A Review of Discourse Markers from the Functional Perspective[1]

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ABSTRACT

The study of discourse markers has been a hot spot, which led to an increase in articles and monogrphs on discourse markers in recent decades. The present article examines what discourse markers, their characteristics, properties and functions are in English from the Functional Perspective. It describes the uses of English discourse markers in conversations by reriewing a few typical representative works. By summarizing the research foci and approaches about the discourse study in the past decades, the study proves that flexibility and multifunctionality are two important properties of discourse markers.

1.0   Introduction

A discourse is the result of an interaction between two or more participants, who start talking in order to achieve a communicative goal. In the process of communication, speakers often explicitly search for certain indications of mutual agreement and understanding while hearers provide corresponding feedback or backchannels as expressions of understanding and interest. Both the speakers' promptings

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and the hearers' feedbacks are often done through the use of specific discourse markers (henceforth DMS) words like *well, oh, um, yeah, right, let's see* and others. Those markers perform a specific signaling and monitoring function in the cooperative give-and-take of conversation, and signal different nuances of participants' intentions, as well as information on their reactions to the conversation flow (Yang, 2006) Such typical functions served by DMs make them likely to function as significant markers of the common ground in a discourse between speakers and hearers.

There is something mysterious about DMs which engages the curiosity of the analysts. Since the 1970s, the worldwide interest in the study of DMs has undeniably been on the rise and has constantly expanded throughout the 1980s, 1990s till the present. They have been considered from a variety of perspectives and approaches, e.g. as signaling a sequential relationship between utterances (Fraser 1990; Fraser, 1999), as marking discourse coherence (Schiffrin, 2007), and from a relevance-theoretic point of view (Blakemore, 2002; Blass, 1990), to name just a few; they have been analyzed with regard to gender (Holmes, 1986) and age (Kyratzis and Ervin-Tripp, 1999; Matras, 2000) (Müller, 2004). Those studies seem to be hardly comparable because they vary with respect to very many different aspects: the language(s) under consideration, the items taken into account, the terminology used, the functions considered, the problems focused on, and the methodology employed (Fischer, 2006). However, they share a general agreement that DMs play important roles in steering the flow of the dialogue and in conveying various attitudes and expectations of the speaker (Stede, 2000). Or, as Crystal comments, "I tend to think of [pragmatic expressions such as you know] as the oil which helps us perform the complex task of spontaneous speech production and interaction smoothly and efficiently" (1988). It is just the varieties and the agreement that activate my potential interest in the study of DMs.

There lies a subtle relationship between language and cognition. Linguistics is generally viewed as one of the main components of cognitive science. This presumably means that linguistics both is fed by and feeds cognitive science as a broader discipline. There is now a rapidly growing body of research in artificial intelligence and linguistics which suggests that utterance comprehension should be interpreted by the reader utilizing information stored in mental representations created from both the text and general knowledge. So, instead of simply making links between words in a text, a reader is regarded as making inferences about cognitively-constructed entities in cognitively-constructed worlds. This not only reinforces the cognitive linguistic position that "Language does not carry meaning, it guides it" (Fauconnier, 1994), but also informs us a promising perspective---cognitive linguistics perspective for the analysis of DMs.

Discourse marker (henceforth DM) is such a complex phenomenon, involving among other things, textual, pragmatic and cognitive factors that interact with each other. A deep investigation into this phenomenon can contribute not only to our understanding of certain kinds of pragmatic or cognitive processes, but also to our understanding of the relationships between pragmatic interaction and grammar, and consequently to a fuller understanding of the role of DMs in human language communication. More specifically, exploring DMs within a much wider context can reflect how discourse is constructed and maintained---how linguistic patterning above and beyond the sentence is arranged in particular.

In 1953, Randolph Quirk published his lecture "Careless Talk", which drew attention to the importance of *you know, you see*, and *well* in spoken English (Quirk, 1955: 169-180; Svartvik, 1980: 167-177). Hereafter, numerous attempts are taken to characterize the distribution and function of these syntactically detachable items existing in speech. However, it is Robin Lakoff's early article *Questionable ansewers and answerable questions* in the 1970s that can probably be marked as the beginning of the serious research on DMs (Müller, 2004). In this article, Lakoff observed that *why* and *well* to begin answers can be used only under certain conditions (Lakoff, 1973: 453-467). Since the 1970s, the study of DMs has been on the rise and a large number of papers and books have been written on certain markers and the definition of DMs. Accordingly, the research work on DMs has developed greatly in scope and depth in the past decades. This paper will provide a review of the study of discourse markers from the Functional perspective by reviewing a few typical representative works.

2.0   Östman's study on discourse markers

Östman (1981) intends to draw a universal characterisation for DMs in his study about *you know*. He does not accept the term "pragmatic devices" in his study arguing that this is an "uninformative" term because they carry variety of functions. According to Östman, the term "pragmatic devices", includes many things such as variations in tense and aspect; variations in sentence-type and intonation, variations in syntactic constructions and other frozen expressions and some interjections. Östman chooses to use a more specific term "pragmatic particle" (DM) to characterize expressions such as *you know*.

