

Discourse Markers as Presenters of Narrative Constituents

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Abstract: Combating the popular perception that discourse markers such as *you know*, *I mean*, *like*, *oh*, and *well* are merely markers of informal conversation with no true significance in discourse, many researchers (e.g. Schourup 1983, Schiffrin 1987, Jucker and Smith 1998, Andersen 2001) have shown that these terms do make important pragmatic and social contributions. Most studies, however, focus on the function of one discourse marker at a time in an utterance or conversation. Through examples of spoken English from recordings of celebrity interviews, I show that discourse markers can be used together and/or repetitively in narratives to present important information. By placing discourse markers before and/or after each significant constituent in a narrative, speakers are able to plan and organize their story and can verify understanding in the listener. Additionally, the listener is guided towards the important narrative phrases and has time to fully comprehend the story.

ナラティブ（物語り）の重要構成要素を提示する談話標識

英語の談話標識（“you know”, “I mean”, “like”, “oh”, and “well” など）は、インフォーマルな会話において出現するもので、談話においては実質的な重要性を持たないと一般的に解釈されてきた。これに対し、Schourup (1983), Schiffrin (1987), Jucker and Smith (1998), Andersen (2001) など数多くの研究者が、談話標識は語用や社会的な面で重要な役割を果たしていると反証している。しかし、そうした研究の大半は、発話や会話における一つの談話標識にのみ焦点をあてている。本研究では、英語の話し言葉の例として有名人のインタビューを用い、ナラティブ（物語り）において同時または反復的に使用される複数の談話標識が重要な情報を提示していることを論じる。語り手は、談話標識をナラティブ（物語り）の重要な構成要素の前後に置いて、話を整理し、聞き手の理解を確認している。一方、聞き手は、談話標識によって、物語りのキーとなる語句に導かれ、話を十分に理解するための時間を得ることができる。

Key words: [discourse markers], [oral narrative], [pragmatic contribution]

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, commonly used informal discourse markers such as *you know*, *I mean*, *oh*, *like*, and *well* have been the subject of a number of studies. Most have focused on determining the functions of these markers in utterances (Schiffrin 1987); interpreting their effect, if any, on the truth conditions of the host sentence (Siegel 2002);

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and debunking popular myths about their origins, demographics, and uselessness (D'Arcy 2007). Yet these researchers typically concentrate on one discourse marker at a time, in one sentence at a time; less attention is given to how discourse markers can work together over a long stretch of talk, such as a story or explanation, to aid both the speaker and the audience.

In longer stretches of discourse, speakers typically use a combination of discourse markers. Each token may have its own function within its host phrase, but when considering the entire utterance, patterns of discourse markers can emerge in the narrative constituents. The two most common patterns involve placement of discourse markers before important narrative components, such as clauses and noun and verb phrases, and placement of discourse markers after these important phrases. The effect of this strategy is altered slightly depending on the placement of discourse markers and which ones are used, but the overall effect for the storyteller is twofold: first, discourse markers can serve as fillers or placeholders (Schourup 1983) while the speaker forms the next phrase; and second, the discourse markers can serve as an organizational framework for the narrative, allowing the speaker to present the story piece by piece. The benefit to the audience parallels these effects: the listener is given time between narrative constituents to process what has been said, as well as a structure that breaks the story into sections, making the stretch of talk easier to digest.

Delving very briefly into this phenomenon, I present two examples of narratives in which the storytellers use discourse markers in these ways. The stories are drawn from interviews on talk shows, in which the speaker is a celebrity guest. In such situations, the speakers have an idea of what they will say beforehand, but do not have a strict script. Thus discourse markers can assist them in planning and organizing their responses, and allow the interviewer and the audience time to fully process the narratives, despite any communication errors that the speaker makes, such as false starts, repairs of verbal missteps, and so on.

Discourse Markers at the Beginning of Narrative Constituents

In the first example, young Canadian singer Avril Lavigne speaks about an amusing episode she had with her band and crew while on tour. Here, the speaker uses discourse markers at or near the beginning of each phrase, as what Jucker and Smith (1998) term 'presentation markers,' which signal to the audience that important information is coming.

*Uh...*You probably heard that me and my guitar player Evan were
uh lit—to—f—we were on a Ferris wheel
and we were in one cart,

and there was a cart behind us
 that had *like, I don't know* my security guard,
 and *like*, some other people
and, we—we—we hit
like, a certain spot
 where *like*, our window met their window,
 so we like yanked our pants down and mooned them.
 (Avril Lavigne 2002)

In the story, Lavigne uses discourse markers *uh*, *and*, *like*, *I don't know*, and *so* to introduce each portion of her story, usually only inserting a few words between them. Although the speaker had probably told this story on other occasions, she still finds it useful to utilize an abundance of discourse markers in its retelling. This reflects the results of Fox Tree's 2006 study, in which subjects told and retold personal anecdotes to different listeners, and were found to reuse between 5% and 22% of tokens of some discourse markers (including *like*, *uh/um*, *you know*, *oh*, and *well*) in the same or similar places in the second telling.

