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The Impact of Discourse Markers on Conversational Coherence

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Abstract

People use languages for different reasons to express their needs, to convey their opinions and to share their feelings. When communicating with someone, the conversation should flow smoothly. Hence, discourse markers acting as linking devices help the listener grasp the meaning without so much effort. When used, these discourse markers create a successful coherence in conversation. In the study, after introducing the discourse markers, their features, aspects, functions and properties are examined. As we live in a society, we have to rely on language for several reasons. To express these reasons, discourse markers are mostly encountered especially in spoken language. They have no syntactic function and even though they do not affect the overall meaning of the sentence they do give significant clues to the listener about the attitude of the speaker. The same discourse marker can be used in various positions in a sentence and it may have a different function. It may start a discourse, change the topic, end a discourse, express a response, bracket a response and specify a boundary in discourse. Furthermore, the linguistic and non-linguistic factors affecting the occurrence of discourse markers are also considered in the study.

Keywords: discourse, discourse markers, conversational coherence, spoken discourse, utterance meaning

1. Introduction

Languages have a unique and common property which serves as a tool for communication among the individuals within a society. People use languages for various reasons such as conveying and sharing their ideas, thoughts and beliefs. They do this by relying on the same symbols that are shared in common in every community. Gee (1999, p.11) asserts that "when we speak or write, we craft what we have to say to fit the situation or context in which we are communicating". Therefore, how we speak or write constitutes the scene or context. When doing this, people have to be consistent in their use of a specific language. While interacting with someone, people use some cohesive devices to be easily understood and

interpreted by their interlocutors. As the terminology of these cohesive devices are somehow problematic, they are named differently by various scholars such as discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987), pragmatic markers (Fraser, 1996), discourse particles (Schourup, 1985), and discourse connectives (Blakemore, 1987). Thus in this study, the term discourse markers as Schiffrin (1987) suggested will be used. Discourse markers act as the connectives of a text to be coherent and cohesive. Syahabuddin and Zikra (2020, p. 72) state that "the use of discourse markers is to create the coherence and cohesion in a text which is considered as the requirement of a good text". In this way, a text should be meaningful in order not to be misinterpreted by the listener. Müller (2005, p. 8) agrees that "the use of discourse markers facilitates the hearer's task of understanding the speaker's utterances". Communication requires at least two interlocutors and as Schiffrin (2001, p. 54) argues, the use of such discourse is an ongoing process among the interlocutors to draw upon various types of knowledge that exist in communication. These types of knowledge may consist of how, when, where and what to say to who. For the meaning to be interpreted by the listener correctly, the listener has to rely on such factors as time, place and the social relationship between the interlocutors. Discourse markers are mostly independent of syntax, they do not alter the meaning of the sentences and they can be seen as meaningless words or phrases. (Kamali and Noori, 2015, p. 944) This view is supported by Ang (2014, p. 28) as "in discourse analysis, stress is laid on the understanding of cohesion and coherence of the passage, rather than its grammatical structure." Being the linguistic elements within a sentence, discourse markers carry no syntactic function. According to Sáez (2003, p.347), "the speaker uses such markers to decrease the cognitive effort required from the hearer to interpret the utterance, by signalling which inference reflects more accurately the speaker's meaning." Fraser (1993, p. 3) also considers discourse markers as "part of a grammar of the language, albeit as members of a pragmatic, not a syntactic category." The most commonly used discourse markers can be listed as; oh, well, you know, I mean, because, and, but, or, so, now, then. In terms of semantics, Hansen (1998, p. 236) argues that "discourse markers are generally considered as processing instructions intended to help the hearer in integrating the unit hosting the marker into a coherent mental representation of the unfolding discourse." The term "discourse" is intended to highlight the fact that the connectives' roles should be analysed at the discourse level rather than the sentence level, while the term "marker" is intended to highlight the fact that their meanings should be identified in terms of what they indicate instead of what they particularly describe. (Blakemore, 2002, p. 1) Schiffrin (1987, p.132) gives a brief definition of discourse markers as "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk" and suggests that "they provide contextual coordinates for utterances". Therefore, they contribute to building up the coherence which is jointly formed by the interlocutors in their discourse structure, context and meaning. These markers help the listener to understand what is being said and how they

