; I can't agree with you at all; Wrong!; No way! (*slang.*)

*Example**(Acquaintances)*

- Car-drivers should wear seat-belts.
- I don't think so at all.

Still more emphatic disagreement is voiced by protesting exclamations such as: Come off it!; Rubbish!;³³ Nonsense!; Balls! (*vulgar*); That's a load of rubbish;³⁴ Don't give us/me that; I've never heard such rubbish;³⁵ Absolute nonsense!; That's a ridiculous statement; That's a stupid thing to say. (*All of these are impolite except perhaps among close friends.*)

*Example**(Old lady in a queue)*

- People are getting less and less polite.
- Rubbish!³⁶

If someone is asked whether he or she agrees with an opinion or not, *do/does* can be used in replying.

Examples

- Do you agree?
- No, I don't/Yes, I do.

- Don't you agree?
- No, I don't/Yes, I do.

- Doesn't she think so?
- No, she doesn't.

B. Agreeing or disagreeing that something is a fact*Example*

- Tokyo is bigger than New York.
- Yes, [I know]. (*Or*): That's correct; Yes, I think it is; I agree; [That's/You're] right; Right; O.K.; Quite right;³⁷ That is correct (*formal*); I believe that to be correct (*formal*).

Expressions such as 'I take the same view' and 'I couldn't agree more' are inappropriate here, since it is not a matter of views or argument.

Disagreement

- No, it isn't; I don't think so; That's not correct; I don't think it is; I disagree; You're wrong; Do you really think so (*tactful*); Are you sure (*tactful*); Surely not (*polite*); Not quite.

I'm afraid³⁸ adds a note of apology, softening the disagreement somewhat:

– I'm afraid it isn't; I'm afraid I don't think so; I'm afraid that's not correct; I'm afraid I disagree; I'm afraid I can't agree; I'm afraid you're wrong.

– Rubbish!;³⁹ Nonsense! (*Both impolite.*)

C. Agreeing or refusing to agree to a course of action

The language of agreement here includes: Certainly; Of course; [I'd be] delighted; Not at all; Not in the least; Yes, why not?; OK; Super⁴⁰ (*slang*); You have my consent (*formal*).

Examples

(*To a motorist*)

– Could you take this person to the hospital, please? There's been an accident.
– Certainly.⁴¹ (*'Delighted' would be inappropriate here.*)

(*Spring cleaning*)

– Are you feeling strong? I wonder if you could help me shift this cupboard.
– Of course/Certainly.

(*Of a visiting cousin*)

– Would you meet him at the station when he arrives?
– [I'd be] delighted!/Certainly!/Of course!

(*Two travellers*)

– I think we should stay here until the floods subside.
– Yes, why not?

(*Son and mother*)

– Do you mind if I borrow your camera for a few hours?
– Not at all. (*Or: Not in the least⁴² = willingness to lend; or: Of course not.*)

(*Planning an excursion*)

– We could have a moonlight swim in the bay.
– Super!⁴³ (*Slang.*)

(*Member of a group on an outing, to the leader*)

– I'll go ahead and reserve a table in the restaurant.
– O.K. (*Slang.*)

(*Suitor and father*)

– I know your daughter's under 18, but I'd [still] like to marry her.
– You have my consent. (*Fairly formal.*)

Conditional agreement is expressed by perhaps; reluctant agreement by If you say so; Oh, very well;⁴⁴ Oh, all right; If you insist.

Examples

– It would be better to take no action⁴⁵ (*or: do nothing*) at all at the moment.
– Perhaps.

- Let's catch the next train, not this one.
- If you say so. (*Slightly reluctant agreement*)
- Oh, very well. (*Reluctant agreement*)
- If you insist. (*Very reluctant agreement*)

Refusal

The language of refusal here includes: I'd rather not, if you don't mind (*which is polite, unless don't is emphasized*); No, I can't do that; Certainly not (*definite and less polite*); Of course not (*abrupt*); Who, me? (*colloquial*); No fear (*colloquial*); What do you take me for?; Who do you think I am? (*both impolite*); Never; Not on your nelly (*slang*).

