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The Interface between Intonation and Function of Discourse Markers in English

Summary

The article examines how the function and the distribution of pragmatic markers in spoken discourse are reflected by prosodic means. The results of this preliminary analysis show that the intonation largely depends on the discourse function of a marker, on the one hand, and the speaker's perception of its importance for the ongoing discourse. A vague division can be made between the prosodic patterns of those discourse markers which are strongly involved in the organisation and monitoring of the discourse, and those whose function is more pragmatic.

Key words: linguistics, discourse analysis, intonation

Povezava med intonacijo in funkcijo diskurznihih označevalcev v angleščini

Povzetek

V članku analiziram, kako se funkcija in položaj pragmatičnih označevalcev v govoru odražata v stavčni intonaciji. Rezultati preliminarne analize kažejo, da je stavčna intonacija močno odvisna od diskurzne funkcije označevalca na eni strani in govorčeve presoje, kako pomemben je označevalec za potek diskurza. V grobem lahko ločimo med intonacijskim vzorcem, ki je značilen za tiste diskurzne označevalce, ki imajo bolj organizacijsko in opazovalno vlogo v diskurzu ter tistimi, ki imajo bolj pragmatično vlogo.

Ključne besede: jezikoslovje, besediloslovje, intonacija

The Interface between Intonation and Function of Discourse Markers in English

1. Introduction

In every spoken interaction speakers use a number of different lexical items¹ which at first sight do not contribute much to the contents of conversation, but are indispensable for the organization, structuring and monitoring of discourse, a smooth turn-taking system, as well as the expression of speakers' attitude to the message. Such lexical items are in English *well, now, oh, but, I mean, you know, as a matter of fact*, to mention only a few. In the literature on discourse and conversation analysis these lexical items are often referred to by different names, including *discourse particles, discourse markers, interactional signals, discourse connectives, pragmatic markers, or sentence connectives*. Some of them are used more often with reference to written language, others to spoken. The diversity of names arises from the fact that these lexical items morphologically belong to different parts of speech, are not obligatory and perform different discourse and pragmatic functions.

What is then the purpose of analysing discourse markers? Firstly, discourse markers perform an important role in establishing cohesion in speech. They often have the anaphoric and cataphoric character thus pointing backward and forward in discourse at the same time. Secondly, they are used for organizing and monitoring the topic development. As such they open or close a topic, mark topic boundaries and attract listeners' attention. They introduce reformulated utterances and make reference to shared knowledge. Finally, on a more pragmatic level, they may function as markers of the speakers' view points, their emotional reactions, or to tone down the utterance's effect.

The main question in analysing discourse markers is how speakers distinguish between different discourse and pragmatic functions of the same lexical item. In other words, how speakers know when *well* is used as a topic opening or closing device or as an introduction to a reformulated utterance, or when *I mean* is a face saving expression or a marker that the following statement is a rewording or a clarification of the previous one.

One answer to the question is the position of the marker in the utterance and discourse. But what clues are available to listeners when the marker occupies the same position in the discourse but performs different pragmatic functions? I believe that in such cases intonation often becomes significant.

For this preliminary analysis of the relation between pragmatic markers and their prosodic treatment I chose a sample of the BBC TV series *As Time Goes By*. The choice of the material was governed by the fact that the script contains numerous pragmatic markers and that the actors are aware of their discourse function and know how to pronounce them in order to express that function.

¹ Lexical item is a cover term used with reference to single words, phrases or even clauses.

2. Discourse markers, interactional signals and pragmatic markers

Schiffrin, in her seminal work on discourse markers gives an operational definition of them as “**sequentially dependent** elements which bracket units of talk” (1987, 31) and a theoretical definition of them as “members of a **functional** class of verbal (and non-verbal) devices which provide contextual coordinates for ongoing talk” (ibid., 41). The sequential dependence means that markers are items which function on a discourse level and are not dependent on smaller linguistic units.

The list of discourse markers is relatively open and contains lexical items which belong to different parts of speech: *and*, *but*, *or* are conjunctions; *so* can be a conjunction or an adverb; *now* and *then* are adverbs, whereas *oh* and *well* can be adverb, interjection, filler or particle. To complicate matters even more, the discourse markers also include phrases: *in general*, or even clauses: *you know*. Thus it seems reasonable to treat discourse markers according to the functions they perform in a discourse and not according to their morphological or syntactical characteristics.

