

DISCOURSE MARKERS IN TRANSLATING: CO-OCCURRENCE WITH EXPRESSIONS OF AGREEMENT AND DISAGREEMENT

Silvie Válková

Abstract

The present paper is based on a wider research study (Válková 2012) aimed at language means used to regulate discourse, or, more specifically, signposting the discourse and creating “some space for social interaction” (Povolná 2005: 49). In my view, discourse markers (henceforth DMs) fall under the heading of interpersonal signposts, which are to be distinguished from textual signposts that give the interpretative clues to various text-shaping processes (cf. Figure 1 below). The study demonstrates the possibilities of using parallel English-Czech and Czech-English corpora to reveal quantitative differences in the ways the chosen English DMs co-occur with expressions of agreement and disagreement (narrowed in this analysis to *yes* and *no*) and gives evidence of the qualitative preferences of Czech equivalents along the syntagmatic axis.

Key words

discourse markers, agreement, disagreement, translation, Czech equivalents

1 Introduction

With the increased interest in pragmatic aspects of interpersonal communication, the linguistic theorising about spoken and written discourse and the interpersonal level of its manifestation has been associated with the discussion of *communicatively regulative* units of language (Leech 1983), by means of which many aspects of face-to-face communication can be signalled to supply the interlocutors with interpretative clues to various facets of the multifaceted process of conveying thoughts, attitudes, judgements, empathy, solidarity, distance and many other diplomatic manoeuvres used to control facework and contribute to a ‘happy situation’ of communication (cf. also the term *interactive discourse items* used by Povolná 2005: 49).

Many studies related to the topic of the above-mentioned *communicatively regulative* units, to be more precise discourse markers, have been published in recent years, focusing mostly on individual discourse markers and their functions. Even after the decades of innovative tendencies, I have to admit that the pioneering monograph by Schiffrin on discourse markers (1987) still remains an invaluable source of inspiration, preceded by occasional studies of individual discourse markers, such as: *well* in Svartvik (1980) or Schiffrin (1984); *you know*

in Östman (1981); *y'know*, *I mean*, *well*, and *actually* in Golberg (1980); Keller's (1981) influential study on 'gambits', later echoed and elaborated, for example in Tárynyiková (1989), and many more.

Schiffrin's book initiated a series of other monographs and specialised studies, published during the 1990s and the following decade, for example Jucker and Ziv (1998), Fischer (2000), Aijmer (2002), Aijmer and Stenström (2004), focusing on specific markers (Jucker 1993, 1997, Aijmer 2009, Povolná 2008b), or proposing tentative taxonomies of various groupings of discourse markers, particles, or whatever labels have been used to refer to them over time (cf. Hansen 1998a, 1998b, Povolná 2008a). The mode the studies mostly focused on was *spoken* (conversation, oral narrative, impromptu speech, or spoken standard usage), as many of the titles suggest (cf. Norrick 2001, Hansen 1998a, 1998b, Östman 1982). The tendency that is emergent from recent studies is to pay attention to both spoken and written discourses (e.g. in academic settings or court trials), though, as Urbanová and Oakland (2002: 25) pointed out, discourse markers are before all "typical of spoken English".

With no less respect, any researcher interested in discourse markers will appreciate all the pioneering attempts to study discourse markers from a cross-language perspective (either from the globalising perspective of the languages of the world (Fernandez 1994), or geographically defined areas, such as South Slavic languages in Dedaić and Mišković-Luković (2010), or from the binarity of the mother tongue and target language (mostly English), within a narrower scope of language-to-language comparisons, or a broader scope of a cross-cultural projection of the respective languages into the habits, norms, and expectations of particular language communities, as in Kryk-Kastovsky (1992) or Müller (2004).

With the growth of corpus-based studies, made possible by the existence of large language corpora (both diachronic and synchronic), and parallel language (sub)-corpora, many researchers can benefit from the quantity of data and identify hitherto 'hidden' qualities of discourse markers, alternatively called *discourse particles* (Aijmer 2002), *pragmatic markers* (Aijmer & Stenström 2004), and many other author-specific names (for more details, cf. Válková 2012: 176).

The formal heterogeneity of discourse markers, ranging from simple particles (*oh*, *well*, *now*) and phrases (*in a nutshell*) to clauses (*y'know*, *I mean*), multiplied by the vague specification of their communicative functions, probably contributed to the preference of many linguists to approach and treat those devices as isolated items rather than subsume them under the more general umbrella of the above-mentioned *communicatively regulative* means of language.

