

Discourse Markers: Cotext and Context Sensitivity (PhD dissertation)

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The term ‘discourse marker’ has been used to refer to verbal items such as *oh*, *yeah*, *well* and *like*, which lack semantic content but appear to function at the discourse domain. Until recently, such verbal items have been viewed as part of linguistic performance, but their cross-linguistic correlates and the fact that their distribution and use are systematically constrained clearly render them part of linguistic competence.

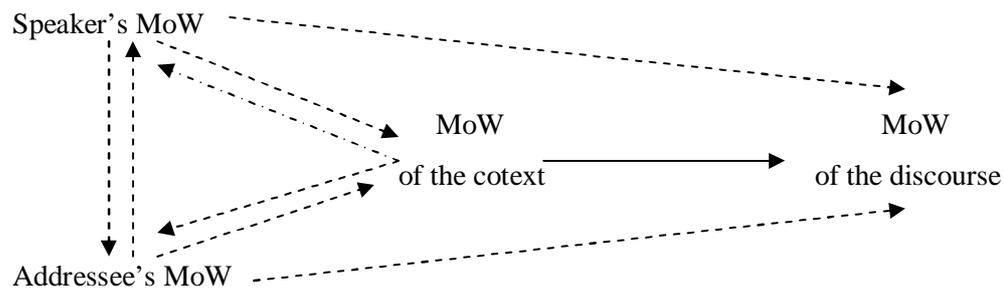
As such, discourse markers have been studied by a wide variety of scholars from several theoretical frameworks. Attempts have been made to enumerate their linguistic properties. The following summary of these properties is based on the introduction to Jucker & Ziv eds. *Discourse Markers: Descriptions and Theories*, 1998. Phonologically, discourse markers are said to be short and reduced, form a separate tone group (Brinton, 1996) and begin an intonational contour (Maschler, 1998). Syntactically, they are claimed to be sentence initial, optional, not part of the syntactic structure and connected to it loosely (Brinton, 1996). Semantically, discourse markers are said to have no propositional meaning (Brinton, 1996) and not to affect truth conditionality (Blakemore, 1996). As for stylistics / sociolinguistics, discourse markers are said to be prevalent in speech, used more by women than by men and stylistically stigmatized (Andersen, 1998).

Other studies view discourse markers as a functional class, attributing multi-functionality to discourse markers such that each discourse marker may have a number of different concurrent functions, which may relate to different aspects of discourse, namely structure, propositional content and conversation participants’

attitudes. As such, discourse markers have been claimed to be “discourse connectors, turn takers, confirmation seekers, intimacy signals, topic switchers, hesitation markers, boundary markers, fillers, prompters, repair markers, attitude markers and hedging devices” (Jucker & Ziv, 1988, p. 1).

I propose that discourse markers are a mono-functional procedural class of verbal items, whose overall function is to serve as conversational monitoring devices, namely to indicate the status of a conversation participant’s alignment with the ongoing conversation at a certain point within it. In my model of discourse (which is based on Van Kuppevelt, 1995), each conversation participant has an individual model of the world (MoW), which includes all the information s/he has that is relevant to the ongoing conversation, including knowledge of the world and contextually relevant factors. Another MoW involved in an ongoing conversation is that of the cotext, namely the textual material. The combination of this MoW with those of the participants creates the model of the world of the discourse as a whole. The use of a discourse marker signals an upcoming or undergone adaptation of one of the various MoW’s involved in the ongoing conversation, thereby indicating the status of the alignment of the user’s MoW with the other MoW’s involved in the ongoing conversation. The initial adaptation generates a continuum of adaptations in the other relevant MoW’s, which invariably results in an adaptation of the MoW of the discourse as a whole.

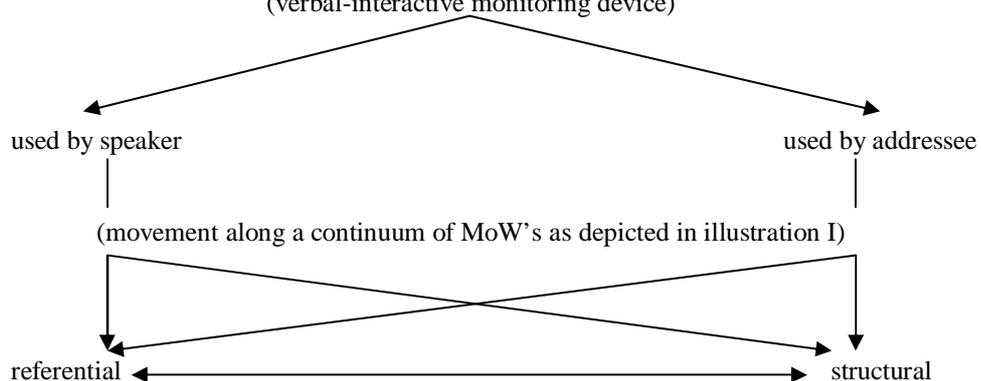
Illustration I: The Overall Function of Discourse Markers



Note that the initial adaptation may generate a variety of continuums along the different MoW's involved in the conversation, as depicted by the arrows. For simplicity, I'll present two examples. In the first case, an adaptation may originate in the mind of the speaker, be manifest in the cotext and affect the MoW of the discourse. In a different case, an adaptation may originate in the mind of the addressee, which generates a required adaptation in the mind of the speaker, which, in turn, affects the MoW of the discourse. The MoW adaptations may relate to and be manifest in units of information in the discourse (referential) or to the structure of the discourse (structural), as depicted in illustration II.