In Stenström’s model of spoken interaction², markers play important roles as topic organizers and monitors, as well as turn-taking devices. Thus she makes a distinction between discourse markers and interactional signals. Both refer to the same set of lexical items, but the difference lies in their function and position in the discourse. “Interactional signals are used to start, carry on and terminate the conversation” (ibid., 61), whereas “discourse markers are used to organize and hold the turn and to mark boundaries in the discourse” (ibid., 63). The best way to distinguish between them is to view them as “filling a gap in the exchange” (ibid., 60). As such they can make up a turn of their own or they may fill a slot in a turn. Stenström underlines the fact that both discourse markers and interactional signals can fill more than one gap in the exchange and more than one slot in the turn, or can do different things in different places, as well as different things in the same place (ibid., 61).

Interactional signals play an important role in a smooth exchange of turns. As such they can appeal for and provide feedback, respond or involve the listener in conversation. Discourse markers, on the other hand, serve to start or end a conversation, introduce a topic, subtopic, digression or the resumption of the old topic.

With the view of encompassing both discourse and pragmatic functions of markers, Carter and McCarthy introduce the term pragmatic markers to refer to a “class of items which operate outside the structural limits of the clause and which encode speakers’ intentions and interpersonal meanings” (2006, 208). Pragmatic markers thus include discourse markers, stance markers, hedges and interjections.

Carter and McCarthy explain discourse markers as words, phrases and clauses which “link segments of the discourse to one another in ways which reflect choices of monitoring, organisation and management exercised by the speaker” (ibid.,). Table 1 presents the most typical words, phrases

² Stenström’s model of spoken interaction consists of five levels: act, turn, move, exchange and transaction, of which act is the lowest level and transaction the highest.

and even clauses which function in the organisation and monitoring of discourse in English.

Discourse Markers						
Organizing				Monitoring		
Open&-close	Sequence	Topic Boundary	Focus	Reformulate	Shared Knowledge	Responding
so; (all) right; then; now; good; well; OK; anyway; fine; lovely; great.	and; and then; finally; first (of all); firstly; for a start; going back to; in general; in the end; in the first place; last of all; lastly; next; on top of that; second; secondly; so; there again; third(ly); to sum up; what's more	OK; so; yeah; and; right; anyway.	hey; listen; look; oh; well; anyway; so.	as I was saying; as it were; I mean; if you like; in a manner of speaking; in other words; not to say; or rather; so to speak; strictly speaking; that's to say; to put it in another way; to put it bluntly/mildly; well.	you see; see; you know.	right; all right; I see; good; great; fine; OK.

Table 1 Discourse markers in English

Stance markers, hedges and interjections are also pragmatic markers whose functions are to express the speaker's attitude towards the message (i.e. stance markers), to tone down the utterance in order not to sound too blunt (i.e. hedges) and to express different emotional reactions to the utterance or the situation (i.e. interjections). Table 2 presents lexical items which are most typically used as stance markers, hedges and interjections in English.

Stance Markers	Hedges	Interjections
actually; admittedly; amazingly; basically; certainly; clearly; confidentially; doubtless; essentially; frankly; to be frank; fortunately; honestly; to be honest; hopefully; ideally; if you ask me; I'm afraid; I must admit; I must say; I think; in fact; indeed; literally; naturally; no doubt; obviously; of course; predictably; putting (to put) it mildly/bluntly; (quite) rightly; really; sadly; seriously; (I'm) sorry; strictly speaking; surprisingly; thankfully; to tell you the truth; understandably; undoubtedly; unfortunately.	apparently; arguably; by any chance; I think; just (about) kind of; like; maybe; perhaps; presumably; probably; roughly; sort of; surely.	bother; crikey; damn; God; goodness (me); gosh; (good) heavens; hooray; jeez; ooh; oh no; oops; ouch; ow; ugh; tut-tut; whoops; wow; yippee; yuk.

Table 2 Stance markers, hedges and interjections in English

3. Discourse markers and intonation

Intonation performs grammatical, discourse and pragmatic functions in speech. The first mainly concerns the division of speech into intonation phrases (IP) and the location of the nuclear syllable; the second and the third are concerned with different pitch movements whose discourse function is to express the anaphoric and cataphoric references, as well as contrast in meaning, while their pragmatic function is to express speakers' attitudes towards the message and their emotional reactions to the message or situation.

The fact that the same lexical items are used to express both discourse and pragmatic functions is an adequate reason for a closer prosodic analysis with a view of finding an interface between their distribution in discourse, on the one hand, and their discourse and pragmatic roles, on the other.

3.1 Discourse markers and tonality³

Carter and McCarthy (2006, 539) claim that prosodic information helps to distinguish between discourse markers and other parts of speech or clauses. According to them discourse markers often occupy their own intonation phrase and are accompanied by brief pauses. Although this may sometimes be the case, it is nonetheless too unreliable to be regarded as the main distinction between the discourse and non discourse marking of lexical items.

