DISCOURSE MARKERS? AN AREA OF CONFUSION

YANG, Shanru[*]

Newcastle University, UK

s.yang2@ncl.ac.uk

Abstract: This article investigates previous studies on discourse markers and problematizes the field in terms of definition, classification and characteristics. Due to different research perspectives, there has always been confusion and disagreement in the terminology and analysis to discourse markers. As one important interactional feature in social conversation, discourse markers work inside and outside the discourse and reflect the interwoven interactions among the participants and context. Despite the intense studies, discourse markers in Chinese, on the other hand, are still under investigation. The study also raises research attention on the use of discourse markers in pedagogical settings, especially in teacher talk. In classroom discourse, most related research is limited to second language acquisition. Hence it is important to conduct research on discourse markers in teacher spoken discourse and explore their detailed functions in classroom interaction.

Key words: Discourse markers – problematization – pedagogical settings

Resumen: Este artículo indaga en los estudios previos sobre marcadores del discurso y trata sobre la problemática asociada a su definición, clasificación y características. Debido a diferentes perspectivas de análisis, ha existido siempre confusión y desacuerdo en torno a la terminología que se aplica en el análisis de los marcadores del discurso. Como rasgos interactivos esenciales para la conversación social, los marcadores funcionan dentro y fuera del discurso, y reflejan las interacciones imbricadas entre los participantes y el contexto. Pese a los exhaustivos estudios que se han llevado a cabo sobre este tema, los marcadores del discurso en chino mandarín han recibido aún poca atención. Este trabajo se centra, además, en el uso de los marcadores discursivos en contextos pedagógicos, especialmente en la intervención del docente. En el discurso en el aula, la mayoría de la investigación se ha limitado a la adquisición de la segunda lengua. Resulta fundamental iniciar la

---

[*] Shanru Yang is a PhD candidate from School of Education, Communication, and Language Sciences, Newcastle University, UK. Her research interests include classroom discourse, teacher development, corpus studies and mixed methods.

---

investigación sobre los marcadores que utilizan los profesores en el discurso oral y explorar sus funciones en la interacción que se produce en el aula.

Palabras clave: Marcadores del discurso – problemática – contextos pedagógicos

1. INTRODUCTION

There are a growing number of studies and research interest on linguistic items like *you know*, *okay* and *well* that people use in written and spoken context since Schiffrin (1987) highlighted their significance. Mostly referred to as discourse markers (henceforth DMs), DMs not only have grammatical functions but also work as effective interactional features, especially in spoken conversation (Schiffrin 1987; Maschler, 1998; Fraser, 1999). The frequency and number of DMs that people use is significant compared with other word forms (Fung and Carter, 2007). DMs play an important role in understanding discourse and information progression (Schiffrin, 1987). Due to their multi-grammaticality and multi-functionality, DMs work inside and outside the discourse and reflect the interwoven interactions among the participants and context (Maschler, 1998). Nevertheless, there has hardly been any agreement in the literature of DMs.

Since the 1970s, there has been an increasing number of research to investigate DMs across different languages (Schourup, 1999). Many studies concentrate on specific or a set of English DMs (Blakemore, 1992; Ariel, 1998; Jucker and Smith, 1998; Fraser, 1999; Schiffrin, 1987, 2003; Redeker, 1990), while there are also numerous researches interested in equivalent Non-English DMs, including Catalan (González, 2004), Chinese (Chen, 2001; Feng, 2008; Wei, 2011), French (Hansen, 2006), Finnish (Hakulinen, 1998), Greek (Ifantidou, 2000; Archakis, 2001), German (Günthner, 2000), Hebrew (Maschler, 1998; Ziv, 1998), Indonesian (Wouk, 2001), Japanese (Takahara, 1998; Suzuki, 1998), Korean (Park, 1998), Spanish (de Fina, 1997) and so on. Spoken contexts investigated include social interview (Schiffrin, 1987; Trester, 2009), family/friends conversation (Maschler, 1998; Fuller, 2003), telephone talk (Bolden, 2006), film scene (Cuenca, 2008) and psychotherapeutic talk (Tay, 2011).

