Discourse markers: Introduction

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In the relevant literature, there are studies which deal with a whole range of discourse markers (Schourup 1985; Schiffrin 1987, 1994; Fraser 1988[1993]; Watts 1989; and Fraser 1990 on English; Bazzanella 1990 on Italian; Hölker 1988, 1991 on French; and Kroon 1995 on Latin), while others concentrate on individual ones (Lakoff 1973; Svartvik 1980; Owen 1981; James 1983; Carlson 1984; Schiffrin 1985; Watts 1986; and Blakemore 1988). In some cases discourse markers are analysed within larger discourse analytical frameworks (Labov and Fanshel 1977; Owen 1983; and Brinton 1996). Despite this wide research interest, however, there is no generally agreed upon definition of the term "discourse marker". A variety of terms are used to refer to these elements. Among them are discourse marker (e.g. Schiffrin 1987), pragmatic marker (e.g. Fraser 1996, Brinton 1996), discourse particle (e.g. Schourup 1985; Abraham 1991; Kroon 1995), pragmatic particle (e.g. Östman 1981), pragmatic expression (e.g. Erman 1987) or connective (Blakemore 1987, 1988). The terminological diversity reflects both the wide range of linguistic approaches that have been employed for their study, and the multiplicity of functions which these elements are said to fulfil. These functions include discourse connectors, turn-takers, confirmation-seekers, intimacy signals, topic-switchers, hesitation markers, boundary markers, fillers, prompters, repair markers, attitude markers, and hedging devices. The different terms also reflect different attitudes to the question of the uniformity or fuzziness of the class of discourse markers.

There is of course no easy correlation between a given approach or a function and a particular term but the term "discourse connective", for instance,

tends to be used in a more restricted sense to refer to elements like *so* and *therefore*. The term "discourse particle" is often used to refer to elements like *ja, doch, halt, eben* in German; *dan, toch, maar, wel, eens, even* in Dutch; and *vel, visst, nok, da* in Norwegian (see the collection of articles in Abraham 1991a and 1991b). These elements in German, Dutch and Norwegian appear to serve functions that are distinct from those elements in English that are commonly known under the name "discourse marker". The term "pragmatic expression", finally, tends to be used for markers that consist of more than one word, e.g. *you know, you see* or *I mean* (Erman 1987).

In addition to the diversity of terms that are used there is also little agreement as to which elements in a specific language should be considered as discourse markers. This is even (or perhaps particularly) true for a language such as English, whose discourse markers are probably more extensively covered in the literature than those of any other language. While there seems to be at least some agreement for elements such as the ones listed above, other elements are of more doubtful status (*because, and, then* are included by Schiffrin (1987) but not by Schourup (1985) while *hey* and *aha* are included by Schourup but not by Schiffrin). Blakemore (1987: ch. 4), who uses the term "discourse connectives", includes elements such as *therefore, so, after all,* and *moreover*. Thus, the multiplicity in the terminology reflects on the one hand the broad range of elements in different languages with broadly comparable functions, and, on the other hand, it reflects distinct theoretical perspectives. We have chosen "discourse marker" as a convenient cover term because it seems to be the one with the widest currency and with the least restricted range of application, one that enables us to include a broad variety of elements under a single conceptual umbrella. There is no prescriptive intention in this terminological choice, and in line with this philosophy we left unchanged the various terminological instantiations in the different papers. In the same spirit we have desisted from standardising the various discourse transcription and transliteration conventions.

Interestingly, the range of features proposed in the literature as being characteristic of discourse markers is not always shared by the various putative members of the class. It appears that "discourse marker" is a fuzzy concept. While many of the elements analysed in this volume manifest a significant amount of these basic features, few, if any, show all of them. Thus, in line with Roschean prototype conception, elements demonstrating more of the criterial features may be taken to be more prototypical members of the class of discourse markers and those showing fewer characteristic properties may be

considered more peripheral. This scalar conception of the membership in the class of discourse markers appears to be well-equipped to account for the range of items displaying partially overlapping characteristics across a variety of languages.