If we take, for example, the expression *I mean* in examples (1) and (2), it is clear that in (1) it is part of the clause structure and as such non discourse marking, while in (2) it has the parenthetical function within a sentence and is thus regarded as a discourse marker:

- (1) *I mean* what I say.
- (2) *I mean*, wouldn't it be better to postpone the meeting.

But when it comes to the division of the two examples into intonation phrases, speakers always have a choice between the marked or unmarked version. It is thus reasonable to expect that the unmarked version of example (1) would consist of one intonation phrase, as in (1a), while in the marked version the speaker may insert the intonation phrase division after *I mean*, as in (1b), and thus emphasise his intention:

- (1a) *I mean* what I say.⁴
- (1b) *I mean* | what I say.

3 Tonality is the system of dividing speech into intonation phrases.

4 The underlined syllables are nuclear or tonic syllables.

Similarly, in example (2), the speaker may separate the discourse marker *I mean* from the rest of the clause in order to emphasise the rewording or the previous utterance or to clarify it, as in (2a), or decide for only one intonation phrase in which *I mean* is not given any special emphasis, as in (2b):

(2a) *I mean* | wouldn't it be better to postpone the meeting.

(2b) *I mean*, wouldn't it be better to postpone the meeting.

The relationship between tonality and discourse markers is not always straightforward; the chances for a discourse marker to be separated from the rest of the clause by an intonation phrase mostly depend on the position of the marker in the discourse (i.e. initial, medial or final in an utterance or a turn), as well as its discourse function (i.e. organising or monitoring discourse). But even there speakers have a choice to express their ideas in such a way as to guarantee successful communication even if it means overriding general guidelines.

3.2 Discourse markers and tones

When discourse markers are treated as separate intonation phrases, they contain the nuclear syllable where a particular pitch movement or tone is realised. The pitch height of the tone can also be significant. The decision with which tone and at which pitch height a discourse marker will be realised also depends on the position and function of the marker and will be discussed in the following.

4. Function and intonation of discourse markers

The purpose of this is to discuss different functions of discourse markers and their prosodic realisations. The discourse markers are divided into those which are mainly involved in the organization of discourse in terms of opening and closing topics or conversation, expressing relationship of sequence between parts of discourse and focusing attention, diverting, shifting and resuming a topic, as well as those which enable speakers to monitor and manage the discourse.

4.1 Organising discourse

Discourse markers play an important role in the organisation of discourse. They are particularly frequent in opening and closing a conversation and in opening, re-opening, closing or temporarily closing a topic. In all these functions most of the discourse markers will indeed have their own intonation phrase since they represent a transition from one topic to another or mark the beginning or the end of a conversation. They are attention seeking devices and as such deserve a prosodic treatment of their own.

According to Brazil's intonation model (1997) the fall (↘) is used to introduce information which is unknown to the addressee, while the high key (↑) expresses contrast to the message in the previous intonation phrase or general knowledge.

In example (3) there are two discourse markers which function as discourse **closer** (*well*) and **opener** (*now*). In both cases the speaker treats them as separate intonation phrases and in both cases uses falling tones uttered in high key:

(3) Jean: $\uparrow \searrow$ Well, | that's all finished. || $\uparrow \searrow$ Now, | what have you been chatting about?

Similarly in examples (4) and (5) the discourse markers *so* and *anyway* are used as topic and subtopic **boundaries**, respectively. In (4) Margaret uses *so* to pick up on information she has learnt and which was interrupted by ordering drinks, while in (5) Lionel uses *anyway* to mark the boundary between his behaviour to his ex-wife and the fact that she has suggested to meet him. They both use separate intonation phrases for the markers and pronounce them in high key and with the falling tones:

(4) Lionel: You didn't like champagne.

Margaret: I didn't like lots of things. | $\uparrow \searrow$ So, | you're married again. || How long ago did that happen?

(5) Jean: Have you shown an interest in her?

Lionel: Good God, | no! $\uparrow \searrow$ Anyway, | she says she's in London for a few days and might we meet for a drink.

Another distribution of discourse markers where there is a very high possibility for them to be treated as separate intonation phrases is when they are used to **focus** the attention of the listener on something that is of high importance. In example (6) Jean uses the marker *look* to draw Lionel's attention to an important fact, namely that she cannot get dressed by 8:30. She pronounces it as an intonation phrase of its own, in high key and with the falling tone:

(6) Jean: $\uparrow \searrow$ Look, | you know what I mean. || I can't possibly be ready for 8:30.

