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A Theoretical Approach to Spoken Discourse Markers

Siham BOUZAR¹

¹ Université d'Alger 2, Algérie

Abstract

Discourse markers of spoken English such as *you know, I mean, well, see, so, and, but* and many others perform an important role in conversation. They have been the subject of investigation in a host of studies focusing on native and non-native speakers of English and have been assigned a multitude of terminologies and diverse definitions by various researchers. Therefore, this article will highlight the definitions allotted to discourse makers, their properties as well as their functions.

Key words: Discourse markers; Speaking skills.

Introduction

A great deal of studies on discourse markers (for example, Aijmer 2002, Fraser 1990, Schiffrin 1987, Schourop 1975) has been carried out during the last two decades. The latter play an important role in discourse and are crucial elements to be learnt by non-native speakers of English. In this respect, Taboda (2006) qualified the study of discourse markers as *an extensive area of research in itself*, while Fraser (1999: 932) characterised it as *a growth industry in linguistics*. Furthermore, Lewis (2006: 43) highlights their presence as the *pepper* in spontaneous conversation.

Accordingly, in this theoretical approach, the definitions attributed to discourse markers, their properties as well as their functions are considered. Likewise, the issue related to the contribution of discourse markers to coherence is addressed.

1. Discourse Markers: Definition and Terminology

Despite the wide research interest raised by discourse markers for many years, there is no general agreement upon the definition of this term. In fact, discourse markers have been used under a multitude of terminologies and given various definitions.

As far as the terminology adopted to determine discourse markers, there is no definite consensus upon what to call those items. They have been assigned various names. Schiffrin (1987), McCarthy (1998: 178), Müller (2005:03) and O'Keefe et al (2007: 172) referred to them as *discourse markers*. Trillo (2006:194) called them *linguistic elements*. Schourup (1985), Aijmer and Blakemore (1987, 1992, 2002) gave them the name of *discourse connectives*. Another fairly frequent term is *pragmatic markers* (Andersen 1998). Furthermore, Pridham (2001:30) attributed to them the term *utterance indicators*, while Cook

(1989:14) prefers the term *cohesive devices*. Redeker (1991) referred to them as *discourse operators* and were named *cue phrases* by Knott (2000), Knott & Sanders (1998) and Sanders and Noordman (2000). Other less frequent terms according to Fraser (2006:190) include *discourse particles, discourse signalling devices, indicating devices, phatic connectives, pragmatic operators, pragmatic particles, semantic conjuncts, and sentence connectives*.

Concerning the definitions attributed to those linguistic elements, Schiffrin (1987:31) gave an *operational definition* to markers. She defines them as sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk. McCarthy (1998: 178) put forward this definition: *discourse markers are words or phrases which are normally used to mark boundaries in conversation between one topic or bit of business and the next*. Another definition is submitted by Trillo (2006:191) who defines them as *those elements such as you know, I mean, well, oh, m, you see, look, listen, have a specific semantic meaning and contribute to scaffold the pragmatic coherence of interaction*. Besides, O’Keefe et al (2007: 172) defines them as *words and phrases outside the clause structure, that function to link segments of the discourse to one another in ways which reflect choices of monitoring, organisation and management exercised by the speaker*. Moreover, Pridham (2001:30) defines discourse markers or utterance indicators as *signposts indicating the structure of the conversation for the hearer, and helping the audience understand what is being said*.

In addition, the International Encyclopedia of linguistics defines discourse markers as *a set of linguistic items in the cognitive, social, expressive and textual domains* (Bright: 1992).likewise, Biber, Conrad and Leech (2002:449) define them as *inserts which contribute to the interactive character of speech, because they signal relations between speaker, hearer(s) and discourse*. They also assert that *discourse markers signal interactively how the speaker plans to steer the dialogue* (2002:456). Another definition is given by Thornbury (2008:15-33) who says that *discourse markers are used to buy time, to start a turn, or to mark the beginning or end of a segment through the use of grammar and vocabulary*.

Discourse markers are also said to *instruct discourse participants how to consider an upcoming utterance, providing a path toward the integration of different components of language into one coherent discourse* (Louwerse and Mitchell, 2003:202). Fraser (1999:91) provides a comprehensive definition of discourse markers:

A class of lexical expressions drawn primarily from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbs and propositional phrases. With certain exceptions, they signal a relationship between the interpretation of the segment they introduce S2 and the prior segment S1.

