WHY ARE THERE SO MANY LABELS FOR DISCOURSE MARKERS?[1]

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Abstract

There are many different labels used to refer to what in linguistics is probably most frequently termed 'discourse markers' (Schiffrin 1987, Fraser 1990, Stenström 1994, Swan 1995, Aijmer 1996, Biber et al. 1999). The aim of this paper is to contribute to the study of these markers, which are typical in particular of the spoken variety of language, namely by attempting to compare different approaches adopted by linguists in their investigations. In addition, the author's tentative goal is to place the approaches applied into several groups according to their most relevant aspects and thus explain why so many different labels are used to denote the above-mentioned language phenomena. Since the author's broader research is concerned with clausal forms such as *you know, you see, I mean* and *I think*, some of which can be considered discourse markers (cf. Schiffrin 1987, Stenström 1994, Swan 1995), she pays attention to these items, too, while searching for the most appropriate label.

1 Introduction

Spoken English used in everyday face-to-face interaction is viewed as the most common kind of English (Crystal & Davy 1969). It is characterised by many features that are typical of this language variety only, one of them being items commonly referred to as discourse markers (DMs). These occur most frequently in spoken language, where they perform a wider scope of functions than in the written variety. They are not constitutive elements of the syntactic structure (Aijmer 2002) and tend to be awkward or even impossible to analyse in syntactic terms. DMs are "seemingly meaningless phrases, abundant in spoken language" (Erman 1986: 131) and generally contribute little, if anything, to the propositional content of utterances into which they are inserted (Stenström 1990). However, owing to their important pragmatic functions in spoken discourse, they play a crucial role in facilitating the hearer's interpretation and understanding of what the current speaker intends to communicate, thus enabling the smooth flow of interaction and enhancing the establishment of discourse coherence. Consequently, we might say that in order to achieve his/her communicative goals, the current speaker intentionally uses signals such as discourse markers to suggest to his/her hearer(s) a preferred line of interpretation of the ongoing conversation which comes as close as possible to his/her own understanding.

Conversely, the current hearer uses these guiding signals, sometimes labelled "signposts in the communication" (Aijmer 2002: 2), as instructions on how to achieve coherence and arrive at an interpretation which is in conformity with the current speaker's communicative goals, since coherence is not a text-inherent property; it is a matter of interpretation (Bublitz 1988, Lenk 1995) and a result of an ongoing process of negotiation of meaning between all participants in spoken interaction (cf. Povolná 2006).

2 Different labels used for discourse markers

Discourse markers have always drawn the attention of many linguists, who have approached them from various viewpoints. This has resulted in the present state of research, in which there are many labels denoting DMs and, moreover, there are many disagreements among scholars as to which markers belong in the group mostly referred to by the term 'discourse markers', i.e. "the most common name suggested for the seemingly empty expressions found in oral discourse" (Brinton 1996: 29) and "the one with the highest currency and with the least restricted range of application" (Jucker & Ziv 1998: 2).

Most of the studies discussed below are synchronic investigations, for example, Östman (1981), Schourup (1985), Erman (1986), Schiffrin (1987), Fraser (1990), Stenström (1994), Lenk (1995) and Aijmer (2002), while others offer results based on analyses performed from a diachronic perspective, for instance, Brinton (1996) and Andersen (2001).

2.1 Discourse markers/particles/signals/items

Many labels used for DMs comprise the expression 'discourse', evidence of which is provided by labels other than discourse markers as mentioned above (Schiffrin 1987, Fraser 1990, 1999, Stenström 1994, Swan 1995, Aijmer 1996, Biber et al. 1999), such as softening/correcting discourse markers (Swan 1995), discourse particles (Schourup 1985, Aijmer 2002), discourse signals (Stenström 1989, 1990b), discourse items, often shortened to D-items (Stenström 1984, 1990a, Svartvik & Ekedahl 1995), and 'mainly interactive' discourse items (Leech & Svartvik 1994).

