# PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN THE USE OF DISCOURSE MARKING *"AND"* BY ROMANIAN EFL LEARNERS

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*Abstract: The acquisition of pragmatic competence is an essential result in the study of English as a foreign language and the grasp of the accurate functions and roles of English discourse markers in conversation is a challenge for most Romanian EFL learners. In order to discover the mechanism of acquiring pragmatic competence, several discursive roles and functions of the English discourse marker "and" used by Romanian students in classroom interactions are analyzed from pragmatic and functional perspectives. The aim of this comparative analysis is to see whether Romanian learners of English are aware of the functional roles that native English speakers ascribe to "and" and whether they use the marker accordingly. What is also very interesting to discover is whether there are similarities or overlaps between the functions of the English discourse marking "and" and its Romanian equivalent "şi".*

*Keywords: discourse markers, pragmatic competence, conversation, discursive functions, EFL*

## 1. Introduction

This article is based on the research conducted in my doctoral thesis which dealt with the study of discourse markers in conversation. In this article, the results obtained in the above mentioned research were applied to classroom interactions and the goal was to see the manner in which Romanian EFL learners use English discourse markers. In all the recorded conversations in English (for research methodology and data collection see 2.) it appears that the use of English discourse markers by Romanian students shows a clear understanding of their pragmatic meaning and discourse management roles. It is very interesting to see that even though the respondents are not native speakers of English therefore sometimes the level of English, especially in point of grammatical accuracy, is not very elevated, the discourse markers are correctly used in both formal and informal conversational contexts.

The explanation for this interesting phenomenon is provided by Cots (in Müller 2005: 14) who claims that when a learner becomes successful in a foreign language it means that his/her linguistic behaviour has become very similar to that of the native speakers. In other words, it is not only grammatical structures and semantics that are actually taken into account and acquired by learners but also the pragmatic and functional patterns that words have in conversation/discourse.

Jaworski (in Müller 2005) reunites the acquisition of pragmatic and functional patterns of language use under the umbrella term *pragmatic competence* which is defined as a type of communication competence that presupposes the speakers' ability to communicate appropriately in specific contexts of use.

Müller (Müller 2005: 18) mentions sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence that should be taken into account when analyzing the particular uses of discourse markers. She explains these three terms in the following:



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> *"Sociolinguistic knowledge is necessary for the negotiation of the relationship between speaker and hearer during a conversation, which can be done through, for example, the use of well or you know; a range of discourse markers are said to create coherence in discourse, the knowledge of which is part of discourse competence; and strategic competence manifests itself when non-native speakers use discourse markers to express or to introduce the expression of lexical difficulties (finding the appropriate intended word or phrase) or to appeal to the hearer's understanding." (Müller 2005: 18)*

The fact that Romanian speakers of English as a foreign language have manifested sociolinguistic and discourse competence in the use of discourse makers is probably due to the fact that the discursive roles and functions of Romanian markers are somewhat similar to those of the English discourse particles. For instance, the two discourse markers *well* and *you know* that Müller provides as examples in the quotation given above are functionally similar (including from the perspective of sociolinguistic implications) to the Romanian discourse markers *păi*, functional equivalent of *well*, and *ştii*, functional and semantic equivalent of *you know.*

The use of discourse markers as evidence of strategic competence could be said to pertain to native speakers as well and not only to foreign language learners. Discourse markers, with foreign language learners, could indeed signal the speaker's struggle to construct a grammatically and lexically accurate utterance but we might also think that native speakers could display strategic competence when using several discourse markers consecutively to gain more time to construct a turn or to hold the floor for a longer period of time. These are not instances of discourse competence since they are connected more to the subjective will of the participants and much less to the objective discursive requirements of the verbal exchange.

## 2. Research Methodology

For this research, Romanian students who are learners of English as a foreign language were recorded during speaking practice exercises within their English classes. The students who participate in the conversations are Foreign Affairs, Accounting and Finance students, teenagers between 19 and 22 years old, their level of competence in English being Upper-Intermediate to Advanced. Throughout the article I will use the actual names of the respondents Gabi, Diana, Alexandru, Victor, Iuliana and Anca, as I have been granted permission to do so.