Blakemore (2004:221) provides a functional definition to those linguistic elements. She states: *the term discourse marker is generally used to refer to a syntactically heterogeneous class of expressions which are distinguished by their function in discourse and the kind of meaning they encode*. Weydt (2006:206) supplies an additional definition to them. He mentions that *particles are (single) words, which have no dissecting (lexical) deictic, or*

word class meaning, but they do have semantic content which they deploy in connection with other elements of the utterance.

2. Properties of Discourse Markers

The description of discourse markers and the delimitation of what kind of linguistic elements should be subsumed under this term were not definitely precised by authors who were concerned with the study of those items. For instance, Schourup (1985:1) starts his dissertation by declaring *this is a study of several common items in English conversation known variously as discourse particles, interjections, discourse markers and less respectfully hesitations or fillers.*

No details were given on any characteristics of these particles. Schiffrin (1987:328) on her part suggested some specific conditions as criteria for an expression to be used as a marker. According to her, it should be used at the beginning of an utterance and that its omission from a sentence does not alter its meaning. Furthermore, she cites:

- *It has to have a range of prosodic contours, e.g. tonic stress and followed by a pause, phonological reduction;*
- *It has to be able to operate at both local and global levels of discourse, and on different planes of discourse, this means that it either has to have no meaning, a vague meaning, or to be reflexive (of the language of the speaker).(Schiffrin ,1987:328)*

Schiffrin (1987) also addressed several features of discourse markers. Regarding syntactic position and grammaticality, she claims:

Although markers often precede sentences [...]they are independent of sentential structure. Removal of a marker from its sentence initial position, in other word, leaves the sentence structure intact. Furthermore, several markers - you know, I mean, oh, like- can occur quite freely within a sentence at locations which are very difficult to define syntactically.(Schiffrin1987:32 8)

The quotation actually contains two features: syntactic independence and place of occurrence in relation to the sentence structure. In other words, she offered suggestions to delimit the features of such expressions as *the initial position* as the common place of occurrence, and mentioned other characteristics as *phonological reduction and no or vague meaning* (Schiffrin 1987:328).

In sum, when searching the literature for definition of discourse markers we will find that authors who were concerned with the study of those linguistic devices did not delimit precisely their properties. In this context, let us have a look at the individual features of the latter:

2.1- No Single Word Class

In searching the literature concerned with discourse markers, there is a difficulty in placing the latter within a traditional word class. Svartvik (1980:168) mentioned this feature.

2.2- Phonological Features

In her attempt to delimit the properties of discourse markers, Schiffrin (1987:328) looked at their phonological aspect. She suggested that *they have a range of prosodic contours, e.g. tonic stress and followed by a pause, phonological reduction.*

2.3- Syntactic Position

Regarding the position of discourse markers within a discourse, we find that they are supposed to occur at the initial place of a discourse unit. In this respect, Hansen (1997:156) states that discourse markers *prototypically introduce the discourse segment they mark.* Moreover, we can notice the presence of the notion of initiality in Schiffrin's functional definition of those items as well as in the conditions she settled to delimit their features (1987:31-32; 328).

Schourup (1999:233) on his part addressed the idea of syntactic position and mentioned that *although initiality is rarely considered as criteria for discourse markers status, most items considered discourse markers to be possible in initial position, and many occur there predominantly.*

2.4- Syntactic Independence

There have been diverse formulations to describe syntactic independence. Fraser (1988:22) for instance declares that *the absence of the discourse marker does not render a sentence ungrammatical and/or unintelligible.*

The idea that discourse markers occur within a sentence and are not tied to its syntactic structure is supported by Schiffrin who states: *removal of a marker from its sentence initial position [...]leaves the sentence structure intact.* (1987:32).

2.5- Lack of Semantic Content

Considering the literature about discourse markers, we find expressions such as *markers having no meaning in themselves* (Erman, 2001:1339), *no apparent meaning* (Trillo, 2002:774) and *relatively little semantic content* (Vandenberg 2001:82) to denote the lack of semantic content that is associated with those linguistic devices.

