An Analysis of Discourse Markers in Online Chat Discourse

Asst. Prof. Dr. Nashwan Mustafa Al-Sa'ati
Department of English
College of Arts / University of Mosul

Abstract:

This study investigates the types, functions, frequency and importance of discourse markers (henceforth, DMs) in thirty private synchronous online Yahoo chat texts. The data are drawn from same- and cross- sex dyadic interactions. Adopting Schiffrin's (1987) and Fraser's (1999) models, the study seeks to address certain research questions such as how are the forms of DMs in online chat discourse realized; which DMs are the most frequent; Does gender type play a role in the chatters' use of DMs, etc.

Certain hypotheses are formulated out of which DMs are frequently used in online chat. Second, there are differences in the use of DMs in same- and cross-sex dyadic interactions; it is also hypothesized that conjunction is the most frequent DM in all types of interactions; and that some DMs are informal while others are quite formal.

The results of the study match the hypotheses raised. Thus, it has been found, among the concluding remarks, that there are frequent use of DMs by chatters and that there are gender differences in the use of DMs though conjunction has the highest percentage.

Key words: Text; discourse markers; Internet (online) chat discourse

تحليل علامات الخطاب في محادثات الانترنت

أ.م.د.نشوان مصطفى الساعاتي
قسم اللغة الانكليزية
كلية الآداب / جامعة الموصل

ملخص البحث:

تبحث هذه الدراسة أنواع ووظائف ونسبة الاستخدام وكذلك أهمية علامات الخطـــاب فـــي ثلاثين نصا من نصوص الانترنت الآنية الخاصة على موقع ياهو. وتم جمع البيانات عـــن طريـــق الاتصالات الثنائية المتماثلة والمختلفة الجنس. واعتمادا على نموذجي شـــيفرن (1987) وفريـــزر (1999)، تحاول الدراسة الإجابة عن بعض الأسئلة منها ماهي علامات الخطـــاب فـــي محادثـــات الانترنت ؛ وماهي علامات الخطاب الأكثر تكرارا وهل يلعب جنس المتحدثين دورا في اســـتخدام علامات الخطاب، الخ .

يفترض الباحث ان علامات الخطاب تستخدم بكثرة في الانترنت. وان هناك اختلافــا فـــي استخدام علامات الخطاب في الاتصالات الثنائية المتماثلة والمختلفة الجنس. فضلا عن ذلك، فــان الربط هو أكثر علامات الخطاب استخداما في كل أنواع الاتصال، وان بعض علامات الخطاب هي غير رسمية والبعض الآخر رسمي تماما.

وقد أيدت النتائج الفرضيات المطروحة. فقد وجد، من بين النتائج، ان هنالك استخداما كثيرا لعلامات الخطاب وهناك أيضا اختلافات في الاستخدام حسب الجنس بالرغم من أن الربط حقق النسبة الأعلى في الاستخدام..

Introduction:

Discourse markers play a crucial role in the organization of native speaker discourse. However, they do not change the truth conditions of the propositions in the utterance. That is why, the semantic relationship between the elements that DMs are realized in will remain the same even if the DM is removed (Chetia, 2013: 2). Besides, they can facilitate listeners' comprehension and help smooth spontaneous interaction between speakers (Liao, 2008:2).

A great deal of research on DMs has been carried out during the past two decades (e.g. Schourop, 1985; Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1990; Aijmer, 2002;). Although other terms such as ''discourse particles'', ''connectives'', ''pragmatic expressions'' or ''pragmatic markers'' are preferred by some researchers, the term ''discourse markers'' is more commonly employed by researchers who work on English discourse (Liao, 2008:2).

Moreover, if a chatter, as far as online discourse is concerned, wants to sound more like a native speaker, one way is to adopt the conventional expressions used by native speakers in society and DMs are one of these expressions since they are, as mentioned earlier, common in everyday native speech. Thus, if a chatter omits, for example "well", the likely reaction will be that he/she is dogmatic, impolite, boring, awkward to talk to, etc. (Svartvik, 1980:171).

2. The Problem

Recently, a number of studies have examined the DMs used by native speakers of a variety of languages (Liao, 2008:3). However, relatively few studies, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, have explored the use of DMs by online chatters.

