

Pragmatic Functions of Discourse Markers: A Review of Related Literature

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Abstract: *Recently, studies on spoken language in real-life contexts increased dramatically. As a result, some of the features previously considered 'empty', 'superfluous' and redundant- such as sort of, y'know and well (Goddard and Meanpatterson, 2000, p. 98) now are considered as crucial aspects of interpersonal communication. These expressions called 'discourse markers' (Schiffrin, 1987) or 'pragmatic expressions' (Fraser, 1999) have been of "substantial interest to researchers studying situated language use because of their role in demarcating discourse connections as well as their potential for indexing social relationships" (Bolden, 2008, p. 102). The present study opts for reviewing the theoretical approaches towards discourse markers (hereafter DM) that ushered in the past three decades. It deals with the most prominent studies carried out on DMs and their functions in spoken discourse. The present account of DMs provides the reader with the knowledge about how DMs operate at textual and interpersonal levels of discourse. The implementation of the current study might be for those who are interested in DMs and their functions in making conversation smooth.*

Keywords: *Discourse Markers, Discourse, Interpersonal function, Textual function*

1. INTRODUCTION

The last 30 years have observed an explosion of articles and books on DMs, representing different theoretical frameworks and approaches towards them. The various terms used to call these features are illustrative of the diversity of functions DMs perform in the discourse. There is no general agreement on what to call these linguistic elements. They have been studied by different researchers under different labels to name a few: DMs (Schiffrin, 1987) (the term adopted in this study), Pragmatic Marker (Brinton, 1996; Fraser, 1996), Discourse Connectives (Blakemore, 1989), Discourse Operators (Redeker, 1991), Cue Phrases (Knott, 1993), Discourse Particles (Abraham, 1991; Kroon, 1995; Schourup, 1985), Pragmatic Particles (Ostman, 1983) and Pragmatic Expressions (Erman, 1987). Other less frequent terms include: discourse signaling devices, indicating devices, Phatic connectives, pragmatic connectives, pragmatic operators, pragmatic formatives, semantic conjuncts and sentence connectives.

2. SCHIFFRIN'S FIVE-PLANE MODEL OF DISCOURSE MARKERS

Among the prominent studies on DMs, Deborah Schiffrin's (1987) detailed analysis of 11 DMs in English could be regarded as the most comprehensive one. Assuming that "language is designed for communication", Deborah Schiffrin (ibid, p. 6) in her book *Discourse Markers* develops a theoretical model in an attempt to show how DMs contribute to the coherence of conversation discourse by creating links between units of talk, in particular how the same item fulfils different functions, depending on where it appears in conversation. Her detailed account of DMs which is a sociolinguistic approach towards the markers and the discourse within which they function explains the behaviour of DMs on five different levels of talk.

Defining DMs as "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk" Schiffrin (1987, p.31) specifies the following properties for DMs while emphasizing that these properties are interdependent and not one of them can be understood without attention to the others.

1. They form structure.
2. They convey meaning.
3. They accomplish actions.

Believing that conversation is a multilayered interaction, Schiffrin (1987, p. 24-28) refers to five planes of talk as:

1. Exchange structure (ES) which reflects the mechanics of the conversational interchange and shows the results of the participants turn taking and how these alternations are related to each other.
2. Action structure (AS) which reflects the sequence of speech acts which occur within the discourse.
3. Ideational structure (IdS) which reflects certain relationship between the ideas (propositions) found within the discourse.
4. Participation framework (PF) which refers to the different ways in which speaker and hearer can relate to each other.
5. Information state (InS) which reflects the ongoing organization and management of knowledge as it evolves over the course of the discourse.