(For a thorough analysis of the tradition and the present state of research, cf. above all Aijmer and Simon-Vandenbergen's study *Pragmatic Markers* in *The*

Handbook of Pragmatics (available on the internet – cf. Note 1) and Östman's (1995) survey article on '*Pragmatic particles 20 years after*'. For an overview of diverse conceptions, approaches, and terminology, cf. also Povolná 2010: 30–69.)

2 Discourse markers

2.1 General characteristics

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed overview of the various classifications, definitions, and functions of discourse markers. What I can offer here is only a brief outline of my own view of discourse markers, while entirely skipping the explicit discussion of these items by other authors (cf. Válková 2012).

Inspired by Leech (1983), I take the rule-governed nature of constitutive units as a basis on which to apply the principle-controlled regulative units that supply language users with communicative clues to the socio-semiotic nature of language use. Communicatively regulative units will be referred to as *discourse signposts* and the process by which they enter utterances in interaction will be called *signposting*. Signposts can then be sub-categorised into interpersonal and textual. From this perspective, the category of discourse markers falls under the heading of interpersonal signposts, to be distinguished from textual signposts giving the interpretative clues to various text-shaping processes. My view of the above-mentioned network of communicatively regulative units is visualised in the figure below.

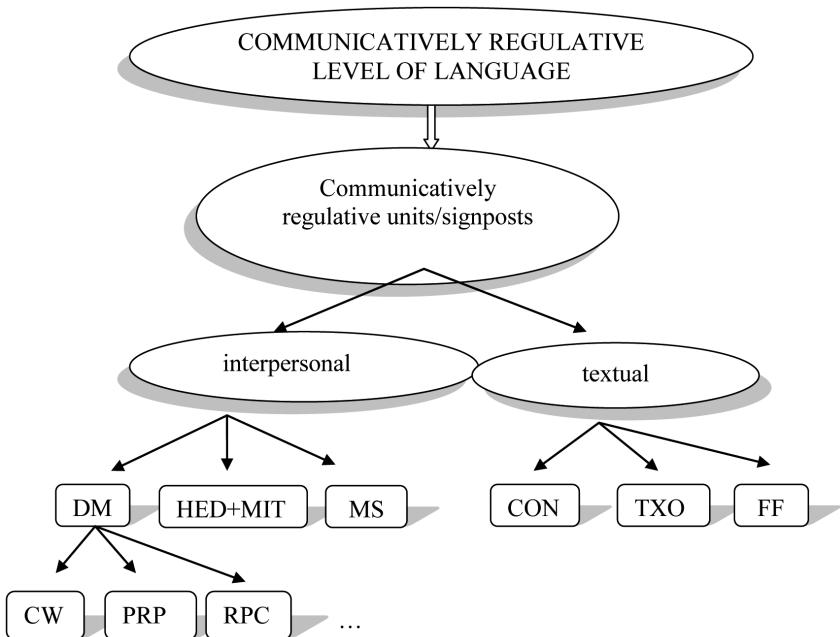


Figure 1: A network of communicatively regulative units (signposts)

DM = discourse markers; HED = hedges; MIT = mitigators; MS = markers of stance (attitudinal and style disjuncts); CON = discourse connectives; TXO = text orienters; and FF = focus formulae, with possible specification within each sub-group; DMs, for example, can be further subcategorised into CW = contact words (*well, now*), PRP = pragmatic particles (*oh, ah*), and RPC = reduced parenthetical clauses (*y'know, I see*).

Discourse markers, which are not part of the propositional content of the sentence, are syntactically detachable from a sentence, and tend to be used in initial position, although other positions are also possible. They give interpretative clues to the strategy by which the content of the following proposition can be approached. As for the prosodic features, they have prosodic autonomy, which, however, is not a safe criterion as they can also be integrated into the utterance without a tone unit boundary.

Discourse markers often co-occur with some other lexical elements (e.g. exclamations, expletives, vocatives) and other discourse signposts (either strengthening the meaning of the respective markers or adding meaning which a

simple marker would not have – various sequences and the environments in which they occur were studied e.g. by Ryšavá 2012). Discourse markers often collocate with expressions of agreement and disagreement, i.e. of the *yes* (*yeah*) and *no* type, giving the affirmation-negation scale an additional flavour of tentativeness (*well, yes*), surprise (*oh, no*), and other context-sensitive values. Similarly to DMs in general, the co-occurrence of DMs with *yes* or *no* expressions depends in the final reading on their larger context.

