Discussion article: Pragmatic markers, interjections and discourse*

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Abstract

This article addresses a range of issues centering on pragmatic markers, interjections and the analysis of discourse in relation to three contributions in this volume of the journal. After an initial clarification of terminology in the area of pragmatic markers in general and discourse markers more specifically, I introduce an Interactional Sociolinguistic perspective on pragmatic markers by contrast with the Adaptive Management in Discourse approach of Romero. Then I take up the matter of written versus spoken data with relation to the articles by Fernández-Villanueva and Matamala. I go on to focus on interjections and their distribution, in particular the discourse marker functions of *oh* in English with relation to the article by Matamala. Finally, I broaden the discussion to a general consideration of interjections as pragmatic markers.

Key words: pragmatic markers, discourse markers, interjections, *oh*.

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1. Introduction

In this article I discuss three contributions to this journal, those by Romero, Fernández-Villanueva and Matamala. My comments on the first paper focus on theoretical issues, comparing Romero's approach to the framework of Interactional Sociolinguistics. My comments on the articles by Fernández-Villanueva and

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Matamala concern initially the matter of written versus spoken data, then turn to the distribution of *oh* along with other interjections, and finally to a more general discussion of interjections as pragmatic markers.

Conversational turns can often be divided up into two separate parts:

a)   a basic move with a constituent structure and a particular meaning or force;
b)   a pragmatic marker distinct from the constituent structure of the basic move, relating that move to the dynamic context, signaling:
— assumptions about the current speech event;
— and the interpersonal relationships of the participants;
— the relation of the basic move to the foregoing turn;
— and its evidential status;
— the speaker's stance, attitude, emotional state;

and so on.

Pragmatic markers prototypically occur in turn-initial position; they differ in this way from characteristically utterance-internal modal particles in those languages like German and Dutch which evince a clear distinction between the two (see section 2 of Traugott's article, this volume, for more on this distinction). Some writers use the term "discourse marker" to cover roughly this same set of items, but according to the original definition of Schiffrin (1982), discourse markers constitute only a proper sub-class of pragmatic markers, namely those which signal the relation of the basic move to the foregoing turn (compare Fraser 1996). Schiffrin calls discourse markers: "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk" (1982: 31). They focus on interaction and relations between propositional speech acts, indicating contrast, conclusion, elaboration, transition and so on. From this perspective, *so* in example (1) is a discourse marker proper, because it relates the foregoing utterance to the one it initiates (as a conclusion), while *honestly* in (2) is a commentary marker, because it indicates the speaker's attitude toward the utterance it initiates, namely something about the manner of its expression, but does not relate it to the foregoing utterance, and *wow* in (3) is a parallel marker, because it expresses speaker affect (surprise) separate from whatever is expressed by the utterance it initiates.[1]

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1.   All data cited here are below derive from four generally available corpora of transcribed spoken English: first, our own Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English (SCoSE), an extensive collection of audio and video recordings of free conversation and conversational interviews, involving a wide range of speakers from the United States and Britain. Notes on our transcription conventions and on participants in the recordings, along with steadily increasing numbers of transcribed excerpts from the SCoSE are available online at:
     http://www.uni-saarland.de/fak4/norrick/sbccn.htm (last access 6 January 2007);
     second, the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBCSAE)
     http://www.talkbank.org/media/conversation/SBCSAE/
     third, the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English (LLC)
     http://khnt.hit.uib.no/icame/manuals/LONDLUND/INDEX.HTM
     and fourth, the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English (WSC)
     http://khnt.hit.uib.no/icame/manuals/wsc/INDEX.HTM
     Excerpts from these other corpora have been partially adapted to our transcription conventions.

(1) PETE: … that's really scary.
     MILES: .. *so* I guess it's time for me to become a priest.
     (Santa Barbara Corpus, 0002)

(2) A   I don't think this is Charlie Wilson's line
     B   you don't
     A   *honestly* I think he's he's entirely taken up with English as a second lan-
         guage
     (London-Lund Corpus, 2-1)

(3) Brandon: with two bodyguards to protect him
     Lydia: *wow*, to think of it.
     (Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English: JACK)

It seems to me that this is more than a mere matter of terminology, and I main-
tain this distinction in my following comments, though the authors I discuss (par-
ticularly Romero and Matamala) do not. The parallel pragmatic marker *wow* in
example (3) illustrates a primary interjection of the kind we shall investigate in the
later sections of this article.

