A Case Study on the Pragmatic Use of Discourse Markers

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Abstract

Earlier linguists have exerted great efforts into syntactic and semantic analyses of discourse markers (hereafter DMs). While the importance of the pragmatic appropriateness and interpersonal adaptation DMs attached to the discourse are inadequately discussed. In analyzing the use of DMs in selected conversations, this paper attempts to demonstrate that the use of DMs is very important for the pragmatic competence of a speaker.

Key words: Discourse markers; Pragmatic competence; Definition; Characteristics

1. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON DMS

The study of discourse markers constitutes an extensive area of research in itself. It has been characterized as "a growth industry in linguistics" (Fraser, 1999, p.932).

1.1 Definition of DMs

The first difficulty in examining DMs lies in the definition of exactly what they are, and what to call them. Among the terms used we find: coherence markers, discourse markers, lexical markers, discourse operators, discourse connectives, pragmatic connectives, sentence connectives, cue phrases, clue words, discourse signaling devices. Fraser (1999) proposes that DMs are conjunctions, adverbs and prepositional phrases that connect two sentences or clauses together. Schiffrin (1987, 2001), on the other hand, believes that DMs can have both local and global functions (i.e. they may connect propositional meaning or, in conversation, determine the structure of the exchange). Schiffrin also includes items that Fraser would probably not consider as DMs: *Oh, y'know* and *I mean.* For Blakemore (1987, 1992, 2002), who works within the framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995), claims that these markers impose constraints on the implicature the hearers can draw from the discourse: Discourse without connectives is open to more than one type of implicature. Louwerse and Mitchell (2003) consider discourse connectives as cohesive devices that cue coherence relations, marking transition points within a sentence, between sentences, or between turns, both the local and the global levels of conversation and discourse. Their consideration of discourse markers as cohesive devices is in line with Halliday and Hasan's (1976) account of cohesion, by which conjunctions signal cohesiveness by means of additive, adversative, causal and temporal relations.

1.2 Characteristics of DMs

The characteristics of DMs, are mentioned as criteria to identify a DM status. According to Schourup (1999), there are three basic characteristics. The first one is connectivity. DMs are used to signal relationships between discourse units, as Schourup (1999, p.230) qualifies, between the assumptions which underlie utterances. Thus, they may be used to create coherence within a speaker's turn or signal the relationship between one speaker's utterance and another's response (Schiffrin, 1985). The second constitutive feature of DMs is that they are, grammatically speaking, "optional". If a DM is omitted, the relationship it signaled is still available to the hearer, though no longer explicitly cued. The third feature is their non-truth conditionality that they do not change

the truth conditions of the propositions in the utterances they frame (Schourup, 1999, p.232). That is, they do not affect the propositional content of utterances in which they occur. Brinton (1996, pp.33-35) especially notes their sociolinguistic and stylistic features:

(a) They possess a feature of oral rather than written discourse and are associated with informality,

(b) They appear with high frequency,

(c) They are stylistically stigmatized,

(d) They are gender specific and more typical of women's speech.

To sum up, DMs are an open class of syntactically optional, non-truth-conditional connective expressions. They are seen as a separate functional class that consists of words or expressions from many different grammatical categories. Included are mainly conjunctions (e.g. *but, and, because*), adverbials(e.g. *therefore, well, then*), prepositional phrases(e.g. *as a result, after all)*, and utterance fillers(e.g. *well, oh*). Later a summarized classification of the DMs used in this study will be drawn in the table from the pragmatic point of view.

1.3 Two Approaches to DMs

DMs have been investigated within many frameworks reflecting divergent interests, approaches, and goals. Two approaches, which are most often adopted by researchers, will be introduced as below.