Most of the researchers who use the above-mentioned labels suggest establishing a new discourse category for the phenomena under their scrutiny; Stenström, for instance, states (1984) that the decisive factor for the inclusion of an item in a specific discourse category is not the high frequency of a particular item in speech, but the fact that its pragmatic function prevails over its function

as an 'ordinary' clause constituent; in other words this question is whether the item is a characteristic feature of the speaker's strategy in a given communicative situation (ibid.: 66). As for different functions these items can perform in spoken English, Stenström (1990a) emphasizes that they generally perform "different functions in different positions but can also perform different functions in the same position" (ibid.: 141), since the function of a marker/an item does not depend only on its position but also on its inherent meaning and the entire situational context, which cannot be underestimated when analysing spoken language data (cf. Malinowski 1923).

Many scholars that may be placed within this group adopt an approach along the lines proposed by Schiffrin in her book *Discourse Markers* (1987), although the items they analyse under various labels need not be identical. Schourup (1985) investigates discourse particles within his model of conversational discourse, while Schiffrin's analysis of DMs (1987) is based on her model of coherence in talk, which she takes to be a model of discourse. Studies can also be included in this group in which, as in Schiffrin (ibid.), the importance of DMs for the establishment of discourse coherence is emphasized, as is the case of Lenk (1995, 1998) and Aijmer (1996), who study them with regard to their contribution to coherence. Aijmer (ibid.) draws a line of demarcation between local and global DMs, as does Schiffrin (1987), who distinguishes between DMs functioning in the local and global discourse context, and Lenk (1998), who refers to local and global coherence level.

Finally, it must be noted that, owing to their mainly pragmatic approach, some of the investigations mentioned above can also be placed in the group that follows. This is the case, for example, with Fraser (1990), who, while proposing a minimal pragmatic core meaning for each marker, views DMs as a class of commentary pragmatic markers.

2.2 Pragmatic markers/particles/expressions/connectives

Another group of approaches is that which views the markers under their investigation mainly from the point of view of pragmatics, although the linguists represented here do not necessarily all understand pragmatics in the same way (cf. pragmatics as implicit anchoring in Östman 1995). This is mostly indicated by the labels to which these linguists resort, in particular the adjective 'pragmatic'. Consequently, there are terms such as pragmatic markers (PMs) (Brinton 1996, Andersen 2001, Erman 2001), commentary or parallel pragmatic markers (Fraser 1990), pragmatic particles (Östman 1981, 1982, 1995), pragmatic expressions (Erman 1986), and (void) pragmatic connectives (van Dijk 1979).

Most of the scholars that can be included in this group emphasize in their studies the importance of the phenomena they are analysing for establishing and maintaining interpersonal contacts between discourse participants and for organizing discourse (Erman 1986). For example, Andersen (2001) proposes a three-dimensional model to account for the pragmatic meaning of PMs, namely subjectivity, and interactional and textual capacity.

Erman (2001) distinguishes among three types of PMs, namely those functioning as social, textual and metalinguistic monitors with the main functions of eliciting audience involvement, organizing discourse (including coherence relations) and indicating the speaker's attitudes and emotions respectively. Erman (ibid.) claims that the most important function of PMs as textual monitors is to organize discourse in order to create coherence, hence as discourse markers, which implies that he considers, as does Fraser (1990), DMs to be a subgroup of PMs, stating that they ensure either global or local coherence (cf. Schiffrin 1987, Lenk 1995, 1998, and Aimer 1996, all discussed above).

Coherence relations are also mentioned by Östman (1995), who, while surveying the current state of affairs of what he calls pragmatic particles, stresses that, in addition to their interaction-signalling and attitude/involvement functions, these particles also have discourse marking and discourse organizing functions, which he calls "cultural-coherence functions" (ibid.: 98).

In connection with the diachronic perspective on PMs adopted by Brinton (1996), it is worth mentioning her assumption that it is not possible to speak about a continuity of PMs, or particular pragmatic functions, in the history of the English language; however, it is possible to acknowledge the continuing necessity in the language of giving expression to a wide variety of textual and interpersonal meanings.