Since the use of DMs is common in native speakers' everyday spoken discourse, we may assume that DMs also require special attention in Internet chat discourse. Thus, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. How are chatters' forms of DMs realized in comparison with everyday language?
2. Which DMs are the most frequent in online chat discourse?
3. What is the role of gender in the chatters' use of DMs?

3. Hypotheses

Based on the research questions, the study hypothesizes that:

1. DMs are frequently used in online chat.
2. Conjunction, as a DM, has the highest percentage among the other markers in all types of interactions.
3. Dyadic same- and cross-sex interactions reflect differences in the use of DMs.
4. Some DMs are informal while others are quite formal.

4. Aims of the Study

Adopting Schiffrin's (1987) and Fraser's (1999) models, the present study is an account of the use of DMs and the implications they have with respect to their function for cohesion, coherence and continuity of private synchronous Internet chat discourse. It aims at illustrating how DMs can be a notable linguistic variable within Internet chat or within CMC register.

Thus, the study focuses on showing the types, functions, frequency and importance of using DMs in Internet chat highlighting the effect of the machine medium on some features of the conversational structure.

It should be mentioned that for its analysis, the study has adopted the models mentiond above because their authors have presented a detailed account of DMs and the models suit our study.

5. Data Collection

The data is elicited from yahoo synchronous private chats. It is based on the interaction of chatters in three gender categories, viz. male-male,

female-female and male-female. All of the participants are 24-30 year students at the Department of English, College of Arts, University of Mosul with a total number of sixty students.

To elicit the most authentic speech, the data were taken without the chatters' knowledge that they were being tested. Ten conversations were recorded for each type of interaction; each one of them took 10 minutes on different topics such as talking about the materials that the students study, talking about exams, parties, friendship, girlfriends, students' behaviour inside class, business and any other personal experience they were willing to share. Therefore, the topics can be considered to be relatively informal.

6. Discourse Markers: Definitions

Swan (1980:1) defines a DM as "a word or an expression which shows the connection between what is being said and the wider context". For him, it is something that a) connects a sentence to what comes before or after, or b) indicates a speaker's attitude to what he is saying. For his part, Bussman (1984: 39) argues that DMs aid communicators in linguistic or conversational consistency and coherence. He further contends that the use of DMs helps speakers develop language skills, feel more comfortable about their conversational skills, and allows speakers to collect their thoughts before officially speaking. This is supported by Halliday (1985: 49) who points out that they convey two types of information: attitudinal comments of the speaker and information about the connections between utterances.

Operationally, Schiffrin (1987:31) defines DMs as sequentially dependent elements which brackets units of talk. As for Redeker (1991: 1168), he calls them "discourse operators" and defines them as "a word or phrase, for instance a conjunction, adverbial, comment clause, interjection that is uttered with the primary function of bringing to listener's attention a particular kind of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context". For his part, Fraser (1998: 302) defines DMs as linguistic items used by speakers to facilitate the interpretation of utterances by providing contextual information easy to decode which will be used by the hearer to enrich the sentence meaning. He believes that DMs have variant degrees of semantic meaning; they are utterance-initial; and they can signal a discourse relationship or show a writer's or a speaker's attitude. He adds that they are not elements of the clause structure; they work from outside the clause, which is frequently marked by the use of commas in writing or by a pause after them in speaking. For Schiffrin (2001:20), DMs are also known as "words or short lexicalized phrases" that organize texts. They help to create 'cohesion' and 'coherence' in a given text by establishing a relationship between the various ideas that are expressed within the text.

To sum up, DMs are utterance-initial words. They show discourse relationship or the writer's (or speaker's) attitude to what he/she is saying. They facilitate the explanation of utterances and help in creating

conversational coherence. Besides, they are frequently marked by the use of commas in writing or by a pause after them in speaking.

7. Discourse Markers: Previous Studies

Since the late 1980's, DMs have been studied in a variety of languages and examined in a variety of genres and interactive contexts. But, for a long time, English was considered a language that lacked particles (Lenk, 1998: 15). However, subsequent studies of DMs in English have pointed out that this is indeed not the case (Chetia, 2013: 2). Schiffrin (1987) formulized the study of DMs by observing various types of conversations. She concluded that each marker has various functions, depending on the speaker's situation.