Each of these components is connected to the others and all of them contribute to the flow of the conversation. Schiffrin believes that to make communication successful all these components need to be integrated and discourse markers contribute to the discourse coherence by locating utterance on particular plane(s) of talk

Schiffrin's analysis was based on the data she collected by tape- recording the interviews with Jewish families in Philadelphia. In her book, she provides a detailed analysis of 11 English DMs including: *and*, *but*, *or*, *so*, *well*, *then*, *now*, *because*, *oh*, *y'know*, and *I mean*. To Schiffrin, the coherence based approach towards DMs "combines interactional and variational approaches to discourse to analyze the roles of markers in co-constructed discourse" (Schiffrin et al., 2003, p. 60).

On the basis of her analysis (1987) she argues that *and* and *but* have both cohesive and structural roles; structural because they link two/more syntactic units such as clauses, phrases or verbs and cohesive because the interpretation of the whole conjunctive utterance depends on the combination of both conjuncts. According to Schiffrin's view *because* is used to indicate a relation of 'cause and result' while *so* shows a relation of premise and conclusion. (ibid, p. 191-203) She states that *now* is used to indicate the speaker's progression through a discourse. It is also used to indicate the upcoming shift in talk. *Then* is used to indicate the succession between the prior and upcoming talk. Schiffrin (ibid, p. 74) tackles *oh* and *well* differently in the sense that they operate on the informational and interactional levels of discourse structure respectively. She presents *oh* as a marker of information management. It is used to indicate old information recognition and new information receipt, the replacement and redistribution of information. It is used in repairs, questions, answers and acknowledgments. (p. 90-95). While *well* is indicator of request for elaboration and clarification (ibid, p. 120), *y'know* has two discursual functions; a marker of meta- knowledge about what speakers and hearers share and a marker of meta-knowledge about what is generally known. It is also used to indicate a situation in which the speaker knows that the hearer shares some knowledge about a particular piece of information (ibid, p. 268).

(5) A: *You study very hard these days.*

B: *O ye, y'know, "no bees no honey; no work no money?"*

I mean marks the speaker's orientation to two aspects of the meaning of talk: ideas and intentions. It is used to mark the speaker's upcoming modification of the ideas and intentions of the prior utterance (ibid, p. 296). Schiffrin's account of DMs concentrates more on the linguistic and structural role they play in maintaining discourse coherence through linking units of talk. She propounds that "markers select a meaning relation from whatever potential meanings are provided through the content of talk and then display that relations" (1987, P. 318). Therefore, the use of DM narrows down the number of potential interpretations which the speaker can draw from the utterance. The following table illustrates the possible effects these 11 English DMs have in the five-plane model of talk suggested by Schiffrin (1987).

Table1. *Planes of talk (adopted from Schiffrin 1987, p. 316)*

Exchange Structure (ES)	Action Structure (AS)	Ideational Structure (IDS)	Participation Framework(PF)	Information State (INS)
	<i>oh</i>		<i>oh</i>	<i>oh</i>
<i>well</i>	<i>well</i>	<i>well</i>	<i>well</i>	<i>well</i>
<i>and</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>and</i>		
<i>but</i>	<i>but</i>	<i>but</i>		
<i>Or</i>		<i>or</i>		
<i>So</i>	<i>so</i>	<i>so</i>	<i>so</i>	<i>so</i>
	<i>because</i>	<i>because</i>		<i>because</i>
		<i>now</i>	<i>now</i>	
	<i>then</i>	<i>then</i>		<i>then</i>
		<i>I mean</i>	<i>I mean</i>	<i>I mean</i>
<i>y'know</i>		<i>y'know</i>	<i>y'know</i>	<i>y'know</i>