are connected to what has already been said. (Castro, 2009, p. 59) So, discourse markers are not necessary and obligatory when constructing an utterance, however they are really useful and effective to create a better understanding in terms of the interlocutors. Alonso-Almeida and Álvarez-Gil (2021, p. 12) state that when translating from the source text to the target text, sometimes these markers may not be translated; "they are either omitted, or they need to be paraphrased or replaced by equivalent devices in the target text". Sun (2013, p. 2137) asserts that "discourse markers are unique linguistic items which give guidance to the listener as to how the meaning is organized, what processes are being used to utter it, and what the speaker's intentions are." So, discourse markers are linguistic elements used by the speaker to help the listener gain the interpretation of an utterance by supplying contextual information. Sáez (2003, p. 348) claims that "they convey two types of information as attitudinal comments of the speaker or information about the connections between the utterances." In both cases, they can be omitted as they are syntax-independent or if they are used, they are mostly marked by some punctuation marks in writing or by a pause after them while speaking. In terms of pragmatics, discourse markers give signals about the speaker's utterance. Although the absence of discourse markers does not alter the well-formedness of a sentence, they hinder the significant clues that the listener may get about the interpretation of the speaker's utterance. (Shen, 2007, p. 52). For an effective and healthy communication to take place between the interlocutors, most of the time such discourse markers are required to be used. According to Aysu (2017, p. 133), "discourse markers may be used more than once in a sentence in informal or spoken discourse." However, despite their frequent usage in spoken discourse, discourse markers should be used correctly and appropriately in written and formal discourse. Therefore, speakers use such discourse markers to integrate forms, meanings, and actions to make sense of what is being apparently said. (Urgelles-Coll, 2010, p. 28) Conversational coherence is the result of a dynamic process that takes place among the interlocutors where discourse markers play a very crucial role.

Schiffrin (1987, p. 315) states that "it is the properties of discourse together with the linguistic properties of the expression (meaning and/or grammatical properties) which provide markers with their indexical functions." With the help of this indexical function of the markers, the listener may grasp why an utterance is generated, used and ready to be understood by the interlocutor. Like many other commentary markers, a discourse marker does not take place as a significant element of the sentence in terms of the content. They can always be separated or omitted without affecting the content meaning or the grammaticality of the sentence. (Fraser, 1993, p. 6) As Schiffrin (1987, p.9) suggests, "cohesive devices do not themselves create meaning; they are clues used by speakers and hearers to find the meanings which underlie surface utterances." In spite of their detachability from a sentence or an

utterance, discourse markers make the pragmatic meaning and the content of the message more visible.

2. Characteristics of discourse markers

When phonology is taken into account, discourse markers are rather short words that usually appear at the beginning of a clause. Furthermore, they are syntactically independent elements that can operate in spoken discourse. (Valdmets, 2013, p. 112) They are used to connect the segments of discourse and show how a specific sentence or utterance is related to the other elements and assist the speaker to produce a coherent and cohesive discourse. Fraser (1993, p. 5) argues that "a discourse marker not only signals a commentary message but, at the same time, signals the scope of this message." As the breadth of the message is mostly the basic message that is conveyed, the discourse marker is an important part of it.

Discourse markers may be used for various purposes so they have different characteristics as Hasund (2003, p. 56) offers. In terms of phonology, they are short and generally reduced and they may form a separate group or be subordinated to another linguistic item in the sentence. For syntax, they mostly occur in the initial position within a sentence, but are also found in the middle or at the end of a sentence. They are not considered as a vital element of a sentence and have no clear grammatical function. Therefore, they are optional. In terms of semantics, they lack semantic meaning and are not considered as part of the content of the sentence. Apart from the abovementioned aspects of discourse markers, Brinton (1996) claims that "they are grammatically optional and semantically empty but they are not pragmatically optional or superfluous, instead, they serve a variety of pragmatic functions" and highlights the following features:

- They are basically an aspect of spoken discourse.

- They are mostly observed in spoken discourse.

- They are considered to have almost little or no meaning at all.

- They are optional.

Based on these features, it can be stated that discourse markers are mostly used in spoken discourse with high occurrence rates. They particularly give no meaning to the utterance and thus do not alter the meaning and finally they are considered as the optional elements within an utterance. According to Sun (2013, p. 2137), discourse markers might contribute to the comprehension of a text. In order to interpret a message more accurately, it would be best to look upon the surrounding context even though they do not add any meaning and hence can be deleted without giving any harm to meaning. However, they have an important function as

easing the comprehension of a spoken text by acting as short pauses which give the hearers some time to grasp the actual meaning of the utterance.

3. Functions of discourse markers

To understand the functions of discourse markers that they perform, Müller (2005, p. 9) lists the following:

- They are used to initiate discourse (*So*, how are you doing?).
- They are used to specify the border in discourse as shifting the topic) (*Anyway*, Is it possible that we could work on the same project?);
- They are used to express a response or a reaction (*Well, everyone can state their own opinions*.);
- They are used to serve as fillers or delaying tactics (*Well*, this is not the case I've been trying to say);
- They are used to aid the speaker while speaking (Well, *um*, I'm not so certain about that);
- They are used to affect an interaction or sharing between the interlocutors (All the players during the last game *you know* did their best.);
- They are used to bracket the discourse either cataphorically or anaphorically (a. She was not on the list *y'know*. b. *Y'know* she was not on the list.)

No matter where they occur in a sentence or utterance, discourse markers definitely facilitate the comprehension and give clues to the hearer. (Bartolo Jr, 2019, p. 6) suggest that "from a pragmatic point of view, discourse markers appear to be a certain part of pragmatics. Thus, they should not only be studied grammatically but also pragmatically." Because when semantics is taken into account, the meaning never changes, however in terms of pragmatics, the meaning may easily change based on the contextual factors and clues. That's why, discourse markers play vital roles in getting the real message the speaker produces.