Spratt (1992: 423- 439) found that the use of DMs adds to a child's discourse complexity or ability. He further revealed how, during disputes and times of heightened tension or excitement, the use of DMs dramatically increases. Besides, studies on the discourse organization of children illustrate how the use of markers becomes more sophisticated with age. At first, DMs are used at the local level, signifying upcoming talks or turns into a new subject. This level is known as the "simple or one- dimensional level". Later, the use of DMs become more advanced and the markers are used on a global level, covering larger units of discourse, such as returns to prior topics of discussions (ibid). In his dissertation, Johnson (1996) discussed how "OK" and related DMs in ESL grammar classes serve as linguistic soothers or verbal adapters. While learning English, Johnson argues, students use the markers to fill in gaps in speech and comprehension.

Furthermore, Sankoff et al. (1997, cited in Liao, 2008: 4) investigated the use of DMs in English and French by English learners of French as a second language in Montreal. They found that learners tended to use DMs less frequently in their L2, i.e. French than in their native language, i.e. English. What is more, the form, the frequency and the function of DMs have been investigated in Croatian L1 Italian learners (Nigoević/Sučić, 2001, cited in Marco and Leone, 2012: 2). The research relies on data collected during interviews and shows that advanced learners of Italian as L2 use different DMs such as fillers, mitigating devices, agreement/ assessment and turn-taking signals.

Trillo (2002, cited in Liao, 2008: 3) examined the use of DMs in English by native and non- native speakers, children and adults. He concluded that native and non- native children speakers show a similar pattern in their use of DMs, whereas non- native adult speakers fossilize in their L2 pragmatic development due to the lack of DM instruction. For Fuller (2003, cited in Liao, 2008: 4), she compared the use of DMs by native speakers and non- native speakers in different contexts, viz. interviews and conversations. Her findings supported all the previous studies on the use of DMs by non- native speakers in that non- native speakers use fewer DMs. However, her results indicated that there was a higher rate of the use of "you know" by non-

native speakers than the rate by native speakers. The analysis of functions, types and positions of different DMs used by Swedish learners of Italian as a FL conducted by Bradel (2004, cited in Marco and Leone, 2012: 2) showed that the most frequent non- lexical DMs (e.g. eh, hm, mhm) are produced either in turn- initial positions or for keeping the turn. Furthermore, they were employed to request clarification and to draw attention. For her part, Mu¨ller (2005, cited in Liao, 2008: 4) compared American native speakers of English with German non- native speakers of English in which participants retell and discuss a silent movie in a university setting. She distinguished individual functions for each DM and discussed both the linguistic and non- linguistic factors that might influence the frequency of DMs. Her findings showed that native speakers and non- native speakers prefer different DMs but there were differences in the usage of the individual functions.

In addition, Fung and Carter (2007, cited in Liao, 2008: 4) compared the production of DMs by native speakers, collected from a corpus of spoken British English, with non- native speakers, collected from a corpus of classroom discourse in Hong Kong. They found a considerable discrepancy in the use of DMs, in particular at a very restricted level and with limited functions. As for Hellermann and Vergun (2007, cited in Liao, 2008: 4), they focused on adult immigrants as beginning learners of English, a population with chances to develop their English in their daily working lives. They suggested that more highly proficient students demonstrated more use of DMs and they also appeared to be more acculturated to the English- speaking cultures.

Moreover, a previous research by Marco and Leone (2012) on computer-mediated communication employing Skype, a Voice Over Internet Protocol software, has confirmed that non- lexical DMs are more frequent in less proficient speakers and that upper- intermediate Italian L2 speakers use a large variety of lexical and non- lexical DMs, in particular assessment and acknowledgment signals. Another recent study on DMs investigated the use of "OK" in service interactions between employees and their customers. It was concluded that "OK" serves a specific linguistic purpose in interactions, viz. it releases the addressee to take the next step in the dialogue (Chetia, 2013: 7).