As Table 1 shows DMs may work at more than one structural level of talk at once. In Schiffrin’s five-plane model, turn is the basic unit of the ES and *well, and, but, or, so* and *y’know* function in this level. The basic unit of AS is speech act and *oh, well, and, but, so, because* and *then* mark speech acts as one of their secondary functions. The basic unit of the IDS is proposition and *but, or, and, so, because, now* and *then* have their primary function on this plane, while *well, I mean* and *y’know* are presented as markers with secondary uses. Within participation framework relations between the speaker and his/her utterance are expressed and negotiated. *Well* and *I mean* are the primary markers to do this job, supported by the secondary uses of *oh, so, now* and *y’know*. At IS level, *oh, y’know* plus *well, so, because, then* and *I mean* help to manage and organize knowledge and meta-knowledge, what the speaker knows and what s/he assumes the hearer knows. At this level the focus is on the cognitive capacities of the speaker and hearer (cited in Muller 2005, p. 88-89). As Schiffrin concludes all members of the analyzed DMs have one primary function, signaling discourse structure on one of the five planes of talk. She further states that all of them can have a secondary function, signaling a different kind of structure on at least one other planes of talk. Although the DMs focused on by Schiffrin do not belong to a unified grammatical class but they are functionally related.

To the author, a salient criticism of Schiffrin’s study pertains to the quantity of the corpus she has based her analysis on. She uses the same chunks of transcriptions frequently to illustrate the use of yet another DM. When a sample is so small, making a quantitative statement or generalization seems senseless. Another problem with Schiffrin’s work is that although she defines DMs as “bracketing units”, she does not provide an explicit definition of what the ‘unit’ is. Furthermore, her model has been criticized for its limited validity and explanatory power. A noticeable gap, as Lenk (1998) argues, in Schiffrin’s five-planed model of talk is that it ceases to discriminate between the DMs. “While DMs can function on more than one structural level at once, how a hearer can be certain that his interpretation of that DM’s function in that particular instance is correct?” (p. 43). The uncertainty a hearer faces when trying to understand the function of a particular DM in context increases as all markers can function on all different planes of talk. Another criticism to her model is that “How discourse coherence is signaled for the hearer on a more global level”, i.e. how markers in certain positions might signal the relationships that go back to earlier parts of the discourse or project forward on the following discourse (p. 43). Another criticism comes from Kroon (1995) for whom Schiffrin’s five-planed discourse model lacks a clear definition and explanation of the components of discourse coherence.

3. FRASER’S CHARACTERIZATION OF DISCOURSE MARKERS

Fraser (1999) provides a relatively comprehensive definition of DMs:

“A class of lexical expressions that signal a relationship between the interpretation of the segment they introduce, S2, and the prior segment,S1.They have a core meaning which is procedural, not conceptual and their more specific interpretation is ‘negotiated’ by the context both linguistic and conceptual” (Fraser, 1999, p. 831).

Fraser’s definition of DMs explicitly points out to their characteristics as:

1. They have a core meaning and their specific meaning is negotiated by the context.

2. They signal a relationship between the interpretation of the segment they introduce, S2, and the prior segment, S1.

Figure 1 illustrates Fraser's categorization of meaning conveyed by different groups of pragmatic markers.

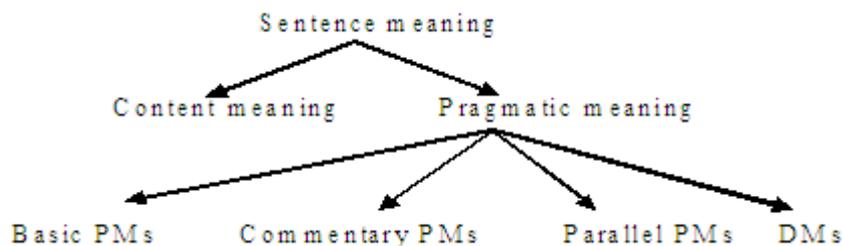


Figure1. Different types of pragmatic markers (Fraser, 1990)

The distinction between ‘content meaning’ and ‘pragmatic meaning’ proposed by Fraser refers to content meaning as “the literal interpretation of the sentence”, a moreover less explicit representation of some state of the world that the speaker intends to bring to the hearer’s attention while the pragmatic meaning is concerned with the speaker’s communicative intention, “the direct message the speaker conveys in uttering the sentence” (1990, p. 386). Fraser believes that pragmatic meaning is conveyed by four different sets of pragmatic markers; 1) basic pragmatic markers, 2) commentary pragmatic markers, 3) parallel pragmatic markers and 4) discourse markers which are discussed in detail in the following section. While Fraser makes a distinction between conceptual and procedural meanings of DMs, Andersen (2001) asserts that the conceptual and procedural distinction cannot be regarded as the defining criterion to characterize the DMs category.

