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THE INFLUENCE OF AGE AND GENDER ON THE SELECTION OF DISCOURSE MARKERS IN CASUAL CONVERSATIONS

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Abstract: *This paper is a pragmatic, functional and discursive analysis of actual conversations. The aim of this research is to discover the extent to which the contributions of the participants in casual verbal interactions are influenced by variables such as age or gender. Casual conversation is the interactional pattern in which discourse markers could acquire the most innovative pragmatic meanings and functions due to the lack of discursive constraints that characterize this type of verbal exchange. Among the elements that generate such discursive individuality are the variables of age and gender. The latter variables could either contribute to the confirmation of the core pragmatic meanings and functions of discourse markers or they could trigger the speaker's distancing from these central functional descriptions.*

Keywords: *discourse markers, variables, pragmatic functions, gender, age.*

1. Introduction

Talk in interaction is the instance in which the use of discourse markers is expected to generate variants of use which, under the direct influence of variables such as age and gender, could differ to a great extent from the core pragmatic meaning (if any) of the respective markers.

This paper will look at the manner in which talk in interaction generates variants of marker use by making a comparison between the core pragmatic meaning of markers, their coordinates of use described by the literature and their speaker-specific variants in real interactional contexts.

2. Research Methodology

In order to make the research activity more comfortable for the respondents, they have been given a voice recorder and asked to record conversations whenever and for whatever period of time they saw fit. Out of seven hours of conversation, the most relevant fragments have been extracted in order to demonstrate some definite theoretical and practical aspects.

All the verbal exchanges given as examples in this paper are rendered in the language in which they were uttered (English or Romanian) in order not to alter the semantic and pragmatic meaning of the markers in their original context but the

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analyzed items in Romanian are to be either translated into English (whenever possible) or their functional equivalent in English will be given.

3. Age and Marker Preference

When listening to the conversations recorded for this research one could notice that the young participants in the speech event have a marked preference for markers such as *you know* (*ştii*), *and* (*şi*), *well (păi*) and *I mean*. As it has been shown, even in formal contexts young people recur to the above mentioned markers as a familiar refuge which could simplify their communication.

If these markers could also occur in institutional settings, in casual conversations they are extensively used especially to express *shared knowledge and common ground between speakers,* as *functional elements in discourse management*, with an *interactive or expressive function*, and to *highlight cohesion and coherence relationships in discourse*. (Schiffrin 1987, 2006; Blakemore 2006; Müller 2005; Murar 2008; Pons Borderia 2006; Downing 2006; Eggins 2004; Cruse 2006).

In the following conversation between and Alexandru and Roman, two young men from the Republic of Moldova, the use of discourse marking *you know* (*ştii*) is used in its function of expressing *shared knowledge and common ground between speakers.*

1.Alexandru:**Da păi** eu am văzut că ăştia cu balul ăsta **ştii** (inaudible) (.) **asta** (.) **asta::**
2. eu când – mie-mi spun băieţii chiar că acolo poţi să nici nu vii să nici nu
3. faci. Poţi să te înţelegi **ştii**? Ca să vii şi să te-nţelegi cu oamenii **ştii** şi să
4. să deie pă blatu
5.Roman: [locu]
6.Alexandru: [locu]–ntâi da.
7.Alexandru: **Şi** eu am zis că **băi** nu nu ce-i aşa ceva **ştii**?

In this conversation, Alexandru and Roman are talking about the first year students' ball where Alexandru takes part in a contest. His reaction to what he found out about some abnormal practices is very emotional and this is obvious especially from his first turn.

In line 1, the turn is begun by the discourse marker *da* (*yes*) which is used as a discourse management marker. *Da* marks Alexandru's claim for the floor as well as the abrupt start of a new topic of the first year students' ball which was in no way connected to a preceding topic of amusing situations generated by the difference between name anniversaries in their Old Style Orthodox religion and the New Style Orthodox one which is practised in Romania. In the same line, Alexandru hedges his topic introduction with the discourse marking *well (păi*) but, as it can be noticed, he experiences difficulties in constructing his turn.

Alexandru has two failed attempts to start his turn and achieve a coherent discourse unit and it is only the third attempt (*mie-mi spun …*) that proves to be successful. The struggle for a coherent discourse unit is marked by the discourse marking *asta* (*that is*) - uttered twice, preceded and followed by pauses and with a prolonged vowel at its second uttering - which signals the speaker's hunt for time to construct the turn and, at the same time, to build discursive coherence.

The discourse marker *you know ştii* (*you know)* is used in lines 1, 3 and 7 as an expression of common ground between speakers but also in its interactive or expressive function. The discourse markers fulfilling the latter function, signal the speaker's emotional involvement in the uttered discourse unit.

In line 7, in order to reclaim the floor after Roman's brief intervention, Alexandru starts his turn with the discourse marking *and* (*şi*), a very popular turn-initiation marker among younger and older speakers alike.

