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DISCOURSE MARKERS AS FUNCTIONAL ELEMENTS

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to justify the necessity of adopting a functional approach to the study of discourse markers but also to revisit the theories connected to functionalism in linguistics and to define what a functional approach to discourse markers would actually imply. In the first part of the paper, the focus will be placed on functionalism and on those theories which are most relevant for a functional analysis of discourse markers. The second part of the paper will be centered on discourse markers, their discursive and pragmatic functions as well as on their connection to functional linguistics.*

Keywords: *pragmatic meaning, grounding, functionalism, discursive goal.*

1. Introduction

The functional analysis of discourse markers is perhaps the only pertinent manner in which discourse markers can be studied given the fact that some of them are even devoid of semantic meaning (Schiffrin, 1987; Ariel 223; Trillo 193). But in spite of this semantic void, they have powerful pragmatic and functional discursive roles as this paper will hopefully show. In this paper, the functions of discourse markers will be singled out and theoretical concepts related to the functional analysis of discourse markers will be reviewed. The main assumptions that lead the researcher to the conclusion that language is primarily a functional phenomenon have been put forth by systemic linguistics who suggested four main theoretical claims meant to sustain the functional character of language:

1. language use is functional
2. its function is to make meanings
3. these meanings are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are exchanged
4. the process of using language is a *semiotic* process, a process of making meaning by choosing. (Eggins 3)

The description of language as a semiotic process is correct since the production of meaning is not always semantically determined. Especially in talk-in-interaction in general and in the case of discourse markers in particular, it is pragmatic meaning that we are dealing with. Pragmatic meaning especially in relation to discourse markers is defined by Deborah Schiffrin (2006) as the recurrent use of a certain marker to convey communicative meaning. The latter, Schiffrin adds, is dependant upon the relational functions that markers develop in the respective text or context of use.

As Simon Dik (83) comments the functional view presupposes that language is an instrument used by individuals in order to attain certain goals which can be

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traced back to the complex pattern of social interactions. In the functional view, speakers use linguistic expressions in such a way as to communicate messages that would manage to change the hearers mentally or emotionally, thus modifying their knowledge, convictions or feelings.

Mathesius (qtd. in Daneš 11), apart from the communicative function of natural speech, advocates the existence of an expressive function. The latter presupposes the manifestation of emotions and is permanently intermixed with the communicative function. In scientific discourse, however, the communicative character prevails. But Mathesius terms these functions 'external' to language which could prove that they are mostly connected to the manner in which language functions in society, to its pragmatic effects, and not to an internal, grammatical description of the language. As opposed to formalists who concentrate on truth conditions for the logical pattern of sentences without taking into consideration the meaning that the utterance was created for, functionalists focus on meaning from the perspective of the manner in which language is used (Nuyts 69; Lock 1).

This broad perspective on the functional, social-conscious and goal-oriented nature of speech is essential for the study of discourse markers. The functional nature of markers is proven by the predominantly procedural character of these items which are rarely endowed with semantic meaning, the socially-dependent character of discourse markers is obvious in cases in which marker use differs according to the social context as well as the social status that the participants in the speech event have and the goal-oriented function of markers is illustrated by their polyfunctionality which is an indication of the pragmatic shift of meaning that one discourse marker could undergo in order to be able to fulfill as many discursive goals as possible.

The expressive function that Mathesius (idem.) associated to the functional view of language is inextricably linked to the use of discourse markers. The latter are sometimes used by speakers to express emotions (*oh*, *gosh*), hesitations (*well, uhm, so*), surprise, contrasting ideas (*and*, *but, instead*), seeking agreement (*you know, like, I mean*), etc. We might say that this function dominates the use of some discourse markers and permeates the use of others.

2. Discourse Markers and the Prague School of Linguistics

Discourse markers or *continuatives* in Halliday's terms, are elements that appear in initial position and which can be part of the Textual Theme. But there are authors from the Prague School of linguistics who consider that the elements that we now term *discourse markers* are situated outside the Theme. One of these authors is Nosek (158, 163) who speaks about *sentence constituents* or *functives,* textual elements that connect sentences and 'partial utterances' into a coherent text. They are constitutive elements that are semantically void.