Illustration II: The function and textual manifestations of discourse markers

Cognitive adaptation of world model signaled by the use of discourse markers
(verbal-interactive monitoring device)



According to the model, discourse markers have one overall procedural function, which is to monitor the ongoing conversation by signaling undergone or upcoming adaptations of the various MoW's involved in the ongoing discourse. This

monitoring relates to those conversational aspects pertaining to the relations between the participants as well as to those between each participant and the cotext such as agreement, disprefferal, emotive or attitudinal features, politeness strategies, fillers and/or the highlighting of certain information. The adaptation in the MoW of the discourse as a whole can be manifest in the referential or structural aspects of discourse or both, all of which are guided by considerations of relevance. These, in turn, can be further sub-classified into what scholars have viewed as different functions of discourse markers. The referential manifestations include the broad functions of glossing or commenting on some unit of information. This gloss or comment can take the form of qualification, expansion and/or introducing a new unit of information, all of which add new information to the discourse or bring a certain unit of information into a focus of relevance different from the one that it had occupied until the current point in the ongoing conversation. The structural manifestation relates to framing, boundary marking, connectors, turn-taking and/or topic witching, all of which affect the structure of the cotext. Both kinds of manifestations will be exemplified and briefly discussed below.

To see if my model accounts for the phenomenon of discourse markers I performed a qualitative and a quantitative analysis. In the qualitative analysis, I examined existing analyses of six English discourse markers, namely *yeah*, *oh*, *well*, *like*, *(be)cause* and *y(ou) know*, in order to show that the various roles and functions attributed to them by different scholars can be subsumed under the overall procedural function of monitoring conversation and that the textual manifestations are, indeed, structural or referential. My analysis employed elements from Conversation Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics and Pragmatics.

The quantitative analysis consisted of examining the occurrences of the six aforementioned discourse markers in two sets of conversations from the *BNC Sampler*, which is a representative part of the BNC, which was compiled in 1994 [and tagged in 1995-6.] I chose two sets of conversations in order to minimize the findings being coincidental. The conversations I chose included 23,449 words, approximately 2100 utterances in total. The first set, called KCA, is a set of conversations between 5 participants, 2 males and 3 females aged 29-32 and one male aged 56. They were all friends or relatives. The conversations, which were recorded in 1992, took place at home watching TV and at the pub. The second set, called KC7, which was also recorded in 1992, includes 4 participants who are friends: 1 male aged 21 and 3 females aged 18, 22 and 32. These conversations were recorded at home. I compiled all excerpts where the chosen discourse markers appear and analyzed them for conversational role and gender, utterance location and textual manifestations.

The general findings are that the discourse markers from the chosen subset appear 598 times (once in 3.5 utterances on the average). Generally, speakers and addressees use discourse markers with almost equal frequency (290:308 respectively) but this ratio changes with each discourse marker. Regarding utterance location, the examined discourse markers are primarily utterance initial (444 times, 74%). They appear medially 107 times (18%) and finally 47 times (8%). The distribution of utterance location differs with the choice of discourse marker. The primary textual manifestation is structural (for all discourse markers but *like* and *oh*), but in most cases both manifestations are evident (258 times, 43%). When only one manifestation is evident, it is mostly structural (187 times, 31%) whereas the referential manifestation alone appears 73 times (12%). Thus, there seems to be a greater need for structural monitoring than for referential monitoring.

The first discourse marker I examined is *yeah*. According to the proposed model, *yeah* monitors conversation by indicating that its user has adapted or is about to adapt his/her model of the world in light of new information that is consistent or compatible with his/her MoW. As a result, the other participants know that the information to which *yeah* relates is part of the model of the world of the cotext and their models of the world are adapted accordingly, followed by an adaptation of the model of the world of the ongoing discourse. The manifestations of *yeah* are presented in the following illustration and are followed by the relevant quantitative findings and a number of examples, as will be the case with all examined discourse markers.