2. PROBLEMATIZATION

DMs have a wide range of possible related labels including lexical markers, discourse particles, utterance particles, semantic conjuncts, continuatives. The reason for the wide range of terminology and definitions is that DMs are inherently problematic and difficult to define or characterise (Schourup, 1999). Referring to as pragmatic markers (PMs), Fraser (1999) proposes a grammatical-pragmatic understanding towards the linking feature of DMs between discourse segments. Blakemore's (1992) relevance theory, on the other hand, perceives that DMs are only expressions with procedural meaning that constrains the utterance.

In addition to the disagreement on definition, the membership in the class of DMs also has difficulty to meet an agreement among different categorizations. Confusions are found in unaligned sub-categories as well as mismatches between definition and classification. Some DMs are included on one definition while others are not. Even on the agreed ones, disagreement arises in terms of sub-classes and applications. As Schourup (1999) suggests, the discussion of classificatory disagreement originates from the multiplicity in definition

stated earlier. Variations in different frameworks leave DMs remain at issue regarding to inconvenient labelling other than DMs, definition, categorization, selection criteria in sub-categories and grammatical status. Macro-markers like *what I am going to talk about today* or *let's go back to the beginning*, as discussed in Chaudron and Richards (1986) can be excluded due to identification difficulty in syntax.

Though DMs' functions vary across discourse contexts, to establish a set of criteria that can distinguish DMs from other grammatical items is crucial before discussing descriptive features they entail (Jucker and Ziv, 1998; Aijmer, 2002). Adapted from Brinton (1996), Fung (2003) and Müller (2004), basic characterisers of DMs can be divided into diagnostic features and descriptive features, among which the former provides the crucial test for DMs (Jucker and Ziv, 1998). The division can be summarized as follows (Table 1):

Diagnostic features:

    a) Lexis: multi-resources, fixed/short/small, micro-markers;

    b) Prosody: pause, intonation, stress, accompanied with non-word verbalization;

    c) Syntax: flexible in position, independent between clauses, detachable, turn-initial or stand-alone position in referential relation;

    d) Semantics: independent, optional, no effect on truth condition;

    e) Indexicality: anaphoric or cataphoric between discourse units.

Descriptive features:

    f) Grammaticality: marginal categories, controversial grammatical status;

    g) Multi-functionality: referential, structural, interpersonal, cognitive level;

    h) Stylistics: high frequency/diversity, repetition, stranding, cluster and collocation;

    i) Sociolinguistics: context-dependent, orality.

Table 1. List of characteristics of DMs

There are five criteria under diagnostic features to help identify whether an item is a DM, despite the fact that controversy may still exist under each sub-set (Maschler, 1998). DMs are lexically constrained in that they are small, short and fixed linguistic items (Brinton, 1996; Günthner, 2000). The prosodic contours are phonologically reduced and tend to form a separate tone group (Brinton, 1996; Jucker and Ziv, 1998). DMs are independent linguistic entities both syntactically and semantically. In most cases, however, it is common to find DMs in turn-initial position to signal upcoming information (Othman, 2010). Descriptive features illustrate additional features that most DMs share including grammaticality, multi-functionality, stylistic and sociolinguistic characteristics (Brinton, 1996; Lenk, 1998; Müller, 2004). The multiplicity of DMs distinguishes their functions at various levels of interaction, in which are included structural, referential, interpersonal and cognitive domains (Jucker and Ziv, 1998; Frank-Job, 2006; Fung and Carter, 2007).

3. PREVIOUS APPROACHES

The terminology, classification and characteristics of DMs, have been reached numerously from different research domains, among which discourse coherence (Schiffrin, 1987. 2003), pragmatics (Fraser, 1999), relevance theory (Blakemore, 1992) and systemic functional grammar (Halliday and Hasan, 1976) are the most influential ones (Schourup, 1999; Jucker and Ziv, 1998; Frank-Job, 2006; Cohen, 2007; Han, 2008).

