

***INVESTIGATING DISCOURSE MARKERS IN PEDAGOGICAL SETTINGS:  
A LITERATURE REVIEW***

***SHANRU YANG***

**Abstract**

This article discusses previous studies on discourse markers and raises research attention on discourse markers in pedagogical settings, especially in teacher talk. As important interactional features, discourse markers perform great multi-functionality in conversation. It is discovered that due to different research perspectives, there has always been confusion and disagreement in the terminology and analysis. Studies on discourse markers also often focus less on the local context. In classroom discourse, most related researches are limited to second language learners. Hence it is important to conduct a research on discourse markers in teacher talk and explore their functions in classroom interaction. The review suggests that a multi-functional framework should be applied in relation to pedagogical purposes.

**Keywords:** *discourse markers, college teacher talk, multi-functionality, classroom interaction*

**Introduction**

Discourse markers (henceforth DMs) have been studied from various research perspectives in the field of linguistics (Jucker and Ziv, 1998; Fraser, 1999; Müller, 2004). Examples of DMs include words like *right, yeah, well, you know, okay*. According to Aijmer (2002), DMs are highly context specific and indexed to attitudes,

participants, and text. Therefore, they have discourse functions both on the textual and interpersonal level. DMs play an important role in understanding discourse and information progression (Schiffrin, 1987).

Traditionally, a description of the linguistic items of DMs has been the main research focus in the past twenty years. Schiffrin (1987) raised the importance of DMs in the 80s, and offered a coherence model which includes semantic, syntactic and discourse-organising level to investigate how DMs assist oral coherence (Archakis, 2001). A more pragmatic view later developed and emphasised more on the functional aspect that DMs work within and beyond the context. Studies on DMs can be generally divided into two categories. The first category is a descriptive analysis of DMs in a particular language spoken by its native speakers (NS). The second is about the acquisition of DMs of target language by non-native speakers (NNS). Nevertheless, the latter has been studied much less and is limited to second language learners (Müller, 2004; Fung and Carter, 2007).

In educational settings, DMs are found to have a positive role in classroom context as effective conversational endeavours (Othman, 2010). The studies on DMs in teacher talk yet are under-researched (Fung and Carter, 2007). So far, little attention has been paid to the use and functions of DMs as one essential interactional factor in classroom teacher-student conversation. It is hence important to look at the previous works on DMs and particularly their relations to pedagogical purposes in classroom context.

## Definition

In spoken conversation, the frequency and amount of DMs that people use is significant compared with other word forms (Fung and Carter, 2007). As one important element that constitutes and organizes conversation, DMs not only have grammatical functions but also work as effective interactional features (Schiffrin 1987; Maschler, 1998; Fraser, 1999). One way to evaluate how information is processed and transferred in talk is to rely on DMs (Jucker and Smith, 1998). The terminology of DMs, however, has never reached an agreement due to different research perspectives (Jucker and Ziv, 1998; Fraser, 1999; Frank-Job, 2006; Cohen, 2007; Han, 2008). DMs have been defined as sentence connectives from a systemic functional grammar perspective (Schiffrin, 1987; Halliday and Hasan, 1976; Cohen, 2007), and also as pragmatic markers (Fraser, 1999) from a grammatical-pragmatic view.

To Schiffrin, the first scholar to bring up the importance of DMs, “markers are sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk” (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 31). She described 11 specific types of DMs within the discourse coherence model including “*you know, I mean, so, then*” (Schiffrin, 1987). Being located in the four planes of talk of coherence model, namely *ideational structure*, *action structure*, *exchange structure*, *participant framework* and *information state*, those markers in her study are regarded as contextual coordinates for utterances (Schiffrin, 1987; Fung and Carter, 2007).

From a more pragmatic point of view, according to Fraser (1999), DMs can be defined as “a class of lexical expressions drawn primarily from the syntactic classes of

conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases [which] signal a relationship between the interpretations of the segment they produce” (p. 931). Distinguishing DMs from whether they refer to a textual segment between sentences or discourse segment in structure, Fraser (1999, p. 946) categorised DMs into two major types as follows:

- 1) Discourse markers which relate messages
  - a. contrastive markers: though, but, contrary to this/that, conversely etc.
  - b. collateral markers: above all, also, and, besides, I mean, in addition etc.
  - c. inferential markers: accordingly, as a result, so, then, therefore, thus etc.
  - d. additional subclass: after all, since, because.
- 2) Discourse markers which relate topics
  - e.g. back to my original point, before I forget, by the way etc.