Illustration III: The manifestations of *yeah*

interactive monitoring (indicating compatibility with user's model of the world)

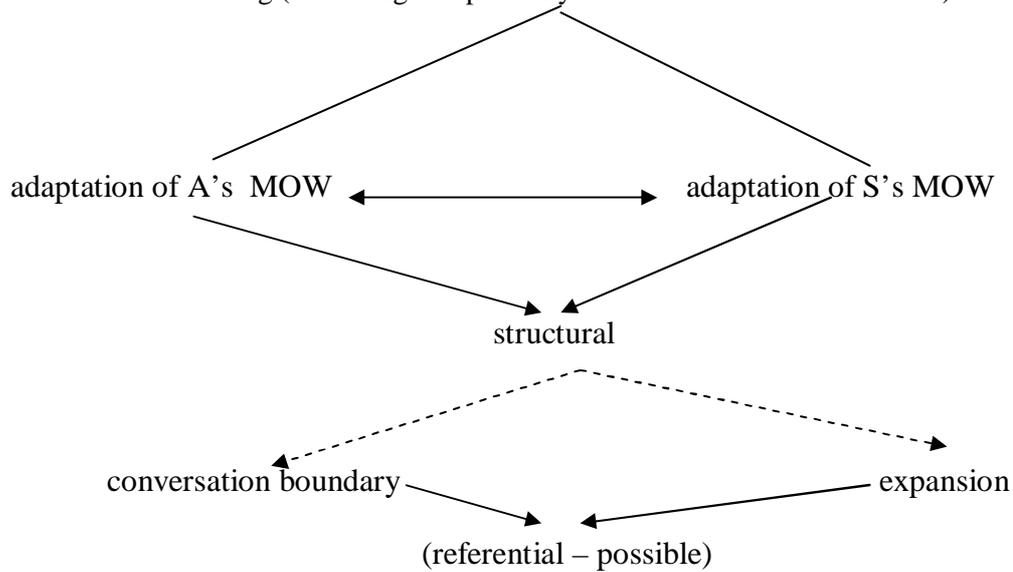


Table 1: The quantitative findings for *yeah*

Yeah appears 181 times (30%) in the examined corpus.

	Conversational Role		Utterance Location			Manifestations		
	Speaker	Addressee	Initial	Medial	Final	S	R	Both
N	64	117	166	8	7	65	8	106
%	35.4	64.6	91.8	4.4	3.8	40	4.4	58.5

S and A refer to speaker and addressee respectively; I, M, and F relate to utterance initial, medial and final locations; S refers to the structural manifestation alone and R to the referential manifestation alone. The percentages are rounded to the nearest integer.

An interesting finding, which is not exclusive to *yeah*, is that when a new referent is introduced it is often the user of *yeah* him/herself. (in the case of *yeah*, 40 times, 22%). Another interesting finding is that in contrast to the other examined discourse markers, *yeah* is uttered twice in a row relatively frequently (29 times, 16%). This can be explained either by attributing it to performance factors or to a means of increasing the force of the utterance, something that can be paraphrased as “This is already part of my model of the world. It needn’t be specified.” Another possible account is that *yeah* is the least face threatening discourse marker of the examined subset or, even, that it is actually face saving, so saying it more than once not only does not constitute a face threatening act but it is actually felicitous in terms of rationality and cooperation.

Examples for the discourse marker use of *yeah*:

1. A: I really know how to. You know shoot the ball.

B: *Yeah*. (Jucker & Smith, 1998:179:17A2s)

In this excerpt, A has already mentioned that that she has been the captain of her basketball team without mentioning any specific skill she has. B indicates the receipt of this information and, by the use of the discourse marker, that this information is compatible with her model of the world – indeed, captains of basketball teams are expected to know to shoot the ball. Both participants’ models of the world and that of the cotext and of the ongoing discourse have been adapted to include the new (or

newly relevant) information and the conversation may continue on the same topic or on a new one. Thus, in this case the manifestation is structural.

2. A: do you ever play tennis?

B: yeah... every once. Well I haven't in a while, but I used to *yeah* I used to a while ago.

A: *yeah* I like tennis

B: uh huh

A: but I don't play very well. (Ibid. 17B6s)

The first, unitalicized *yeah* is most probably not a discourse marker but a positive answer to the preceding polar interrogative. The first italicized *yeah* is different from the discourse marker in example #1 in that it is used by the speaker, so it clearly cannot be a marker of acknowledgement since one hardly needs to acknowledge information s/he him/herself provides. What happens here is that the speaker herself reactivates her first positive reply and repeats the preceding material almost verbatim. In doing so, she lets B know that his/her model of the world is inaccurate and instructs him/her how to adapt it in light of the new information (the new unit of information is the time of playing). A's subsequent use of *yeah* is similar to that in example #1, i.e. it points to the subject of tennis now being in the focus of relevance. A then continues with a new referent, namely his/her own tennis skills. In this example, the manifestations are both structural and referential.