The participants were given either a conversation topic or a list of questions; the discussions were always moderated by the teacher. Mention should be made of the fact that, in order to increase the reliability of the recorded material, the respondents were not aware of the items that were to be analyzed in their conversations and the only explanation provided was that the interest would be 'the manner in which people interact in conversation'.

In the following sections, several discursive roles and functions of the English discourse marker *and* used by Romanian speakers will be analyzed from pragmatic and functional perspectives in order to see whether the foreign language learners are aware of the functional



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roles that native speakers ascribe to the above mentioned discourse marker and whether they use the marker accordingly.
Another aim of this research is to discover any functional similarities or overlaps that might exist between the English discourse marker and its Romanian equivalent *şi*.

## 3. Discursive Roles and Functions

The analysis of discourse markers in conversation requires a pragmatic-functional perspective. Hence, I suggest a different classification of the discursive attributions that discourse markers have in conversation by advocating the pragmatic-functional categories of *discursive roles* and *discursive functions.*

In the category of *discursive functions* I place all the specific functions of discourse markers that are situated at the interactional level, namely prefacing answers, the expression of opinions or evaluations, repairs, politeness, mitigation, face-saving or face-threatening acts, hesitation (for the definition of these terms see Sacks, 1992; Blakemore, 2006; Mey, 2009.), etc. *Discursive roles* are all the discourse organization procedures that are situated at the textual level and which concern the speaker's technical construction of the discourse unit. The *discursive roles* that markers can fulfill are: turn-claiming marker, interruption prefacing marker or it could signal speaker self-selection when no interruption is performed, turn-construction markers, and so forth.

Therefore, my claim is that the *discursive functions* are a set of *specific and recurrent functions* of a particular discourse marker, a set of functions that constitutes the discourse marker's functional individuality whereas the discursive roles of markers are *non-specific and circumstantial textual attributions* that any discourse marker would be able to fulfill.
This pattern of analysis will be used in the study of the discursive attributions that *and* could have in formal conversations between non-native speakers of English namely Romanian EFL learners.

## 4. Discourse marking functions and roles of 'and' with non-native speakers

If the discourse marking *well* and *you know* were not very much used by the EFL learners, things are different for the discourse marking *and,* which is among the most frequent markers in all the recorded conversations. *And* can fulfill various functions which are very similar to the discursive roles and functions that its Romanian equivalent *şi* fulfills.

One of the discursive roles that *and* could have is that of turn-claiming marker and unit insertion marker. In the conversation below Gabi reclaims the turn:

(1)
1. Gabi: em I think that em: both persons have to trust each other (...) It's only
2. about trust
3. Teacher: yeah, it's about trust
4. Gabi: **and** I don't borrow money to people who I don't trust [sic]
5. Teacher: that's a good point

After stating a general point of view about how friends should trust each other in line 1, Gabi reclaims the floor in line 4 using *and* as a discourse marker functioning at the textual level and oriented towards the prefacing of turn-claiming by the same speaker who adds



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another unit to her argumentation process. So it can be safely claimed that *and* has two discursive roles namely that of prefacing turn-claiming and of inserting another unit in a larger argumentative structure. Both roles operate at the textual level and it is very difficult to determine the most salient one but as it has been mentioned before, one of the most important characteristics of discourse markers is their polyfunctionality.