Schiffrin (1987) and Fraser (1999) are the two most quoted scholars in the study of DMs. The two strands resort to a descriptive framework of DMs’ linguistic entity rather than function. There are also other possible labels resulting from different research perspectives, including lexical markers, discourse particles, utterance particles, semantic conjuncts, continuatives and so on. A generalization of those linguistic labels of DMs is summarised in the following table (Table 1).

Label	Example
backchannels/backchannel cues	Verschuren, 1999
continuatives	Trillo, 1997
cue words	Horne et al, 2001
discourse markers	Östman 1981; Schiffrin, 1987
discourse signalling devices	Polanyi & Scha, 1983
discourse connectives	Blackmore, 1987, 1988
discourse operators	Redeker, 1990, 1991
discourse particles	Goldberg, 1980
fillers	Brown & Yule, 1983
gambits	Keller, 1979
linguistic markers	Redeker, 1991
modal particle	Waltereit, 2001
pragmatic expressions	Erman, 1992
pragmatic devices	van Dijk, 1979
pragmatic formatives	Fraser, 1987
pragmatic markers	Fraser, 1988
pragmatic operators	Ariel, 1994
pragmatic particles	Östman, 1995
semantic conjuncts	Quirk et al, 1985
sentence connectives	Halliday & Hasan, 1976
utterance particles	Luke, 1990

Table 1. Terminology variations of DMs

Though the terminology of DMs may differ, it is necessary to generalize certain features that most labels share. It is generally agreed that DMs bear the characteristics of being oral and multifunctional (Lenk, 1998; Müller, 2004). Archakis (2001) and Fung and Carter (2007) have generalized four common characteristics of DMs. First of all, syntactically, DMs are flexible in any position of an utterance. DMs can be placed at any position that fits into the utterance. In most cases, however, it is common to find DMs in turn-initial position to signal upcoming information. DMs, to some extent, function to organize the utterance in structural level (Othman, 2010). Semantically speaking, to remove DMs has no effect on the listeners' to understand the whole meaning of the utterance. DMs can be identified by prosody as a 'separate tone unit' (Fung and Carter, 2007, p.413). In other words, they are independent linguistic entities both syntactically and semantically. Lexically, DMs are drawn from lexical phrases like verbs, prepositions, modal words etc. Last but not least, the multi-

functionality feature differ DMs from other linguistic items. DMs can be found functioning in various levels in interaction (Frank-Job 2006; Fung and Carter, 2007).

### **Previous approaches to DMs**

Traditionally there are three major trends that can be generalized in the studies of DMs, namely discourse coherence, pragmatics and systemic functional linguistics (Fraser, 1999; Schiffrin et al, 2003). They are different from each other because of various ways to understand the concept of DMs and analytical method (Schiffrin et al, 2003).

The first attempt is the coherence model founded by Schiffrin (1987), as mentioned above. According to Schiffrin (1987), four planes within the framework can be distinguished according to different levels of coherence functions that DMs play, namely *exchange structure*, including adjacency-pair like question and answer, *action structure* where speech acts are situated, *ideational structure*, which is viewed from semantics as idea exchange and *participation framework*, i.e. the interaction and relation between the speaker and listener (Fraser, 1999; Schiffrin, 1987). The focus of studies based on this model, however, puts more emphasis on textual coherence rather than local context.

The second approach proposed by Fraser himself, is a solely “grammatical-pragmatic perspective” (Fraser, 1999, p. 936). He believed that DMs are not just functioning as textual coherence but also signalling the speakers’ intention to the next turn in the preceding utterances. Compared with the coherence model, Fraser (1999) contributed to a more complete generalization and a pragmatic view towards different markers, including DMs, in a wider context rather than structural organization. In

Chinese classroom environment, Liu (2006) conducted a pragmatic analysis on one Chinese literature class and concluded that DMs used in teacher talk have five major textual functions: *connect*, *transfer*, *generalize*, *explain* and *repair*. In the process of constructing classroom context, he argued that DMs contribute to the functions of discussion, emotion control and adjust of social relationship (Liu, 2006). This conclusion yet has weak data support and is over simplified without relating much to the classroom context. Similar to Fraser, Blakemore (1992, cited Fraser, 1999) adopted Relevance Theory from pragmatics and claimed that DMs only have “procedural meaning” (p. 936) and are limited to specific contexts. Referring DMs as discourse connectives, Blakemore focused more on DMs’ presentation in discourse processing and segments’ interrelation (Fung and Carter, 2007).