3. Jim: I looked at it [the photo] the other day and I thought I must remember to ask. I didn't know him very well. *Yeah*. Anyway, he... (BNC Sampler, KCA 0555)

This is a prototypical example of a speaker's use of *yeah*. Jim adapts his own model of the world as a result of a shift in the focus of relevance incurred by the information in his own utterance. The following example shows the two textual manifestations:

Nancy's reply includes both the introduction of a new referent and a structural shift, namely the beginning or reactivation of a different topic.

4. [[Jemma: Pretend you're a cowboy, or a bank robber, okay.

Nancy: *Yeah*. How did they manage that? (Ibid. KC7 0850)]

The next discourse marker I examined was *oh*. Generally speaking, *oh* is very similar to *yeah* in that it often constitutes an utterance in its own right and is used primarily by addressees. The main difference between *oh* and *yeah* lies in their procedural meaning. *Oh* is "used to propose that its producer has undergone some kind of change in his or her current state of knowledge, information, orientation or awareness" (Heritage, 1984:299). In other words, *oh* is used to indicate that the information to which it relates is incompatible with its user's model of the world. As a result, its user often has to denote that s/he has located and replaced a prior information unit which is incongruent with his/her model of the world i.e. a new referent is introduced. Therefore, *oh*'s primary manifestation is obviously referential. Since a new referent may generate a structural movement, the structural manifestation (of conversation boundary, again similarly to *yeah*) is often evident as well. In any case, the other models of the world involved in the ongoing discourse have to be adapted in light of the new information. The manifestations of *oh* are presented below.

Illustration IV: The manifestations of *oh*

interactive monitoring

(indicating incompatibility with user's model of the world)



referential

(user adding a new referent or shifting the focus of relevance to another referent)



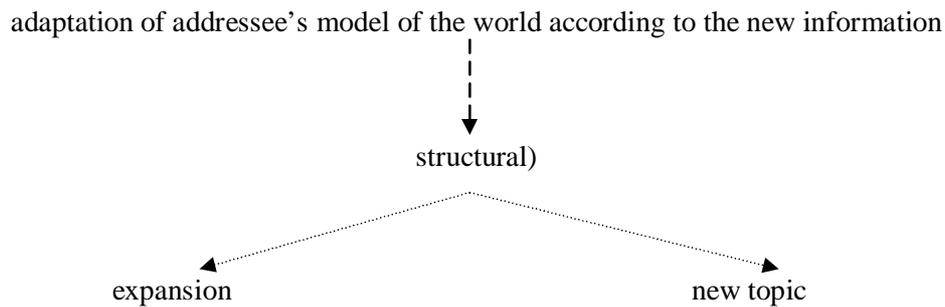


Table 2: The quantitative findings for *oh*

Oh appears 106 times (18%) in the examined corpus.

	Conversational Role		Utterance Location			Manifestations		
	Speaker	Addressee	Initial	Medial	Final	S	R	Both
N	25	81	106	--	--	24	29	40
%	24	76	100	--	--	23	27	38

The relatively low frequency of *oh* is to be expected. First, the analyzed conversations are between friends and, hence, one would expect more cases of compatibility than of incompatibility. Another possible reason is that an indication of incompatibility is face threatening almost by definition and, therefore, one might be reluctant to articulate it. In addition, since conversation is a cooperative endeavor, one tries to incorporate incoming information into his/her model of the world, and, therefore, cases of incompatibility are less frequent than cases of compatibility.

Examples for the discourse marker use of *oh*:

1. Irene: How can I get an appointment t'go there t'bring my son on a tour?

Debby: *Oh* I didn't even know they gave tours! I'm not the one t'ask about it.

(Schiffrin, 1987:86:23)

This example is prototypical of an addressee's use of *oh*. Debby indicates that she cannot answer Irene's question since she does not have the information, i.e. the required information is not part of her model of the world. Thus, there is a clear

structural boundary, as the conversation obviously cannot continue on this topic, followed by an introduction of a new referent, 'I'.

2. Jack: How bout uh... how bout the one uh.. uh. Death of a Salesman?

Freda: Well, that was a show, sure.

Jack: *Oh* that was a movie too. (Ibid. 86:23)

In this case, a new referent is added, namely the movie *Death of a Salesman* in contrast to the show by the same name. Following the required adaptations of the various models of the world, the conversation may continue on the same topic or embark on a new one (both of which constitute textual structural manifestations).

3. Debbie: No leave it on. I got ta use the bloody tapes. *Oh*. I couldn't use it up with the kids you know. (BNC, KCA 0619)

This exemplifies a speaker's use of *oh*. The afterthought is incompatible with the previous information, and the inability to use 'it with the kids' constitutes a textual-structural manifestation of a temporary deviation from the topic.