To conclude, DMs were widely investigated in various languages, genres and contexts. For example, they were studied in child discourse and ESL classes. Thus, it has been found that DMs have different forms and functions which depend on the speaker's situation. For instance, it has been shown that certain types of DMs are used more than others and that some of them appear in different positions of the turn. In addition, DMs indicate prior and upcoming talk, fill in gaps in speech, request clarification, etc. In terms of frequency, DMs are proved to be used less frequently in L2 (i.e. by non-native speakers) than in native language unless students are advanced learners.

8. The Model Adopted

For our analysis, the current study adopts an eclectic model, namely Schiffrin (1987) and Fraser (1999). This is due to the fact that apart from giving a detailed account of the subject and the two models suit our study, they are similar in that both argue for a coherence- based account of DMs. That is, DMs convey coherence relationships between units of talk. Besides, for both, DMs do not form a syntactic class but made out of different classes.

The two models, however, differ in that for Schiffrin, DMs are like adjacent units of talk (this is known as the local coherence) but for Fraser, DMs need not link two adjacent units of talk. That is, DMs can relate the segment they introduce to any other previous segment (this is known as the global coherence). In addition, Fraser argues that DMs have semantic core meaning which is not conceptual but rather procedural. That is, DMs work as procedures that provide the hearer/ reader with information on how to relate between the interpretation of S2 and that of S1 and can be deleted without affecting the propositional content of the segment. Let us look at the following example:

*John felt tired. **After all**, he did not sleep all the night*

The use of "after all" guides the hearer/ reader to recognize that the message expressed by S2 is coherent as premise with respect to the conclusion expressed by S1. However, if deleted, the hearer/ reader will be left with no guide to the relationship between the two segments.

8.1 Schiffrin's Account of Discourse Markers

Schiffrin (1987) gives a detailed analysis of twelve DMs in English: **and, but, so, or, because, well, now, then, oh, well, you know** and **I mean**. The data that Schiffrin used to analyze these DMs are based on her sociolinguistic corpus which is composed of tape-recorded interviews with ordinary speakers. It consists of long transcribed speech units taken from these interviews.

Schiffrin maintains that DMs can function on different levels of discourse structure (linguistic or non-linguistic). They can operate on the 'ideational' (informational) structure in the sense that they indicate relations between ideas in discourse, i.e. they mark the organization of ideas in discourse. For instance, a DM such as **'but'** indicates that what follows is in contrast with what precedes. She adds that DMs such as **'and, or, so** and **because**' can indicate three types of relations that contribute to the configuration of idea structures: cohesive relations, topic relations and functional relations. She believes that other DMs, such as " **now, you know** and **I mean**" can also operate on other levels, viz. the participation framework and information state (discourse exchange and interactional structure) in the sense that they play a role in controlling the conversation between speakers and hearers.

Furthermore, Schiffrin argues that DMs contribute to the coherence of discourse through, as mentioned earlier, relating different components of talk in the sense that the interpretation of any component is dependent on the interpretation of the other. Since coherence is the result of integration among different components of talk, any device which simultaneously locates an utterance within several emerging contexts of discourse automatically has an integrative function. That is, if a marker acts like an instruction to consider an upcoming utterance, then the result is a type of integration between the components of talk. This is, in turn, achieved when the speaker focuses on prior text within an information state and simultaneously views that utterance within a particular action structure (ibid: 330).

8.2 Fraser's Account of Discourse Markers

Fraser (1999: 902) defines a discourse marker as a class of lexical expressions drawn primarily from the syntactic classes of conjuncts, adverbs, prepositional phrases, interjections and particles. He adds, they signal a relationship between the interpretation of the segment they introduce and the prior segment as well as a writer's or a speaker's attitude. He believes, discourse markers have variant degrees of semantic meaning. They are utterance-initial. However, he points out that researchers have agreed that DMs are lexical expressions that relate discourse segments, but they have disagreed on how they are defined and what functions they carry. For him, researchers are even unable to agree on the grammatical category of DMs or how to delimit their class or even what types of meaning these markers express.

