On Coherence and the Metalinguistic Function of Conversational Routines

Anca CEHAN

Coherence is often described using Halliday and Hasan's framework (1976), which deals with its grammatical and lexical means. These two types of cohesive markers can be supplimented by lexicalised or semi-lexicalised phrases (Keller 1981, Stubbs 1983). Here are a few such examples taken from Romanian and English:

Romanian examples	***English examples***
ideea este că	*the point is*
dacă mă gândesc bine	*come to think of it*
da(ti)-mi voie să spun ceva	*let me tell you something*
în ceea ce mă priveşte	*as far as I'm concerned*
după părerea mea	*the way I look at it*
în opinia mea, etc.	*in my opinion*, etc.

Such phrases introduce what the speaker is about to say, but they can also have some other functions in discourse organization: they not only organize discourse content but also provide a comment on the message. Such functions enable us to consider them metadiscursive elements or, simply, discourse markers.

The issues that we need to address in relation to these discourse markers is whether they are similar to other markers such as anaphoric nouns, adjectives, demonstratives, etc. Are they necessary in order to understand a text? What is their function? What are their relationships with other linguistic features of discourse? The literature on discourse analysis mentions that coherence is generated not only by special text markers but that it is a text feature expected by the participants in the discourse. The participants have natural expectations concerning discourse coherence, assume that any discourse must be coherent, and interpret it in the light of that assumption. Consequently, they rely on both underlying semantic relations and the formal realizations of the construction of the discourse.

The speaker may use two types of cohesive devices to mark the progress of the text: s/he can mention explicitly what s/he is going to say or how s/he will structure various parts of the text using metalinguistic statements of the kind "I'll first say A, then B, and I will conclude by saying C". Such a device is characteristic of certain text types, such as public presentations and scientific texts. Sometimes called 'a preface', such a device is typically found before a conversational move (e.g., when someone asks for permission to add something or wants to bring the discussion back to a preceding topic) or at the beginning of a larger text written in formal or scientific style. A preface can also be found in formal types of spoken discourse, such as administration meetings

„Philologica Jassyensia", An III, Nr. 1, 2007, p. 117-122

BDD-A815 © 2007 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:06 UTC)

of considerable length which are highly structured. In addition, specific prefaces characterize certain types of texts such as stories and anecdotes (Schiffrin 1987), and jokes (Stubbs 1983). Examples of such prefaces are:

Romanian prefaces	***English prefaces***
permiteți-mi să (incep prin a spune/ a întreba…)	*let me (begin by saying/asking…)*
dați-mi voie să formulez o întrebare	*may I ask you this question…*
înainte de toate aş vrea să spun că…	*I have this to say first of all…*
aş vrea să adaug că…	*may I add that…*
aş dori să revenim la…	*let me bring you back to…*
pe asta o ştii (știți)…?	*have you heard the one about…?*

Another type of cohesive devices are some small words such as *well, right, OK,* etc, whose role in building coherence and organizing discourse is not negligible, either. All discourse markers have contextual properties which account for their contribution to cohesiveness: they can refer backwards and forwards in the discourse context, they are oriented to the speaker and/or the listener, and their function is metalinguistic rather than referential.

***Discourse marker*: a term difficult to define**

The notion of 'discourse marker' is difficult to define, as the term has been used in different ways. It can describe 'small words' – particles or expressions that characterize spoken discourse (Stenstrőm 1994), such *as* the English *well, right, you know* (or such Romanian words as: *aha*, *ăă, aşa, bine, bun, deci, ei bine, îhî, păi*, etc.) Conjunctions such as *and, but* and *or* (*şi, dar, sau*) have also been included in the category of discourse markers by van Dijk (1977) and Schiffrin (1987). There is, however, little agreement concerning the common characteristics of these markers or as to what items belong in this category. The methods which could be used to prove membership are also unclear. The question still remains whether criteria such as co-occurrence restrictions or semantic and/or functional ones are appropriate for discourse. Consequently, Schiffrin groups together disparate elements such as *oh, well, but, so,* and *you know.*

However, we could identify and discuss a subgroup of markers which signal boundaries in discourse; these have been called 'illocutionary adverbials' (Mittwoch 1977), and share the grammatical function of adverbials. Phrases like *to bring you back to…* or *to come back to that subject… (să ne întoarcem la…, revenind la subiectul…)* have a function that can be described only in terms of the broader discourse context, as it signals the speaker's intention of returning to a previous topic. *As I was saying* or *as I say* (*aşa cum spuneam*) perform the role of focusing the interlocutor's attention on the upcoming message. Such phrases perform similar functions to those of small words like *well* or *right* (*ei bine, bun, deci, şi atunci*). The difference between the small word discourse markers and these adverbial markers is that the latter preserve some of their literal meaning, and it is still possible to understand what they mean on the basis of their constituents.