The first attempt is discourse coherence model founded by Schiffrin (1987), as mentioned above. According to Schiffrin (1987), five planes within the framework can be distinguished according to different levels of coherence functions that DMs play, namely *exchange structure*, including adjacency-pair like question and answer, *action structure* where speech acts are situated, *ideational structure*, which is viewed from semantics as idea exchange and *participation framework*, i.e. the interaction and relation between the speaker and listener, and lastly *information state* that focuses on participates' cognitive capacities (Fraser, 1999; Schiffrin, 1987, 2003). Studies based on this model, however, emphasize more on discourse coherence rather than local context.

The second approach proposed by Fraser himself, is a solely «grammatical-pragmatic perspective» (Fraser, 1999, p. 936). He believed that DMs not only function in textual coherence but also signal the speakers' intention to the next turn in the preceding utterances. Compared with the coherence model, Fraser (1999) contributed to a more complete generalization and a pragmatic view towards different markers, including DMs, in a wider context rather than structural organization. In Chinese classroom environment, Liu (2006) conducted a pragmatic analysis on one Chinese literature class and concluded that DMs used in teacher talk have five major textual functions: *connect, transfer, generalize, explain* and *repair*. In the process of constructing classroom context, he argued that DMs contribute to the functions of discussion, emotion control and adjust of social relationship (Liu, 2006). This conclusion yet has weak data support and is over simplified without relating much to the classroom context. Similar to Fraser, Blakemore (1992) adopted relevance theory from pragmatics and claimed that DMs only have «procedural meaning» (p. 936) and are limited to specific context. Referring DMs as discourse connectives, Blakemore focused more on their presentation in discourse processing and segments' interrelation (Fung and Carter, 2007).

Another recent approach is through systemic functional linguistics (SFL) founded by M. A. K. Halliday (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Though Halliday and Hasan (1976) didn't brought up the issue of DMs directly, in the analysis of textual function, they investigated words like *and, but, I mean, to sum up etc.* as sentence connectives that perform an important part in semantic cohesion. DMs are regarded as effective cohesive devices with various meanings and functions in segment organization. The study is primarily based on written texts yet it still sheds some light on the importance of DMs in function and meaning construction (Schiffrin et al, 2003).

As Yu (2008) noticed, studies on DMs mainly focus on syntactical-structural level or pragmatic coherence while researches on features, categorizations and contexts are scare. How to relate the functions of DMs to their local context and go beyond the context should

also be researched. There are also other alternative methods. For instance, a dynamic-interactional approach (Frank-job, 2006) is proposed to view DMs as a developmental process of pragmaticalization which underlies the multi-functionality of DMs in meta-communication. Schleef (2004), on the other hand, investigates the frequency and distribution of DMs from a sociolinguistic perspective. As Fischer (2006) points out, a presentation of different approaches is the fundamental step to understand «the heterogeneity of the field and to identify those parameters in which the various approaches differ, as well as the common assumptions» (p.4).

4. DISCOURSE MARKERS IN CHINESE

Though, DMs across languages has been the focus of previous studies as it is discussed before. A detail systemic description of DMs in Chinese is still under investigation (Feng, 2008). Studies on Chinese DMs tend to undertake pre-existed analytic and theoretical framework without taking too much consideration of the symbolic nature of the language itself (Su, 2002; Wang et al, 2007; Wei, 2011).

Feng (2008) presents a typology of pragmatic markers in Chinese. In his discussion, there are four properties relating to their characteristics, namely, non-truth-conditionality, propositional scope, syntactic dispensability, and semantic dependency. A distinction between conceptual pragmatic markers and non-conceptual pragmatic markers are made on the basis of inherent semantic meanings (Feng, 2008).

- Conceptual pragmatic markers:
  a)   Epistemic pragmatic markers: *yexu* (perhaps), *shishishang* (in fact), *wokan* (I think), *xianran* (obviously).
  b)   Evaluative pragmatic markers: *jingqideshi* (amazingly), *yuchundeshi* (stupidly), *congmingdeshi* (cleverly).
- Non-conceptual pragmatic markers:
  a)   Contrastive pragmatic markers: *danshi* (but), *raner* (however), *buguo* (but), *buliao* (unexpectedly).
  b)   Elaborative pragmatic markers: *yejiushishuo* (that is to say), *biru* (for example), *tongyang* (similarly), *youqi* (particularly).
  c)   Inferential pragmatic markers: *yinwei* (because), *suoyi* (so).