3.1.Discursive Innovation in Youth Talk

A very interesting marker which is very popular especially among young people is *băi* (a functional equivalent of *look* as an attention marker). An instance of its use can be seen in line 7 where Alexandru renders a fragment of direct speech bracketed by *băi*. In the discursive context, this marker is used to express disagreement but also to draw the attention of the interlocutor on the ensuing justification of the disagreement.

The following discourse unit illustrates another very interesting use of *băi*:

1.Roman: eu n-am – n-am prins aşa ceva, nu. La noi – noi la Construcții o fost, n-o fost
2. chiar pă blatu. **Băi,** cine-o avut mai mulți susținători o – de exemplu băieți de
3. anu-ntâi care s-o îns – o venit şi cu băieți mai mari s-o salutat, o băut o bere
4. **una-alta**, s-o distrat, o mai spus o gluma **una-alta**.

In this turn, *băi* is used as an attention marker as it warns the listeners that something important in about to be said but it also functions as an elaboration marker. Roman expands on his statement that the contest held at his faculty's ball was not 'staged' and begins an explanatory narrative on the matter. It is obvious that, as any discourse marker, *băi* can fulfil various functions according to the discursive context in which it is used. It is very important, in such cases where there is almost no core pragmatic meaning of the marker, to look at the surrounding discourse to see what the respective marker signals.

In line 4 we encounter another expression having a discourse marking function in the context: *una-alta* (functional equivalent of *and so on* or *this and that*) displays the orientation of the speaker towards discursive relevance and that's the reason why the enumeration does not continue. This marker performs the above mentioned function of expressing *shared knowledge and common ground between speakers* and has a prominent *interactive or expressive function*. Apart from this marker, there several others that can be used by young people to display group membership by giving the impression that commonly shared ideas and practices are being discussed (e.g. *like, y'know, cos'*, etc)

4. Bracketing in Mixed Talk

It has been argued that women's speech style is facilitative, cooperative, egalitarian and personal while men's discourse is assertive and authoritative, men's conversation style being a form of display, of competition and hierarchy, of getting control of the interaction (Sheldon 227).

In point of discourse markers, the differences between female and male speech are triggered only by the discursive outcome that they pursue in conversation. Otherwise, we cannot safely claim that there are female-specific or male-specific discourse markers but only, perhaps, a different manner of using them in conversation, according to their personal discursive agenda.

The conversations in this chapter are informal ones and the participants in the conversational events are George and Cristina, a married couple in their mid-thirties, both having a high level of academic instruction; in their conversations, a great number of discourse marking words and expressions can be encountered.

4.1. Arguments

In arguments the importance of discourse markers increases because, on the one hand, there is a constant competition for the floor among the participants in the speech event as every one of them wants to have the chance to expose their ideas in the most convincing manner in such a way as to 'outsmart' the other participants. On the other hand, given the fact that we are dealing with a conflictual type of exchange, the presence of discourse markers is necessary for hedging and mitigation.

The following conversation between Cristina and her husband, George can serve as an example. In this fragment they are discussing the solutions they have given the fact that no television or internet provider covers their neighbourhood. George suggests that they improvise an antenna:

1.Cristina: Ei pe naiba, nu prinzi orice,
[vezi-ți de treaba]
2.George: [exagerez]
3.Cristina: **Păi** exagerezi, **tocmai**, **că uite** tu ai =
4.George: = **dar** las' că nu televizorul este =
5.Cristina: =**Ba** eu cred că este, **tocmai**, **că** la țară oamenii nu:: ştiu cât stau
6. ăştia care sunt şi la şefi, **ce ştiu eu**, şi au la serviciu RDS **şi-aşa**,
7. nu ştiu dacă neapărat acasă folosesc internetul.

This conversation shows that there is an open competition both for the floor and for the defense of expressed ideas. However, the avoidance of face-threatening acts is obvious especially in line 3 when Cristina confirms George's appreciation of his previous statements as an exaggeration by using *păi* (*well*) as a hedging device, for the same appreciation which, coming from her and so becoming an other-appreciation, could have been face-threatening.

In order to mark the opposition between George's statements which she considers to be false and her own appreciation of the matter, Cristina uses the discourse marking *tocmai* (*that's the idea*), to introduce, with the help of *că* (*cos*) used in its discourse marking function of presenting an idea which is 'disguised' in the causal continuation of previous discourse, an exemplifying situation or an argument in favour of her discursive goal.

Although she also hedges her argument with the listener-oriented *uite* (*look*), the listener does not agree to allow her to finish the turn. On the contrary, when he discovers a false *transition-relevance* place between two words, he interrupts by marking his opposing stance with the discourse marking *dar* (*but*).