Within his universal perspective, Östman offers some standard to characterize pragmatic particles:
(1) Be short;
(2) Be prosodically subordinated to another word;
(3) Resis clear lexical specification and be propositionally empty;
(4) Tend to occur in some sense cut off (semantically) from the rest of the utterance.

Östman's characterization covers two aspects, "functional and structural". Functionally, it is claimed that pragmatic particles perform the same functions in all languages; and structurally, he argues (i) that in different languages, there is a similarity between their surface-linguistic features and (ii) that one particle or set of particles in one language might have a functionally matching particle or set of particles (but not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence) in another language. According to Östman's suggestion, it is possible that each pragmatic particle has a prototype meaning or function of its own; and this function is independent of and can be extracted from its occurrence.

Östman believes that there are two kinds of "architectures" which pragmatic particles can help with building up a clausal and a textual one. For example, in an utterance, if the pragmatic particle *I guess* is used to indicate the speaker's degree of certainty towards his statement, this particle refers to the "clause-level" architecture whicle at a textual level, it focuses on the relationship of one utterance/text/turn to another.

Östman says potentially all pragmatic particles rely on all of these aspects in discourse. Thus, it is clear that pragmatic particles can display any one or several of these features simultaneously. Östman argues that both structural and functional perspectives are necessary in order to allow for an overall characterisation of pragmatic particles. It is commonly accepted that pragmatic particles occur frequently in spontaneous, face-to-face conversation. Östman observes a close relationship between the occurrence of a pragmatic particle and the "spontaneity" of discourse. He suggests that the existence of one implicates another; the occurrence of pragmatic particles and the same token contributes to an impromptu speech and implies that the discourse is impromptu in nature. For example, in an utterance, when a pragmatic particle is used, the grammatical flow of that utterance is interrupted; as a result, that utterance becomes grammatically fragmented, often producing what Östman terms a grammatically deviant sentence. He suggests that grammatical deviance implies spontaneity. He claims that actual language usage and general human behaviour are closely related. He believes that behind communicative output, there are socio-psychological causes and processes. Östman claims that "planning" and "politeness" are two significant factors of human behaviour which affect the occurrence of pragmatic particles in impromptu speech. Planning is speaker-oriented and directly affects both content and form of the utterance. On the other hand, politeness is interaction-oriented and it affects content and form indirectly. Östman claims that pragmatic particles appear in discourse as a reflection of planning. The speaker can plan his utterances both silently (pauses) and linguistically (markers such as *mm*); however, in order to make sure that the addressee does not mistake this silence for "transition-relevance place", the speaker can hold the floor by using the appropriate pragmatic particle.

The planning-hesitation function of pragmatic particles has to do with their structural aspects in this

two-way universal description. "Planning" stands out as one of the reasons for using a pragmatic particle in a discourse. "Politeness" is another important factor that is conducive to their occurrence. "Planning" focuses on the cognitive aspects of human linguistic behaviour while "politeness" is an interactive and social notion.

In a summary, Östman emphasizes that in general pragmatic particles are not arbitrarily occurring phenomena in language but governed by both linguistic and communicative discourse constraints. Östman suggests that within the universal framework, one has to take into consideration both their linguistic characteristics and their interactional properties and functions to produce an adequate description of pragmatic particles first in English and then in other languages.

3.0   Wierzbicka's study on discourse markers

Wierzbicka (1986:519) calls DMs "little words like *well, why* or *even* which are what distinguishes human languages from the languages of robots". In order to analyse discourse markers, Wierzbicka takes into consideration of the approaches taken by different scholars.

Wierzbicka adds other lexical and grammatical devices such as interjections and swear words, etc to this list. She claims that these small words and expressions "pertain to the very essence of human communication". In her illustration of different approaches to particles by different scholars, Wierzbicka starts off with:

(1) The "lexical equivalent" approach. She thinks that the "lexical equivalent" approach is the simplest way to deal with particles. This approach leads to circularity and allows one-to-one correspondence, which even worsens the situation. To support this view, Wierzbicka quotes Locke, who argues that:

> They (particles) are all marks of some action or intimation of the mind: and therefore to understand them rightly, several views, postures, stands, turns, limitations, and expectations and several other thoughts of the mind, for which we have either none or very different names, are diligently to be studied. (Wierzbicka, 1986:519)

(2) The "functionalist" approach. The "functionalist" approach attempts to characterise the function of a particle in a given context by means of functional statements.

(3) The "conversational or discourse" approach. Conversation analysis deals with the relations between the structure of conversation and linguistic structure, which makes particles come to prominence.

(4) The "abstract explanation" approach. It refers to abstract descriptive labels attached to particles such as *yet* "additive", *rather* "corrective", *anyway* "resumptive", etc.

(5) The "logical" approach. It consists in translating certain particles into the target language.

(6) The "performative" approach. It attempts to analyse particles via performative verbs.

(7) The "scalar" approach. It tries to present a number of different particles in terms of relative positions they hold within a particular semantic "continuum".

(8) The "radical pragmatic" approach. It assigns to particles, in contrast to the scalar approach, semantic explications.