Although *and* is a marker of continuation, there might be contexts in which its role is that of prefacing contrast with one or several previous statements. An illustration of this discursive function is the following class discussion:

(2)
1. Teacher: on the other hand, do we lend money to people we don't trust?
2. Students: no
3. Teacher: not really, so?
4. Diana: **and** that's when you get embarrassed because you lend money to a
5. person you trust and then you see they are not trustwor::=
6. Teacher: =thy=
7. Diana: = thy
8. Teacher: right. **And** angry because you trusted them, right?
9. Alexandru: **and** then he's trying to convince you that it's nothing but money (laughter)

In the first part of (2), the idea that we only lend money to people that we trust was agreed upon by all students. In line 4, Diana presents a scenario that departs from the previous assumption and actually contradicts it; the implication of Diana's statement in lines 4 and 5, is that even though people might seem worthy of our trust, most times they demonstrate the contrary. In this conversation, the discourse marking *and* prefaces contrast in such a way as to give the impression that it only provides another argument in favour of the previous idea. It is possible that even though she has a different point of view on the matter, Diana does not want to place her contribution in disagreement with previous opinions. Therefore, it is not the marker that *signals* contrast but it is the actual content of her utterance that guides the other participants towards the right interpretation.

The other participants take the correct inferential path and, in line 8, the teacher adds another idea in support of Diana's statement. The discourse marking *and* is again used to preface the insertion of an additional argument that coherently continues Diana's line of argumentation. Moreover, in line 9, Alexandru continues the discursive support for Diana's direction by providing, again with the help of discourse marking *and*, a possible outcome of the situation presented by Diana. Alexandru uses the discourse marking *and* as a preface for result.

The discourse marking *and* fulfilling the discursive function of preface for result is also illustrated in the following verbal exchange:

(3)
1. Teacher: other opinions
2. Victor: never borrow money
3. Teacher: never bo- Ok, why?
4. Victor: em: because thinking of the current em: society em: the jobs are not
5. very sure



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6. Teacher: right
7. Victor: **and** you don't know if you can afford to repay

In (3), Victor structures his argumentation on three parts; first, in line 2, he presents the postulate, then, in line 4 and 5 he provides a motivation for the postulate and finally, in line 7 he introduces the result of the situation presented in lines 4, 5 (jobs are uncertain → you might not afford to pay back the loan). *And* prefaces the expression of a result but it also coordinates the parts of the same argumentative unit which extends over several turns. With the proposition prefaced by *and* Victor's argumentative unit comes full circle because the result presented in line 7 is also a motivation for the initially expressed postulate in line 2.

The discourse marker *and* can also bracket the expression of condition such as in the following verbal interaction:

(4)
1. Teacher: why is it important to socialize with managers?
2. Iuliana: because communication is the key in every single situation
3. Teacher: yeah, that is a good point, communication is the key. And maybe it
4. works better when you are having a beer or a cup of coffee
5. Anca: **and** you're relaxed

In line 3, *and* prefaces the provision of comment which refers to the 'felicity conditions' of communicating with the manager. In line 5, Anca introduces another condition for better communication which is bracketed by the discourse marking *and*. The functional role of *and* in line 5 is twofold: it fulfills the discursive functions of prefacing condition and it has the discursive role of coordinating two units of a joint response to Iuliana's comment (line 2) but of the two functional roles that *and* fulfills in line 5, the most salient is that of condition prefacing marker.

The fact that *and* is mainly used for coordination (taking into account its grammatical status of coordinating conjunction) qualifies this marker for the discursive role of prefacing the insertion of a new term in an enumeration started by a previous speaker. The following example is an illustration:

(5)
1. Teacher: in fact, not necessarily distance but decency, right?
2. Iuliana: **and** a pure balance between work and love.

The topic of (5) is that employees involved in a romantic relationship with a co-worker, have to keep their distance from each other at work. The discourse marking *and*, in line 2, is a preface for the insertion of additional items in an enumeration. What is interesting is that no enumeration was started by the first speaker but Iuliana's insertion of another element of the same category turned it into one. In order to see the logic the enumeration, we must state that the general departure point of the enumeration would be 'things that people who are romantically involved with their co-workers have to preserve'. The first element was provided in line 1 (decency) and the second followed in line 2 (balance between work and love). In this example we are dealing with *and* functioning at the interactional level because Iuliana uses this marker to display cooperation and to construct discourse in a very collaborative manner.