Cristina uses the same method of the false *transition relevance place* to interrupt George's statement. She start her own turn with the discourse marker *ba* (a functional equivalent of *on the contrary*) signalling the fact that her ensuing discourse will be in disagreement with George's. She again makes use of the same combination of discourse marking *tocmai* (*that's the idea*) and *că* (*cos*) used as *cause* that embeds reasons (Schiffrin, 1987, 193), signalling the fact that her future argument is the correct one.

The two discourse markers that Cristina uses in line 6 have an interesting function in the context. *Ce ştiu eu* (*what do I know*) and *şi-aşa* (*and so forth*) are discourse management markers that help the speaker construct her turn by gaining more time for the construction of ensuing discourse.

As we have seen from the discussion of arguments, the variable of gender does not contribute in a significant way to the manner in which discourse markers are used. All hedging devices, fillers, mitigating devices and meta-talk that we analyzed in this section cannot be said to be gender-specific in any way.

Consequently, we could say that in this case, it is not gender that decides the choice of discourse markers but the conversational goal that speakers have.

5. Bracketing in Same-Sex Talk

The coordinates of women and men talk enounced in the previous chapter, state that there are significant differences between the two conversational styles. In broad lines, women are characterized as having a more collaborative and supportive conversational style whereas men theoretically have a competitive and dominance-oriented conversational style.

5.1. Male Talk

In all the conversations that we recorded, we noticed that male talk is dominated by interruptions. If a narrative is begun by a speaker, it is very difficult for him to actually finish it without numerous interruptions which are not aimed at clarifying something of vital importance for ensuing discourse. The following conversation illustrates the fact that interruptions are more of a practice that necessity. The dialogue is between the two young students Alexandru and Roman:

1. Alexandru: **Da. d-apăi** dimineaţă -
2.Roman: - am fost la::
3.Alexandru: dimineaţă mă trezesc şi mă uit (.) la noi este una, o fată care doarme şi-o cheama Gabi
4. Şi mă [uit
5.Roman: [la voi în cameră?
6.Alexandru: da
7.Roman: cu prietenu
8.Alexandru: da da. Da n-are . N-are prieten da' doarme la noi.
9.Roman: (laughing) Normal.
10.Alexandru: **şi:**:
11.Roman: n-are pat da?

Alexandru is trying to narrate an event but is constantly interrupted by Roman who is interested in getting control of the interaction. It is worth mentioning that only Alexandru's turns are bracketed by discourse markers. Roman's interruptions, although discursively aggressive, are not mitigated by such markers as *but, and* or *well* which normally indicate that another speaker wants to uptake. The interruptions are abrupt and irrelevant, indicating the existence of a competition for the floor. In other words, Alexandru's mitigated and politely introduced turns in lines 1 and 9, for instance, stand no chance when confronted with Roman's aggressive discourse style.

Generally, the existence of discourse markers used by all participants in a conversation event, indicate the fact that both speakers and listeners pay attention to the conversational needs of the others and they constantly try to preserve the interlocutor's 'face'. In this fragment of conversation, Roman shows no such orientation especially because, after his turn in line 11, he begins a conversation with a girl who is also present but who, up to that point, had been listening to Alexandru's narrative.

Apart from gender, age and in-group status are other categories that influence the two men's conversational styles. Alexandru is a freshman and Roman is an MA student whom Alexandru, as well as everyone else in the group, respects and looks up to. Roman is aware of his 'senior' status in the group and acts accordingly both discursively and otherwise. If this section has demonstrated that male talk is competitive and aggressive, in the following section we will look at the manner in which women react in casual conversation.

5.2. Women Talk

Deborah Tannen (Tannen 42) states that feminine language is oriented towards connection and intimacy whereas masculine speech style is mainly focused of status and independence. We might add that, especially in casual conversations, women are interested in sharing personal experience or bonding and this might be the reason why their conversational style is very supportive and collaborative. In other words, since they orient discourse towards personal, intimate subjects, their discursive style couldn't be competitive or aggressive in normal situations.

Female speakers involved in conversational events treat their interlocutors with the same attention and consideration so as to be granted the same discursive privileges when they come to share their ideas. Female speakers encourage their conversational partners to continue their turns and provide active listenership when they do not hold the floor. Back-channelling is, thus, very frequently encountered in all-women conversations.

The protagonists of the following dialogue are two female students, Mădălina (23 years old) and Anda (21). The two young women are room-mates in a students' hostel and, in order to improve their spoken English, they allocate a few minutes a day to practise conversations in this language. The topics are not decided beforehand and, that is why their conversations in English resemble interviews in which they try to find out more about each other.

1.Anda: **So**, your last Christmas.
2.Mădă: My last Christmas was a lonely Christmas. I was at home with nobody around.
3.Anda: **[I can't believe it]**
4.Mădă: [My mother is is] gone far away in Spain.
5.Anda: **OK**.
6.Mădă: She couldn't come home, my brother was with his friends out in town and I was all alone crying.