2.2 Limiting the choice of discourse markers

In my article I decided to concentrate on the comparison of English and Czech for the following reasons: first, there are many publications focusing on different functions of DMs, characterising them from different points of view – e.g. the relevance-based account of DMs, DMs as means of cohesion and coherence, means of politeness, etc. Second, I think (in agreement with Aijmer 2002) that DMs are not meaningless decorations that serve only to build an atmosphere of Englishness. Non-native speakers, however, tend to choose one of the extremes: they either ignore these expressions as they are not sure when and how to use them or they overuse them in the hope of sounding fluent. Fillmore et al. (as cited by Aijmer 1996: 211) consider DMs “something a language user could fail to know while knowing everything else in language”. I hope that giving Czech speakers the background information about their mother tongue can make them more sensitive to understanding the usage of DMs in English. Lastly, I think that the prototypical co-occurrence of DMs with expressions of agreement and disagreement and their translations into Czech may be a stimulus to a more adequate ‘language-in-action’ ELT, as well as for teaching Czech to foreigners.

For the purposes of my analysis I decided to narrow the scope of all possible expressions ranked among discourse signposts and concentrate on the one-word expressions *ah, oh, well, and now*, representatives of what in Figure 1 above are referred to as contact words and pragmatic particles. The reason for this choice is that these expressions have similar discourse functions. This makes them interesting language material from the point of view of their translations – considering their partly overlapping functions (for details, cf. Válková 2012: 184-190); it will be interesting to see

- whether their retrospective and prospective orientation (cf. below) influences the frequency of their co-occurrence with expressions of agreement and disagreement;

- whether the choice of Czech equivalents will be similar as a result of comparable functions of the respective DMs.

The first research question is influenced by the fact that DMs can point backwards to the preceding discourse and forwards to the upcoming discourse. Although it is difficult to classify DMs neatly into the above-mentioned categories according to their retrospective or prospective cohesive role, such attempts have been made (e.g. Aijmer 1996, 2002), resulting in a tentative finding that *ah* and *oh* are characteristically retrospective and signal some reaction to the preceding communication, usually followed by an explanation, justification, etc. *Well* is characterised as pointing both backwards and forwards in communication, i.e. it can signal either a reaction to what was said before or it can announce a new point or topic in the discussion. The last discourse marker, *now*, points forwards; it is typically used to change topic. My expectation is that although the functions of *now* in communication overlap with the other markers under investigation, because of its prospective orientation its co-occurrence with *yes* and *no* will be less frequent than in the case of *ah*, *oh*, and *well*.

The second research question presupposes some degree of similarity of the Czech equivalents of the respective discourse markers with the expressions of agreement and disagreement as their functions in discourse are comparable. To some extent, however, translators can be creative, with the aim of avoiding monotony and going against expectations.

3 Data description

I used the Czech National Corpus – Parallel Corpus: InterCorp (henceforth the CNC). InterCorp is a large parallel synchronic corpus covering a number of languages and, unlike other corpora, which are usually static (i.e. they do not change with time), InterCorp is incremental, with its size and the number of languages growing. The bulk of InterCorp consists of fiction in Czech and other languages and a selection of political commentaries published by the Project Syndicate and Presseurop (Note 2). For my purposes I used the Czech-English and English-Czech translations of the above-mentioned sources. For a comparison of the frequency of occurrence, the British National Corpus was checked.

4 Results of the analysis

Ah in the CNC – Parallel Corpus collocates with expressions of agreement and disagreement, i.e. *yes* and *no*, in different proportions. The co-occurrence of

ah with *yes* was more frequent, i.e. 28 examples, while the combination of *ah* with *no* appeared only three times. For the comparison in the British National Corpus the proportions were not the same: *ah yes* appeared in 264 (*ah yeah* in 118) examples, *ah no* in 90.