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## 5. *And* vs. *şi* – comparison of discourse marking functions

The two discourse markers are, with *but*, the most frequently used in both casual and formal conversations by male and female respondents and by all age categories without any exception. They do not ensure the particularity or individuality of the speakers but they are just means to a textual or interactional goal. In Table 1.4, I draw a comparison between the discourse marking functions and roles that the two markers can fulfill. The functions of the discourse marking *and* in the literature were put forward by Svartvik (1980), Norrick (2001), Blakemore (2002), Müller (2005), and Schiffrin (1987, 2006) and.

Table 1.4

| **Functions of *and* in the literature**<br>**Blakemore (2002), Müller (2005), Norrick (2001), Schiffrin (1987, 2006), Svartvik (1980)** | **Discursive roles and functions of *and* with non-native speakers of English** | **Discursive roles and functions of the Romanian discourse marker *şi***<br>**Matei (2012)** |
|---|---|---|
| Coordinates idea units | Coordinates units | |
| Continues another speaker's ideas and transforms talk into a product of mutual effort | Continuation of other speaker's ideas (frequent in classroom talk) | |
| Soliciting a speaker's continuation | | End positioned – summoning another participant to provide clarification, answers, justification, additional information |
| Adding reasons to another speaker's explanation | Prefaces the provision of comment | |
| Prefaces questions | Question prefacing marker | Question prefacing marker |
| Turn-claiming marker | Turn claiming marker | Turn-claiming and turn-keeping device |
| Marks a different topic segment / topic shift | | Marker of topic shift<br>Prefaces the insertion of a new story into the frame story |
| Displays an upcoming utterance as part of a not yet completed interactional unit | Inserting another unit in a larger argumentative structure | Speaker's return to a previous topic<br>In insertion sequences with adjacency pairs |
| Prefacing list items | Prefaces the insertion of items into an enumeration | |
| | Prefaces condition, contrast and result | |
| | | Prefaces reported speech |

This table shows that the acquisition of pragmatic competence in the use of *and* as discourse marker by the Romanian learners of English is facilitated by the considerable functional overlap between *şi* and the English marker *and*. The grammatical status of conjunction that both markers have in English and Romanian helped the speakers in the process of attaching pragmatic meanings and using the discourse marking *and* in correct



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discursive contexts with functions and roles which are consistent to the specificity of the English language.

## 6. Conclusion

Discourse marking by *and* is very frequent both with native and with non-native speakers because it can fulfill a large number of discursive roles and functions and, at the same time, give the other participants in the conversation the impression that there is continuity in discourse. Therefore, even in cases in which the discourse marker *and* expresses contrast, the appearance of continuation is still given.

*And* could operate both at the textual and interactional level; the versatile nature of this marker would thus allow it to contribute to discourse management in a technical way (claiming of turns, coordination of units, etc) while also helping speakers to display awareness of their conversational partners and build their contributions in a polite manner.

The fact that there is a high degree of overlap between the functions and roles of *şi* and of the corresponding English marker *and,* facilitates an easier process of acquiring pragmatic competence in the use of *and* by Romanian EFL learners.

Perhaps the exposure to media in English also contributes to a better grasp of the discursive functions of *and* at the textual level. Therefore, it would be beneficial, with a view to understanding of the discursive roles and functions of all discourse markers in conversation, to include as many listening and speaking activities in the English courses for EFL learners.

**Transcription conventions**

| | |
|---|---|
| ? | - rising intonation followed by pause |
| ! | - animated tone |
| (.) | - pause without falling intonation |
| - | - self interruption with glottal stop |
| *italics* | - emphatic stress |
| CAPS | - very emphatic stress |
| **Bold** | - used to highlight the discourse markers that are to be analyzed |
| : | - prolonged final vowel or syllable |
| text= | - no discernible pause between the end of a turn and the beginning of another |
| =text | speaker's turn |
| [ | - the starting point of speech overlap |
| ] | - the end point of speech overlap |
| (text) | - author's comments and specifications adapted from Schiffrin (1987: *ix, x*) |

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