(*In the canteen*)

- Look, there's Jean. Ask her to come and sit next to us.
- I'd rather not, if you don't mind - I don't know her. Ask her yourself.

(*Student to student*)

- Sit next to him in the exam and pass him the answers.
- No, I can't/won't/couldn't do that. (*Shocked.*)

(*Discussing a visitor*)

- Her train gets in at 3 a.m. Would you like to meet her at the station?
- I'd prefer not to. (*Polite.*)
- No fear!⁴⁶ (*or: No way!*) (*Both impolite.*)

(*About an acquaintance or official guest*)

- Could you meet him at the station?
- What do you take me for? A taxi-driver? (*Very impolite.*)

(*Kidnappers*)

- Just sign this statement and you'll be released.
- Never! I'll do nothing of the kind!

(*Blackmailer*)

- Just pay up and I won't bother you again.
- Not on your nelly! (*Slang.*)

Exercises

1. Your teacher suggests that the system of government in your country is inadequate. How do you disagree politely but firmly?
2. Your friend insists that oil costs only \$1 a barrel. What do you say?
3. Someone you dislike suggests that you should carry his/her suitcase to the station. How would you reply (a) politely, (b) impolitely?
4. You are discussing cafés and restaurants in your town with a friend. Write a short dialogue in which you agree or disagree in what you say about them.
5. 'People who want to keep cats should pay an annual licence fee for each one of them.' Disagree politely but firmly with this statement, made (a) in conversation, (b) at a public meeting.

6. 'Hooligans and vandals should be made to pay for the damage they cause.' Agree strongly.
7. Disagree gently with the statement made in 6.
8. 'Britain has nearly a hundred million inhabitants.' Question this statement tactfully.
9. 'Write my name on the attendance sheet at the meeting, will you? I can't come.' Refuse (a) politely, (b) less politely, to do this.

Notes

- ¹ Am: are probably.
- ² Am: president *or*: administration.
- ³ Am: He's difficult to get along with.
- ⁴ Am: No, it isn't *or*: You're right. (Also British English.)
- ⁵ Am: She's really nice.
- ⁶ Am: Wearing seat belts should be compulsory.
- ⁷ Am: Aye, aye.
- ⁸ But NOT 'I agree thoroughly'.
- ⁹ Am: I agree.
- ¹⁰ Not American.
- ¹¹ Not American.
- ¹² Am: very much.
- ¹³ Not American.
- ¹⁴ Not American.
- ¹⁵ Not American.
- ¹⁶ Am: I completely agree *or*: I think exactly the same. (Also British English.)
- ¹⁷ Am: harder. (Also British English.)
- ¹⁸ Am: You're right.
- ¹⁹ Am: a really good. . . . (Also British English.)
- ²⁰ Common in American.
- ²¹ Am: Don't you think it's a lot to pay for a ten-year-old car that's not in very good condition? (Also British English.)
- ²² Americans would use 'crazy'.
- ²³ Not American.
- ²⁴ Not American.
- ²⁵ Americans would also use: Are you kidding?
- ²⁶ Am: president.
- ²⁷ Am: I can't agree with you.
- ²⁸ Am: I'm not sure I agree with you. (Also British English.)
- ²⁹ Americans wouldn't use 'surely'.
- ³⁰ Am: Come on!
- ³¹ Am: Dogs shouldn't be allowed.
- ³² Am: I totally disagree. (Also British English.)
- ³³ Not American.
- ³⁴ Not American.
- ³⁵ Not American.
- ³⁶ Am: Nonsense. (Also British English.)
- ³⁷ Not American.
- ³⁸ Americans would not use 'I'm afraid' in this way.
- ³⁹ Not American.
- ⁴⁰ Not American.
- ⁴¹ Am: Sure.
- ⁴² Am: Of course not.
- ⁴³ Am: Great!
- ⁴⁴ Am: all right.
- ⁴⁵ Am: to do nothing. (Also British English.)
- ⁴⁶ Am: No way!