1.3.1 The Coherence-Based Approach

The first and most detailed study of DMs is that reported in Schiffrin's work (1987). She is concerned with elements which mark "sequentially-dependent units of discourse". She labels them "discourse markers" and analyzes in detail the expressions *and, because, but, I mean, no, oh, or, so, then, and y'know* as they occur in unstructured interview conversations. Her primary interest is the ways in which DMs function to "add to discourse coherence" (1987, p.326). In Schiffrin's view, DMs contribute to coherence by establishing multiple contextual coordinates simultaneously, thus facilitating the integration of various components of a talk. She maintains that coherence is "constructed through relations between adjacent units in discourse" (1987, p.24), and claims that there are five distinct and separate planes, each with its own type of coherence (1987, pp.24-28): (a) exchange structure, which reflects the mechanics of the conversational interchange and shows the result of the participant turn-taking and how these alternations are related to each other; (b) action structure, which reflects the sequence of speech acts which occur within the discourse; (c) ideational structure, which reflects certain relationships between the ideas found within the discourse, including cohesive relations, topic relations, and functional relations; (d) participation framework, which reflects the ways in which the speakers and hearers can relate to one another as well as orientation toward utterances; it is concerned with shifts in the

speaker's attitude or orientation toward the discourse or toward speaker-hearer relations; (e) information state, which reflects the ongoing organization and management of knowledge and metaknowledge as it evolves over the course of the discourse, that is, it is related to speaker knowledge and meta-knowledge.

1.3.2 The Relevance-Oriented Approach

The second theoretical perspective, which takes a step further to study the cognitive-pragmatic function of DMs, is provided by Blakemore (1987, 1992). Basing herself on Relevance Theory, she assumes that DMs indicate exactly how the relevance of one proposition is dependent on the interpretation of another. She defines DMs as discourse connectives. They are expressions that constrain the interpretation of the utterances. They are imposed to facilitate the hearer's processing by indicating the direction in which relevance is to be sought by virtue of the inferential connections they express (Blakemore, 1987, p.141).

Blakemore believes that DMs should be analyzed as linguistically specified constraints on context and suggests that there are at least four ways in which information conveyed by an utterance can be relevant (1992, pp.138-141):

It may allow the derivation of a contextual implication (e.g., *so, therefore, too, also)*;

It may strengthen an existing assumption, by providing better evidence for it (e.g., *after all, moreover, furthermore)*;

It may contradict existing assumption (e.g., *however; still, nevertheless, but)*;

It may specify the role of the utterance in the discourse (e.g., *anyway, incidentally, by the way, finally*).

A comparison of the coherence-based approach (CBA) and the relevance-oriented approach (ROA) shows the differences between them:

Table 1
Differences Between the Two Approaches to DMs

CBA	ROA
Textual coherence	Optimal relevance
DMs link discourse units	DMs link discourse unit and context
DMs indicate coherence relations	DMs constrain inferential processes
DMs encode conceptual meaning	DMs encode procedural meaning.

The general conclusion is that the relevance-theoretic approach is more plausible because it provides the psychological motivation for the use of DMs between speaker and hearer. This paper inclines to Blakemore's relevance-oriented model. The data analyzed focuses not on the discourse connectivity as the coherence-based approach has proposed but mainly on the hearer's interpretation process.

2. THE PRAGMATIC STUDY OF DISCOURSE MARKERS

Since this paper concentrates on the pragmatic use of DMs, which essentially belong to a pragmatic category of the use of DMs, the classifications that discuss DMs from pragmatic perspectives will be sorted out and then combined into the working classification in this paper.