Hölker (191: 78-79) lists four basic features that characterise discourse markers (or pragmatic markers, as he calls them). (1) they do not affect the truth conditions of an utterance; (2) they do not add anything to the propositional content of an utterance; (3) they are related to the speech situation and not to the situation talked about; and (4) they have an emotive, expressive function rather than a referential, denotative, or cognitive function. The first two of these features are semantic in nature, the third is pragmatic and the fourth is functional.

Brinton (1996) has a much longer list of features represented in abbreviated form in table 1. The list has been reordered to combine features that pertain to the same level of linguistic description.

- Phonological and lexical features:
a) They are short and phonologically reduced.
b) They form a separate tone group.
c) They are marginal forms and hence difficult to place within a traditional word class.

- Syntactic features:
d) They are restricted to sentence-initial position.
e) They occur outside the syntactic structure or they are only loosely attached to it.
f) They are optional.

- Semantic feature:
g) They have little or no propositional meaning.

- Functional feature:
h) They are multifunctional, operating on several linguistic levels simultaneously.

- Sociolinguistic and stylistic features:
i) They are a feature of oral rather than written discourse and are associated with informality.
j) They appear with high frequency.
k) They are stylistically stigmatised.
l) They are gender specific and more typical of women's speech.

Table 1: List of basic features of discourse markers (based on Brinton 1996: 33-35)

In Brinton's list several of the features are accompanied by appropriate hedges such as "predominantly", "often" or "sometimes". Tentative and sketchy as this list may be, it is at least suggestive of the range of features discourse markers may display and, as such, it may be of service in implementing the prototype approach intimated above. Thus, although few, if any, discourse markers will manifest all of these features, the higher the number of features for any particular marker, the more it can be seen as a prototypical member of its class.

It is significant to note that not all the features on Brinton's list are equally diagnostic. In fact it is mainly the features on the first three levels (phonological/lexical, syntactic/textual and semantic) which provide the crucial tests. The features mentioned on the functional and on the socio-linguistic/stylistic level are predominantly descriptive. Whether a specific linguistic element is monofunctional or polyfunctional is not a useful criterion in deciding whether it is a discourse marker or not because of the obvious analytical vicious circularity it entails. Many studies actually set out to argue explicitly for the monofunctionality or polyfunctionality of specific markers, thus nullifying this as a valid criterion.

In a similar fashion the sociolinguistic and stylistic distribution can only be established once a discourse marker has been identified as such. The difference between oral and written discourse feature, for instance, is not particularly helpful as a diagnostic for the class of discourse markers. The last feature in particular is not suitable as a test for class-membership. Brinton (1996: 35) describes this feature as "controversial". In any case it is unlikely that we would want to exclude a particular element from the set of discourse markers if it turned out that it was not gender specific or that it was more common in men's speech.

The different studies of discourse markers distinguish several domains where they may be functional, in which are included textual, attitudinal, cognitive and interactional parameters. Accordingly, discourse markers have been analysed as text-structuring devices (marking openings or closings of discourse units or transitions between them), as modality or attitudinal indicators, as markers of speaker-hearer intentions and relationships, and as instructions on how given utterances are to be processed. Despite their initial attractiveness, these cannot be adopted as criterial functional properties due to the non-mutual exclusivity evident in the functional distribution of discourse markers throughout. The papers in this volume display an interesting intersection in the assignment of some of these functions. Written from a

variety of analytical and technical perspectives and utilising theoretical approaches including discourse analysis and relevance theory, they will not be uniformly characterised. Broadly speaking then, the first three papers, by Maschler, Shloush and Hakulinen focus on text-structure signalling, the next set of papers by Rouchota, Stenström, Andersen, Jucker and Smith, Ziv, and Ariel concentrate on cognitive aspects, and the remaining four papers by Suzuki, Park, Fraser, and Takahara analyse contrastive markers, which display a range of attitudinal, cognitive and interactional properties, thus obviating the inherent problem of functional-domain specificity as criterial in the analysis

In the following we want to give a brief overview of the papers that appear in this volume. The first three papers by Maschler, Shloush and Hakulinen focus on the structure creating and structure signalling function of discourse markers in Hebrew and in Finnish.