2.6- Orality

Most researchers who are interested in linguistic items which could be called discourse markers agree upon the fact that the latter occur in spoken language. According to Schourup (1999:234), most discourse marker studies are based on spoken data, and *most forms claimed to be discourse markers occur primarily in speech.*

Schiffrin (1987) on her part does not list orality as one of the features of discourse markers; however, it is obvious from the functional definition of those items as *contextual coordinates of talk* that she does not have in mind elements which occur exclusively in written language.

Besides, Müller (2005:7) holds that *even though orality may not be a defining feature, it describes a frequent condition of the linguistic items many academics treat as discourse or pragmatic markers*. Other researchers focussed in their description of the properties of discourse markers on the functional aspect of those devices.

2.7- Multifunctionality

Discourse markers are hard to describe functionally. No single approach can tackle the multiple functions of those linguistic element; for instance, they can be indexial, or creators of coherence or even facilitators of discourse interpretation. In this respect, Jucker and Ziv (1998b:4) write:

Whether a specific linguistic element is monofunctional or polyfunctional is not a useful criterion in deciding whether it is a discourse marker or not because of the obvious analytical vicious circularity it entails. Many studies actually set out to argue explicitly for the monofunctionality or polyfunctionality of specific markers, thus nullifying this as a valid criterion.

Likewise, Aijmer (2002:3) talked about multifunctionality as a feature of discourse markers and stated:

Discourse particles are different from ordinary words in the language because of the large number of pragmatic value that they can be associated with. Nevertheless speakers are not troubled by this multifunctionality.

All in all, it can be said that the review of literature brought insight into the properties of discourse markers via the description of their characteristics. In fact, the authors concerned with those devices tackled their properties indirectly by looking at their specific features. The section forthcoming deals with the functions of those linguistic particles.

3. Functions of Discourse Markers

Pragmatic markers are multifunctional and therefore difficult to describe functionally. In this respect, Aijmer (2009: 5) cited some functions of discourse markers. According to him, discourse markers are *indexical*, i.e. they comment on the information by clarifying the speaker's intentions and the hearer's interpretation. In addition,

They mark a transition from one part of the dialogue to another, providing thus, the grease between the propositional parts of the discourse making it possible for the conversationalist to move quickly and smoothly from one topic to another.

Besides, Schiffrin (2001: 58) on her part claims that the use of discourse markers is multifunctional, and that the latter helps the creation of coherence. She states: *It is this multifunctionality on different planes of discourse that helps to integrate the many different simultaneous processes underlying the construction of discourse, and thus helps to create coherence.*

Furthermore, discourse markers facilitate the hearer's task of understanding the speaker's utterances. According to Schiffrin (1987:326), discourse markers provide contextual coordinates for utterances: *they index an utterance to the local contexts in which utterances are produced and in which they are to be interpreted*. They also provide the hearer with processing instructions regarding possible interpretations: *markers select a meaning relation from whatever potential meanings are provided through the content of talk, and display that relation* (1987:318).

In addition, Schiffrin (1987:281) pointed out that discourse markers help speakers to interact with each other and verify the reception of the information appropriately without mismatches and misunderstanding. According to her, discourse markers allow *a speaker to check on how discourse is progressing away from the initial distribution: a speaker can solicit affirmation of information reception as well as evidence of shifts in their interactional alignment*. Schiffrin stated elsewhere that *the presence of discourse markers in conversation helps the mechanics of turn-taking, the organization of speech acts, the structuring of discourse ideas, the interactive structure of participants, and the presentation of information*.

4. Discourse Markers and Coherence

The establishment of a coherent conversation by discourse markers constitutes a central part for those interested in those linguistic items. Indeed, Schiffrin asserted that *one of the central tasks of every day talk is the accomplishment of conversational coherence* (1987:126).

The production of a coherent discourse is *an interactive process which requires speakers to have different types of communicative language in addition to grammatical knowledge of sound, form and meaning* (Schiffrin 2001:54). In fact, discourse markers do not only signal the coherence relations existing in a discourse but also give us a picture of the speaker's competence who uses them. The latter comprises *expressive and social ability* as well as *cognitive and textual competence*. In other words:

[...]an expressive and social ability to use language to display personal and social identities to convey attitudes and perform actions, and to negotiate relationships between self and other. Others include a cognitive ability to represent concepts and ideas through language and a textual ability to organize forms, and convey meanings within units of language longer than a single sentence.

