

1 The Development of Discourse Markers

An Introduction

1.1 Discourse Markers

Discourse markers (henceforth: DMs) are widely believed to be more of a peripheral phenomenon of language use, and even more so of language structure.¹ Referred to in some earlier work as “disfluencies,” “filled pauses,” “fumbles,” “pleonasm,” “signals,” “signs of poor elocution,” “symptoms,” and the like, they tend to be discussed in grammatical treatments only marginally, if at all. Oxford linguist Max Müller (1861: 346, 352) argued in the nineteenth century that DMs and the like “are playthings, not the tools of language,” and this is a view that in some form or other is still found today. What tends to be ignored in many academic and non-academic discussions is that DMs play an important role in linguistic communication, especially but not only in spoken language use, belonging to the most frequently used linguistic expressions in many languages.

The important role that discourse markers play in linguistic communication can also be seen in the fact that it may affect socio-cultural behavior beyond linguistic discourse. For example, in some parts of the world, specific DMs have assumed emblematic functions as signals of group identity. In contemporary Korean, the DM *makilay* and a few related forms are very popular among youngsters – to the extent that between 2011 and 2017 it was chosen as the name of a children’s TV show, the *Makilay Show* (Rhee 2013).

An example of a perhaps even more conspicuous role played by a DM as an emblem of social and cultural identity can be found in the East African country Kenya. The Kalenjin language is one of the major languages of this country, spoken by several million people. This language did not exist prior to World War II. There was a group of closely related “dialects,” each with its own name and cultural identity but with no name in common. In the 1940s, there emerged an awareness of their linguistic and cultural unity among the speakers of these

¹ For a definition of “discourse marker,” see (7) of Section 1.1.2. The term (linguistic) “discourse” refers generally to language in use and to how language is used in order to enact activities and identities (Bax 2011: 1).

2 The Development of Discourse Markers: An Introduction

dialects, and the term “Kalenjin” was proposed to refer to all these speakers and dialects, becoming the name of a monthly magazine in the 1950s and eventually the official name of both the language and its speakers. The name is derived from the form *kalenchiin* “I say to you,” which is a DM of high frequency used in most though not in all of the dialects of the group.²

The sociolinguistic significance, and in particular the emblematic value that DMs may acquire is also reflected in situations of language contact, where DMs tend to be transferred easily from one language to another – more than most other kinds of linguistic expressions. But in spite of all the progress that has been made in the course of the last decades, the overall state of research on DMs is still far from satisfactory. Thus, the following observations, made at the end of the last century, still apply to a large extent up to the present:

The term DM typically refers to a more or less open class of syntactically optional, non-truth-conditional connective expressions. There is, however, wide disagreement about the nature of the connection DMs express, the nature and extent of the elements connected, and the grammatical status of the DM category. An inconvenient result of such disagreements is that the items (and uses of items) designated by the term DM on one definition sometimes overlap only minimally with those designated on another definition. Equally inconvenient is the fact that the referential overlap between the term DM and other similar terms, such as pragmatic marker and pragmatic particle, can in some cases be as great as that between variant definitions of the term DM itself. (Schourup 1999: 242)

Rather than with what DMs are, however, our concern in the present book is with how they came to be what they are – that is, with their historical development. To this end, a number of reconstructions of DMs will be presented. These reconstructions are in no way intended to do justice to the history of the relevant DMs, for which the reader is asked to consult the references cited. Rather, our interest is more narrowly with defining salient stages of grammatical development and with how this development accounts for why DMs are structured the way they are in their present-day usages.

1.1.1 Introduction

In a number of languages there are pairs of homophonous linguistic expressions that differ drastically from one another in their grammatical behavior. The following examples, taken from English (1), German (2), Spanish (3), Bulgarian (4), and Swahili (5), illustrate these differences (the relevant expressions are printed in bold).

² The morphological form of the expression is *k-a-len-chi-in* (*k*-1.SG-say-DAT-2.SG.O) “I say to you.”