2.1 Some Foreign and Domestic Pragmatic Studies on DMs

Brinton (1996) mentions that DMs have little or no propositional meaning, most DMs have their superficial literal meaning, but they are pragmatically oriented in communication. They carry interpersonal functions by effecting cooperation, sharing, or intimacy between speakers and hearers, including confirming shared assumptions, checking or expressing understanding, requesting confirmation, expressing deference, or saving face (politeness). And quite a lot of studies on DMs in languages other than English provide evidence for the interpretation of the pragmatic meanings of DMs. Fraser and Malamud-Makowski (1996) contrast English and Spanish contrastive DMs and find that in both languages they signal similar interpretations of the utterances they introduce. Schwenter (1996) examines the Spanish DM *o sea* and argues that the pragmatic meanings of DMs cannot be analyzed without reference to the content meanings of their lexical sources. Archakis (2001) describes and accounts for the functions of four Modern Greek expressions. The study shows that DMs, along with their prosodic correlation and co-occurring lexical items constitute a constellation of important information for understanding how segmentation of spoken discourse is produced and understood. Chen (2002) presents a contrastive pragmatic analysis of DMs in Chinese and English conversations (e.g. *ne* （呢）, *ma* （嘛）and *ba* （吧）in Chinese) following the relevance-oriented approach and demonstrates the influence of such makers on the strength of utterance proposition. Ma (2003), conducts a comparative study of DMs in both English and Chinese in translation. He points out that while showing some differences, DMs in both languages perform a common function in pragmatic making. There are other important studies exploring the pragmatic meanings and functions of DMs in China such as Ran (2000), whose work will be introduced in the following section.

2.2 Pragmatic Classification of DMs

In fact, just like the problematic terminology and definition of DMs mentioned previously, classification of DMs also causes some confusion as different scholars have different criterion. So far there has no general agreement upon how to classify DMs. Anyhow, in this paper, the term DMs refers only to the expressions in spoken discourse which are used pragmatically.

Let us first take a look at a tentative distinction between pragmatic markers and DMs, with the latter subsumed under the former according to Fraser (1999). From a discourse point of view, the crucial difference between the two lies in the fact that DMs are semantic links specifying or highlighting the semantic relationship between discourse segments. In contrast, the pragmatic markers are only used to present the speaker's comment on or attitude towards the proposition expressed by an utterance. There is little agreement as to what elements in a specific language should be considered as DMs. However, Redeker holds that an ideal classification should offer "a broader framework that embraces all connective expressions and is not restricted to an arbitrary selected subset" (1991, p.1167). This classification may cover both the wide range of linguistic approaches that have been employed for different purposes of studies and the multiplicity of functions that these expressions are believed to fulfill.

In 1987, Fraser (1987) suggests that the pragmatic markers are lexical expressions which do not contribute to the propositional content of the sentence but signal different types of messages, which he further breaks into four subtypes: basic markers, commentary markers, parallel markers and discourse markers. Romero (2002) classifies the DMs into two main groups: involvement markers and operative markers. Involvement markers refer to the elements that enhance the positive face of the interlocutors because they try to involve the listener in the thinking process of the speech, for instance, *you know, you see, well, I mean*. Operative markers are the elements that are more concerned with the operative process of the interaction, which, as in the case of the attention getting elements like *look, listen*, are intended to make the conversation flow without any disruption.

Ran (1999, 2000, 2003), working under the framework of relevance-theory has conducted a wide range of researches on DMs from pragmatic perspective. He bases his study on the data taken from Chinese conversations. In his study, he presents an account of how DMs pragmatically function as guidelines to help the hearer achieve a pragmatically-oriented understanding of the utterance in discourse, and ultimately how the DMs constrain the interpretation by cognitively helping the hearer make less processing effort for achieving contextual effects. He makes no strict distinction between discourse markers and pragmatic markers but combines them as DMs. There are in total eight types of DMs in his classification and they are: topic-related markers, evidential markers, referential markers, reformulation markers, manner of speaking markers, contrastive markers self-assessment markers and locutionary performatives. And since this classification mainly bases on Chinese DMs, so it would be appropriate to adopt this classification in the comparative studies between Chinese and English.