(9) The "paraphrase" approach. It is accepted as a common-sense approach and used on occasion by the representatives of all other approaches. Since paraphrasing is a "conscious and rigorous" method, the particle is simply paraphrased.

(10) The "semantic primitives" approach. It aims at capturing the semantic value of a particle and expressing it by means of a paraphrase.

(11) The "Lockian" approach. In this approach, in order to explain the meaning of a particle, the sentence that contains the particle has to be reconstructed; and this reconstruction is possible through introspection. We must also observe what is going on in our minds, which is the only direct observation.

(12) The "Leibnizian" approach. It is complementary with respect to Locke's. They share the basic assumption. Leibniz proposes a formula that should satisfy all the examples: moreover, he makes it

clear that if necessary, we have to adopt several formulas. He accepts that "polysemy" is a fact of life. He sees no reason why it never occurs in the area of DMs while it occurs frequently in other areas of the lexicon.

(13) The "example of use" approach. In the "example of use" approach, analysts often try to supplement the "synonyms method" by means of examples, which illustrate the actual use of particles in question.

4.0 Miracle's study on discourse markers

From recordings of a series of radio and some authentic conversation records Miracle (1991) investigates marker *hao* (好，*OK*) in Taipai. He employs Deborah Schiffrin's (2007[1987]) discourse coherence as his framework and uses the model of Geis (1991) as discourse parsing which describes speech acts and social actions into three types of meanings: intentional act (I-act), literal act (L-act) and social act (S-act). Based on his findings, Miracle concludes that *hao* (好，*OK*) has a core function of closure and transiton. "In all of these aspects of discourse structure, the social action structure, the turn structure, the idea structure and the information structure *hao* (好，*OK*) acts as a marker of closure and transition" (Miracle, 1991:121).

5.0 Other study of discourse markers

Fox Tree and Schrock (2002) discuss the English DMs *you know* and *I mean* by looking at their meanings and functions within spontaneous talk. Similar to the many researchers' findings in the field, they agree that almost every discourse marker is described as serving a wide range of functions. Therefore, they explain the multifunctionality and their surface similarities coming from each marker's basic meaning.

In her paper, Janet M. Fuller (2003) examines the use of various DMs in English in two speech contexts, interviews and casual conversations. She intends to determine the role of those markers in marking and negotiating speaker roles. Fuller's study shows that in an interaction, the roles of speakers together with the relationship of the interlocutors affect the use and distribution of certain DMs. She proves with examples that certain markers such as *well*, *oh* and *you know* show different patterns of use based on different speech context.

Fung and Carter (2007) suggest that DMs are socially sensitive and pragmatically significant. On the basis of a corpus-driven approach, they create a multi-categorial model, which embraces interpersonal category, referential category, structural category and cognitive category. Their research results indicate that for both native speakers and learners, DMs form a part of the basic fabric of talk in pedagogic discourse and are useful contextual coordinates to structure and organize speech in interpersonal, referential, structural, and cognitive categories. At the interpersonal level, DMs are useful to serve as solidarity building devices to enforce and mark shared knowledge, attitudes, and responses. Referentially, they indicate textual relationships proceeding and following the DM. Structurally, they are used to orientate and organize the discourse in progress and signal links and transitions between topics. Cognitively, they help in denoting the speaker's thinking processes, marking repairs and marking speaker's assessment of the listener's knowledge of the utterances.

6.0 Conclusion

We have seen an explosion of articles and books on DMs representing different approaches and languages from Functional Systemic perspective in the past decades. The distribution and interpretation of DMs in discourse have been studied from different viewpoints with unique frameworks, as a discoursal feature, an encoding device or a decoding mechanism. The focus of most of the past researches has been identifying the categories, properties, meanings, and functions of DMs from certain perspective. Those researches seemingly different, despite the differences, quite a bit of overlap can be found among the relevant findings. That is, most theories of DMs acknowledge that the

flexibility and multifunctionality are two important properties of DMs.

As we have indicated above, although we can claim that DMs share some universal features and often do similar discourse-pragmatic work. More empirical studies of DMs in the world's languages are needed before any generalisations can be made about their nature. Regardless of the typology of a language, there are words and expressions, which signal the interactional strategies of the participants. Agreement, listener involvement, emphasis are all expressed by one linguistic item or another (as well as other means available in the language). Languages are similar in this respect. What may be different, however, is the realization of these functions by different features of the language. While there are perhaps universals of DMs, there are also language-specific features in their form and function.

It has become clear in this study that DMs are an essential part of naturally occurring speech and they signal a certain degree of informality between the participants. Despite their apparent interactional significance, as far as the present researcher's language learning experiences are concerned, DMs are almost the last to be mastered in learning a foreign language. In fact, their frequent and correct use on the part of a language learner is closely related to the improvement in his/her mastery of the language.

It has been indicated throughout that incompetence in the use of this "sloppy speech" might create more important interactional consequences than ignorance of syntactic rules for, being indispensable elements of the predominant medium of our interaction in the social world that is conversation, DMs contribute significantly to its organization and maintenance.

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