	Czech equivalent	Number of occurrences
<i>Ah yes</i>	ach/ano/á ano	11
	ano, ovšem	3
	ano/no jistě	3
	no jo	3
	ano	2
	0 (zero equivalent)	1
	aha	1
	á, vidíte	1
	jasně	1
	oj	1
	tak, tak	1
	TOTAL	28
<i>Ah no</i>	kdepak	2
	ááá, ne, ne	1
	TOTAL	3

Table 1: Czech equivalents of *Ah yes/no*

In expressions of agreement and disagreement, the occurrence of *oh yes/yeah* is more frequent than *oh no* (i.e. 162 examples of the former, 47 of the latter; in the British National Corpus the ratio is 3,419 examples of *oh yes* and 3,270 of *oh yeah* to 2,173 of *oh no*). *Oh* also appears in more elaborate expressions, e.g. *oh God yes, oh dear no* (e.g. *Oh God, yes, no expense spared. Samozřejmě, příteli, samozřejmě, jen nešetřit na nákladech. Oh dear no. Ani za nic.*).

	Czech equivalent	Number of occurrences
<i>Oh yes/yeah</i>	ano	34
	ach/ale/ano/eh/hm/ó/to ano	30
	(jo) a/ale/no/to jo/jó	21
	0 (zero equivalent)	17
	jo	12
	ano/no/to jistě	8
	aha/ahá	7
	a/ano/no ovšem	7
	ach/jo/tak tak	5
	(oh) samozřejmě	4
	aha/jo aha	3
	(no) jasně	3
	máte pravdu/pravda	3
	opravdu?	2
	myslíte?	1
	se ví	1
	skutečně	1
	taky že	1
	to vříš	1
	určitě	1
	TOTAL	162
<i>Oh no</i>		
	Czech equivalent	Number of occurrences
	ach/ale/ba/jen to/ne/ne,jistě/ ne,to/to/to snad/to určitě/ vůbec ne	33
	ale/i/ne kdepak	7
	0 (zero equivalent)	2
	ani za/tak nic	2
	houby	1
	nic takového	1
	to není možný	1
	TOTAL	47

Table 2: Czech equivalents of *Oh yes/yeah/no*

The frequency of *well* in expressions of agreement and disagreement is lower than in the case of *oh* (five times lower). *Well yes* was found in 18 examples

and *well no* in 20 in my corpus; in the British National Corpus the ratio was 440 examples of *well yes* (569 *well yeah*) to 732 of *well no*. In comparison with the previous discourse markers, it is interesting to see that there are more Czech equivalents for *well no* than for the combination *well yes/yeah*.

	Czech equivalent	Number of occurrences
<i>Well yes/yeah</i>	ano	6
	0 (zero equivalent)	3
	ano, totiž	2
	no...ano	2
	no (to) jo	2
	ale ano	1
	ehm...ano	1
	hm, má pravdu	1
	TOTAL	18
<i>Well no</i>	Czech equivalent	Number of occurrences
	(ne) to ne	5
	ne	4
	no, ne	2
	(no) vlastně ne	2
	ani ne	1
	no	1
	no dobrá	1
	no to zrovna ne	1
	tak to ale není	1
	to (se mi) neliší	1
	zase vedle	1
	TOTAL	20

Table 3: Czech equivalents of *Well yes/yeah/no*

Now with expressions of agreement or disagreement was not found in the Czech National Corpus. In the BNC there were six examples of *now yes* and 18 examples of *now no*. The function in many cases, however, seems to be different from that of a discourse signpost, e.g. *Now no one said anything at all*.

5 Comparison of Czech equivalents

In the following tables I compare the outcomes of the research of Czech equivalents of the respective DMs with expressions of agreement and disagreement.

The combinations of *ah, oh, well* with *yes/yeah* have three common equivalents in Czech: they are translated by a zero equivalent and by a bare expression of agreement, i.e. *ano*, while the last common expression is a colloquial agreement, *jo*, with some premodifying elements. Below the common equivalents (in bold) are those which are common to two DMs (in alphabetical order) – there are six common to *ah yes* and *oh yes/yeah* and two common to *oh yes/yeah* and *well yes/yeah*. Each DM with *yes/yeah* also has its own Czech equivalents that are not common to the other markers, the combination of *oh yes/yeah* having the most. This may be influenced by the fact that this combination was the most frequent both in my corpus and the BNC, which may have led the translators to find different possibilities in Czech to avoid monotony.