5. Jemma: Why what's he done?

Gill: *Oh. Well* it's not up to me, it's nothing to do with me. (Ibid. KC7, 0834)

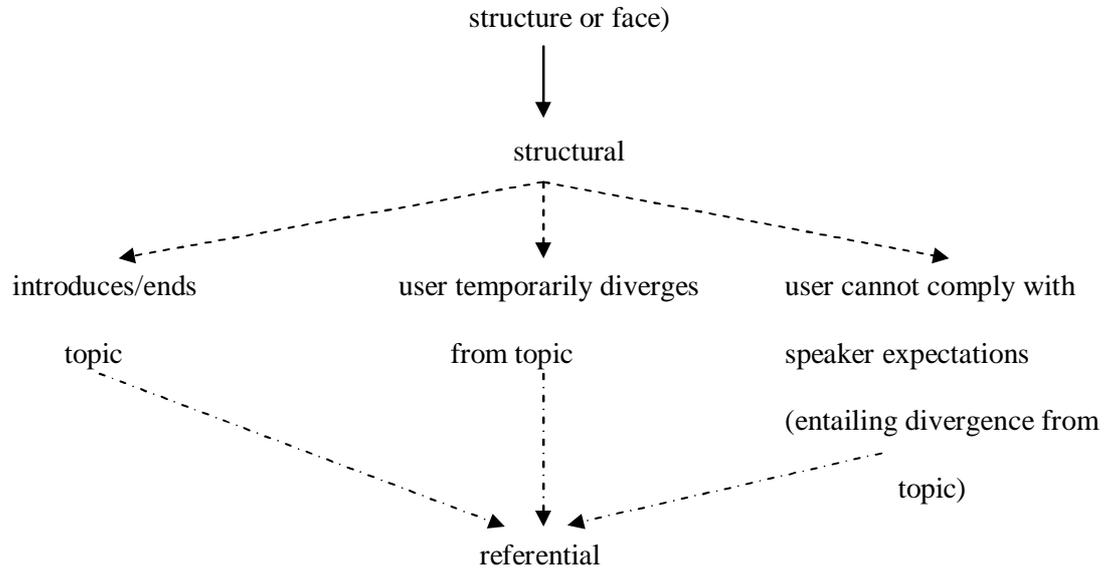
This example illustrates the full range of *oh*'s manifestations. Structurally, there is a clear deviation from the topic as Gill does not answer the question addressed to her. In addition, she adds a new referent, namely herself.

The third discourse I examined is *well*, which is the most versatile, most prototypical and most extensively analyzed discourse marker from the examined subset. Similarly to *oh*, *well* seems to have no conceptual component, but it has acquired one in its use as a discourse marker, namely to convey its user's knowledge that s/he is not meeting with conversational expectations or, in other words, to use Pomerantz' 1984's terminology, that its user is about to perform a conversationally dispreferred move. The manifestations of *well* are presented below.

Illustration V: The manifestations of *well*

interactive

(monitoring conversation by indicating that an utterance is dispreferred in terms of contents,

**Table 3: The quantitative findings for *well****Well* appears 111 times (19%) in the examined corpus.

	Conversational Role		Utterance Location			Manifestations		
	Speaker	Addressee	Initial	Medial	Final	S	R	Both
N	35	76	91	19	--	49	3	52
%	32	68	82	17	--	44	3	47

Examples for the discourse marker use of *well*:

1. Debby: What happened?

Zelda: *Well...* at one time he was a very fine doctor. And he had two terrible tragedies.

[story follows].

(Schiffrin,

1987:110:16)

The utterance prefaced by *well* is clearly not part of the upcoming narrative and, therefore, does not constitute an answer to the preceding question. Hence, the

information to which *well* relates constitutes a structural shift, which reduces coherence and is, as such, dispreferred.

2. A: Did you kill your wife?

B: *Well*, yes. (Lakoff, in Werth 1981:107)

In this case, B's use of *well* indicates that from his point of view, a bare positive answer is insufficient. One can almost hear the following 'but'. Thus, B indicates that he is about to make a dispreferred move to himself or to his addressee.

3. Hayley: So you don't like really being on your own then?

Lynn: *Well* I should say that but [continues]. (BNC, KCA 1135)

This example clearly demonstrates the procedural component of *well* in that Lynn herself says that she is not providing the expected answer. The indication of disprefferal (this time to the user herself) is even more evident in