9. Data Analysis

DMs are realized in various grammatical categories including conjunctions, adverbs, particles and prepositional phrases:

9.1 Conjunctions

In a conversation between two females, talking about a party, **but** is used by the second speaker to refer to something unpleasant. The use of "but" in this exchange signals a contrast. That is, what follows is in opposition to what precedes:

    A: The party was so interesting
    *B: I know that **but** our generator.... you know what? Forget it*
    A: I will talk about it tomorrow because I know you are busy

Besides, in another conversation between two interactants where they are talking about an exam, the discourse marker **because** is used by the first speaker to express a reason or an excuse for him to end the discussion since he has to study:

    *A: I am sorry but I ll go now **because** I should study*
    B: be free

9.2 Adverbs

The analysis, as mentioned earlier, shows that DMs are not drawn from a specific grammatical class, but rather from other classes. Hence, they can be time deictics, viz. **now** and **then**.

Time deictics can be shown in the following extracts between two chatters, where, in the first, they are talking about business, and in the second, they are talking about their meeting the next day:

> *A: anyhow it is hard to be jobless*
> *B: yes that's it* **now**[1]
> *A: O.K*
> --
> *A: when will we meet?*
> *B: In 12 is it good for you or not*
> *A: yes very good,* **then** *I will see you tomorrow*

9.3 Particles

As DMs, particles are realized as **ok, you know,** and **I mean**. In the following excerpt between two females talking about friendship, **ok** is used by the second speaker to acknowledge the peceding turn and to initiate a movement towards closing the topic:

> *A: We 'll continue at 9:00 o'clock*
> *B:* **OK***, until that time I hope to enjoy your time*
> *A: thank you and bye*

Chetia (2013: 7) believes that various functions have been attached to "OK" depending on its position within an utterance. Hence, at the beginning of a turn, it expresses agreement, and can also indicate acknowledgement of the preceding utterance. "OK" in second position following "yes" emphasizes the agreement which is expressed by "yes". However, that role, he adds, depends on the intonation of the utterance. For example, "Yes, OK" (spoken with a sigh) indicates reluctant agreement or consent. On the other hand, "Yes, OK" (spoken with stress on "OK") indicates impatience with the interlocutor.

Other markers, viz. **you know** and I **mean** have been used on the informational level of discourse structure. Let us look at the following conversation between two males where one of them is talking about his story with his girlfriend:

> *A: you always find an answer of everything*
> *B:* **you know***, I ....*

The DM **"you know"** in the previous excerpt is used to make the information to be told by the second speaker more salient.

---

[1] It should be mentioned that the data are presented with the same mistakes committed by the chatters without any correction by the researcher.

It should be noticed that Schiffrin (1987) suggests that **"you know"** is used frequently in narratives because it allows the speaker to solicit the hearer affirmation, helps the hearer to filter through the story and then creates a joint focus on the speaker's provided information.

Additionally, in another conversation between two chatters where they are talking about A's behaviour within class, the use of **"I mean"** as a DM is highlighted as an indicator for showing clarification:

> A: *Sometimes you behave irrationally*
> B: *What do you mean?*
> A: ***I mean*** *you always comment on everything*

For Schiffrin (1987), one common function of **"I mean"** is that it is used as a marker of a speaker's modification, expansion or clarification of the prior utterance.

9.4 Prepositional Phrases (PP)

It is not surprising to find few cases of DMs in the form of a prepositional phrase. This can be shown in the following conversation between two females, where one of them requests the other to come to college and the PP **"in fact"** is used by the second speaker as a signal for expressing her opinion:

> A: *why you don't come to the college today?*
> B: ***In fact***, *I was feel so tired*

10. Discussion and Conclusions

The present study is a step towards uncovering the nature of DMs used by Internet chatters. It is also an attempt to determine how the use of DMs by chatters depends on gender differences. Thus, the conclusions of the study give a detailed picture about the use of DMs among all the groups of chatters as well as the variations in the levels of competence across the different groups.

In fact, the results match the hypotheses raised. Thus, throughout this study, it has been found that Iraqi students chatters know DMs and how to use them functionally through their chat with one another. The results suggest that the use of each DM is acquired by the chatters in different degrees since they have displayed variation in their use of DMs. It has also been found that the most frequently used DMs among the chatters are: and, but, because (as conjunctions), now, then (as adverbs), OK, you know, I mean (as particles). Apart from these DMs, the chatters are seen to have used another DM occasionally; it is "in fact" (as a prepositional phrase).