As not all of the adverbial discourse markers have a completely fixed form, many of them displaying a semi-fixed or variable characteristics, it is difficult to compile a complete list. They range from completely fixed phrases such as *in any case,*

BDD-A815 © 2007 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:06 UTC)

by the way, after all (*în orice caz, fiindcă veni vorba, à propos, la urma urmelor*) to semi-fixed phrases or stems. They belong in the same set of discourse markers as the one-word particles, but they can be considered conversational routines.

Discourse markers: functional classes

Discourse markers can be grouped into two functional classes: micro-markers and macro-markers (Chaudron and Richards 1986) or local and global markers (Schiffrin 1987), depending on whether they mark the relationship between utterances or elements of the macro-structure. A few examples from English and Romanian follow:

Micro/local markers		***Macro/global markers***	
so far as I/one could tell	*aş/s-ar putea spune că…*	*in other words, to put it another way*	*altfel spus*
as X has mentioned	*aşa cum am (ați, s-a,* etc.*) mai spus*	*again (as) I say, there again*	*din nou, continuând ideea…*
as X has suggested	*aşa cum s-a (am, ați,* etc.*) sugerat*	*in other words*	*cu alte cuvinte*
		now you come to mention it	*dacă veni vorba*
as I believe	*aşa cum cred că…*	*to follow up that*	*în continuare*
needless to say	*ca să nu mai vorbesc/spun/mentionez/ adaug că*	*to begin (with), firstly, in the first place*	*în primul rând*
come to think	*când te gindesti că…*	*secondly*	*în al doilea (rând)*
		once again	*încă o dată, repet*
believe it or not	*cred (credeți, credem,* etc.*) sau nu*	*going back to this*	*întorcându-mă la…*
of course	*cu siguranță*	*in a word*	*într-un cuvânt*
as far as I (you, we) can remember	*daca imi (iți, ne,* etc.*) amintesc bine*	*first of all*	*mai intâi (de toate)*
if I understand correctly	*dacă înțeleg (înțelegi,* etc.*) bine*	*in short*	*pe scurt*
come to that /if it comes to that	*dacă veni vorba despre*	*to come back to*	*revenind la…*
if you ask me	*dacă mă întrebați*		
if I might say so	*dacă mă pot exprima astfel*		
if I may say so	*dacă pot spune aşa/acest lucru*		
when you think	*dacă te gândeşti*		
since you mentioned	*dacă tot veni vorba*		
whether I like it or not	*dacă vă (îmi, ne,* etc.*) place sau nu*		
as a matter of fact in (actual) fact	*de fapt*		
as the case may be	*după cum vine cazul*		
as far as memory goes	*după câte îmi amintesc*		

BDD-A815 © 2007 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:06 UTC)

as far as I can gather/understand	*după câte îmi dau seama*
as far as I could tell	*după câte se pare*
as far as I know	*după câte ştiu/ după stiinţa mea*
as you know	*după cum ştiţi*
as I (you, etc.*) said before*	*după cum spuneam (spuneai, etc.)*
the point is	*ideea este că*
since you mentioned it	*fiindcă veni vorba*
far more important	*mult mai important/ esenţial*
as far as I am (you are, etc.*) concerned*	*în ceea ce (mă, te,* etc.*) priveşte*
basically	*în esenţă*
generally (speaking)	*în general*
in any case	*în orice caz*
strictly between us	*între noi fie vorba*
after all	*la urma urmei*
far more important	*mult mai important*
let us remember	*să ne amintim că,* etc.

All these discourse markers can be recognized by their metalinguistic function.

The metalinguistic function of discourse markers

Although not all metalinguistic phrases are discourse markers, there is a close connection between discourse markers and the metalinguistic function. Discourse markers do not have a referential function; they have either a metalinguistic, an expressive one, or both. The distinction between the referential function and the other functions goes back to Jakobson (1960), who distinguishes seven functions: expressive/ emotive, directive/conative/persuasive, poetic, contact, metalinguistic, referential, contextual/situational.