2.3 Fillers/inserts/parentheticals/parenthetic sentences

A further group of approaches adopted in the study of what is commonly termed DMs is represented by researchers who view such markers as performing the functions of language means that are inserted into their host structures; hence, the labels they use include fillers (Leech & Svartvik 1994), inserts (Biber et al. 1999), parentheticals (Huddleston & Pullum 2002), clauses of the 'parenthetic' type (Crystal & Davy 1969), parenthetic sentences (Crystal & Davy 1975), verbal fillers (Stenström 1994) and fumbles (Edmondson 1981). However, it should be noted that some of these studies also use the name discourse items (e.g. Leech & Svartvik 1994, mentioned above).

Most of the linguists included in this group view the items under investigation as language devices used in order to avoid false starts and other hesitation phenomena, or falling silent or even being interrupted by their hearers. Edmondson (1981), who uses the label fumbles, considers them to be "conventionalized ways of plugging" (ibid.: 154) potential gaps with the result that no gap is perceived by the interlocutors. Crystal and Davy (1975) relate parenthetical sentences, which they subdivide into three groups, termed reinforcing, diminishing and softening connectives, to the current speaker's intention to provide "some kind of orientation which will guide the listener as to the direction in which the conversation is intended to go, the intentions underlying what is said, or attitudes towards him" (ibid.: 89).

The 'filling' function of the markers discussed is clearly explained by Leech and Svartvik (1994), who state that "when we speak we often fill in gaps with 'fillers' (such as *you know*, *you see*, *I mean*, *kind of*, *sort of*) to allow us to think of what next to say, or just to indicate that we intend to go on talking" (ibid.: 11), and Biber et al. (1999), who recognize two roles of inserts: 1. to signal a transition in the evolving process of the conversation, and 2. to signal an interactive relationship between speaker, hearer, and message (ibid.: 981).

2.4 Some other labels

Apart from the labels discussed above and the approaches by which they are used, there are many others not yet mentioned. Erman (1986), who himself gives preference to pragmatic expressions (see above), also lists verbal fillers, softeners, pause-fillers and hesitation-markers, while arguing that some of the terms are either too specific (e.g. hesitation markers) or too general (e.g. verbal fillers).

An even broader list than that given by Erman (1986) is offered by Brinton (1996), who adds other labels such as connectives, continuers, discourse connectives, discourse-deictic items, discourse operators, discourse-shift markers, discourse words, gambits, hedges, initiators, interjections, markers, markers of pragmatic structure, parenthetical phrases, and reaction signals. However, it is beyond the scope of the present contribution to discuss all of these terms.

Based on what has been explicated above and in agreement with, for example, Brinton (ibid.), it can now be concluded that there exists such a great variety of labels denoting DMs because there are many different approaches adopted in their study, and, furthermore, the inventory of the markers studied within different approaches, sometimes even by the same scholar, vary to a great extent.

3 Labels used for *you know, you see, I mean*, *I think*, etc.

Since the author's broader research, in which she compares different genres of spoken English, is concerned with clausal forms such as *you know, you see, I mean*, and *I think*, some of which can also be considered discourse markers, these items will be discussed briefly; first, with special regard to those studies in which they are viewed as comment clauses (CCs), and, second, with the intention of finding an appropriate label for these items, comparing this with some of the terms discussed above.

3.1 Comment clauses

Quirk et al (1985: 1112-1118) regard clausal forms such as *you know, you see, I suppose, I think* as comment clauses. They are defined as parenthetical disjuncts and can either express the speakers' comments on the content of the matrix clause, in which case they function as content disjuncts and are realized by finite clauses, or convey the speakers' views on the way they are speaking, in which case they are realized by non-finite clauses. The present paper is concerned with the former function since only finite CCs have been found in the spoken data analysed (see Povolná 2003, 2007). As for *I mean*, Quirk et al. (1985) do not include it among CCs at all; they do, however, mention it as a means of 'mistake editing' used in impromptu speech (ibid.: 1313).