2. Adaptive Management versus Interactional Sociolinguistics

In his article, Romero sketches a framework he calls Adaptive Management in
Discourse, and considers its relation to second language learning with regard to
discourse markers. It will be instructive to compare Romero's Adaptive Management
in Discourse to another current perspective, namely Interactional Sociolinguistics,
with which it shares important features.

Romero proposes an approach to discourse markers which he calls the dis-
course-cognitive model. In this model, discourse markers are defined as "elements
that fill the discoursal and cognitive slots that spoken language needs in order to
weave the net of interaction" (Romero 2006). He says his approach is geared to
the description of the dynamics of discourse and the cognitive status of the mark-
ers. In this view discourse markers are dynamic elements that serve to mold the
speaker-hearer relationship according to the pragmatic force of an utterance in a
given context:[2] The key to this model is that discourse markers are the elements

2. By comparison with other accounts, some of Romero's examples are discourse markers, while
    others are not. He includes among his Operative Markers: *well*, *now*, *so*. According to Schiffrin, these
    are discourse markers, while according to Fraser, *now* is generally a pragmatic marker, namely a
    focusing marker. Romero includes among his Involvement Markers: *you know*, *you see*, *I mean*;
    Schiffrin considers *y'know* a discourse marker, but Fraser considers both *y'know* and *y'see* pragmatic
    markers, namely a commentary marker and a focus marker, respectively. Though I do not feel fully
    competent to classify his Spanish examples, it seems to me *¿me entiendes?* and *¿me explico?* and
    similar expressions "directed to the addressee to check if Adaptive Management is necessary" are
    neither discourse markers nor pragmatic markers, but rather literal requests for listener feedback—
    even if they're translated by English pragmatic markers or discourse markers.

that guarantee the "adaptive management" of the message to a discourse situation. Romero defines Adaptive Management in Discourse as the capacity of a speaker to adapt the grammatical, lexical and pragmatic parameters of discourse through a series of remedial elements and through a principled process, in order to comply with the demands of a new cognitive stage in a conversation *via* a cognitive standardized process. Thus, discourse markers are the self-regulating elements that enter the structure to help keep a conversation alive.

According to Romero other models of discourse that incorporate the idea of feedback are predominantly linear and concentrate on specific exchanges or transactions, but this does not hold for Interactional Sociolinguistics (see Gumperz 2000), which specifically seeks to describe the self-regulation of conversation accomplished by participants. The signals they send each other, called contextualization cues, serve to keep each other abreast of where they perceive the conversation to be going, what sort of interaction they are engaged in, and what their attitudes about it are. These contextualization cues include all kinds of discourse markers, even those covered by the broad definition of Romero. Of course, he expands the usual definition of discourse marker to include even signals of stance like intonation, since he is trying to account for the whole range of feedback mechanisms in his Adaptive Management model—but these are all covered in Interactional Sociolinguistics under the heading of contextualization cues. Discourse markers are just one kind of contextualization cue, others include formulaicity and repetition, disfluencies and prosodic elements like volume, tempo and intonation.

In his article, Romero wavers between considering adaptive management a matter of personal feedback (the method that a speaker uses to repair misunderstandings) and an interactional achievement (fundamental elements that guide the speaker-hearer interaction towards an appropriate interpretation of the pragmatics of discourse), but in Interactional Sociolinguistics it is clear that the mechanism must be based in interaction rather than in the individual. Both (all) participants must be monitoring and signaling or interaction breaks down—and Interactional Sociolinguistics has carefully documented examples of such breakdowns, especially in intercultural contexts (see Gumperz 1982 for examples and discussion). In particular, Romero's definition of Involvement Markers as "the discourse markers that deal with the management of social rapport to safeguard the face of the interactants" (p. 84) sounds almost exactly like early Tannen (1984), especially the connection of terms like involvement and rapport. Romero says, "involvement markers can typically make the speaker follow Adaptive Management strategies when the addressee indicates that he/she is not following", but markers certainly cannot MAKE a speaker do anything. What he must mean is that certain cues (or the lack of certain cues) will lead an interlocutor to realize that the other participant has failed to achieve uptake and that remedial steps are in order. It becomes clear in examples like this that it is the give-and-take of face-to-face interaction with its cuing, inferencing and feedback in both directions which matches his model of adaptive management, but this dyadic interactive negotiation of goals, strategies and interpretations is precisely the centerpiece of Interactional Sociolinguistics analysis.