Despite the fact that there is no given definition of DMs in Chinese, the above classification is in fact problematic in terms of clarification. There is an inconsistency and restriction in categorization. What's more, a group of lexical items including utterance modifiers such as *laoshishuo/jiang* (honestly speaking), domain adverbs, temporal connectives and ordinals, second-person forms, modal verbs, connective *he/yu/gen/ji* (and), digressives, *hao* (well) are all excluded. Considering the fact that DMs can be multi-functional, a descriptive proposal of DMs in Chinese needs to be further defined, classified, and elaborated.

5. DISCOURSE MARKERS IN PEDAGOGICAL SETTINGS

In pedagogical discourse, DMs can be found operating in four realms of functional categories, namely *interpersonal, referential, structural* and *cognitive* level (Fung and Carter, 2007). So far, little attention has been paid to the use and functions of DMs as one essential interactional factor in classroom teacher-student conversation. The studies on DMs in classroom context are also limited to L2 learners' acquisition rather than teacher talk (Fung and Carter, 2007; Yu, 2008).

The use and functions of DMs as one essential interactional factor in teacher talk. In fact, the appropriate use of DMs in classroom not only can improve the participation of the students but also contribute to the effectiveness of learning (Othman, 2010). It is important that more researches and attempts are needed to probe on the issue.

There are still few exceptions though. For instance, Othman (2010) investigated three specific DMs *okay*, *right* and *yeah* used by NS lecturers in Lancaster University, UK. It is found that college lecturers use DMs as signposts on structural level when taking turns in lecturing as a subconscious behaviour, observed by Othman (2010). The study uses naturalistic video recorded data and interviews with lecturers to cross-check the interpretation from both the lecturers and the researcher's point of view. It recognizes the functional significance of those three DMs in conversational interactions when organizing utterances.

In Chinese context, Yu (2008) investigated interpersonal meaning of DMs in Chinese EFL classroom within the framework of systemic functional linguistics. In her article, DMs are studied in six moves of the process of teaching: *opening, information checking, information clarification, responding, comment* and *repetition*. According to Yu (2008), the appropriate use of DMs can improve the effectiveness of classroom teaching. Liu (2006) conducted a pragmatic analysis on one Chinese literature class and concluded that teachers' DMs have five major textual functions: *connect, transfer, generalize, explain* and *repair*. In the process of constructing classroom context, he argued that DMs contribute to the functions of discussion, emotion control and adjust of social relationship (Liu, 2006).

Though little attention has been paid to the use and functions of DMs in a pedagogical environment, DMs are constantly used in teacher language to help creating an effective flow of information from teachers to students in different stages of learning process, if used appropriately (Yu, 2008). Different from other applications, DMs used by EFL teachers also assist to realize certain pedagogical purposes that direct EFL classroom lesson plan (Walsh, 2006). In classroom context, DMs function as a lubricant in interaction to reduce understanding difficulties, incoherence and social distance among students, and between teacher and student (Walsh, 2006; Fung and Carter, 2007). DMs in teacher talk play an important role for students to understand teacher language better, which hence helps them to improve learning efficiency. As it is observed, DMs perform both social and educational functions simultaneously in classroom context. The relationship between DMs and efficacy of classroom interaction is still not yet fully presented.

6. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have discussed the confusion in the study of DMs in terms of terminology, classification and characteristics. Different approaches to analyse DMs are also presented and evaluated. It can be noted that the reason behind the confusion in the terminology and analytical method is because of various research perspectives. DMs in Chinese, in particular, have not yet been investigated thoroughly. In pedagogical settings, less attention has been paid to the effect of DMs and their function in teacher talk, though many studies have suggested that there is a positive effect of DMs in classroom interaction as effective conversational endeavours (Othman, 2010). Researchers, therefore, should develop complex analytical frames in relation to the local context to unveil the multi-functionality of DMs.

References

AIJMER, Karin (2002), *English Discourse Particles. Evidence from a Corpus*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

ARCHAKIS, Argiris (2001), «On discourse markers: Evidence from modern Greek», *Journal of pragmatics* 33(8): 1235-1262.