According to Nosek (idem.), the sentence constituents function as a code which is recurrent (or stereotypical, as this paper terms it) and this is why their repeated structure is known to native speakers. As Nosek (163) puts it:

'*Their repeated structure is unconsciously mastered by a native speaker. It creates connections between the sentences, resulting in a text that is tied up by this important syntactic element. Although the constituents of the sentence operate functionally only within one sentence, they can reappear and be repeated beyond the sentence limits in different groupings and be identified by speakers in sentence series , and thus*

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become a valuable grammatical and textual orientation for the speaker.'

It is quite clear from Nosek's description of the manner in which sentence constituents function that the identification of these items' functional roles within discourse is mainly based on practice and on their stereotyped or recurrent uses. But I believe, at least as far as English is concerned, that even though native speakers are prompt in recognizing the function that such an element fulfils, it is not only them that could master and recognize the possible discursive functions of such items. For instance, in the process of language learning, these patterns of discourse marker use are inevitably transmitted to L2 learners by means of conversation, written texts, movies, etc as they are part and parcel of the linguistic/interactional competence that non-native speakers aim to acquire. The acquisition of language by L2 learners is similar to children's language learning. Bates and MacWhinney (243), for instance, speak about the understanding and use of connectors with small children. They state that it is the pragmatic function that precedes and guides the acquisition of language. In other words, speakers learn words and their discursive functions in order to be able to express whatever pragmatic meaning they need in order to make their contribution efficient. In fact, speakers learn the linguistic means that help them attain their desired ends.

A substantial help in the understanding of the functions of sentence constituents or discourse markers is provided by what Halliday (1994) called Rheme. The latter, being the expansion of the Theme, provides the confirmation of the discursive direction that the initially placed discourse marker indicates.

3. The Functional Character of Discourse Markers

The class of discourse markers is formed of elements which, as Ariel (224) points out, either have a semantic meaning and their interpretation in context resonates with their form (*and, I mean*) or of items which are semantically empty (*well, oh*). Moreover, even items that pertain to the former category, can acquire functions towards which their inner semantic meaning is not conducive. For instance, there are cases in which the function of discourse marker *and* is that of discourse continuative (discursive device used by speakers in claiming the floor), filler, hedge, etc.

Given the fact that their semantic dimension is no longer reliable, discourse markers can only be analyzed from a functional perspective. As Gisela Redeker (339) rightfully claims, markers are not to be seen as lexical items but as 'contextually situated uses of expressions' whose functions are only identifiable in relation to the communicative purpose of the interactional situation in which they are used (Fischer 427,429).

Acknowledging the lack of semantic homogeneity of the class, Fischer (432) attempts a categorization of discourse markers from a cognitive perspective. Fischer claims that the mental processes that discourse markers signal can help the researcher identify at least the subclasses that they might form: interjection, hesitation marker, segmentation marker. Fischer provides several examples of the mental processes associated to various markers and provides 'translations' for the discursive functions identified.

For instance, interjections *oh, ah* and *oops* indicate the sudden recognition of information and contain an 'I now'-component and hesitation markers, *uh* and *um*, signal a current thinking process 'I am

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thinking'. Segmentation markers, *well, yes, okay*, are divided into two groups: markers whose meanings involve the communication partner (*yes* – 'I think that you and I think the same') and those which display the result of a cognitive process (*well* – 'after I have thought about all I know about it I say this').

This functional-cognitive approach that Fischer uses in the analysis of the functional spectrum of discourse markers leads her analysis to a logical, pertinent conclusion that markers have a particular rather than an arbitrary range of functions and even though there is disagreement concerning some of the new or possible functions that markers can have in context, there is however a commonly attributed function for each item. Any other contextual functions of discourse markers arise from the communicative tasks that speakers have and it is the same communicational task that determines the use of items form other word classes to fulfil discourse marking functions.

Ariel (242,243) draws attention to the same non-arbitrariness of discourse markers' functions that Kerstin Fischer referred to. In what the relationship between Form and Function is concerned, Ariel (idem) states that there are two equally possible relationships: first there can be *one function – many forms* or, since each of the forms is used for different functions we can also have *one form – many functions.*

But these two possible relationships do not indicate grammatical arbitrariness (a term which is apparently very popular in both formal and functional linguistics) in the sense of randomness. The feature that characterizes them is unpredictability because forms may lend themselves to several innovative meanings. In this sense, functionalists, according to Ariel, claim that the discourse markers' *universality of form* (as opposed to *uniformity of form*) is motivated by function.