Yael Maschler's contribution examines the segmentation function of discourse markers in Israeli Hebrew talk-in-interaction. Modifying earlier classificatory proposals, she recognises four distinct realms where discourse markers are functional: interpersonal relations, reference, structure and cognitive constraints, and distinguishes several levels of discourse structure in which the discourse marker may indicate frame shifts, in accordance with particular narrational schemes. Maschler's study adopts a relatively wide definition of discourse marker, including a broad range of linguistic phenomena displaying similar segmentational functions. This research technique points out a very interesting discourse structuring generalisation, corroborating findings elsewhere, namely, that larger discourse chunks require more segmentational sign posts (before and after) than do smaller ones. The size parameter is shown to correlate with the hierarchical structure in a systematic manner. This finding raises a very important question concerning the potential functional convergences between the various discourse markers with respect to the relevant frame shift.

Shelley Shloush's analysis of the Hebrew discourse marker *bekicur* 'in short' offers an additional perspective on an interesting segmentation function of discourse markers, the particular effects of which depend on the discourse chunk in question. Three apparently distinct uses of *bekicur* are portrayed: one as a so-called apposition marker (occurring mostly clause internally), the second as an inference indicating device (occurring mostly interclausally) and the third one (another interclausal entity) as a marker of topic shift. Utilising the analytical tools provided by relevance theory, Shloush suggests that *bekicur* has a unique procedural function in discourse, namely, to interrupt the

relevant chunk, once a need emerges to cut it short. The various instantiations (appositional, inferential and topic shift indication) are shown to be predictable consequences of the relevant discourse segment unit interrupted by *bekicur*. When a list of properties or arguments is interrupted (the clause internal distribution) *bekicur* signals a reformulation or apposition; when *bekicur* interrupts a string of propositions contributing to this discourse segment topic, it signals an inference contributing directly to this discourse topic, and finally, when larger chunks of discourse are involved, *bekicur* interrupts the flow indicating a discourse topic shift, either to return to the original topic (in the case of a deviation) or to end a given topic. Shloush considers alternative theoretical frameworks such as coherence-based approaches to discourse structure in this context and suggests that only with the proper relevance theoretic modifications they may be employed in accounting for the use of such discourse markers.

Auli Hakulinen takes a dictionary definition of the Finnish discourse marker *nyt* as a starting point for a conversation-analytical analysis. It turns out that there are different subtypes of *nyt* but they all have in common that they mark the turn in which they occur as part of an on-going activity and as presupposing a preceding context. Thus the dictionary definitions of *nyt*, which focus on this aspect, are largely confirmed but its function is context-dependent. In negative statements, for instance, *nyt* is forward-looking and anticipates a certain kind of continuation.

The papers by Rouchota, Stenström, Andersen, Jucker and Smith, Ziv, and Ariel focus on the cognitive aspects of discourse markers. The first three of these papers are devoted to English discourse markers, whereas Ziv and Ariel analyse Hebrew data.

Villy Rouchota analyses parenthetical discourse connectives such as *moreover*, *nevertheless* and *after all* as conveying procedural meaning. She claims that they are parenthetical in the sense that they are syntactically unintegrated and are separated from the host clause by comma intonation or comma orthography. They function as comments. Rouchota contrasts two possible approaches: speech act theory and relevance theory. Within speech act theory, the adverbial connectives receive the same semantic interpretation as other parenthetical expressions such as *I wonder*, *confidentially* or *allegedly*. They are both analysed as contributing to the explicit and truth-conditional content of utterances. However, Rouchota argues for the alternative relevance theoretical analysis under which adverbial connectives and parentheticals receive drastically different interpretations. It is only parentheticals which add

to the explicit content of utterances. Adverbial connectives, on the other hand, fulfil a commenting function by encoding procedural meaning and by constraining the implicatures of an utterance.