ARIEL, Mira (1998), «Discourse markers and form-function correlations», in A. H. JUCKER and Y. ZIV (eds.), *Discourse markers: Descriptions and theory*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V.

BLAKEMORE, Diane (1992), *Understanding utterances*, Oxford: Blackwell.

BOLDEN, Galina B. (2006), «Little words that matter: Discourse markers 'so' and 'oh' and the doing of other-attentiveness in social interaction», *Journal of Communication* 56(4): 661-688.

BRINTON, Laurel J. (1996), *Pragmatic markers in English: Grammaticalization and discourse functions*. Berlin: Mouton.

CHAUDRON, Craig and RICHARDS, Jack C. (1986), «The effect of discourse markers on the comprehension of lecture», *Applied Linguistics* 7(2): 112-127.

CHEN, Yiya (2001), «*Dui bu dui* as a pragmatic marker: Evidence from Chinese classroom discourse», *Journal of Pragmatics* 33: 1441-465.

COHEN, Esther, (2007), «Discourse markers: Context and context sensitivity». Retrieved on 9 December, 2011, from: www.biu.ac.il/js/hb/ils/cohen2007.pdf

CUENCA, Maria Josep (2008), «Pragmatic markers in contrast: The case of well», *Journal of Pragmatics* 40(8): 1373-1391.

DE FINA, Anna (1997), «An analysis of Spanish Bien as a marker of classroom management in teacher student interaction», *Journal of Pragmatics* 28: 337-354.

FISCHER, Kerstin (2006), *Approaches to Discourse Particles*, Amsterdam: Elsevier.

FRANK-JOB, Barbara (2006), «A dynamic-interactional approach to discourse markers», in: Fischer, K (ed.), *Approaches to discourse particles*, Amsterdam: Elsevier.

FRASER, Bruce (1999), «What are discourse markers?», *Journal of Pragmatics* 31: 931-952.

FENG, Guangwu (2008), «Pragmatic Markers in Chinese», *Journal of Pragmatics* 40: 1687-1718.

FULLER, Janet M. (2003), «Use of the discourse marker *like* in interviews», *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7: 365-377.

FUNG, Loretta (2003), *The use and teaching of discourse markers in Hong Kong: students' production and teachers' perspectives.* PhD thesis, University of Nottingham.

FUNG, Loretta and CARTER, Ronald (2007), «Discourse markers and spoken English: Native and learner use in pedagogical settings», *Applied Linguistics* 28(3): 410-439.

GONZÁLEZ, Montserrat (2004), *Pragmatic markers in oral narrative: The case of English and Catalan*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins B. V.

GÜNTHNER, Suzanne (2000), «From concessive connector to discourse marker: The use of *obwohl* in everyday German interaction», in E. COUPER-KUHLEN and B. KORTMANN (eds.), *Cause, condition, concession, contrast: Cognitive and discourse perspectives*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

HALLIDAY, M. A. K. and HASAN, Ruqaiya H. (1976), *Cohesion in English*, London: Longman.

HANSEN, Maj-Britt Mosegaard (2006), «A dynamic polysemy approach to the lexical semantics of discourse markers (with an exemplary analysis of French *toujours*)», in F. KERSTIN (ed.), *Approaches to Discourse Particles*, Amsterdam: Elsevier.

HAKULINEN, Auli (1998), «The use of Finnish *nyt* as a discours particle», in A. H. JUCKER and Y. ZIV (eds.), *Discourse markers: Descriptions and theory*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins B. V.

HAN, Ge Ling (2008), *Pragmatic markers: Toward bi-directional optimalization in communication*, Nanjing: Southeast University Press.

IFANTIDOU, Elly (2000), «Procedural encoding of explicatures by the Mod- ern Greek particle *taha*», in G. ANDERSEN and T. FRETHEIM (eds.), *Pragmatic markers and prepositional attitude*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins B.V.

JUCKER, Andreas H. and SMITH, Sara W. (1998), «And people just you know like «wow»: Discourse markers as negotiating strategies», in A. H. JUCKER and Y. ZIV (eds.), *Discourse markers: Descriptions and theory*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins B. V.