Romero Trillo (193) explains the plurality of meanings and functions that discourse markers can acquire in context by the concept of 'discourse grammaticalization' Through the process of discourse grammaticalization, discourse markers have included in their semantic/ grammatical meaning (if any) a pragmatic dimension having interactional purposes. Trillo (idem) explains that a marker that has undergone the process of grammaticalization becomes a homonym which constrains the relevance of any new function that emerges in a synchronic system. In other words, it acts as censor for any discursive function that is realized in that particular synchronic context.

This view would imply the existence of a core function that a discourse marker might have. Since we cannot always speak of semantic meaning in association with discourse markers, a particular pragmatic meaning might also be said to represent the core meaning of a marker. This would be the case with discourse marking *be like* whose core pragmatic meaning is that of indirect speech marker and the other discursive functions that might also be realized in discourse are story preface, quotation marker, approximation marker, modesty marker (avoiding expert opinion) etc.

3.1.Grounding

The concept of *grounding* that Clark and Schaefer (in Taboada 145) put forth is another indication that discourse markers have a functional role in discourse. Clark and Schaefer (idem) start from the assumption that discourse markers guide the setting of common ground (*grounding*) that takes place when speakers interact. The *common ground* that the speakers have at the beginning of their verbal interaction is constituted of the mutual knowledge and

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the set of background assumptions that speakers have. Shared knowledge increases as the conversation unfolds and other common points are added from the communicated information.

The receipt of new information and its integration into the domain of shared knowledge is confirmed by the hearer and thus more information is added to the above mentioned common ground. Hence, Clark and Schaefer (ibid.) define *grounding* as the collaborative process whereby the hearer confirms the understanding and the receipt of information through signals which are sought for by the speaker. In the case of lack of understanding, the information is rephrased, repeated or other comprehension verifications are performed.

According to the two authors, *grounding* is considerably more prominent in task-oriented dialogues than in casual conversation because the former presupposes that the comprehension of information is a *sine qua non* condition for the passage to further stages in the exchange.

Maria Teresa Taboada (145) provides a very interesting example of how *grounding* functions in the case of adjacency pairs. Thus, the author states that an unexpected part in an adjacency pair will usually be preceded by a discourse marker whose role is that of signaling the fact that the sentence is not in accordance with the common ground that speakers had with respect to the structure of an adjacency pair.

Among the discourse markers that can be used in *grounding* mention should be made of such markers as *you know, you see* and *I mean*. According to Ioana Murar (135), the discourse marking *you know* and *you see* mark the state of knowledge that exists between speakers or, in the light of the discussion above, the evaluation of common ground. Murar (idem) further claims that both markers show the orientation of the speakers towards the hearer's needs and, at the same time, signal the fact that the speaker verifies the level of shared knowledge. *I mean* is connected to the same idea of common ground negotiation in the sense that, as Murar (ibid.) states, this marker is used to 'soften statements and to correct understandings' (135).

4. Functions of Discourse Markers

The multifunctional, polysemous character of discourse markers has almost become a given in the study of discourse markers as it is probably the most agreed upon feature of these items. This section discusses the functions that discourse markers fulfill in discourse. In Andrew Kehler's (241) view, a felicitous discourse has to meet the very important criterion of being coherent and it is the contribution to discourse coherence that represents the primary function that discourse markers fulfil.

- According to Diane Blakemore (232) *discourse markers are defined in terms of 'their function in establishing connectivity in discourse'*. Connectivity could be understood either as coherence or cohesion which mark text connections at different levels. Following Blakemore's (234) definition, coherence is a cognitive notion which represents the hearer's integration of the received information/ propositions into the larger representation of a text. Cohesion, however, implies the structural connection between different units of a text as well as between different texts (Fraser, in Blakemore 232) and, as Schiffrin 13) states, cohesion depends upon a process of semantic inferencing that departs from words and sentences and reaches text and discourse level.

According to many authors, discourse markers can function both as cohesive

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devices and, given the fact that they have a pragmatic meaning, they can also ensure text and discourse coherence (Blakemore, 2006; Schiffrin, 1987, 2006; Müller, 2005; Murar, 2008; Taboada, 2004; Trillo, 2009,; Cheshire, 2007, etc.). For instance, Deborah Schiffrin (326) defines the contribution of discourse markers to coherence as follows: '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' (326).