As aforementioned, Fraser (1996) believes that discourse markers help the speaker to clarify the type of relationship s/he intends to convey between two segments. In other words, the procedural meaning of DMs contributes to the interpretation of message. However, they have no effect on the truth conditional content of proposition. This is shown in example 1. Clearly the removal of the italicized DM in this example will not affect the propositional content of the segment.

(Example1) Clair is a philosopher. *But* her husband is a soldier.

The only effect that the deletion of *but* between two propositions has is that the hearer/reader will be left with no guidance to the relationship between the two segments. Thus the ‘core meaning’ encoded by the DM provides the hearer/reader with the information about how “to interpret the message conveyed by the segment 2 (S2) Vis-a- Vis the interpretation of segment1 (S1)” (Fraser 1997, p. 302, 1999, p. 44). In his earlier work Fraser categorizes discourse markers as a subclass of ‘commentary pragmatic markers’. However, later in 1996 he considered discourse markers as a separate class of pragmatic markers. While viewing DMs as a subclass of pragmatic markers, Fraser has classified pragmatic markers into four categories (1996):

1. Basic pragmatic marker: It signals the force of the basic message, the illocutionary force the speaker intends to convey. (I *promise* to help you, I *regret* that.....)
2. Commentary pragmatic marker: It encodes another message that comments on the basic message. The following exemplify the different types of commentary pragmatic markers:
 - a. Assessment markers: *fortunately, sadly*
 - b. Manner – of - speaking markers: *frankly speaking, bluntly speaking*
 - c. Evidential markers: *certainly, conceivably*
 - d. Hearsay markers: *reportedly, allegedly*
 - e. Parallel pragmatic marker: It signals a message in addition to the basic message. The subcategories of parallel pragmatic markers along with examples presented below:
 - a. Deference markers: *Sir, Your honour*
 - b. Conversational management markers: *now, well, Ok*
3. Discourse marker: It signals the relationship between the basic message to the foregoing discourse: *so, and, but, anyway, although, however.....*

Fraser maintains that DMs contribute to the coherence of the text by indicating coherence relationships between units of talk. For instance *but* in example 2 indicates that the S2 and S1 cohere in relation to ‘contrast’.

(Example 2) Laura studied very hard. *But* she failed her exam.

While *so* in example 3 shows that S2 and S1 cohere in relation to causality.

(Example 3) He took the metro. *So* he arrived on time.

He (1999, p. 938) further argues that DMs do not have to signal any relationship between S1 and S2. A DM can relate the segment it introduces with any other previous segment in discourse which he calls ‘global coherence’ as contrasted to Schiffrin’s ‘local coherence’. In addition, the use of DMs makes the relationship between utterances explicit “By providing instruction to the hearer on how to interpret the utterance to which the DM is attached” (p. 186). Although there are over 100 DMs in English, Fraser proposes that he has found only four basic semantic relationships reflected in their use.

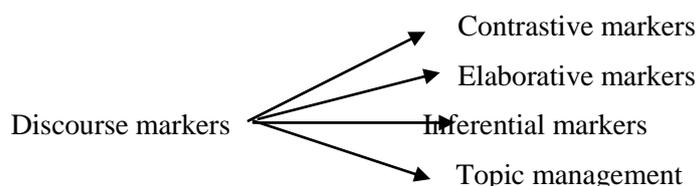


Figure2. Discourse markers typology (Fraser, 1999)

1. Contrastive markers signal that the utterance is in contrast to the propositional meaning of the preceding utterance, e.g. *but, however, still, yet*. He refers to three types of relationships contrastive DMs establish between the preceding and the succeeding propositions which have been illustrated in the following figures:

Type1: The succeeding proposition is in ‘contrast’ with the preceding one.