However, this classification is not an overall picture of all the DMs. It fails to cover two types of DMs in both Chinese and English and they are utterance-fillers and tag questions, the types of which are also insufficiently studied. The first added type is utterance fillers such as *uh, well, oh, you know* proposed by Clark and Fox (1992). In Philip's (1995) classification of DMs, he listed two kinds of fillers: the one with explicit meaning such as *you know, yes, no*, etc. and the one without explicit meaning such as *well, oh, yeah,* etc.. These utterance-fillers are classified as distinctive DMs with pragmatic implications in that they reflect the speaker's intentional effort while executing interactional communication. The other added type is tag questions such as *shall we, will you*, *would you* etc. From pragmatic perspective, Brinton (1996, p.38) claims tag questions are DMs in that they are used to structure conversation by helping both speaker and hearer in their quest for mutual understanding.

To sum up, the concluded ten types of DMs are listed in Table 2:

Table 2
A Sample of Chinese and English DMs Under Ten Classifications

Classification	Chinese DMs	English DMs
Topic-related markers	话又说回来,我想讲的是,谈到这	Anyway, talking about this
Evidential markers	众所周知, 报纸上说	It is said that, as far as they know, people say
Referential markers	概括起来说, 由此可见	I mean, accordingly
Reformulation markers	换句话说, 这样说吧	To put it this way
Manner of speaking markers	恕我直言, 简而言之, 严格地讲	Actually, basically, normally, supposedly
Contrastive markers	不过, 但是	however, despite
Self-assessment markers	依我之见, 幸运的是	I think, fortunately
Locutionary performatives	我告诉你, 你说实话	I tell you
Utterance-fillers	啊, 嘛, 呢	Uh, well, oh, you know
Tag questions	是不是, 可以不, 好不好	Shall we? are you?

So far, the definition, characteristics, two different theoretical bases: Coherence-based and relevance theory and the classification of DMs have been briefly introduced here. In this paper, the writer mainly discusses DMs from the pragmatic perspective. With the pragmatic classification of DMs in Table 2, the DMs in the data will be identified and listed under this classification for further analysis.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

Considering the reliability and validity of data, they should be carefully selected. Both qualitative and quantitative methods will be adopted in analyzing process and testing the significance of the data.

3.1 Data Collection

As we are talking about the pragmatic use of DMs with a case study, the texts for this study are not supposed to be randomly chosen. To guarantee the validity of the data, five parameters below must be taken into consideration:

Firstly, the subjects selected are English speakers, being more cultural-centered, they are American people.

Secondly, the corpora chosen are in spoken rather than in written discourses, because studies have reported a higher frequency of DMs in speech than in written discourses. Louwerse and Mitchell (2003) have found 10 times as many DMs in spoken as in written discourses, and twice as many in informal as in formal discourses. Since dialogue is a dynamic and emergent type of discourse, in which participants do not have access to an organized structure or outline, so the use of DMs is more frequent.

Thirdly, considering the different speech styles such as interview, debate and everyday conversations, this paper adopts TV sitcoms. This indicates that the relative formality of the speech event is casual and informal in nature.

Fourthly, the social relationship between interlocutors targeted is narrowed down mainly among friends. Pragmatically speaking, this close relationship guarantees that the speakers have more assumptions about the hearers' current state of knowledge, so the speakers are better equipped to provide advice on how to process their words.

Fifthly, it is the factor of gender. Briton (1996) notes that the use of DMs is more typical of women's speech. In this regard, the number of women in the stories is about the same amount with the number of men in both episodes in this paper.

After taking all the parameters listed above into consideration, the texts for the study are selected from the very popular TV sitcom *Friends*. This sitcom is so

popular for the reason that it is the portrait of people's everyday life. There are enormous uses of DMs in the dialogues among the interlocutors. Forty episodes in total are collected from the TV sitcom. Approximately, there are 210,000 words in total.

3.2 Data Processing

In order to obtain the statistics, several statistical procedures need to be applied to. The basic statistic techniques are word counting and frequency counting.

In line with qualitative research method, tentative efforts are made to illustrate how and how often those DMs are used in English conversations. A study of the frequency, positional distribution and functional features of the DMs is under analysis. Given to the research purpose, a series of tasks to be fulfilled and accomplished step by step are listed as below.