1.1 Discourse Markers

3

- (1) English
 a *Jeff is **still** sick.*
 b ***Still***, *Jeff is sick.*
- (2) German
 a *Hier wohnen wir **sicher**.*
 here live we safely
 “Here we live safely.”
 b ***Sicher***, *hier wohnen wir.*
 sure here live we
 “Sure, here we live.”
- (3) Spanish (Arroyo 2011: 868)³
 a *Lo haré **bien**.*
 “I’ll do it well.”
 b ***Bien***, *lo haré.*
 “Right, I’ll do it.”
- (4) Bulgarian
 a *Tja raboti **dobre**.*
 she works well
 “She works well.”
 b ***Dobre***, *šte ti pomogna.*
 ok will you help.1.SG.PRES
 “Ok, I’ll help you.”
- (5) Swahili
 a *Hamisi yu-po **sawa**.*
 Hamisi 3.SG-LOC.COP correct
 “Hamisi is fine.”
 b ***Sawa***, *Hamisi yu-po.*
 okay, Hamisi 3.SG-LOC.COP
 “Right, Hamisi is here.”

Considering that the expression concerned appears in final position in the (a)-sentences but in sentence-initial position in the (b)-sentences one may wonder if it is the position that is responsible for the difference in meaning. The answer is however in the negative. Take the German example: Instead of (2b) one could say something like (6), where the first expression, *sicher*, is the same as the expression *sicher* in (2b) but occurs in medial position of the sentence.⁴ Thus, sentence-initial position does not seem to be a relevant factor to distinguish the two expressions.⁵

³ The examples are constructed, the sources are Arroyo (2011: 868) for Spanish and Kibiki (2019) for Swahili. Otherwise, the sources are taken from our own data.

⁴ The term “medial” position is used here more generally for placement slots other than the initial and the final one, or the left and the right periphery of a clause or sentence.

⁵ Cf. Furkó’s notion of the “quasi-initiality” of discourse markers (Furkó 2014: 293).

4 The Development of Discourse Markers: An Introduction

(6) German

*Hier wohnen wir, **sicher**, aber wir wohnen nicht **sicher**.*

here live we sure but we live not safely

‘Here we live, sure, but we don’t live safely.’

The example in (6) also illustrates another property distinguishing the (a)-expressions from the corresponding (b)-expressions: Their meanings may be similar or related, but the fact that they can occur in the same sentence with contrasting functions suggests that their meaning is not the same. But these are not the only properties distinguishing the two, as the following observations suggest.

First, the meaning of the (a)-expressions is part of the meaning of the sentence (or clause), modifying or qualifying the meaning of the verb. That of the (b)-expressions, by contrast, is not a semantic part of the sentence or clause. Second, the function of the two is also different: Whereas the (a)-expressions are adverbs qualifying the meaning of the verb, the function of the (b)-expressions is commonly classified as “metatextual” (e.g., Traugott 2018: 27): Rather than to the content of the sentence, the meaning is “pragmatically conditioned” (Coulmas 1979: 240) – in other words, it relates immediately to the situation of discourse, that is, the preceding discourse, the attitudes of the speaker, and/or speaker–hearer interaction.⁶

Third, the syntax is also different: Whereas the (a)-expressions are constituents of the sentence – hence, belong to the sentence syntax, the (b)-expressions are fairly independent of the syntactic structure of a sentence; as Arroyo (2011: 868) puts it with reference to example (3), they are characterized by “the absence of a true syntactic function.”

Fourth, the two also differ in their prosodic shape: Whereas the (a)-expressions are firmly integrated in the intonation contour of the sentence, the (b)-expressions tend to be set off from the rest of the sentence, often occurring “in an independent breath unit carrying a special intonation and stress pattern,” as Traugott (1995: 7) puts it.

Fifth, there is a difference in semantic–pragmatic scope: The (a)-expressions form one scope unit with the verb they modify. The scope range characterizing the (b)-expressions, in contrast, is of a different nature. On the one hand, it is not restricted to some part of the proposition but relates to the proposition as a whole. On the other hand, it extends beyond the proposition to the context – that is, to the situation of discourse where the sentence is produced.