4. Debbie: Did it [the Chippendales show] turn you on then? When you was watching it like?

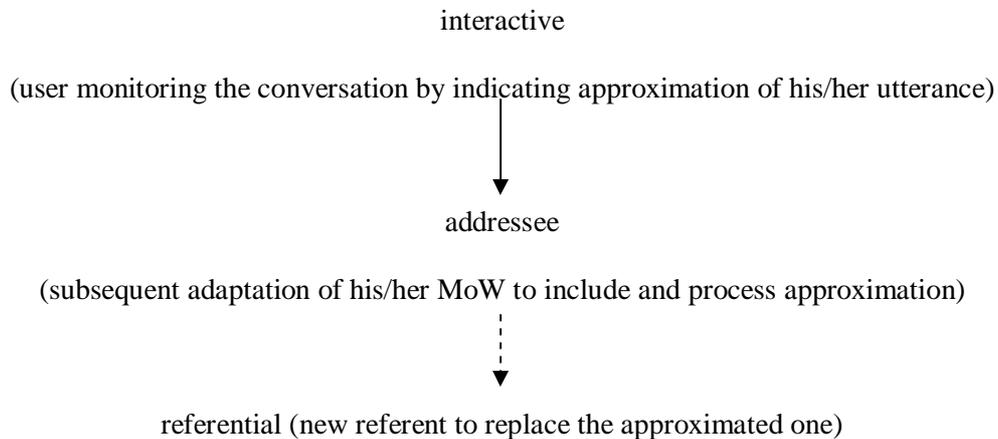
Lynn: *Well* I was yeah he was you couldn't (Ibid. 0206)

This example also shows how the introduction of oneself (in this case only introduced without predication) is a means of indicating or perhaps justifying disprefferal, or maybe be a mechanism for defense against face threatening acts. The manifestation in this case is structural.

The next discourse marker I examined is *like*. All the functions attributed to *like* in the literature can be subsumed under the overall function of approximation or indicating loose talk. To quote Schourup (1985:35-6) "*like* allows the speaker to call attention to a current thought in the private world and to specify... the tenor of what is in mind without placing the details of the private thoughts in the shared world. In the terms of my model, the user of *like* indicates that his/her model of the world is somewhat

different from what his/her utterance denotes but that this difference is not important in terms of processing and understanding the import of the utterance.

Illustration VI: The manifestations of *like*:



In my corpus, *like* is used less frequently than the previously discussed discourse markers 85; 14%. This is not surprising for a number of reasons. First, it is the discourse marker that gives the least mileage of the discourse markers I examined. Second, there is a potential loss of face, which emanates from the fact that one cannot seem to articulate his/her ideas clearly and precisely.

Table 4: The quantitative findings for *like*

Like appears 85 times (14%) in the examined corpus.

	Conversational Role		Utterance Location			Manifestations		
	Speaker	Addressee	Initial	Medial	Final	S	R	Both
N	70	15	23	52	10	4	48	24
%	82	16	27	61	12	5	56	28

Examples for the discourse marker use of *like*:

1. He goes into McDonald's (...) and he's *like* can I have breakfast and he's *like*

breakfast at eleven thirty.

(Andersen, 1998:28

COLT 138905/6)

In this example, the first *like* precedes a rendition of a quote (probably imprecise) and the second is a rendition of the user's thoughts – both indicators of an approximation.

2. I think I might get sidetracked you know, ahm, *like* around the hallways.

(Jucker and Smith 1998:19:12:12A2s)

In this case, *like* serves as an indicator of an example whose purpose is to illustrate a wider point. In other words, the example is an approximation of the point the speaker wants to make. The speaker's anxiety is clearly about getting sidetracked, not about the specific location of the hallways.

3. Jemma: but they had this one enclosed off room where all the dealers sat round this

massive *like* circular console type table and *like* they were all under thirty but *like* overweight, all driving Porsches and taking coke and shit like this and right they just, they got into the office at something *like* six in the morning. (BNC KC7 0651)

In this example Jemma is clearly does not express her own thoughts but the approximation she provides is obviously sufficient to portray the general picture of what she has in mind.

The following example is of a deliberate approximation, for reasons of propriety. The topic is parents' sex life and the speaker seems to be uncomfortable with an explicit mention of the subject, so he uses *it* as a sort of euphemism and indicates that he is doing so by using *like*.

4. Tom: Do you think that they don't do it *like*?

Lynn: Well they're bound to aren't they? (BNC, KCA 0533)

The next to last discourse marker I examined is *(be)cause*. Similarly to *like*, the conceptual meaning of the lexical item because is highly apparent in its use as a discourse marker. All the functions attributed to *(be)cause* as a discourse marker can be subsumed under the function of signaling that the information to which *(be)cause*

relates is in some way subordinate to the information in the usually directly preceding information unit. In the case of a discourse marker, the subordination need not necessarily be one of cause and effect. Rather, according to Schiffrin (1987), it may also relate to the speaker’s intention to present unshared information that s/he intends to be treated as background information and from which the addressee may draw certain inferences.