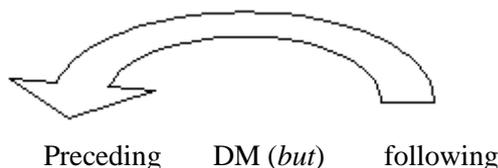


Figure3. Contrastive DM (type 1)

Type2: The following proposition ‘corrects’ the preceding one.

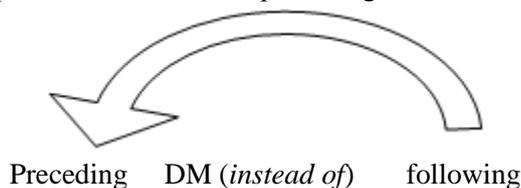


Figure4. Contrastive DM (type 2)

Type3:

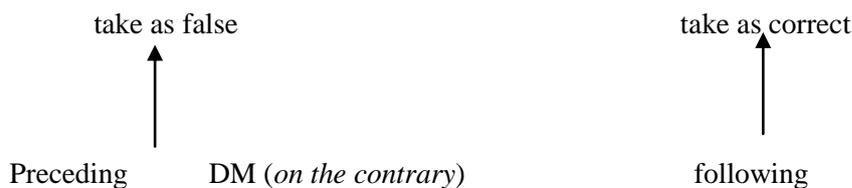


Figure5. Contrastive DM (type 3)

2. Elaborative Markers function as a refinement of some sort on the preceding discourse, e. g. *and, above all, also, in other words, in fact, moreover* (ibid, p. 188).
3. Inferential Markers signal that the force of the utterance is a conclusion which follows from the preceding discourse, e.g. *so, after all, therefore, thus* (ibid, p. 188).
4. Topic-change Markers signal a departure from the current topic, e.g. *by the way, before I forget....* (p. 187).

4. BRINTON'S DICHOTOMY OF DISCOURSE MARKERS' FUNCTIONS

What is at the heart of Brinton's proposed definition of DMs as "phonologically short items that have no or little referential meaning but serve pragmatic or procedural purpose" (2008, p. 1) is that DMs act mainly in the pragmatic/metadiscourse plane of talk and have little or no propositional contribution to the meaning of the discourse