Romero does not get around to analyzing either successful or problematic inter-actions in his article, but contents himself with describing the differences in cuing (via discourse markers) in two different systems (Spanish and English). In any case, work in Interactional Sociolinguistics amply demonstrates how this can be accomplished.

3. German *also* in semi-informal oral interaction

For a concrete comparison of discourse markers, we can turn to the following two contributions, the first by Fernández-Villanueva concerning the German particle *also* and the second by Matamala concerning the English interjection *oh*. Specifically, Fernández-Villanueva focuses on *also* in talk by native and non-native German speakers, while Matamala focuses on *oh* as a discourse marker in English sitcoms and its translations into Catalan.

In her article on uses of *also* in oral, semi-informal German, Fernández-Villanueva investigates a single item often, if not usually systematically, studied in the past. She reviews the literature on German *also* (roughly 'therefore, so, well' in English), then analyzes the uses of *also* in semi-informal oral interactions, based on empirical data from the VARCOM corpus. In particular, she investigates the presence and frequency of *also* at the beginning of a sequence, the functions it serves and the interrelations between these functions. Fernández-Villanueva then con-trasts these results with the descriptions of *also* in current reference works, draw-ing interesting conclusions about the appropriate treatment of *also*, about its use by native and non-native German speakers, and about its ongoing development in present-day German talk.

Fernández-Villanueva's research, based as it is on a set of corpora, yields sig-nificant descriptive results with interesting consequences. Her careful use of sta-tistics to support conclusions about distribution leads to hypotheses about change in progress (by contrast with Romero). She adduces solid statistical evidence for sig-nificant differences between native and foreign speakers (again by contrast with Romero). Moreover, she maintains a clear distinction of oral versus written dis-course with appropriate concern for potential differences and well motivated rea-sons for those differences (by contrast with Matamala, as we shall see below.)

Traditional grammars of German consider *also* an adverb, but this amounts to capitulation in the face of polyvalence and pragmatic functions not clearly bound into sentence grammar. As Fernández-Villanueva demonstrates, in function *also* is often closer to a modal particle than an adverb in the strict sense. Specifically, in its non-integrated use in turn-initial or "null" position (that is: "Null-Position" or "Vor-Vorfeld" in German syntactical terminology) at the head of a spoken sequence, *also* functions as a discourse and/or interaction marker serving to reformulate some-thing in the foregoing discourse or to reorganize a portion of it. As such, it would count as an elaborative discourse marker in the taxonomy of Fraser (1996), though German *also* has a number of other more or less idiomatic functions as well.

4. The English interjection *oh*

Turning now to Matamala's article on *oh*, we discover a highly idiosyncratic interjection with specific discourse marker functions. Indeed, from a grammatical perspective, *oh* is the most deeply entrenched and frequent primary interjection in English (see Heritage 1984). Interjections divide into primary interjections like *oh* and *aw* and secondary interjections like *shit* and *damn* (see Ameka 1993 and Nübling 2004 for overviews of research on interjections). Primary interjections may have taken on functions as pragmatic markers; but, except for a few interjections such as *oh* and, to a lesser degree, *ooh* and *ah*, which have assumed functions as discourse markers signaling a change in cognitive state, the class of primary interjections includes expressions of affect showing little or no association with a specific pragmatic function. Moreover, *oh* seems to retain much of its original interjection force of indicating surprise, even when it fulfils discourse marker functions.