Illustration VII: Manifestations of *(be)cause*

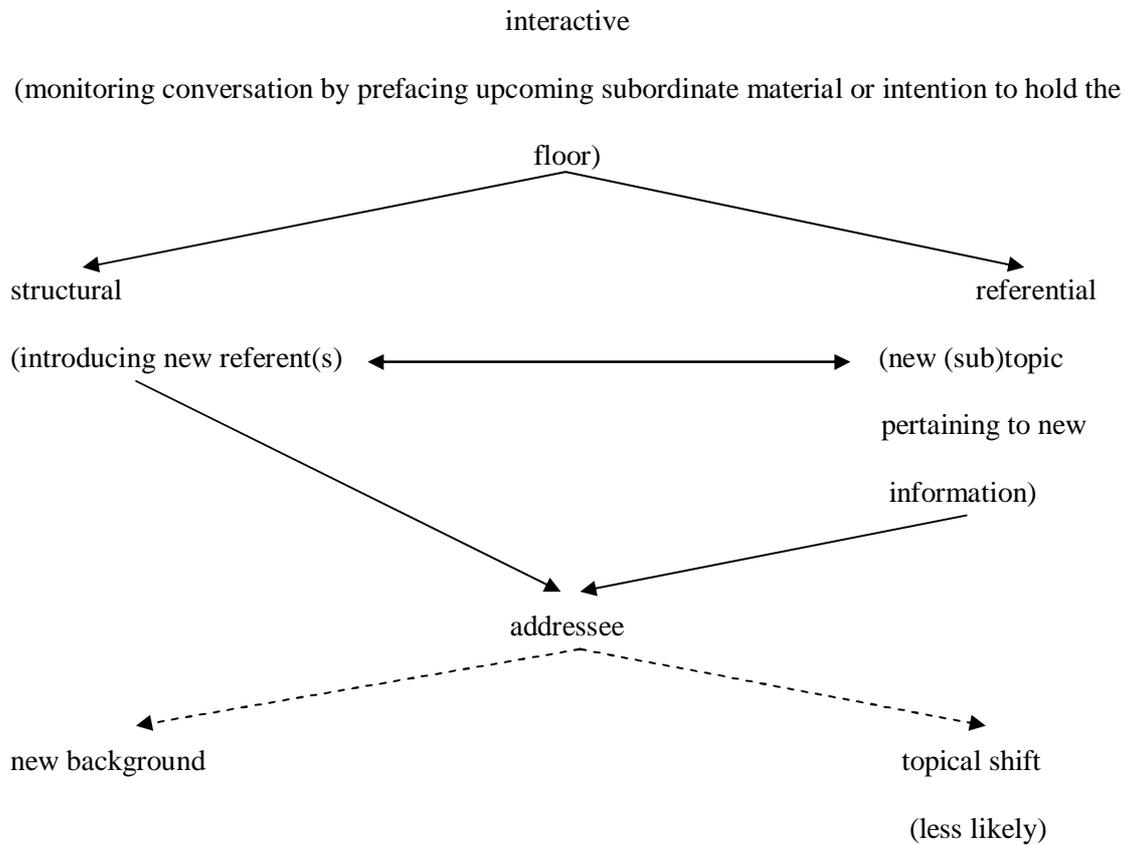


Table 5: The quantitative findings for *(be)cause*

(Be)cause appears 58 times (9.5%) in the examined corpus.

	Conversational Role		Utterance Location			Manifestations		
	Speaker	Addressee	Initial	Medial	Final	S	R	Both
N	41	17	50	8	--	16	1	41
%	71	29	86	14	--	28	--	71

Examples for the discourse marker use of *(be)cause*:

1. Henry: Sometimes it works. *(Be)cause* there's this guy Louie Gelman, he went to a big specialist. [story] So doctors are – well they're not God either. (Schiffrin 1987 195:6)

The purpose of the example of Louie Gelman is clearly to illustrate the point of this segment of the conversation, namely that doctors aren't God. The fact that this example should not be interpreted as the import of the utterance is signaled by *because*. The simultaneous manifestations of *because* are clearly illustrated: the new referent is Louie Gelman and the structural shift is the story.

2. Marie: ... Did Will come out?

Celia: Yeah well no *(be)cause* he just, he pulled the curtain. I was knocking and then and then he said like you know... you're not allowed to be here it's too late. It's the boys' area. (Stenstrom 1998:10 COLT 142304:185, 200, 211)

Clearly the relation between the response to the polar interrogative and the following information is not one of cause and effect. Celia wants to expand the topic by presenting what is for her relevant background for her answer and indicates her intention by using *because*. In this case as well, both textual manifestations are evident .

The following two examples are more of the same.

3. Lynn: So she's better off.

Hayley: Yeah. But how stupid can they be? *Because* I mean the less of you are... (BNC KCA 0913)]

4. Lynn: I started *cos* I started teasing her *cos* she's big chested for her age, right, she's gonna follow my sister *cos* my sister's got big boobs and I started, but of course he just carries it on and on now. (Ibid. KCA 0112)

In this example, each item of background information seems to induce a need for more background information. The relatively high frequency of appearances of *because* seems to be a sort of a series of signposts that enable one to follow the main thread of the conversation.