Anna-Brita Stenström uses the Bergen Corpus of London Teenage English Language (COLT) as a database for a comparison of the use of *cos* and *because*. The study indicates that *because* is typically used as a causal subordinator introducing a restrictive or non-restrictive adjunct clause, while *cos* is used as a thematic discourse link that introduces a non-restrictive disjunct clause. It introduces information with no obvious connection with prior discourse. Stenström also shows that *cos* is more frequent in COLT, which records London teenage language, than it is in the London-Lund Corpus of spoken English, which records the language of adults and mostly academics. The phonological realisation and sociological characteristics evident in the use of *cos* as a discourse marker seem to accord with the descriptive properties observed by Brinton with respect to the phonological reduction and the sociological parameters.

Gisle Andersen also uses the COLT database. He analyses the discourse marker *like*. In contrast to previous work on *like*, he argues that a unitary account can explain all uses of the discourse marker *like*. The theoretical background is provided by Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory. *Like* is conceived of as conveying procedural meaning, specifically, as a marker of loose language. Accordingly, it marks a discrepancy between the utterance and the thought that this utterance represents. Moreover, again in relevance theoretical terms, it encodes a procedural constraint on the explicatures of utterances. This means that *like* gives processing instructions to the addressee and does not add directly to the semantic content of the utterance. The scope of *like* can vary from a numerical expression or a noun phrase to an entire proposition. However, *like* is not in every respect a prototypical discourse marker. In some cases, e.g. when it modifies a numerical expression and is functionally equivalent to such truth-conditional adverbials as *roughly* or *approximately*, it clearly affects truth conditions. This view is echoed in Ziv's discussion of the Hebrew *kaze*, where the problem of assigning truth functional effects to entities functioning procedurally is discussed.

Andreas Jucker and Sara Smith argue for a distinction between reception markers such as *yeah*, *oh*, *oh*, and *really?*, which are used to signal a reaction to information provided by another speaker, and presentation markers such as *like*, *you know*, and *I mean*, which are used to modify the material to be presented by the speaker. They analyse three markers in some detail (*yeah*,

like, and *you know*) and show that they are used to negotiate the common ground between the participants. Interlocutors use utterances both to convey information and to provide advice to the addressee as to how this information is to be processed, and they provide each other with feedback as to how the information supplied by the other is integrated into their own state of knowledge.

They also observe that in their data of conversations between pairs of strangers and pairs of friends, the strangers rely more on the use of reception markers whereas the friends rely more on presentation markers.

Their approach can be characterised both as cognitive because it views discourse markers as giving processing instructions to the addressee and as interactional because the establishment of common ground between speaker and addressee is seen as a matter of negotiation between them.

Yael Ziv's discussion of *kaze* 'like this' as a discourse marker (as distinct from a cognate adjectival or nominal modifier) concentrates on its dual nature as displaying both conceptual and procedural properties. Its positive truth conditional effects, properties associated with entities encoding conceptual meaning, are shown to be evident in its non-committal hedgy nature. The procedural perspective is highlighted when its speech act modification function is examined and predictions concerning constraints on its distribution are borne out and shown to follow from its procedural nature. Thus, its inability to become salient by the relevant focus establishing devices, namely, its non-occurrence as the focal element in alternative interrogatives, clefts, or restricting subjuncts like *only*, is claimed to be indicative of its non-propositional contribution.

Mira Ariel's paper investigates the procedural uses of discourse markers like Hebrew *harey* (akin to English *after all*), which mark the information under their scope as already accessible to the addressee. Such marking can serve important argumentative functions alongside its manipulative or humorous uses. The discussion is couched within a considerably more general theoretical concern regarding the linguistic vs. extra-linguistic status of such discourse markers. Drawing on Fodor's (1983) distinction between modular and central cognitive systems and associating grammatical competence (as he does) with the modular system, and pragmatic competence with the central system, Ariel raises the question of the division of labour between the grammatical and pragmatic competence involved in the use of such discourse markers. A related question that is highlighted in this study pertains to form-function correlations. The arbitrariness of this relationship associated with grammar is measured

against the motivatedness and predictability evident in the inferential, extra-linguistic pragmatic competence. The paper offers a diachronic perspective on the nature of form and function correlations evident in the use of discourse, thus resolving the co-existence of arbitrary and predictable features.