JUCKER, Andreas H. and ZIV, Yael (1998), «Discourse markers: Introduction», in A. H. JUCKER and Y. ZIV (eds.), *Discourse markers: Descriptions and theory*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins B. V.

LENK, Uta (1998), «Discourse markers and global coherence in conversation», *Journal of pragmatics* 30(2): 245-257.

LIU, Shu-xin (2006), «Teachers' discourse markers and classroom context», *Journal of Hunan Institute of Humanities (Science and Technology)* 4: 148-150.

MASCHLER, Yael (1998), «Rotsè lishmoa kéta? Wanna hear something weird/funny? [lit. a segment]: Segmenting Israeli Hebrew talk-in-action», in A. H. JUCKER and Y. ZIV (eds.), *Discourse markers: Descriptions and theory*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins B. V.

MÜLLER, Simone (2004), «Well you know that type of person: Functions of well in the speech of American and German students», *Journal of Pragmatics* 33: 193-208.

OTHMAN, Zarina (2010), «The use of *okay, right* and *yeah* in academic lectures by native speaker lecturers: Their 'anticipated' and 'real' meanings», *Discourse Studies* 12(5): 665-681.

PARK, Yong-Yae (1998), «The Korean connective *nuntey* in conversational discourse», *Journal of Pragmatics* 31(2): 191-218.

REDEKER, Gisela (1990), «Ideational and pragmatic markers of discourse structure», *Journal of Pragmatics* 14: 367-381.

SCHIFFRIN, Deborah (1987), *Discourse markers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

— (2003), «Discourse markers: Language, meaning and context», in D. SCHIFFRIN, D. TANNEN and H. E. HAMILTON (eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis*, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

SCHIFFRIN, Deborah, TANNEN, Deborah and HAMILTON, Heidi E. (2003), *The handbook of discourse analysis*, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

SCHLEEF, Erik (2004), «Gender, power, discipline, and context: On the sociolinguistic variation of *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know* in English academic discourse», *Texas Linguistic Forum* 48: 177-186.

SCHOURUP, Lawrence (1999), «Discourse markers», *Lingua* 107: 227-265.

SU, Lily I-wen (2002), «A cognitive exploration of Chinese connectives», in L. SU et al. (eds.), *Form and function: Linguistic studies in honour of Shuanfan Huang*, Taipei: Crane publishing.

SUZUKI, Satoko (1998), «Pejorative connotation: A case of Japanese», in A. H. JUCKER and Y. ZIV (eds.), *Discourse markers: Descriptions and theory*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins B. V.

TAKAHARA, Paul Osamu (1998), «Pragmatic functions of the English discourse marker anyway and its corresponding contrastive Japanese discourse markers», in A. H. JUCKER and Y. ZIV (eds.), *Discourse markers: Descriptions and theory*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins B. V.

TAY, Dennis (2011), «Discourse markers as metaphor signalling devices in psychotherapeutic talk», *Language & Communication* 31(4): 310-317.

TRESTER, Anna Marie (2009), «Discourse marker 'oh' as a means for realizing the identity potential of constructed dialogue in interaction», *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 13(2): 147-168.

WALSH, Steve (2006), *Investigating classroom discourse*, New York: Routledge.

WANG, Yu-Fang et al. (2007), «From informational to emotive use: meiyou ('no') as a discourse marker in Taiwan Mandarin conversation», *Discourse Studies* 9(5): 677-701.

WEI, Ming (2011), «Investigating the oral proficiency of English learners in China: a comparative study of the use of pragmatic markers», *Journal of Pragmatics* 43: 3455-3472.

WOUK, Fay (2001), «Solidarity in Indonesian conversation: The discourse marker *ya*», *Journal of Pragmatics* 33(2): 171-191.

YU, L. Q. (2008), «Interpersonal meaning of discourse markers by foreign language teachers in classroom», *Journal of the Graduates of Sun Yat-Sen University (Social Sciences)* 29(3): 129-135.

ZIV, Yael (1998), «Hebrew *kaze* as a discourse marker and lexical hedge: Conceptual and procedural properties», in A. H. JUCKER and Y. ZIV (eds.), *Discourse markers: Descriptions and theory*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins B. V.