And, sixth, there is also a difference in placement: Whereas the (a)-expressions are restricted to positions reserved for adverbial constituents, the (b)-expressions do not show such constraints; rather, they can –

⁶ Concerning the “situation of discourse,” see Section 1.1.2.

dependent on their particular function – also occur in other positions, even if the position at the left periphery of the sentence is the favorite position for many of them.⁷

These six properties seem to be of more general interest, for the following reasons. First, they are not restricted to the examples mentioned; rather, each of the five languages disposes of a whole set of expressions showing essentially the same properties. Second, they are not restricted to the five languages but can also be observed in other languages – thus, they seem to be of typological interest. And, third, the properties are not confined to one particular component of grammar; rather, they relate to grammar at large, extending from syntax to phonology (prosody) and from semantics to pragmatics.

The six properties will be the main concern of the chapters to follow, even if they do not conclude the list of contrasting properties distinguishing (a)- from (b)-expressions, as we will see in the next section (cf. (11) of Section 1.1.2). We will refer to the (a)-expressions summarily as “sentence grammar units” and to the (b)-expressions as discourse markers (DMs), following a widely used convention.

The main goal of the present book is to find out how to explain these differences. However, the account proposed is confined to historical reconstruction – that is, our interest is strictly with diachronic explanation. This means that we will not be able to deal with many of the questions that have been raised with reference to doublets like those in the examples of (1) through (5).

There is both massive evidence and wide agreement to the effect that DMs are as a rule historically derived from sentence grammar units – that is, the (b)-expressions illustrated in (2) through (5) can be traced back historically in some way to the corresponding (a)-expressions. The question then is: What is the mechanism that can be held responsible for this development? As we will see later in this chapter, this issue has been discussed controversially, and we will not only discuss the various views that have been voiced on this issue but also look for an answer to this question.

⁷ Following a widespread convention we will be using here the terms “left periphery” and “right periphery” for linguistic expressions located, respectively, before or after a clause or sentence – that is, they are not part of a clause or sentence, typically being syntactically unintegrated (cf. Beeching and Detges 2014). These terms are useful within the framework used in this book, even if we are aware that there are a number of problems associated with the terms. First, they are not really fortunate considering that they impose a visual view of the linearization of language based on its written structure (Haselow 2016: 83). Second, in a number of languages having writing systems different from those found, e.g., in European languages, such as traditional Japanese, Hebrew, Urdu, or Persian, “left periphery” and “right periphery” are confusing in that they may have the opposite significance from the one they have in the former languages. And, third, the terms can refer to quite different concepts depending, for example, on which kind of adjacency pair is involved (see Traugott 2015). Concerning the term “periphery,” see Cinque (1999).

6 The Development of Discourse Markers: An Introduction

1.1.2 A Definition

The term “discourse marker” (DM) is used in a wide range of senses and for quite a number of different phenomena. DMs are referred to with a variety of different terms, such as discourse particles (e.g., Schourup 1985; Abraham 1991; Aijmer 2002; Diewald 2006: 406), pragmatic markers (e.g., Brinton 1996; 2008; 2017; Fraser 1996; Aijmer and Simon-Vandenberg 2009; Aijmer 2013; 2016; Beeching 2016; Traugott 2016), discourse connectives (Blakemore 1987: 105; Erman and Kotsinas 1993: 79), discourse operators (Redeker 1991: 1169; Gaines 2011), style disjuncts or conjuncts (Quirk et al. 1985: 631–45), speech act adverbials (cf. Aijmer 1997: 3), formulaic theticals (Heine, Kaltenböck, and Kuteva 2016: 56–58), discourse organizers (Pons Borderia 1998: 215), discourse signals (Lamiroy and Swiggers 1991: 123), “adverbials,” or simply “conjunctions.”

The above terms are by no means all identical in meaning, but refer to at least a set of the expressions that are classified here as “DMs.” For example, for Lewis (2000: 15, 51) discourse connectives are a sub-set of DMs, and for Fraser (1999) DMs form a subset of pragmatic markers.