Several authors have attempted an analysis of the functions of discourse markers and have discovered a set of main functions to which, of course, other context-dependent ones could be added. Here is the list of functions that have been mentioned in the literature (Schiffrin, 1987, 2006; Blakemore, 2006; Müller, 2005; Murar, 2008; Downing, 2006; Eggins, 2004). The following list goes from the general functions to the particular ones.

• *Discourse markers contribute to or highlight cohesion and coherence relations in discourse***.** As opposed to other cohesive devices such as conjunctions, discourse markers involve speaker choice. Conjunctions have an inherent meaning that determines their almost automatic selection especially by native speakers. However, with a discourse marker that is known to be able to fulfill a number of functions, it becomes a matter of how the speaker chooses to construct meaning. In other words, it is a matter of selecting the most appropriate sign that could accommodate the desired pragmatic meaning.

• *Discourse markers act as constraints on relevance*. Here we can perhaps refer to two types of relevance, discursive and contextual, connected to Halliday's (qtd. in Eggins 9) three variables of *field* (the social activity in which the speakers are involved or the subject matter of the text), *tenor* (the social distance (power and solidarity) between the participants in the speech event and which determines the degree of familiarity in the wording) and *mode* (is concerned with the medium (spoken, written) by means of which the text is expressed as well as with the amount of feedback) of discourse. Generally (except for deviant cases involving chronic social inadaptability of speakers, mental illness, etc.) discourse markers are used in accordance with the three variables mentioned above thus constraining the discursive and contextual relevance of the discourse they bracket.

• *Markers guide the interpretation process of the hearer towards a desired meaning.* This function involves the speaker's indicating the hearer, by means of discourse markers, the correct inferential path that has to be taken in view of a correct understanding of the message.

• *They have an interactive or expressive function* which covers such aspects as politeness, face-saving or face-threatening uses of markers, turn-taking related uses of DMs, signaling emotional involvement of speakers in their contribution.

• *Discourse markers have a deictic or indexical function* which indicates the discourse markers' ability to show the relationship that is to be established by the hearer between prior and ensuing discourse.

• *They are functional elements of discourse management* in the sense that they are used in initiating discourse (e.g. *now, now then, so, indeed*), marking a boundary or a shift, serve as a filler (e.g. *em, well, like*), used as delaying tactic and markers can also be used in holding or claiming the floor (e.g. *and, coz – because*), focusing attention (e.g. *look*), diverting (e.g. *well*), reformulating (e.g. *in other words, I mean, actually*) and resuming (e.g. *to sum up*).

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• *Discourse markers are used to express shared knowledge or common ground between speakers***.** By means of this function which has been termed as *grounding*, discourse markers are used to display other-attentiveness. The latter can be achieved by the permanent verification of the listener's understanding of information (e.g. *you see, got it*) or by showing awareness that the communicated proposition represents common knowledge (e.g. *you know, indeed*).

• *Discourse markers are used in responses to signal the hearer's attention and involvement*, a function which can be fulfilled by markers such as *okay, right, I see, all right*, etc. Minimal responses such as *mhm* can also be included in this category.

This list of functions is an ever-expanding one as well as the list of functions that a certain marker can acquire in discourse because the negotiation of meaning in talk-in-interaction is a never-ending process. Perhaps, the only aspects that remain perpetually valid are the three variables of discourse (*field, tenor* and *mode* – maybe with changed/adapted names in future research) according to which discourse is structured.

5. Conclusion

The first part dealt with the most important issues connected to functionalism and the performance of a functional analysis on language in general and on discourse markers in particular. Among the conclusion that this paper has drawn, probably the most important one is that the use of language is highly contextualized and it does not necessarily involve the creation of a semantic meaning but of a pragmatic one. This is why the definition of language as a semiotic system seems pertinent.

In a functional use of language, discourse markers constitute important functional elements that contribute to the coherence and cohesion of discourse, have an important role in the interpersonal and expressive use of language and show conformity to the institutionalized uses of language in its social and cultural context. The lack of semantic meaning that characterizes some discourse markers is compensated by the manifest presence of pragmatic meaning, an ever-changing meaning in full accordance with the dynamics of language use.

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