Step 1: Identify and calculate the DMs. The sorted-out DMs will be put under a classification of DMs given in Table 2.

Step 2: Analyze in tables the DMs in total number and top five DMs with their frequency and distributional properties. The frequency of the five DMs will be manifested by its percentage.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 DMs in Selected Episodes of *Friends*

In what follows, the DMs in selected episodes of *Friends* will firstly be labeled under the pragmatic classification of DMs along with word counting throughout the data in Table 3:

Table 3
DMs identified in *Friends*

Ten categories	Discourse markers	Total *N*
Topic-related markers	By the way (14), anyway (11), speaking of (3)	28
Referential markers	I mean (312), it seems (3), all things considered (2), for instance (2), given that (1)	320
Manner of speaking markers	Actually (26), do you think (23), basically (16), if you want (8), eventually (2), normally (5), relatively (3), technically (4), if you know what I mean (3), presumably (2), if you don't mind (2)	94
Evidential markers	Let's say (6), they think (3), as a friend (2), one might wonder (2), they say (2)	15
Reformulation markers		0
Contrastive markers		0
Self-assessment markers	I think (174), I guess (39), hopefully (6), I assume (5), as far as I'm concerned (4), personally (2), of course (2), interestingly enough (1), un\fortunately (4), I know (9), I hope (8), I figured (8), I have to say (3)	265
locutionary performatives	Look (18)	18
Utterance-fillers	You know (447), well (121), you see (22), uh (21), ah (17), oh (12)	640
Tag questions	Y'know? (84), ok? (36), right? (30), are you? aren't you? won't you? shall we? are we? didn't she? (24), please? (10)	184

Note. ( ): Bracket with number in it stands for the number of DMs.

From Table 3, we come to a rough picture of the use of DMs under different categories. The number is unevenly distributed. We can observe that of the ten categories the most frequently used DMs are utterance-fillers. Particularly the use of *you know*, with a total amount of 447, which ranks the most significant DMs used in English speech. To follow up, they are referential markers, tag questions and manner of speaking markers. These results apparently will facilitate the later comparative analysis.

4.2 Frequency and Distribution of DMs

After the identification of DMs in English episodes, we have a rough picture of how and how often DMs are used in conversations in the data. It is time to figure out the total and most frequently used DMs. The analysis of the data is manifested in the tables below.

Table 4
Total Number of DMs Used in Selected Episodes

	English episodes
Total number of DMs	1,564
Total number of words	209,505
%	0.74

From Table 4, it shows there are 1,564 DMs used in English episodes.

Table 5
Percentage of DMs Under Ten Categories

Ten categories	No.	Percentage
Topic-related markers	28	1.7%
Referential markers	320	20.5%
Manner of speaking markers	84	5.3%
Evidential markers	15	0.9%
Reformulation markers	0	0
Contrastive markers	0	0
Self-assessment markers	265	16.9%
Locutionary performatives	18	1.1%
Utterance-fillers	640	40.9%
Tag questions	184	11.7%

Note. No: The number of DMs in *Friends*

DMs used in the episodes and how they distribute under the ten categories of DMs are illustrated in the table above. This table exhibits clearly the frequent use of utterance-fillers (40.9%), referential markers (20.5%) and self-assessment markers (16.9%) of all episodes. After this overview, we can move on to a more detailed look at the top five DMs under the ten categories of DMs in Table 6:

Table 6
Top five DMs Used in the Data

DMs	*N*	%	Utterance-position
You know	447	28.6	-initial, -final
I mean	312	19.9	-initial
I think	174	11.1	-initial
Well	121	7.7	free
Y' know?	84	5.3	-final

In this pragmatic study of DMs, this paper gives only a small account of the positional feature of DMs, narrowed down on the top-five DMs. It is in this table we see distinctive positional feature of English DMs.