Another recent approach is through systemic functional grammar (SFG) founded by M. A. K. Halliday (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Though Halliday and Hasan (1976) did not bring up the issue of DMs directly, in the analysis of textual function, they investigated words like *and*, *but*, *I mean*, *to sum up etc.* as sentence connectives that perform an important part in semantic cohesion. DMs are regarded as effective cohesive devices with various meanings and functions in segment organization. The study is primarily based on written texts yet it still sheds some light on the importance of DMs in function and meaning construction (Schiffrin et al, 2003).

As Yu (2008) noticed, studies on DMs mainly focus on syntactical-structural level or pragmatic coherence while researches on features, categorizations and contexts are scarce. How to relate the functions of DMs to their local context and go beyond context should also be researched. So far, few articles have been found on

classroom DMs in educational settings. In fact, the appropriate use of DMs in classroom not only can improve the participation of the students but also contribute to the effectiveness of learning. It is important that more researches and attempts are needed to probe on the issue.

### **DMs in pedagogical settings**

Classroom, as Walsh (2006) points out, is a “dynamic” context (p. 4) where series of events take place among teachers, learners, discourses, settings and learning materials. Communications between teachers and learners like conversation and dialogue are realized through the medium of classroom discourse. As one important part of classroom interaction, DMs are useful to help with the flow of conversation.

As stated above, DMs have been researched by numerous scholars’ recently. Though there is a growing number of studies on DMs in the context of pedagogical settings, they are rather limited to L2 learner acquisition. A large scale of studies has focused on the second language learners’ use of DMs mostly using corpus-driven approach. Müller (2004) compared the functions of *well* used by German EFL university learners and that of American NS based on naturalistic corpus. 70 German EFL learners’ conversations are recorded after watching a film and finishing a certain task. Possible factors that influence the different use of DMs between NS and NNS are also discussed. Similarly, Trillo (2002) focused on the pragmatic fossilization issue of DMs in both child and adult NNS in Madrid with comparison to NS during their process of learning English.

DMs in teacher talk, on the other hand, are rarely reached in literature. The use and functions of DMs as one essential interactional factor in teacher talk so far have



not been fully described in previous studies. There are still few exceptions though. For instance, Othman (2010) investigated three specific DMs *okay*, *right* and *yeah* used by NS lecturers in Lancaster University, UK. It is found that college lecturers use DMs as signposts on structural level when taking turns in lecturing as a subconscious behaviour, observed by Othman (2010). The study uses naturalistic video recorded data and interviews with lecturers to cross-check the interpretation from both the lecturers and the researcher's point of view. It recognizes the functional significance of those three DMs in conversational interactions when organizing utterances. In Chinese context, Yu (2008) investigated interpersonal meaning of DMs in Chinese EFL classroom within the framework of systemic functional linguistics. In her article, DMs are studied in six moves of the process of teaching: *opening*, *information checking*, *information clarification*, *responding*, *comment* and *repetition*. According to Yu (2008), the appropriate use of DMs can improve the effectiveness of classroom teaching. Liu (2006) conducted a pragmatic analysis on one Chinese literature class and concluded that teachers' DMs have five major textual functions: *connect*, *transfer*, *generalize*, *explain* and *repair*. In the process of constructing classroom context, he argued that DMs contribute to the functions of discussion, emotion control and adjust of social relationship (Liu, 2006).

Though little attention has been paid to the use and functions of DMs in a pedagogical environment, DMs are constantly used in teacher language to help creating an effective flow of information from teachers to students in different stages of learning process, if used appropriately (Yu, 2008). Different from other applications, DMs used by EFL teachers also assist to realize certain pedagogical purposes that direct EFL classroom lesson plan (Walsh, 2006). In classroom context,

DMs function as a lubricant in interaction to reduce understanding difficulties, incoherence and social distance among students, and between teacher and student (Walsh, 2006; Fung and Carter, 2007). DMs in teacher talk play an important role for students to understand teacher language better, which hence helps them to improve learning efficiency (Walsh, 2006). As it is observed, DMs perform both a social and educational function at the same time in classroom context. The relationship between DMs and efficacy of classroom interaction is still under investigation.

