

Discourse Markers and Lecturers' Gender

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Abstract

Now that discourse markers frequently appear in spoken languages and have a key role in every day conversations, it is important to study whether there is a gender difference in the usage of discourse markers. The present paper is a review of different definitions for the term "discourse marker" (DM) by various researchers based on their point of views. The variation in the definition of DMs is also an indication of DM's multifunctional feature. Meanwhile, on the basis of different scholars' viewpoints, the functions of discourse markers have been discussed. Finally, the role of gender on the type, use, and functions of DMs has been discussed on the basis of the findings of different research studies.

Keywords: Discourse marker, gender, lecture.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the tenets of human beings which distinguish him/her from animals is the ability to use language in the way we know, and one of the main purposes of using any language is to communicate. In fact, communication is viewed as a process of transferring thoughts from one person to another. This means that, "When we use language to say something to someone, we are intentionally communicating with that person" (Yule, 2006, p. 8). This communication can be about anything, ranging from feelings, ideas, thoughts, memories, and intentions to stories and anecdotes and even to scientific matters. Getting to the last one, when communication is about scientific matters, it is either between two people like two classmates, a teacher and a student, or it can be between a teacher and the whole class for the purpose of teaching. This is called a lecture which can occur at different levels, e.g., school or university, and when it is done at university level, it is called academic lecture (with its own characteristics) and it can be carried out in every academic field by university lecturers and professors to provide their students with the state of the art in their specific fields or it can be for the purpose of clarifying an ambiguous issue or to further students' knowledge in a specific area.

In the last 30 years or so, there has been a growing interest in studying academic lectures from different viewpoints as some believe "Lectures in their many forms, are the most commonly used methods for transferring information" (Rahimi Tehrani and VahidDastjerdi, 2012, p. 423), because of internationalization of higher education

both from the viewpoint of students and from that of teachers (Fortanet Gomez and BellésFortuño, 2005), and since lectures have "paradigmatic stature" (Waggoner, 1984, p. 9), or last but not least, because they are "the central ritual of the culture of learning" (Benson, 1994, p. 189). For the very same reasons, there have been several research projects on the use of the English language in academic discourse and its effect(s) on the way academic lectures are presented. Particularly, research studies on discourse markers and different aspects of lectures have made researchers interested in this area (e.g., Ädel, 2010; Chaudron and Richards, 1986; Christodoulidou, 2011; Fortanet Gomez and BellésFortuño, 2005; Kaveifard and Allami, 2011; Khedri, Ebrahimi, and Heng, 2013; and Rashidi and Alhosseini, 2012 to name but a few).

Despite researchers' interest in DMs, different scholars have employed different terms to call DMs and this shows the multifaceted functions performed by DMs in the organization of native speakers' spoken discourse (Shahbaz et al., 2013). Meanwhile, DMs have an indispensable role in oral interaction (Carter and McCarthy, 2006). Researchers define them differently since they view DMs from various viewpoints. That is why different scholars have assigned different names to them, such as 'discourse connectives' (Blakemore, 1987, 1992, 2002), 'semantic conjuncts' (Quirk et al., 1985), 'continuatives' (Halliday, 1994), 'pragmatic expressions' (Erman, 1987), 'pragmatic formatives' (Fraser, 1990), 'pragmatic markers' (Aijmer and Simon-Vandenberg, 2009; Andersen, 2001; Fraser, 1996; Schiffrin, 1987), 'pragmatic particles' (Tannen, 2007), 'filled pauses' (Swerts, 1998), 'discourse fillers' (NavasBrenes, 2005;

Watanabe, 2002), 'discourse operators' (Redeker, 1990), 'discourse particles' (Baker, 2010; Fischer, 2000; Jones, 1992), and last but not least, 'discourse markers' (Fox Tree and Schrock, 2002; Mesthrie, 2001). Consequently, different definitions for discourse markers have been put forth. From one point of view, we can go with Schiffrin's (1987) definition that discourse markers are "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk" (p. 31). With the phrase, 'sequential dependence', she means that the markers work on the discourse level. From another point of view, we can say that discourse markers are words or phrases that are relatively syntax-independent and do not change the meaning of the sentence. Similarly Nosek (1987) believes that "Discourse markers are constitutive elements that are semantically void. The elements that we now term 'discourse markers' are situated outside the Theme" (Nosek, 1987, pp. 159-160). This definition partly agrees with what Richards and Schmidt (2010) state for discourse markers regarding the 'semantically void' nature of discourse markers as "Expressions that typically connect two segments of discourse but do not contribute to the meaning of either" (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p. 162). Too, in line with Richards and Schmidt is Andersen (2001) who believes that "they are necessarily external to propositions and do not contribute to truth conditions" (p. 38).

Similar to the definition of DMs, functions of DMs have also been taken into consideration from different perspectives. Some researchers have claimed that understanding the role of discourse markers and the relationship between different parts of the text is essential for the comprehension of lectures (Chaudron and Richards, 1986; Rido, 2010; Shahbaz et al., 2013; Smit, 2009). Another group of researchers are concerned with features of discourse organization. (Chaudron, 1983; Chaudron and Richards, 1986; Christodoulidou, 2011; Othman, 2010; Eslami-Rasekh et al., 2012, to name but a few). Last but not least, some other researchers believe that "DMs (such as 'okay', 'all right', articulated pauses, strategic silence) can be used in lectures to frame transactions and exchanges" (Rose, 1998, p. 13). According to him, DMs can take the role of shaping exchanges and transactions in lectures. Too, it has been discovered that DMs perform on different functional levels depending on various pedagogical aims, although one should know that it is very much difficult to categorize discourse markers based on their function. (Christodoulidou, 2011).