   Primary interjections do not simply present anomalous phonetic patterns; in many cases, sound sequences functioning as interjections receive spellings that have no firm relationship with their phonetic form, e.g. *whew*, representing an exhalation of breath, often with a whistled component, and *tut* or *tsk*, both of which are supposed to represent a dental or post-dental suction click. Conversationalists use a wide range of sounds (perhaps most frequently inhalations, exhalations and clicks) along with head movements and gestures to signal the beginnings of turns, especially to signal surprise, uncertainty, relief or disagreement. Any of these sounds may function as an interjection, so that primary interjections constitute an open, in principle unlimited class.

   Secondary interjections are words or phrases from various other classes grammaticalized as interjections (see Hopper and Traugott 2003 on grammaticalization). Thus, we find interjections from nouns such as *boy* and *shit*, apparent verbs such as *damn* and *fuck*, and phrases like *goddamn* from *goddammit*, often in reduced forms such as *blimey* from *God blind me*. Besides shortening, as we might expect from lexical items grammaticalized as interjections, various processes of alteration are found, as in *jeez* from *Jesus*, *gosh* from *God*, and *fudge* from *fuck*. Like primary interjections, secondary interjections constitute an open class of items.

   Both primary and secondary interjections can stand alone as complete utterances, generally indicating a sudden outburst of emotion. Free-standing interjections are also common as back-channels or attention signals, especially forms like *wow*, *gee* or *jeez* and *whoa*. In the cases we are concerned with here, interjections occur at the head of an utterance containing at least one other unit, as in *oh no*; *hell yes*; *damn that's hot*; and *fuck that's miles away*. All interjections occur initially, but *oh* always precedes secondary interjections when the two occur together at the head of an utterance.

   Matamala focuses on spoken language or at least scripted dialogue. She gives examples like:

(4)   Sally: Oh, oh, Patrick. Oh, yes. *Oh*, baby.

There are no sentences here, but there are definitely intonation units or utterances for verbal performance. Schiffrin's initial definition of discourse markers (cited above) was cast in terms of "units of talk" for good reason. In fact, the initial use of the term "discourse marker" by Labov and Fanshel (1977) was based on spoken language. The items they identified as discourse markers, their functions and distributions are derived from spoken data, and there is no reason to assume they carry over to written texts. Indeed, many discourse markers such as *well*, *anyway*, *y'know* and *I mean* are frequent in and characteristic of spontaneous conversation, but certainly rare in if not absent from (non-literary) written discourse. As Schiffrin stresses, "sentences are not the unit most germane to understanding language use and social interaction" (1987: 32); for discussion, see section 2.1 of Traugott's article, this volume. Discourse markers relating propositions in written texts must certainly differ from discourse markers bracketing units of talk in face-to-face spoken interaction, but Matamala and many others gloss over these differences and adopt the notion of the discourse marker with no special justification for the description of sentences in written texts. Written discourse apparently has its own characteristic discourse markers such as *in fact*, *conversely* and *furthermore*, but I am not aware of any systematic research on the differences in spoken versus written discourse markers concerning the forms, their functions or their distributions. Linguists interested in grammaticalization tend to work from historical written texts to current spoken data, so that they neglect the important differences between written texts, on the one hand, with their carefully marshalled, edited sentences and their orientation toward correct representation of facts and logic, versus everyday spontaneous evanescent talk, on the other hand, with its orientation toward solidarity and/or polite interaction and relationships. The field of research on discourse markers in particular and pragmatic markers generally is in dire need of a careful study of the critical differences between markers in everyday conversation versus markers in (various types of) written texts.

Cuenca (2000) adopts a prototype approach to categories, in which interjections are considered a context-sensitive peripheral class of the category "sentence" that typically encode pragmatic meanings (see Ameka 1992 on the peripherality of interjections). We can agree with Cuenca about the peripheral sentence status of interjections, but since interjections are characteristic of spoken language (with its utterances or intonation units) rather than written language (with its proper sentences), we should prefer to say they instantiate a (peripheral) type of speech act or utterance type. In particular, interjections are often grouped with exclamatives as items which signal both surprise and either positive or negative affect: thus, interjections may signal either undifferentiated surprise, as in *boy*, *wow*, *ooh*, or surprise along with frustration, as in *god*, *hell*, *shit*, or surprise along with pleasure, as in *yippee* and *hurrah*.