The discourse marker *so* in line 1 is a topic insertion marker which is used to show that the discussion of the previous topic had ended. What is interesting is that Anda introduces the topic of 'the last Christmas' in a very animated tone. But when Mădă starts talking about a sad personal experience connected to this event, the discursive support that she receives from Anda is substantial and the tone of the conversation is immediately adapted to the new mode. The discursive support that Anda offers is in the form of back-channelling in line 3 and the discourse marking *OK* in line 5. The back-channelling sentence in line 3 (*I can't believe it*) displays empathy with the speaker in relation to the narrated event and the discourse marker *OK* signals both the reception of previous information as well as an invitation for Mădă to continue her turn which she does in line 6.

Apart from back-channelling, another type of discursive support provided in all-women talk is in the form of questions and comments formulated by listeners that require the speaker's answers and clarifications. It is a form of 'offering' the floor to the interlocutor as in the following example:

1.Mădă: What about the guy who entered your room yesterday. Was he a colleague
2. of yours?
3.Anda: Ye:s he: is my my my buddy, **I can say that** he's my buddy and I hired
4. him there.
5.Mădă: U::: **so** you're a very important person there.
6.Anda: **Yeah Yeah**. My boss is my boyfriend now (laughing)
7.Mădă: **OH!**
8.Anda: [**Ye:a:h**]

9.Mădă: [I didn't] know that.
10.Anda: **Yeah**. **Well** he's not quite a boss but he's a very important person there.
11.Mădă: **So** you work in teams there you have -
12.Anda: Yes, of course we are all young and it's it's very nice
13.Mădă: Interesting.
14.Anda: **Yeah.**

The idea that women use a great number of discourse markers in conversation is also illustrated by this dialogue. The attention paid to correct wording is marked in line 3 by the meta-talk sentence *I can say that* which shows the fact that Anda has eliminated all the doubts concerning the accuracy of the description of her friend as '*my buddy*' and, with this expression, she confirms her previous characterization.

The concluding marker *so* in line 5 is Mădă's way of showing that she has taken the right inferential path and understood the implications of Anda's remark '*I hired him there*' as an indication of the fact that she has the power not to actually hire but to have someone hired in that firm. But Anda cannot respond with a face-threatening act directed towards herself by giving a negative response to this comment. Instead, she uses the false confirmation marker *yeah yeah* (line 6) and continues with the real reason of her influence.

The discourse marking *Oh*, uttered by Mădă in line 7 not only shows her surprise at this new information but also invites Anda to continue her turn and to offer further details. Anda doesn't make the correct inference and uses another marker *yeah* as a confirmation of her previous statement.

But when Mădă realizes that the correct inferential path has not been taken she insists by making another observation in which her lack of information on the subject is emphasized. This time Anda provides some clarifications about the status of her partner in the firm but her reluctance to do so is signaled by two discourse markers *yeah* and *well* which indicate the fact that she found it awkward to specify that she had provided an exaggerated description of her partner.

But the attention that women pay to her conversation partners is noticeable in line 11: Mădă perceives the fact that Anda is uncomfortable with the subject and makes a topic shift bracketed by the discourse marker *so*. Mădă gives her friend the chance to make some positive remarks about herself. Anda's face-saving comments in line 12 immediately receive a positive feedback from Mădă, a feedback which is acknowledged by the discourse marker *yeah* (line 14).

The two verbal exchanges that have been given as examples for women talk have confirmed the coordinates that the literature has established for this type of talk. Therefore, the variable of gender does influence the manner in which discourse is managed in women talk.

Consequently, women's conversational style can be described as facilitative, collaborative, personal, considerate, supportive as well as oriented towards face-saving acts and bonding. Women use a considerably greater number of discourse markers than men but they also have a preference for indirectness, inferences and implicatures.

6. Conclusion

The assumption from which this paper departed was that variables such as gender or age influence the main pragmatic functions that the literature has ascribed to markers. The translation of the Romanian discourse markers (especially those which have not been 'translated' by the provision of a functional equivalent) has led to a very interesting discovery: the functions of the Romanian discourse markers are in most cases identical to those of their English

equivalents. The variable of gender was proven to have the greatest influence of the use of discourse markers.

Among the most important findings we can mention the fact that women use far more discourse markers than men and they offer more discursive support in conversation. As listeners, women encourage their conversational partners to continue their turns and do not recur to abrupt interruptions as male speakers tend to do.

In conclusion, it is the core pragmatic meaning of discourse markers that establish a general pattern of use but it is the variables such as age or gender that display the individuality of the speakers.

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Transcription conventions

[ ] overlapping talk
:: immediately prior syllable is prolonged
(.) pause
= lack of discernible gap between the turns of different speakers
bold author's emphasis