To narrow it down to classroom context, a large number of research projects have been carried out on the functions of DMs in the presentation of lecture as an academic genre. (BellésFortuño, 2006; Fraser, 1999; Holzschuh, 2013; Jucker, 1993; Lee, 2011; Lee and Hsieh, 2004; Li and Xiao, 2012; Liao, 2008; Othman, 2010; Shahbaz et al., 2013; Trihartanti and Damayanti, 2013; and Zarei, 2013 to name but a few). As an example, Fraser (1999) studied discourse markers from a grammatical-pragmatic point of view and concluded by presenting what appears to be the major classes of DMs according to their function. Meanwhile, BellésFortuño (2006) carried out a

contrastive study between English and Spanish languages in using different types of DMs in academic lectures and came to the conclusion that there is a difference between the type and amount of DM use between American and Spanish languages regarding university lectures and this leads to different rhetorical strategies used by English and Spanish university lecturers which may be either because of the difference between the two languages or due to the difference between the culture of the two languages.

Apart from the role of DMs, there are other important issues such as gender which in one way or another might affect the quality of lecture presentation. Few researchers (Koczogh and Furko, 2011) state that gender has no role in the type of DMs used in lectures by saying there are no substantial quantitative differences in the DM use of men and women (p. 10), most others working in this area believe that gender influences the quality of lecture presentation (Alami and Sabbah, 2012; Chun, 2008; Escalera, 2006; Kim and Kang, 2011; Kyratzis and Ervin Tripp, 1999; Liao, 2008; Matei, 2011; Mei, 2006; Winkler, 2008, to name but a few), but each of them sees this influence from a specific perspective. As an example, Escalera (2006) believes that, "There is gender difference in the use of DMs, but this difference would not be significant when discourse marker use is examined within a given activity context such as role-play" (Escalera, 2006, p. 2490). However, Mei (2006) has a different opinion by stating, "In oral English, men and women speak English in different ways based on different employment of discourse markers. Women generally discuss their personal feelings more than men. Men appear to prefer non-personal topics such as sport and news" (pp. 66-67). Nevertheless, Chun (2008) looks at the issue from the perspective of discourse marker type and states, "There are some significant differences found in the use of inferential and emphatic markers. Female students used more emphatic markers, while male students tend to use more inferential markers" (Chun, 2008, pp. 33-34). Too, Croucher (2004) believes that "The effect of gender on DM use varies with the type of discourse markers" (p. 44). However, he continues by saying that, "There is no significant difference between speakers' gender regarding their usage of two of the markers (um, uh), but there is a significant gender difference in the usage of the other two markers (like, you know)" (Croucher, 2004, p. 44).

Winkler (2008), too, agrees with both Chun (2008) and Croucher (2004) but looks at the issue from a broader perspective and believes that there is a great difference "between the amount and also type of DMs used by females and males" (p. 69). Nonetheless, Liao (2008) believes that there is more gender difference between non-native male and female speakers when she says, "Studies show gender differences in the use of DMs by NNSs" (Liao, 2008, p. 14). Still, Matei (2011), has a different idea because she looks at the issue from pragmatic function of DMs when she says, "Variables like gender influence the main pragmatic functions that literature has ascribed to markers" (p. 219). In her idea, "It is the core pragmatic meaning of DMs that establish a general pattern of use" (Matei, 2011, p. 219). In line with Matei (2011), Alami and

Sabbah (2012) believe that "The difference between Persian men-women discourse in terms of DMs usage is of functional type rather than quantitative where the gender of the speaker does seem to be an influencing factor in DMs usage" (Alami andSabbah, 2012, p. 157).This means that, function of DMs affects what type of DM different genders choose in their discourse.

And finally is Kim and Kang (2011) who look at the emotional aspect of gender role in speakers' choice of DMs and notes, "Women respond more emotionally than men, and use more discourse markers than them" (p. 31). Meanwhile, they add that the type of speech determines men and women's choice of DMs by saying, "There are differences between men and women's private speech, especially discourse markers" Kim and Kang, 2011,P. 32).

However, there is no consensus among researchers regarding the role of gender in the quality of lecture presentation. For instance, Vanda and Péter (2011) claim that, "There are no substantial quantitative differences in the DM use of men and women" (p. 10). In their idea, gender has no influence on the type of DMs used by speakers. In line with Vanda and Péter (2011) is Schleef (2008) who has the same idea and believes that no role can be assigned to gender in the choice of DMs. In his words, "Gender plays no role at all in speakers' use of DMs" (p. 78). However, Beeching (2002) has a different idea about the role that gender plays in the use of DMs. In her opinion, gender has a 'preferential' role rather than an 'exclusive' one in what type of DM to use. This means that there are "gender-preferential rather than gender-exclusive difference" (p. 6) regarding the use of DMs.

2. FINAL REMARKS

Taking a second look various conceptions of the term DM presented by different scholars reveals a lot of discrepancies among the findings by different researchers and also no consensus among them as to the role of gender in DM use. Some have deemed that gender plays an important role in the type of DMs used, while others believe that gender has no role on the use of DMs. In the meantime, some researchers believe that if there is any difference between different of gender on discourse marker use, this different is more qualitative rather than quantitative, whereas other researchers consider this difference more quantitative rather than qualitative. Still others deem the role of gender on DM use as preferential rather than exclusive. To put it in a nutshell, there are a lot of discrepancies among scholars with no consensus as to the effect of gender difference on the use of DMs and so, more research is required in order to get to a more comprehensive and more fruitful result..

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