DMs serve to monitor the production and comprehension of texts and to provide processing instructions on how to interpret texts (cf. Carter and McCarthy 2006: 221). Having been the subject of many studies (see, e.g., Jucker and Ziv 1998; Aijmer 2002; Brinton 2008; Dér 2010, and especially Brinton 2017: 2–37 for overviews), they are defined here as in (7) (cf. Brinton 1995: 380; Schourup 1999; Andersen 2001: 81; 2014; González 2004; Furkó 2014).

- (7) Discourse markers are (a) invariable expressions which are (b) semantically and syntactically independent from their environment, (c) set off prosodically from the rest of the utterance in some way, and (d) their function is metatextual, being anchored in the situation of discourse and serving the organization of texts, the attitudes of the speaker, and/or speaker–hearer interaction.

The viability of the definition stipulated in (7) will be tested in Section 1.4 by means of findings that have been made in previous research on DMs. In accordance with this definition, DMs exhibit a set of grammatical properties that were already mentioned in Section 1.1.1; we will return to this set in (40) of Section 1.5.

We will say that in order for an expression to qualify as a DM it should conform to all four criteria in (7), even if in a few cases there may be reasons to hesitate if a given criterion is in fact fully met. For example, (7a) separates DMs from a number of other kinds of expressions but it is not always strictly observed, in that a number of DMs are not fully invariable. Thus, the Italian DM *guarda*, derived from the homophonous second person singular

imperative *guarda!* “look!,” can be said to be invariable; at the same time there are two variants in addition, namely the second person singular polite form *guardi* and the second person plural form *guardate* (Waltereit 2002: 984; see Section 8.4). Another kind of variability can be illustrated with Korean DMs. They are typically invariable but are often modulated with reference to politeness by means of the politeness suffix *-yo*. Thus, the DM *kuntey* “but,” marking functions like topic shift, surprise, challenge, and discontent, changes to *kuntey-yo* to signal politeness (Seongha Rhee, personal communication of August 9, 2020; cf. Chapter 6.1).

(7b) relates to a widely made observation according to which both the meaning and the syntax of a sentence would essentially remain unaffected if a DM were omitted (see Section 1.4). (7c) is clearly the most vulnerable criterion: Prosodic separation is not an absolutely reliable criterion, being dependent on factors such as a relative speech rate, complexity of the expression, slot of placement within an utterance, emphasis, as well as other processing factors (see Section 1.4.4).⁸

The “situation of discourse” in (7d), relating to the concept of “discourse-deixis” as used by Weinreich ([1966] 1989: 69) or the extralinguistic context of Wilkins (1992: 129), provides the cognitive environment for interlocutors to design and interpret spoken or written texts.⁹ “Being anchored in the situation of discourse” entails, for example, that information otherwise provided by the explicit coding structure of sentence participants is recoverable from that situation. The main components of the situation are (i) text organization, (ii) attitudes of the speaker, and/or (iii) speaker–hearer interaction.¹⁰ The use of “and/or” in the preceding sentence draws attention to the fact that the three components are not neatly separated from one another, and typically more than one of the components are simultaneously involved, even if one of the components may be highlighted in a given context. For example, the English DM *actually* does not only serve (i), that is, the linking two units of discourse,

⁸ An “utterance” is perhaps most commonly understood to be a piece of speech produced by a particular individual on a particular occasion. We follow many other authors, however, in extending the use of the term beyond speech to written text pieces. Utterances are said to contrast with sentences, in that the former tend to be taken to relate to “language-behavior” and the latter to the “language system” (cf. Lyons 1977: 239).

⁹ Accordingly, DMs have been described as being related to the speech situation and not to the situation talked about (Jucker 1993: 436) or, as Waltereit (2006: 64) puts it with reference to pragmatic markers, they “situate their host unit with respect to the surrounding discourse and with respect to the speaker–hearer relationship.”

¹⁰ By using a DM, the speaker is assumed to take account of the hearer’s likely subject knowledge and his or her topic interests and needs and purposes in listening. A larger set of components is distinguished in Kaltenböck, Heine, and Kuteva (2011: 861), where the situation of discourse was described in terms of the following network of components: Text organization, source of information, attitudes of the speaker, speaker–hearer interaction, discourse setting, and world knowledge.