Matamala (section 3) reports for her corpus that when *oh* is followed by an interjection, it is always a secondary interjection and never another primary interjection, but this would rule out *oh wow*, which to all appearances consists of two primary interjections. In a range of corpora I have investigated, *oh wow* occurs regularly in several varieties of English: consider, for instance, just the excerpt below from the Wellington Spoken Corpus (DPC045).

(5) AG u::m four altogether including myself
     BA *oh wow*, and you're the youngest.

Matamala goes on to say that the pattern [*oh* + secondary interjection] as in *oh god* and *oh shit* is the most frequent combination of interjections found in English, and this seems correct based on my corpus research as well.

5. Interjections beyond *oh*

Oh is a unique, primary interjection with particular discourse marker functions. But interjections more generally are expressions of affect showing little or no association with specific pragmatic functions. Interjections may stand alone as complete turns, but when interjections introduce an utterance, they often function as parallel pragmatic markers of affect in Fraser's (1996) terms. In addition, interjections sometimes function as (discourse) markers of contrast or elaboration, as in the passage below from the Wellington Spoken Corpus (DPC118), where natural paraphrases would be *that said* or *indeed*, respectively discourse markers of contrast and elaboration for Fraser (1996):

(6) LU I'm an awful communicator=
     TS =I'd have thought
     KA yeah but that doesn't matter ((laughs))
     hell there weren't many good ones at my school
     LU ((laughs))

Compare also *fuck* in the example below from the Wellington Spoken Corpus (DPC313), where the most natural unflavored substitute would be the standard contrast marker *but*. There is an element of surprise and even topic switch here as well.

(7) PQ where's Foodtown
     RT in Lower Hutt
     PQ oh.
     RT I mean, you can just-
     PQ *fuck* that's miles away.

If interjections are initially expressions of surprise and emotion, then their grammatical extension to markers of contrast or transition seems rather natural: the sudden experience of strong emotion certainly justifies a switch of perspective or topic. In the next example (from the Wellington Spoken Corpus, DPC012), *fuck* even more clearly signals a transition to a new topic. Here *by the way* would be a natural unemotional choice for substitution:

(8) JU ((tsk)) yeah Lambda Lager
         I quite liked it.
     AH ((clears throat)) *fuck* I haven't been up Kaukau for ages.
     JU no

By way of demonstrating the open-ended nature of the class of interjections, consider the next two examples, first with *goddamnation* then with *oh bloody hell*. The first appears in the London-Lund Corpus (1-1) and the second in the Wellington Spoken Corpus (DPC013), and I daresay neither form would be found in North American English, although there is always the possibility of creating new interjections like *fucking A* or *shit mongers*—these last seem limited to younger generations in the U.S. Despite their infinite variability, the pragmatic functions interjections realize seem always to be clear to listeners in the concrete context.

(9)   A   the the other the other the other the other man [@m]
             who ((untranscribable)) I thought was going to get you wild was Potter
       B   *goddamnation* I'll crown that bastard
             before I'm finished with him

(10) TM   yep Europe
             ((television is turned up and a news item is on))
       SU   *OH BLOODY HELL* another oil slick

Interjections thus represent a large, potentially infinitely extendable class of items—or even two open classes of both primary and secondary interjections—unlike the relatively circumscribed, closed classes of other pragmatic markers, and their pragmatic marker functions follow from their general status as signals of affect.

6. Conclusions

Oh and other interjections display a range of functions beyond simply registering affect. Except for a few items like *oh*, interjections realize pragmatic functions which seem to follow from their meanings as expressions of sudden affect. If they were classified among the pragmatic markers, they would count initially as expressive parallel markers, but they also frequently signal contrast, extension and transition. Still, I would argue against treating most interjections as pragmatic markers at all, and for treating them as a class of their own with a good chance of finding universal properties of interjections across languages.

Clearly, we need more in depth studies of individual interjections like *oh* (in English and Catalan) and *also* in German in the spirit of the articles by Matamala and Fernández-Villanueva in order to clarify the roles of pragmatic markers in various languages and to formulate and test hypotheses about changes in progress, but also to draw comparisons between different languages or between differential productions by native-speakers and non-native-speakers.

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