Certain words, phrases and clauses can have a metalinguistic function, among which verbs like *to tell, to formulate, to ask, to add*, etc. and nouns such as *point, idea, question, problem, fact,* etc. A clause like *"The point is that…"* can function anaphorically, as a cohesive device, which refers to preceding discourse, or it can be a transition element for subsequent discourse. The metalinguistic function is also illustrated by phrases used to check the communication channel, as this is in itself an aspect of communication (Stubbs 1983). In a broad sense, the term 'metalinguistic function' can be used to characterize speech acts in which the speaker adds an idea or an argument, summarizes what has been already said, recapitulates, clarifies or reformulates a preceding utterance. The problem is how to delimit the set of 'metalinguisic elements' and how to analyze their structuring and deictic characteristics as they do not create or build a structure by themselves. They are inserted in a discourse structure where an utterance refers to a preceding one and takes over from the antecedent the appurtenance to the text, signalling to the hearer where to look for interpretation. They help the hearer to make inferences about what the speaker intends

BDD-A815 © 2007 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:06 UTC)

to communicate and how to interpret the message. The message can be clarified by reference to the context in which it is produced. The definition of the context includes not only the physical environment but also the co-text and the speaker's and interlocutor's presuppositions, which differ with their background knowledge, beliefs and attitudes.

To understand why an interlocutor gives a certain interpretation to a message, we need to consider Grice's maxim of relevance (1975). This maxim is counterbalanced by that of brevity. The interplay of these two maxims explains why the interpretation of a message can be difficult, and why discourse markers can play an important role. They act as signposts, indicating how the speaker understands the preceding contributions and they prepare their interlocutor for the following utterances. They are used by the speaker in order to make the interlocutor's understanding easier and to maintain the interlocutor's interest. Words and phrases like *actually, as I was saying, as far as I am concerned, I mean to say that… (de fapt, după cum spuneam, în ceea ce mă priveşte, vreau să spun că…)* help the hearer in interpreting the message. They are used as a result of the way in which previous utterances are interpreted as having certain contextual effects.

To conclude, the main function of discourse markers is to integrate utterances in the flow of conversation and to help the interlocutor to interpret them in the given context. They accompany the breaks in discourse cohesion, which may be caused by speaker or topic changes. They accompany addings, misunderstandings, digressions, false starts, self-corrections, etc.

References

Brown, G. and G. Yule 1983. *Discourse analysis*. Cambridge: CUP.

Chaudron, C. and J. Richards 1986. "The effect of discourse markers on the comprehension of lectures". "Applied Linguistics" 7: 113-27.

Cole, P. and J. Morgan (eds) 1975. *Syntax and semantics 3: Speech acts*, New York: Academic Press.

Coulmas, F. (ed.) *Conversational routine. Explorations in standardized communication situations and pre-patterned speech*. The Hague: Mouton.

Grice H.P. 1975. "Logic and conversation". In Cole and Morgan (eds.), 41-58.

Halliday, M.A.K. and R. Hasan. 1976. *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.

Keller, E., 1981, "Gambits. Conversational Strategy Signals". In Coulmas (ed.) 1981

Jakobson, R. 1960. "Closing statement: Linguistics and Poetics". In Sebeok, T. (ed.) *Style in Language*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 350-77.

Mittwoch, A. 1977. "How to refer to one's words: Speech act modifying adverbials and the performative analysis", "Journal of Linguistics", 13: 177-89.

Schiffrin D. 1987. *Discourse markers*. Cambridge: CUP.

Stenstrőm, A.-B. 1994. *An Introduction to spoken discourse*. London and New York: Longman.

Stubbs, M. 1983. *Discourse analysis. The sociolinguistic analysis of natural language*. Oxford: Blackwell.

van Dijk, T.A.1977. *Text and context. Explorations in the semantics and pragmatics of discourse*. London: Longman.

van Dijk, T.A.1981. *Studies in the pragmatics of discourse*. The Hague: Mouton.

BDD-A815 © 2007 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:06 UTC)

Sur la *cohérence* et le rôle métalinguistique des routines conversationnelles

Cet article analyse le rôle métalinguistique des structures figées et semi-figées et la manière dont elles contribuent à la cohérence du texte. Leur fonction métalinguistique paraît être celle d'intégrer les énoncés dans le flux de la conversation et d'aider l'interlocuteur à interpréter le message dans un contexte donné.

"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University, Iaşi
Romania

BDD-A815 © 2007 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:06 UTC)