8 The Development of Discourse Markers: An Introduction

but refers also to (ii), that is, to the expectations and thus to the cognitive state of the speaker (Taglicht 2001; Haselow 2017: 141).

Of the three components, text organization (i) is clearly the most salient one. It concerns general functions like commenting or elaborating on the preceding discourse, drawing attention to what follows, expressing a contrast between the preceding and the following discourse, highlighting specific points, etc. However, (i) need not be involved, or it may be backgrounded in specific contexts in favor of functions that focus on the role played by the speaker (ii), the hearer, or the relation between the two (iii).

The components (ii) and (iii) relate, respectively, to the terms “subjectivity” and “intersubjectivity” (cf. Traugott 1982; 1989; Traugott and Dasher 2002: 22), but the two terminologies must not be equated since, unlike the latter terms, (ii) and (iii) are used here strictly to refer only to *metatextual* functions, such as those expressed by DMs, as well as other expressions to be discussed in Section 2.4. On account of their metatextual functions, the use of DMs presupposes special inferential calculations of the kind described in Relevance Theory (see especially Schourup 1985; 1999; 2001; 2011; Blakemore 1987; 1988; 2002; 2007; Unger 1996).

The term “metatextual” was proposed in work on DMs by Traugott (1995: 6; see also Traugott 2018: 27).¹¹ It is used here for a level of discourse processing that serves to monitor the production of texts and to provide instructions on how to interpret the texts, such as also described by Stein 1985 and Stein (1990: 31–42). The term is similar to but must not be confused with that of “metadiscourse” (or “metadiscursive”) as used in some research on text analysis, where the term stands broadly for discourse about discourse (e.g., Hyland 1998; 2005; 2017; Ädel 2006; 2012; Mauranen 2010; Zhang 2016). In this direction of research, DMs have played no noteworthy role, even if the linguistic expressions commonly classified as “metadiscourse units” serve functions similar to those of DMs, such as repairing, reformulating, commenting on linguistic form or meaning, clarifying, and managing terminology (Ädel 2012: 9). We will return to this issue in Section 8.1.

Attempts have been made to define DMs as a grammatical class,¹² but how to delimit such a class or category is an issue that is discussed controversially (cf. Furkó 2018), and many a student of DMs is inclined to treat them as an open class of units. However, to the extent that some linguistic expression conforms to the definition in (7) we will say here that it belongs to the category of DMs.

¹¹ In more general terms, a “metatextual unit” presents a statement whose topic is the text itself (Witosz 2017: 108; see also Genette 1982).

¹² As early as 1985, Zwicky (1985: 302–3) proposed to treat DMs as “a grammatically significant class of items, in English and other languages generally,” based on their distribution, prosody, and meaning. The most detailed characterization of DMs that we are aware of is provided by Brinton (2017: 8–9, Table 1.1).

1.1 Discourse Markers

9

The definition in (7) would seem to take care of most of the expressions that have crosslinguistically been classified as DMs.¹³ At the same time it differs from definitions proposed in the tradition of Schiffrin (1987), cf. (8), which state that DMs signal some kind of relationship between clauses, utterances, units of talk, or discourse segments. Examples of such definitions are provided in (9) and (10).¹⁴

- (8) [Discourse markers are] sequentially dependent expressions which bracket units of talk.

(Schiffrin 1987: 31)

- (9) [Discourse markers] impose a relationship between some aspects of the discourse segment they are a part of, call it S2, and some aspect of a prior discourse segment, call it S1. In other words they function like a two-place relation, one argument lying in the segment they introduce, the other lying in the prior discourse.

(Fraser 1999: 938)

- (10) By a DM I mean a metatextual marker that signals some kind of relationship between clauses/utterances.