The remaining four papers by Suzuki, Park, Fraser and Takahara are devoted to different languages but they all analyse contrastive markers.

Satoko Suzuki's study attempts to provide a unified account of apparently unrelated functions of a variety of Japanese discourse markers. The pejorative connotation associated with *nante*, *nanka*, *nado*, *demo*, *toka*, and *tari*, the English equivalents of *the likes of* is argued to be derivative of their implication of non-specification. The same lack of specification is also at the heart of their instantiations as hedging devices and as displaying a belittling effect. Rather than adopting a potentially incidental multi-functional analysis, Suzuki manages to supply a uniform account predicting the range of functional manifestations of the relevant discourse markers. Interestingly, but clearly not surprisingly, Suzuki's approach receives cross-linguistic support when discourse markers in other languages follow a similar path. Thus, Ziv's account of the functions of the Hebrew discourse marker *kaze* 'like this' derives its hedging effect from its basic lack of commitment and the related lack of specification. It is precisely such potential corroborations to given analyses that a collection of articles on such a topic may provide.

Yong-Yae Park provides a description of contrastive connectives in English, Korean and Japanese conversations with special reference to the context of dispreferred responses. Employing the framework of conversation analysis, he examines their use in spontaneous discourse. The study concentrates on English *but*, Korean *nuntey* and *kuntey* and Japanese *kedo*, *dakedo*, and *demo*. A distinction is drawn between their functions in turn initial, turn medial and turn final positions, such that turn initially the contrastive discourse marker in question is claimed to express direct disagreement, turn medially — to indicate *pro forma* agreement, and turn finally — to invite the interlocutor's inference. Important questions concerning discourse turn structure and its potential correlation with the range of functions of such discourse markers cross-linguistically are opened up consequently.

Bruce Fraser analyses the contrastive discourse markers of English (*but*, *however*, *although*, *on the other hand*, *in contrast*, *in comparison*, *conversely*, *nevertheless*, *rather*, *instead*, and *on the contrary*). After establishing their syntactic patterning, Fraser analyses the semantic similarities and differences between the individual markers on the basis of the relationships that they can

indicate between the preceding and the following clause or discourse unit. He distinguishes three classes of contrastive discourse markers. The largest class signals that the speaker intends the explicit message conveyed by the following discourse unit to contrast with an explicit or indirect message conveyed by the preceding discourse unit. In this class *but* has the widest semantic application. It imposes the least restrictions on the relationship between the preceding and the following unit. It subsumes the semantic range of *however*, which, in turn, subsumes *on the other hand* and *nevertheless*. The second class of contrastive discourse markers signals that the speaker intends the explicit message conveyed by the following unit to correct a message conveyed by the preceding unit. This class is made up of *instead* and *rather*. The third class, finally, comprises the contrastive discourse markers *on the contrary* and *quite the contrary* which indicate that the speaker intends for the explicit message conveyed by the following discourse unit to be perceived as correct while the message conveyed by the preceding unit to be taken as false.

Paul O. Takahara, finally, presents a comparative analysis of contrastive discourse markers in English and Japanese. He finds that the English marker *anyway*, whose main function is to signal a change of discourse topic, fulfils a range of subfunctions for which Japanese uses different markers (*ichioo, izureniseyo, soredemo, nimokakawarazu, doose, dotchimichi,* and *sorewasooto*). In relevance theoretical terms, this is conceptualised as a constraint on the interpretation process of the addressee. The proposition introduced by *anyway* is relevant in a context that does not include the immediately preceding proposition.

We hope that the descriptions of the various discourse markers provided in this book as well as the issues raised within the relevant theoretical perspectives adopted for their analyses will contribute to the understanding of the generalisations underlying the cross-linguistic instantiations of the broad range of discourse markers.

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