Moreover, the conjunctions: "and, but and because" are seen to be used by chatters to emphasize a contrast, and to express a reason for ending a discussion, respectively. As for particles, and adverbs, the chatters used: OK, you know, I mean, now and then to make something salient, to clarify or give detail of an idea, to introduce a new topic and to end a discussion,

respectively. Finally, the prepositional phrase "in fact" is used to signal an opinion just following it. The analysis, therefore, reveals that the DMs in online chat serve as connectors between what has already been said and what is going to be said , express speakers' attitude and aid successful communication. It should be noticed that the chatters have used these DMs turn initially, medially and in turn final position.

Gender differences are also shown to be prevailed in the use of DMs; then DMs may be important indicators to gender differences in communication within this virtual community. Thus, it has been found that there are differences in frequency in the use of DMs among the three types of interaction. The female conversations proved to have the highest proportion in the use of DMs. In particular, DMs in the female-female conversations got (52.734%), but the male-male conversations got (47.124%), and the male-female conversations got (43.56%), However, conjunction, as a DM has been used more than the other types of DMs in all the types of interactions.

Finally, it seems that the participants' styles play an important role in the choice of DMs. That is why, some other DMs which the researcher see in everyday spoken discourse are not found in online chat discourse, for example **'like'**, **'yeah'** and **'well'** which may be perceived as inappropriate in on-line chat discourse or they might not have been fully acquired by chatters.

11. Recommendations

It is recommended that:

1. Students have to learn more about DMs because there is, almost, no conversation which does not have one of these markers.

2. The teaching of composition, conversation and essay has to urge students about using them and the way they are used.

12. Suggestions for Further Studies

1. A further research is needed to investigate the possible effect of L1 transfer on the use and frequency of DMs.

2. Other studies may look at variables that might affect the use of DMs such as the level of proficiency, length of the study of English, native speaker contact, and so forth.

References

Aijmer, K. (2002). *English Discourse Particles*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Bussman, R.(1984). *The Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*. New York: Oxford Up.

Chetia, B. (2013). "Discourse markers in written English texts in a multilingual setting: A comparative study of high school English in the schools of Assam", *Language in India*, 13(9): 1-28.

Fraser, B. (1990). "An approach to discourse markers", *J. of Pragmatics*,14: 383-395.

_____(1998). "Contrastive discourse markers in English". In: A.Jucker and B. Ziv, eds.: *Discourse Markers*. London: John Benjamin's publishing company, 301-326.

_____ (1999). "What are discourse markers?", *J. of Pragmatics*, 31:931-952.

Halliday, M. (1985). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold..

Johnson, A. (1996). *"Okay" and Related Discourse Markers in an ESL Grammar Class*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Southern Illinois University.

Lenk, U. (1998). "Discourse markers and global coherence in conversation", *J. of Pragmatics*, 30: 245-257.

Liao, S. (2008). "Variation in the use of discourse markers by Chinese teaching assistants in the US", 1-30.<www>http// www.google.com//

Marco, A. and P. Leone (2012). "The use of discourse markers in L2 in face-to-face vs. computer- mediated- communication settings",1-3 <www> http// www.google.com//

Redeker, G. (1991). "Linguistic Markers of Discourse Structure",*Linguistics*, 29(6): 1139-1172.

Schiffrin, D. (1987). *Discourse Markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____ (2001). "Discourse markers: Language, meaning and context". In: D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen and H. Hamilton, eds.: *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell: 54-59.

Schourup, L. (1985). *Common Discourse Particles in English Conversation*. New York: Garland.

_____ (1999). "Discourse markers", *Lingua* 3(4), 227-265.

Spratt, R. (1992). "Children's use of discourse markers in disputes: Form-function relations and discourse in child language", *Discourse Processes*, 15, 423-439.

Svartvik, J. (1980). "Well in conversation". In: S. Greenbaum and G. Leechand J. Svartvik, eds.: *Studies in English Linguistics*. London: Longman: 167- 177.

Swan, M. (1980). *Practical English Usage*. New York: Oxford University press .