(Traugott 2018: 27)

The reason for proposing the definition in (7) is that in a number of their uses, DMs do not necessarily signal a relationship as stipulated in (8), (9), or (10). For example, expressions such as *I think* and *you know* are commonly considered to be paradigm instances of English DMs. Yet, one may wonder if *I think* in an utterance like *Jeff lives I think in Greece* is fully in accordance with the definitions in (8) through (10), occurring within and having semantic–pragmatic scope over the phrase *in Greece*, not really bracketing units of talk or signaling a relationship between clauses or utterances (see also Section 8.3).¹⁵ Similar observations can be made in languages other than English. For example, many discourse-initial DMs in Korean do not clearly refer to any discourse segments, simply expressing the speaker's attitude

¹³ For a large list of English DMs, see Fraser (1990: 388). The definition in (7) is on the whole compatible with that by Crible (2017: 106), according to whom DMs “function on a metadiscursive level as procedural cues to situate the host unit in a co-built representation of on-going discourse.”

¹⁴ Haselow (2017: 141) distinguishes two kinds of views or perspectives on the nature and definition of DMs, namely a narrow and a broader one. Under the former, DMs are usually syntactically integrated and signal a propositional relationship between two neighboring textual units, where DMs are, e.g., conjunctions like “but,” “because,” “or,” and “so.” Under the latter, DMs are syntactically, semantically, and often prosodically independent. Whereas the definitions in (8–10) relate primarily to Haselow's narrow view, (7) is in accordance with his broader view.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Traugott (personal communication of January 19, 2020) though points out that there is a relationship in at least some of the uses of *I think*. Nevertheless, according to the definitions

10 The Development of Discourse Markers: An Introduction

(Seongha Rhee, personal communication of August 9, 2020). In sum, by relying on the definition in (7) we are proposing a slightly broader concept of DMs than that implied in (8) through (10).

Text organization is certainly a paradigm function of DMs but, as has been pointed out in a number of studies, DMs cannot reasonably be reduced to it (cf. Schwenter 1996); signaling the speaker's attitude and/or engaging the hearer are also important parts of the functions of DMs. Thus, if DMs do signal a relationship between units of discourse, as they most commonly do, this is not their only function, as is argued in particular in Relevance Theory (e.g., Blakemore 1987; 2002; Schourup 1999; 2001; 2011). Accordingly, expressions as defined in (8) through (10) are therefore classified by some authors as discourse connectives. For Lewis (2000: 51), for example, discourse connectives are DMs "that signal a rhetorical relation between two or more discourse segments."

We will rather take the properties listed in (7) to be of help in deciding what is and what is not a DM, and will refer to linguistic expressions showing these properties as belonging to the category of DMs. In doing so we are aware that these properties are not the only ones that tend to be associated with DMs; a catalog of other features is listed in (11).

- (11) Features that have been suggested to characterize or define DMs
- a Their meaning is procedural rather than conceptual (e.g., Hansen 1997: 162; Fraser 1999: 944; Schourup 1999; Wilson 2011; Crible 2017: 106).¹⁶
 - b They do not contribute to the truth conditions of the sentence (e.g., Blakemore 1988: 183; Fraser 1996: 167; Hansen 1997: 161; Schourup 1999: 232; Aijmer, Foolen, and Simon-Vandenberg 2006: 101; Haselow 2017: 142).
 - c They can normally be omitted without loss of grammaticality or propositional content, or their use is optional (e.g., Fraser 1988: 22; 1999: 944; Barth-Weingarten and Couper-Kuhlen 2002: 352; Jucker 2002: 212; but see also Dér 2010).
 - d Their functions are restricted to the here and now of the situation of discourse in which they are used; accordingly, they have been classified as indexicals (Aijmer 2002; Aijmer, Foolen, and Simon-Vandenberg 2006: 106; Furkó 2014: 292) or discourse deictics (Levinson 2006).
 - e They cannot be negated.
 - f They cannot become the focus of a cleft sentence.

in (8) through (10), *I think* in *Jeff lives I think in Greece* would not qualify as a DM – a procedure that is not adopted here.

¹⁶ In some studies it is argued that DMs like *oh* or *well* do not contribute to the truth conditions of an utterance and are context-dependent expressions having no meaning of their own (cf. Schiffrin 1987: 127). We follow Schourup (1999: 243) in assuming that the issue is not "whether they lack meaning or not, but rather what kind of meaning they encode" – that is, their meaning is procedural rather than conceptual.