According to Sun (2013, p. 2138), "the functions of discourse markers may fall into two categories: textual functions of language and interpersonal functions." When using the language, the whole text has to be organized clearly in order not to give the hearer wrong interpretations. This feature is the textual function of the language whereas the interpersonal function is the choice of words, utterances and sentences when talking to someone. We have a repertoire of saying the same thing differently and when interacting with someone we have to choose the most appropriate utterance. Since the functions of discourse markers are of paramount importance, Schiffrin (1987, 316) provides a table in which she outlines the planes of talk and analyses the discourse markers thoroughly.

Table 1

Planes of talk about the functions of discourse markers

Information state	Participation framework	Ideational structure	Action structure	Exchange structure
oh	oh		oh	
well	well	well	well	well
		and	and	and
		but	but	but
		or	or	or
so	so	so	so	so
because		because	because	
	now	now		
then		then	then	
I mean	I mean	I mean		
y'know	y'know	y'know		y'know

As seen in the table, the discourse markers are used on different planes of talk having distinctive functions. Information state is the knowledge of the interlocutors about each other. Participation framework is the relationship between the interlocutors. Ideational structure is the link between the ideas. Action structure is the order of the linguistic items found in discourse. Exchange structure is related to the turn-taking process which goes on between the interlocutors. In order to make the discourse more coherent, the same discourse marker may perform distinctively. For example, *oh* is used in the information state to show the transitions; in the participation framework to reflect the interlocutors' understanding the message conveyed and finally in the action structure to identify certain actions. (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 317) All the discourse markers shown in the table above contribute to the smooth flow of the interaction and therefore conversation.

The choice, use and the frequency of discourse markers depend on many factors such as linguistic and non-linguistic. (Müller, 2005, p. 40) presents a table about these factors that may have an influence on discourse markers.

Table 2

Factors affecting the discourse markers

non-linguistic factors	linguistics factors
- gender	- native vs. non-native speakers
- age	- acquisition of English in formal

- social class	and informal contexts
- ethnicity	- usage of English in formal
- relationship between the partners	and informal contexts
- role	- abroad vs. not abroad
- formal vs. informal context for the recording	- British vs. American influence
	- native speaker contact

As seen in the table above, among the non-linguistic factors, gender is an important demographic feature that shapes the use of discourse markers. Within a society, technically men and women speak the same language, however, in practice, this is not the case. Certain discourse markers such as you know and like are used more often by women as Lakoff (1975), Östman (1981) and Romaine and Lange (1991) claim. Age is another non-linguistic factor which determines the choice of discourse markers. Different age groups use the language differently and this is reflected in their speech. For instance, younger speakers have a tendency to use like much more often than the other age groups. Social class and ethnicity also govern the people's choice of discourse markers. In multicultural societies, the speaker may choose specific discourse markers to show the hearer his/her social class or ethnic background. The relationship and interaction between the interlocutors also determine the frequency of discourse markers. Talking to a stranger may be completely different when talking to someone we know. (Redeker 1990; Jucker and Smith 1998). The hearer may interpret the message clearly when he is aware of the role of the speaker. When the formality and the informality of a language are taken into account, it can be stated that discourse markers are mostly used in informal language. (Andersen 1998). Since the occurrence of discourse markers is mainly based on speech, native speakers of a language integrate them much more often than the non-native speakers. After the acquisition of that specific language, discourse markers can be used widely in both formal and informal contexts. Likewise, being abroad and not being abroad, native speaker contact and British and American influence are among the linguistic factors which mold the use of discourse markers in speech.

Traugott (1995, p. 6) puts forth that "what discourse markers do is allow speakers to display their evaluation not of the content of what is said, but of the way it is put together, in other words, they do metatextual work." Since what is said is highly based on the content of the elements within an utterance, it is a determining factor of how the pieces are built. Schiffrin (1987, p. 6) stresses the significant properties of discourse markers as they form structures, convey the meaning and accomplish the actions. For discourse is considered as the larger sequences of smaller units, discourse markers assist to the conversation by forming structures

and conveying the meaning. Accomplishing the actions is related to the interaction that goes between the interlocutors when the turn-taking process applies.

4. Conclusion

If there were no connections between the longer phrases and sentences, it would be quite difficult to interpret what we are told. In order for the meaning to be grasped easily by the listener, the speaker may use a number of sentence connectors. Thanks to these linking words which are also called as discourse markers, cohesion and coherence should be taken into account so that there can be a smooth transition among the sentences and paragraphs in terms of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Such discourse markers are mostly used in oral language and they make it possible to interpret the meaning much more clearly without disturbing the structure and the general meaning of the sentences. In this way, it is more likely to observe both how language is used more effectively in real life in mutual conversations and how interpersonal interaction functions in a healthier way. In addition, the discourse markers mentioned in the study are of great importance in resolving the disagreement between the interlocutors, as they can take on many different functions. By doing so, they can also shape and strengthen the coherence which is crucial in a conversation. Sometimes used without even realizing, discourse markers have some decisive features such as changing the topic, ending the conversation, or directing the course of the conversation. All the above-mentioned characteristics of discourse markers require that they should be used commonly since they make the flow of the conversation smoothly.

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