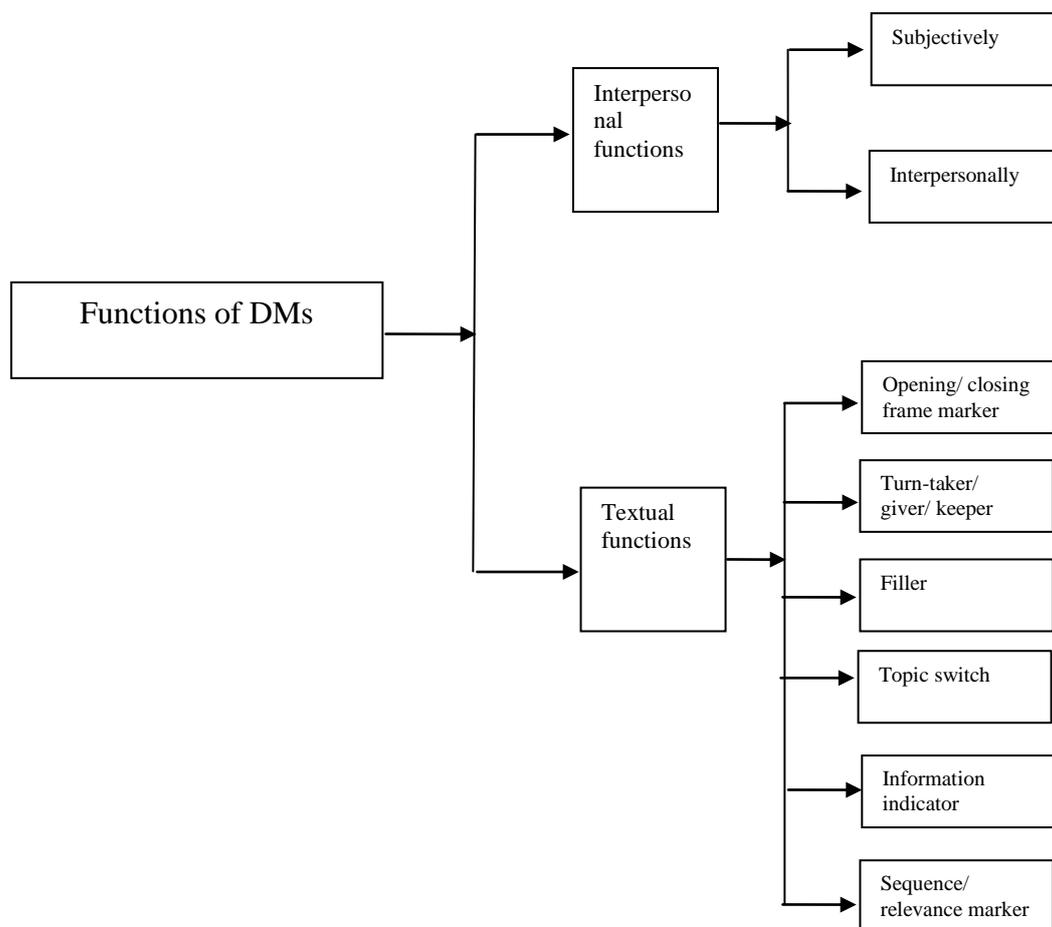


Figure6. Brinton's classification of DMs functions

Brinton proposes the following functions that DMs have in fulfilling the textual function in discourse.

1. To mark various kinds of boundaries (to initiate or end a discourse or to effect a shift in topic).
2. To assist in turn taking in oral discourse or chunking in written discourse.

According to Brinton (1996) the need to initiate and close discourse, to mark topic shifts, to indicate new and old information and to constrain the relevance of adjoining utterances are part of the textual functions of DMs. To signal topic change, to constrain the relevance of adjacent utterances, to elaborate or comment on a preceding utterance and self-correction are among the functions of DMs in textual domain (Yilmaz, 2004).

At the interpersonal level they are used

1. Subjectively to express attitude
2. Interactively to achieve intimacy between speaker and addressee.

From an interpersonal perspective, DMs are seen as vehicles contributing to the establishment and maintenance of relationships between the speaker and hearer. To show the relationship between the speaker and his/her orientation towards the produced discourse is considered an intrinsic feature of DMs. They are used as hedges to express uncertainty and as appeals to the hearer for confirmation. They could be used as a response or reaction to the preceding utterance as well

(Yilmaz, 2004). Bazzanella (1990) refers to politeness, face saving and indirectness as the inherent characteristics of everyday conversations which are involved in the interpersonal functions of DMs. Generally speaking, the interpersonal function is an intrinsic feature of DMs. In this sense they act as hedges/mitigator to soften the negative effects of upcoming discourse, as reactions, responses and relations built by the participants during talk- in interaction.

5. FEATURES OF DISCOURSE MARKERS

Although DMs cover a wide range of items from a variety of grammatical classes such as adverbs (frankly, well), lexical phrases (you know, I mean), conjunctions (but, since, and), filler words (oh), they share some features such as:

1. They are almost used in all languages (Lenk, 1998; Yilmaz, 2004).
2. They are syntactically independent (Schiffrin, 1987).
3. They are syntactically flexible, i.e. They may appear at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of an utterance. This flexibility contributes to their enormous usefulness and high frequency in discourse (Futji, 2001).
4. They do not affect the propositional meaning of utterance (Brinton, 1996; Schiffrin, 1987).
5. They make no contribution to the informational content of discourse.
6. They deal with the pragmatic aspects of discourse (Andersen, 2001; Fraser, 1990; Yilmaz, 2004).
7. They are meaningful but non-truth conditional (Lam, 2008, p. 29).
8. They are multifunctional (Fraser, 1990; Schiffrin, 1987; Yilmaz, 2004).
9. They are short, consisting of one to three syllables (Lenk, 1997).