<i>Ah yes</i>	<i>Oh yes/yeah</i>	<i>Well yes/yeah</i>
0 (zero equivalent)	0 (zero equivalent)	0 (zero equivalent)
ano	ano	ano
no jo	(jo) a/ale/no/to jo/jó	no (to) jo
ach/ano/á ano	ach/ano/ó/to ano	
	ale/eh/hm ano	ale/ehm.../no...ano
aha	aha/jo aha/ahá	
jasně	(no) jasně	
ano, ovšem	a/ano/no ovšem	
tak, tak	ach/jo/tak tak	
ano/no jistě	ano/no/to jistě	
	máte pravdu/pravda	hm, má pravdu
á, vidíte	myslíte?	ano, totiž
oj	(oh) samozřejmě	
	opravdu?	
	se ví	
	skutečně	
	taky že	
	to víc	
	určitě	

Table 4: Comparison of Czech equivalents of *ah yes, oh yes/yeah* and *well yes/yeah*

The combinations of the discourse markers with an expression of disagreement have only one common Czech equivalent, i.e. *ne* with some premodifiers. Unlike the combinations with expressions of agreement, these do not have a common zero equivalent; it is only the combination *oh no* that was not translated into Czech, and this, moreover, with a very low frequency. *Ah no* and *oh no* have one common equivalent, while there is no common equivalent to *ah no*, *oh no*, and *well no*. *Oh no* and *well no* then offer some more equivalents in Czech, although their frequency is not high and is most probably influenced by the surrounding context.

<i>Ah no</i>	<i>Oh no</i>	<i>Well no</i>
ááá, ne, ne	ach/ale/ba/jen to/ne/ ne,jisté/ne,to/to/to snad/to určitě/vůbec ne	ani/(ne) to/no/no to zrovna/vlastně ne
kdepak	ale/i/ne kdepak	
	0 (zero equivalent)	no
	ani za/tak nic	no dobrá
	houby	tak to ale není
	nic takového	to (se mi) nelíbí
	to není možný	zase vedle

Table 5: Comparison of Czech equivalents of *ah no*, *oh no* and *well no*

6 Conclusion

In the introductory part I posed two research questions to which I would like to offer the following tentative answers based on the analysis of the language material specified above.

Does retrospective and prospective orientation of DMs influence the frequency of their occurrence with expressions of agreement and disagreement?

The first discourse signpost, *ah*, combines more often with an expression of agreement (in my corpora the ratio was 28 *ah yes* : 3 *ah no*, and in the BNC 382 *ah yes/yeah* : 90 *ah no*). The combination *oh yes/yeah* is the most frequent of all, with 162 occurrences in my corpora and 6,689 occurrences in the BNC. The *ah no* combination is several times less frequent, with 47 examples in my corpus and 2,173 in the BNC. The discourse signpost *well* combines with similar frequency both with expressions of agreement and of disagreement in my corpora

(i.e. 18 *well yes* : 20 *well no*). In the BNC the proportion is 1,009 : 732. The last discourse signpost, *now*, was not found with either of the expressions *yes* or *no* in my corpora, while in the BNC the frequency is very low, i.e. six examples of *now yes* and 18 *now no* (cf. above), and thus my expectations of *now yes* and *now no* being of low frequency were supported by the corpora. The limited co-occurrence is not imposed on us by linguistic limits but rather by cognitive processing. This finding may suggest that the prospective or retrospective orientation of the respective DM influences the possibility of its co-occurring with expressions of agreement or disagreement. Those markers that have prospective orientation only and announce a new point or topic in the discussion are hardly likely to co-occur with *yes/yeah* or *no*, which typically express a positive or negative reaction to the preceding discourse. Such sequences would be rather counterproductive: it is a little bit chaotic to offer a prospective DM after which a retrospective deixis follows.

Is the choice of Czech equivalents similar as a result of the similarity of the functions of the respective DMs?

The DMs discussed in this article have similar functions in discourse. *Now*, *well*, and *oh* occur in the same discourse slot and their meanings may coincide, overlap, or cross each other in various ways (Aijmer 2002: 24). The author also states that translations into another language strengthen or weaken the claims made on the basis of a single language (*ibid.*: 25). When comparing the Czech equivalents of the DMs with expressions of agreement and disagreement, we can see that those that are common to all DMs also belong among those whose frequency is higher in comparison with the other expressions. The correspondence of Czech equivalents with their English counterparts strengthens rather than invalidates the idea of a significant similarity between the discourse functions of these markers, considered from the English-Czech interface.

Notes

1. <http://benjamins.com/online/hop/>
2. <http://www.korpus.cz/intercorp/>

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