Indeed, establishing connection between linguistic units can be done with the implementation of the so called: *gambits, pragmatic, discourse markers or text forming devices*. These are as noted by Nunan (1993: 21), *words and phrases which enable the writer or speaker to establish relationships across sentence or utterance boundaries, and which help to tie the sentences in a text together*. The function of these elements as mentioned by Bührig and House (2007: 346) *can be characterised as signalling the relation between one utterance and the preceding and/or ensuing discourse by instructing the hearer how he/she is to interpret the utterance containing the discourse marker*.

In this context, research on the nature of the connections between linguistic units created by discourse markers is however often not limited to two adjacent utterances, and a distinction can be made between *local* and *global* coherence as was asserted for instance by Lenk (1998: 27):

Local coherence are those relations between segments in discourse that appear immediately adjacent to each other, whereas global coherence relations are the relations between segments in discourse that appear further apart, with other stretches of discourse in between.

According to Lenk (1998: 49) the use of discourse markers is motivated interactively. In other words, *the speaker wants to guide the hearer's understanding and indicates the connections between discourse segments so that hearer's final interpretation will be as close as possible to her intentions.*

The notion of coherence has been also used by Lenk (1995:341) to express that all parts of the discourse fit together. It has been defined in the Collins Cobuild Dictionary: *if something is coherent, its parts fit together well so that it is clear and easy to understand.*

Furthermore, discourse markers have been studied extensively by various researchers. How different people see verbal interaction as a meaningful whole and how they derive coherence from discourse has been the core of study undertaken by Aijmer and Povolna (2009), Blakemore (2004), Halliday and Hasan (1976) and Schiffrin (1987) among others. For instance, Aijmer and Povolna view coherence in spoken discourse as *the result of interaction and cooperation* (2009:x). Aijmer (2009:5) also states that discourse markers provide *the grease between the propositional parts of the discourse making it possible for the conversationalist to move quickly and smoothly from one topic to another.* Moreover; Blakemore (2004:234) asserted that *coherence is a cognitive notion: it is a notion which people use when interpreting utterances.*

Schiffrin (1987:326) on her part addressed the question of the contribution of discourse markers to coherence as follows: *discourse markers provide contextual coordinates for utterances: they index an utterance to the local context in which utterances are produced and in which they are interpreted.* She argues that discourse markers contribute to the coherence of discourse through relating different components of talk in the sense that the interpretation of any component is dependent on the interpretation of the other. According to Schiffrin (1987:330):

Since coherence is the result of integration among different components of talk, any device which simultaneously locates an utterance within several emerging contexts of discourse automatically has an integrative function. That is, if marker acts like an instruction to consider an upcoming utterance as speaker – focused on prior text within an information state, with a simultaneous instruction to view that utterance within a particular action structure, then the result is a type of integration between those components of talk.

In the same context, Schiffrin maintains that discourse markers contribute to the coherence of the text by establishing coherence relationships between units of talk. Thus, *cohesive devices do not themselves create meaning; they are clues used by speakers and hearers to find the meanings which underlie surface utterances* (1987:09).

Schiffrin's detailed analysis of twelve discourse markers in English: *and, but, or, so, well, then, now, because, oh, well, y'know and I mean* shares some views with Halliday and Hasan's (1976) analysis of the cohesive devices in English. Halliday and Hasan argue that there are linguistic expressions in English such as pronouns, conjunctions and adverbs that have cohesion functions. These expressions indicate links between two parts within a text. Schiffrin agrees with Halliday and Hasan that such expressions indicate that the interpretation of one clause is determined by the information derived from the prior clause.

Conclusion

When communicating ideas, beliefs, emotions and attitudes, both the speaker and the addressee enter a cycle of processes involving transmission and interpretation. When doing this, both of them constantly signal how they want things to be understood or interpreted via the use of a multitude of small words such as you know, I mean, well, see, so, and, but,...etc. The latter, often called discourse markers (DMs), constitute the concern of this survey. Thus, this study looked at the significance of some discourse markers, as linguistic elements which contribute greatly to the flow of conversation, by highlighting their definitions, properties as well as their functions. The article also focussed on the question related to the contribution of discourse markers to coherence.

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