Brinton(1996, p. 6) refers to DMs as lexical items with the following features: they are optional, difficult to translate, marginal in respect to word class, syntactically quite free, empty of lexical meanings and they do not have propositional meanings or grammatical functions. According to Brinton, DMs are characterized by their preponderant use in oral discourse, their predominantly (not exclusively) initial clause position, their high frequency of occurrence and their optional use. Schiffrin (2003, p.58) (1987a, p. 328) specifies the following conditions that would allow a word to be used as DM.

1. They are syntactically detachable.
2. They often occupy the initial position.
3. They cover a range of prosodic contours.
4. They operate at both local and global levels.
5. They operate on different planes of discourse.

She argues that neither the markers nor the discourse within which they function can be understood from one point of view alone, but only as an integration of structural, semantic, pragmatic and social factors. She refers to the role DMs have in accomplishing the integration needed for discourse coherence which she furthermore attributes to the multi functionality aspect of DMs. Lam (2008) discusses the properties of DMs under three categories as:

1. Necessary properties including non/little propositional meaning, indexicality and syntactically optional.
2. Common but non-defining properties including multi-functionality, non-truth conditionality.
3. Descriptive properties including positions in the utterance, syntactic diversity and orality.

6. PREVALENT FUNCTIONS OF DISCOURSE MARKERS

Discourse markers perform a variety of functions in discourse. Muller (2005, p. 9) refers to the most common functions of DMs as:

1. DMs initiate discourse.
2. DMs mark a boundary in discourse (shift/partial shift in topic).
3. DMs preface a response or a reaction.
4. DMs serve as fillers or delaying tactics.
5. DMs aid the speaker in holding the floor.
6. DMs affect an interaction or sharing between speaker-hearer.
7. DMs bracket the discourse either cataphorically or anaphorically.
8. DMs mark either foregrounded or backgrounded information
9. DMs index propositional relations (Schiffrin et al., 2003).

According to Croucher (2004, p. 40) DMs fulfill formal and informal functions. The formal functions of DMs are:

1. To indicate a turn in conversation (*you know, well*)
2. To identify a digression from the topic under discussion (*oh, by the way*)
3. To share a speaker's attitude/sentiment (*like*)
4. To frame general conversation

The informal functions of DMs are:

1. To fill pauses in conversation
2. To act as nervous glitches in speech
3. To act as a part of our collective lexicon

Andersen (1998, p. 147) suggests that DMs are used to mark coherence relations within the text, provide the hearer with processing instructions regarding possible interpretations, mark propositional/illocutionary force and mark interpersonal relations. Traugott (1995, p. 6) points out to the "meta textual work" DMs perform by allowing the speakers to display their evaluations not of the content of what is said but of the way it is put together. Fischer (2006) refers to a range of functions that is commonly attributed to DMs including; functions with respect to the turn-taking system, as an indicator of the discourse relations, as discourse structuring tools, as devices to manage talk, regulate the interpersonal relationships and show politeness. The review of specified functions for DMs in English and other languages, either core function or peripheral, can be used as a baseline to discuss DMs functions in the Persian context.

7. CONCLUSION

In order to continue the flow of talk smoothly, interactants employ various strategies and provide different kinds of clues to come to a mutual understanding at both interpersonal and textual levels. DMs are among those strategies employed to link the stretches of discourse together, mark discourse coherence (Schiffrin, 1987), restrict the scope of the hearer's interpretation of the discourse (Blakemore, 2002) and signal the relationship between the speaker and hearer as well as the relations among different parts of the discourse. Linguistic items from different class of words could function as DMs (for example: conjunctions, adverbs, verbal phrases). As a rule of thumb, DM is not a conjunction nor an adverb and/or a verbal phrase, although it can share some features of them.

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