The final discourse marker to be discussed is *y(ou) know*, which is the most versatile in terms of utterance location and, therefore, of scope. Similarly to *like*, *yeah* and *because*, its function as a discourse marker largely derives from its conceptual meaning when it is not a discourse marker. Scholars attribute several functions to *y(ou) know* as a discourse marker, all of which can all be subsumed under a “presentation of given information of what the speaker assumes to be known to the addressee”(Erman 1987:201). In other words, *y(ou) know* is used to indicate the speaker’s beliefs that there is “no significant discrepancy” (Schourup 1985:102) between the individual models of the world involved in the ongoing conversation and the shared world. As such, (Jucker and Smith 1998:194) *y(ou) know* “invites the addressee to recognize both the relevance and the implications of the utterance” (Schourup 1985:102).

Illustration VIII: Manifestations of *y(ou) know*

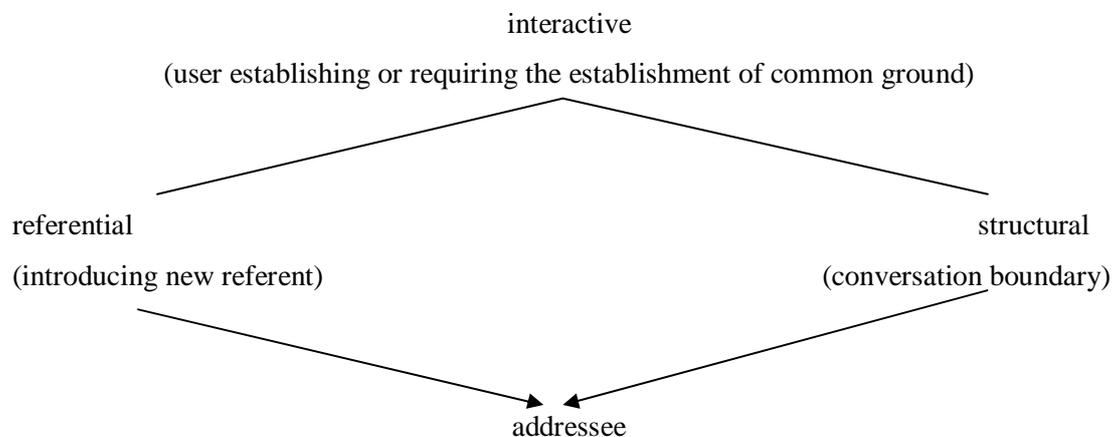


Table 6: The quantitative findings for *y(ou) know*

Y(ou) know appears 57 times (9.5%) in the examined corpus.

	Conversational Role		Utterance Location			Manifestations		
	Speaker	Addressee	Initial	Medial	Final	S	R	Both
N	55	4	8	20	29	21	5	19
%	93	7	14	35	51	36	9	33

Examples for the discourse marker use of *y(ou) know*

1. A bastard's a bastard regardless, *y(ou) know*. (Schiffrin 1987:276:g)

In this case, the information is a tautology so it can't be new to the speaker or to the addressee. The use of *y(ou) know* indicates that the truth of this utterance should be part of the common ground of the ongoing conversation.

2. Why the fact is, you see, Miss, this here ought to have been a *red* rose tree, and we put a white one in by mistake; and, if the queen was to find out, we should all have our heads cut off, *you know*...

(Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, New York: The Modern Library, p. 85)

In this case it is clear that the information is new: Alice has no idea of the repercussions of the queen's seeing a white rose tree instead of the desired red one.

Y(ou) know is used to instruct Alice to treat this information as given.

3. Nancy: She said look, *you know*. She don't keep her house up. She goes, I...

(BNC KC7 0945)

This example illustrates the structural manifestation. *Y(ou) know* and the implicit information is a conversation boundary after which a new subtopic may begin.

4. Lynn: Cos he was handsome, you couldn't you couldn't just *you know* he was wild he was
was (Ibid. KCA 0207)

This example is similar to that of *like* in that it leaves information implicit for reasons of propriety. The difference between *like* and *y(ou) know* is that in the case of *like* a substitute is provided whereas in the case of *y(ou) know* it is not.

To sum up, the proposed model and the quantitative study suggest conclusively that discourse markers are part of linguistic competence in that they form a procedural class of verbal items whose function is to serve as monitoring devices in the interactive aspect of discourse. The monitoring is done by pointing to an undergone or required adaptation of one or more models of the world involved in an ongoing conversation, which subsequently, via movement along a continuum of the other MOW's, results in an adaptation of the model of the world of the discourse. The kind of monitoring and the textual manifestations are determined by the conceptual

component of the chosen discourse marker (in cases where such a component exists) and conversational requirements. In addition, Discourse markers point to their user's attitude to the information to which they relate. Thus, discourse markers constitute an extremely efficient, economical and felicitous means of facilitating the smooth production and interpretation of discourse. The theoretical benefits of this claim are a uniform account for this seemingly diverse class of verbal items and the provision of additional insights into the cognitive domain of processing. In addition, there may be practical implications for L2 teaching and social competence acquisition.