In pedagogical discourse, a comprehensive functional paradigm of DMs is described by Fung and Carter (2007), through examining the use of DMs by NS and NNS on the basis of a comparative study of two pedagogical corpora, CANCODE (a corpus of spoken British English) and natural transcripts of recordings in Hong Kong. Through exploring a comparison of DMs output between native speakers and L2 learners, Fung and Carter (2007) have categorized a core functional paradigm of DMs namely *interpersonal*, *referential*, *structural* and *cognitive* dimension (see Table 2). As they observed, DMs serve as useful interactional endeavours to structure and organize learners' speech in class for both NS and NNS. They perform in different functional levels to aid discourse development and management.

Interpersonal	Referential	Structural	Cognitive
Marking shared knowledge: <i>see, you see, you know</i>	Cause: <i>because</i> Contrast: <i>but, yet</i>	Opening and closing of topics: <i>now, ok/okay, right, let's start</i>	Denoting thinking process: <i>well, I think, I see, and</i>
Indicating attitudes: <i>well, really, I think, sort of</i>	Coordination: <i>and</i> Disjunction: <i>or</i>	Sequence: <i>first, second, firstly, next, then</i>	Reformulation/self correction: <i>I mean</i>
Showing responses: <i>ok/okay, yeah, I see, great</i>	Consequence: <i>so</i>	Topic shifts: <i>so, now, how about</i>	Elaboration: <i>like, I mean</i>
	Digression: <i>anyway</i>	Summarizing opinions: <i>so</i>	Hesitation: <i>well, sort of</i>
	Comparison: <i>similarly</i>	Continuation of topics: <i>yeah, and, so</i>	Assessment of the listener's knowledge about the utterances: <i>you know</i>

Table 2. A core functional paradigm of discourse markers in pedagogical discourse

In *interpersonal* function, DMs such as modal verbs are used often to reduce the social distance between the speakers through the process of sharing common knowledge and indicating agreed attitudes. On *referential* level, DMs mainly function as sentence connectives as defined in systemic functional grammar to connect preceding and following segments in meaning. In *structural* category, as Fung and Carter (2007) generalized, DMs function to signal topic shifting and turn taking. In terms of topic development, DMs mark particular sequences to see how they relate to the suspected project, theme, stance, etc, which are essential to interactional projects (Schegloff, 2007). Lastly, DMs also can work as *cognitive* device to “denote the thinking process” in constructing utterances (Fung and Carter, 2007, p. 415). The multi-functional framework of DMs in NNS learners is effective in that it provides a descriptive model to analyse DMs on different levels. It provides a context-based model to analyze DMs from a functional perspective for classroom discourse, which can be further applied to investigate the use of DMs in teacher talk.

## Conclusion

In this literature review on DMs, I have discussed the confusion of terminology, different approaches towards DMs and DMs in relation to pedagogical settings. It can be noted that the reason behind the confusion in the terminology and analytical method is because of various research perspectives. Researches, however, should further link to the local context rather than employing a pure descriptive analysis.

In classroom context, less attention has been paid to the effect of DMs and their function in teacher talk, though many studies have suggested that there is a positive effect of DMs in classroom interaction as effective conversational endeavours (Othman, 2010). It is discovered that DMs perform on different functional levels depending on various pedagogical aims. Nevertheless, their patterns and functions have not been fully described in literature. The frequencies, categories and effects of DMs that teachers use in classroom interaction are still under investigation. The gap in literature on DMs can be researched through applying a multi-categorical model in relation to relevant pedagogical context, which can shed light upon on further implications for teacher classroom competence in teaching.

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### **About the author**

Shanru Yang is a second year PhD student in School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences, Newcastle University. Her research topic is discourse markers in Chinese college English teacher talk, supervised by Dr. Steve Walsh. Any suggestions are appreciated to send to [s.yang2@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:s.yang2@newcastle.ac.uk)