As is observed from Table 6, the top five DMs are unevenly distributed in selected episodes. To check whether such an outcome is statistically significant, or it is merely a feature restricted to this study, a Chi-square test is introduced. The Chi-square test provides the research with a significant level. If the significance level is less than 0.01 (*p*), it means that the uneven distribution of the DMs is a common feature in discourse; if not, the feature is testified to only limit within the data studied. This test is to be carried out with the well-known statistic software SPSS. The results are in the following Table 7, set up by the software.

Table 7
A Chi-Square Test of Distribution of Top Five DMs in *Friends*

	Observed *N*	Expected *N*	Residual
84	84	227.6	-143.6
121	121	227.6	-106.6
174	174	227.6	-53.6
312	312	227.6	84.4
447	447	227.6	219.4
Total	1138		

Test statistics

	English mitigators
Chi-square(a)	395.946
df	4
Asymp. Sig.	.000

Note. Significant level is 0.01, distribution of the data is normal.

The Chi-square test is operated on the well-known software SPSS, and the grouping variable is DMs. From the test statistics, the significance level in the chart is below the *p* (0.01). The Asymp Sig. is 0.000<0.01(*p*). This gives us confidence to say that the uneven distribution of the use of DMs is a common feature in those episodes.

4.3 Major Findings

This paper, through the analysis of the use of DMs in everyday communication of American people, endeavors to clarify, the use of DMs is very important for the pragmatic competence of a speaker, the ultimate purpose of which is to make the utterances acceptable and negotiable for the interlocutors.

The current study is descriptive and analytic in nature. In the light of the analytic results, the findings of the paper are summarized as follows:

Concluded from Table 5, the use of utterance-fillers and self-assessment markers are significant in the episodes. Through examining the top five DMs in Table 6, both *you know*, *well* are all utterance-fillers. This repetitive use of utterance-fillers proves their significant role in interactive communication. Usually the use of utterance-fillers is overlooked and this may result in an incomplete and insufficient acquisition of these important DMs and leads to communication failure. The conscious and active acquisition of these utterance-fillers mainly used in English speakers' conversations can promote the pragmatic level of English learners.

Another successive result is that in the span of numeral statistics in Table 5, a large number of referential markers (20.5%) are adopted. It infers that people are liable to avoid vagueness and maintain logic with referential markers in English conversations,

Thirdly, from the position perspective in Table 6, most of the DMs are presented at the beginning of the sentence

ahead of a subject and in the final position, but only a few appear in the middle of the sentence.

To sum up, the author is convinced of the need to investigate the development of the use of DMs in conversations. Therefore, this paper intends to arouse the learner's interest and awareness of the importance of these 'small words' that exist substantially in interpersonal communication and can affect our second language learning.

CONCLUSION

The factors contributed to successful communication are complicated, that is why the author chooses this topic to examine how successful communication is realized using DMs. DMs are frequently used in oral discourse and so they can facilitate the smoothness of the communication and therefore achieve successful communication.

As second language learners, it is important to first recognize the important use of DMs in the utterances, and understand their intentions and functions in manipulating interactional distances.

All these calls for the need to bring the teaching of DMs to language instruction for Chinese learners of English. We want to attend to the accuracy of the language while constructing speeches. However, most of Chinese learners are in an unauthentic language environment. The language competence is largely acquired through formal instruction only. The awareness of the use of DMs could absolutely add to promote a better and thorough understanding of not only syntactical features of this group but more importantly, to acquire them with their pragmatic features. In this process, the students will be guided with awareness of the actual use of DMs in achieving successful communication. Thus, first it is necessary to include DMs in our input. Teachers would encourage learners to watch more popular 'soap-operas' on TV and pay special attention to the conversations where these DMs occur. The ultimate purpose is to guide the Chinese learners into using DMs voluntarily and spontaneous in conversation.

The present study has made some efforts into the study of DMs with the help of the corpora. However, the findings obtained here are quite restricted by the chosen corpora. For the overall perspective of the use of DMs, a much larger data is desirable.

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