It is assumed that this rather 'traditional' approach to the clausal forms analysed is based prevailingly on their grammatical structure and partly on some of their semantic functions; thus, in addition to Quirk et al. (1985), this approach is adopted mainly in grammar books, such as Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), Leech and Svartvik (1994), and Biber et al. (1999); it also appears in some shorter studies, most of which deal with CCs only (e.g. Stenström 1995, Povolná 2003, 2005, Kaltenböck 2006). As with Leech and Svartvik (1994), who view clausal forms such as *I mean, you know,* and *you see* as 'mainly interactive' discourse items (see above), these shorter studies emphasize the interpersonal and interactive role of the markers analysed.

With regard to the label 'comment clauses', it must be noted that this is yet another label often used to refer to some of the items discussed in Section 2 above, in particular those that can also be defined as parenthetical disjuncts (according to Quirk et al. 1985: 1112-1118).

3.2 Interactive discourse markers

There has been a lot of discussion in linguistics concerning the most suitable term for what is still commonly referred to as DMs (see above). Having first considered some relevant opinions, we should now identify and explain the term that, in the author's opinion, is the most appropriate, in particular for clausal forms such as *you know, you see, I think,* and *I mean*, i.e. those that owing to their grammatical structure can also be considered finite CCs.

Since one of their main characteristics is given by the fact that they occur frequently in spoken discourse, where they perform important pragmatic functions which usually they do not have in the written variety of the language, the question arises whether to use the label 'discourse' or 'pragmatic'. In the author's opinion, the former label is more suitable because the items under consideration operate above all on the discourse level of communication (cf. Leech's model of communication 1983), where they perform the interpersonal function of language (Halliday 1970). Moreover, the label 'discourse' also suggests that the best way to study these items is to investigate them in different discourse types, so that their different functions in different contextual situations can be recognized and related to the main characteristics of different discourse types (cf. Östman 1995).

As for the label 'marker', it is considered here more appropriate than, for instance, 'particle', which tends to be related to modal particles in some languages, such as German, Dutch and Norwegian (cf. Jucker & Ziv 1998). By contrast, the label 'item' seems rather broad and can include, in the author's view, some other language phenomena as well, for example, tag questions (cf. Stenström 1984). Although the author has used the term 'D-items' in some of her previous studies (e.g. Povolná 2006), she has consolidated her research by giving preference to the label 'marker'. Another candidate for suitable label is 'signal', since the markers under examination signal the current speaker's communicative strategy in a given contextual situation (cf. Tárnyiková 1989); there are, however, many other signals that can indicate the current speaker's communicative strategy in spoken discourse. Hence, the term 'marker' is considered here more suitable than the term 'signal'.

As for the adjective 'interactive', it has been found necessary to include it in the label in order to avoid a confusion with the narrower meaning of DMs, namely as a class within a larger group called pragmatic markers (cf. Fraser 1990, Erman 2001), mostly comprising those markers that only signal a sequential discourse relationship, i.e. "how the speaker intends the basic message that follows to relate to the prior discourse" (Fraser 1990: 387). The markers under

examination perform above all the interpersonal function of language, and by enhancing the smooth flow of interaction they do, indeed, deserve a special label, namely interactive discourse markers. It is not the author's intention, however, to indicate by this label that they do not perform the textual function of language in spoken discourse.

4 Conclusion

Based on discussion of different labels used to refer to what in linguistics is commonly termed discourse markers, with special attention paid to the identifying of a most suitable label for clausal forms such as *you know, you see, I think,* and *I mean*, it can now be concluded that the most appropriate label is 'interactive discourse markers', especially when one analyses spoken language data with the intention of recognizing their possible pragmatic functions in spoken communication, which tend to be the interpersonal and textual functions of language (according to Halliday 1970). The markers analysed perform all kinds of functional tasks, such as enabling co-operation between discourse participants, thus enhancing the smooth flow of spoken interaction, and marking and organizing discourse by expressing the current speaker's attitudes, opinions and feelings towards the addressee and the message mediated by speech, thus contributing to the establishment and maintenance of coherence.

Endnote

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