Taken individually, we can see that some of Lavigne's choices for discourse markers are the result of the need for planning. The first marker, *uh*, is at and near the beginning of the story, followed first by a pause and second by three false starts, indicating that the speaker has not yet fully prepared her response. The first two *likes* (one reinforced with *I don't know*) seem to indicate the speaker is distancing herself from the ensuing expression; that is, she clearly cannot remember exactly who was in the other Ferris wheel cart, so she gives one probable example and glosses over the rest. The third and fourth tokens of *like* may be functioning as a sort of distancing suggested by Andersen (2001). It is unlikely that Lavigne is accustomed to speaking of the workings of Ferris wheels, so she may be using *like* to separate the relevant phrases from her standard use of English. Finally, *and* and *so* serve as strong organizers and presenters in this anecdote. *And* introduces and separates each portion of the situation: first, the location of the speaker and her band member; second, the context of the other cart; and third, the action leading to the climax of the story, which is preceded by *so*.

When we look at Lavigne's story as a whole, there is a clear, though perhaps imperfect, pattern in the dispersal of discourse markers. As mentioned, every important clause, noun phrase, and verb phrase is preceded by a discourse marker, each with a specific function. In using these markers in such a way, the speaker gives herself brief moments to plan her phrasing, while at the same time providing processing time for the audience. She also gives herself and the audience a framework for the story, which can assist in both presentation and comprehension. With some effort, the speaker could tell the same story omitting the discourse markers, but there would be little benefit to doing so. Anecdotes told without

their natural discourse markers seem unnatural and overly formal, as suggested by Dailey-O'Cain's (2000: 73-74) study, in which speakers who used the discourse marker *like* were judged more attractive, friendly, cheerful, and successful than when their *likes* were omitted. Additionally, the ease of expression and understanding would be compromised without the discourse markers, due to the loss of planning time, discourse structure, and individual illocutionary force provided by the markers. Thus it is to everyone's benefit, at least in casual settings such as talk show interviews, that speakers use discourse markers in their narratives.

Discourse Markers at the End of Narrative Constituents

In the following example, rapper Eminem describes fatherhood and some of the background story explaining his success therein. Although he also sometimes uses discourse markers to introduce components of his story, as in Lavigne (2002), he primarily employs *you know* at the end of his discourse units, which tend to be much longer than Lavigne's—an aspect of personal style. It is noteworthy that instead of using a variety of discourse markers, Eminem uses the same one repetitively, but much to the same effect as a combination of several markers.

I think—I think I'm a good father, I really do.

I—I try to be, I don't get to see my daughter a lot,

as much as I want to, but you know when I'm there, *you know...*

and I do provide for her, so... *you know*.

I—I don't—it's kinda like a natural thing, I automatically

kinda know what to do, *you know*.

Just 'cause, I mean my little brother—my little brother's

thirteen years old, I raised him from like, the cradle, *you know*.

And he was born. So it was like I did a lot of—did a lot of

babysitting and a lot of feeding my—feeding—feeding my

little brother in a high chair, and... *you know*.

A lot of that stuff, so I kinda knew a lot to do.

(*Eminem* 1999)

The discourse marker *you know* (or *y'know*) has been associated with a number of functions, including acknowledgment that there is shared information between interlocutors (Schourup 1983, Schiffrin 1987), presentation of information that is generally known (Schiffrin 1987), and others (see Jucker and Smith 1998). In this stretch of talk, however, Eminem also

appears to use *you know* as an ellipsis of sorts, allowing the audience to draw a conclusion from his preceding phrase. This is done with the first italicized token of *you know*, in which the speaker expects the audience to infer something like ‘(when I’m there.) I spend quality time with my daughter,’ as well as in the token following it, in which the conclusion might be ‘(and I do provide for her, so) I’m clearly trying the best I can.’ With the final token, the speaker finishes his sentence (as suggested by intonation and pause), allowing the audience to mentally insert something like ‘and all the other stuff needed to raise a child;’ after the pause, he does reiterate the idea, though (“A lot of that stuff”). The two remaining instances of *you know* may be employed individually to acknowledge that what Eminem is saying is known, either generally or by the interviewer; that is, since he’s already stated that parenting is a “natural thing,” then it could be easily concluded that he “automatically know[s] what to do.” Further, when remarking that he had raised his little brother “from the cradle,” he may be recognizing that the interviewer is already aware of his background.

In examples such as this, the end-punctuation of narrative components can serve a social function, such as collaboration with the listener or confirmation that the audience is still ‘with’ the speaker. This may be done with discourse markers that typically follow a unit of talk, such as *you know* and *you know what I mean*. On the whole, Eminem uses *you know* as a way to check in with his interviewer before continuing to the next part of his story, with the added benefit of a moment to gather his thoughts. The structure that phrase-final discourse markers provides may be less secure than that of phrase-initial markers, however, since in this example, the speaker sometimes uses additional discourse markers after *you know*, to begin the next narrative constituent. Determining whether some speakers can manage with only phrase-final discourse markers requires further study.

Conclusion

Discourse markers have evolved in the English language over time, as have our study and understanding of them. While only a few decades ago, linguists gave pragmatic markers such as these little recognition, we are now increasingly aware of the vital role they play in everyday discourse. It is important, however, to not only study each discourse marker’s characteristics and use individually, but also to investigate how markers can work in concert to achieve a meaningful effect. As suggested above, using discourse markers to introduce or follow significant portions of a story or other stretch of talk can provide benefits to interlocutors, both in terms of pausing for planning and comprehension and in terms of organization. Although this paper focuses on a very small sample of narratives in which discourse markers provide these advantages, further research in this area may uncover the wider existence of this occurrence. We may then confirm the function of phrase-initial and phrase-final patterns; discover other patterns in discourse; and determine,

as aforementioned, whether some speakers use phrase-final markers without the aid of phrase-initial discourse markers.

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