4.2 Monitoring discourse

The process of monitoring the discourse mainly concerns reformulations and monitoring shared knowledge. The function of **reformulations** is to change the wording in such a way that it better fits the context of interaction or speakers' intentions. Whether a discourse marker used in this function will be treated as a separate intonation phrase is less predictable than in the case of discourse openers or closers. The choice of tone is also less predictable. Our analysis shows a pattern in which the discourse markers *well* and *I mean* are most frequently used in this function and are as such treated as separate intonation phrases with either falling or level intonation, as in examples (7) and (8):

(7) Sandy: They're never her own, are they?
 Judy: No way! || ↘ Well | at least I hope not.

(8) Jean: Oh, credit me with some taste! || I → mean | he's very, very good looking
 but if he has a brain he did a very good job of hiding it.

In **monitoring shared knowledge** speakers check the state of common knowledge for which they use expressions *you know*, *you see* and *see*. According to Carter and McCarthy (2006, 539) the difference between *you know*, on the one hand, and *you see* or *see*, on the other, is that the former assumes that the listener may not have the same knowledge as the speaker, while the latter presumes that the speaker and the listener share the same knowledge or have the same point of view.

The distribution of these monitors is usually at the end or in the middle of a turn and they are often treated as separate intonation phrases. As to the pitch movement, they can be said with either rising or falling tones; if the speaker wants to elicit a response from the listener, the rising tone is more appropriate, as in example (9):

(9) Judy: ... I'm trying, as discretely as I can, to push Alistair into Sandy's
 direction. I mean, she's a smashing girl. Once you get past his ego, he's not
 a bad chap. *You ↗ see?*
 Jean: I suppose I do.

If the speaker does not want a response from the listener, the falling tone is usually used, as in example (10):

(10) Lionel: Dull nights on television, | *you ↘ know*.

Although Carter and McCarthy (2006) do not treat question tags as discourse markers, Stenström (1994) does mention them as lexical items which may function as discourse markers or interactional signals. And indeed they do perform a monitoring function. Depending on the intonation, they may be used to engage the listener in the conversation and invite agreement or disagreement with the speaker. In example (11) the rising intonation on the tag clearly invites the listener to express an opinion:

(11) Sandy: They're never her own, | ↗ are they?
 Judy: No way! Well, at least I hope not.

The tag in example (12), on the other hand, is not felt to be an invitation to respond, but if the listener does say something it is usually in agreement with the speaker's opinion:

(12) Lionel: My God! She can knock it back, | ↘ can't she?

Jean: She must've had two bottles to herself.

5. Other pragmatic markers

Hedges, stance markers and interjections are those lexical items which also stand out of the syntactic structure of a clause and which do not contribute much to the main topic of conversation; in other words, their absence does not change the meaning or the grammatical acceptability of the utterance. But they are nonetheless indispensable expressions if speakers want to modify their wording.

5.1 Hedges

Spontaneous speech is an online process, which means that listeners hear everything that speakers intend to say even if it is not perfectly formulated. Sometimes they may, halfway through the utterance, realise that the wording may sound too blunt or assertive so they decide to tone it down by using a hedge.

When it comes to the division into intonation phrases, it would be rather unlikely that hedges were treated as separate IP's unless they also express hesitation on the part of the speaker, as in (13):

(13) Lionel: Look, there'll be no competition. I mean, Margaret and clothes,

| they → just | → sort of | hang on her.

It is far more likely for hedges to be incorporated in the same intonation phrase as the part of the discourse they are referring to. As such they are either completely unstressed (14) or they may be part of the pre-nuclear segment (15), and sometimes even carry the nuclear tone (16):

(14) Jean: She was very glamorous, though, until she started weaving about.

Lionel: Well, that's thanks to old Butterworth's millions, *I suppose*.

(15) Jean: I *sup*↑*pose* ↘ some women | do get more attractive the older they get.

(16) Lionel: Does that make any sense to you?

Jean: Well, in a ↘ sort of way.

5.2 Stance markers

A number of adjectives, adverbs, phrases and even clauses are used to express the speaker's attitude or stance towards the message. The prosodic treatment of a stance marker largely depends on its position in the utterance, the context of interaction, but above all on the speaker's perception of its importance for the ongoing discourse.

In example (17) Jean is disturbed by the fact that Lionel's ex-wife is so glamorous-looking although he has always claimed the opposite. Hence her emphatic prosodic treatment of the hedge *honestly* which she pronounces as a separate intonation phrase and with the fall-rise tone which is often used to express an implicature or a contrast – in this case, Lionel's dishonesty.

(17) Jean: ↘↗*Honestly* Lionel, | ages ago when I asked you about her, why didn't you say she was a very glamorous women? I could've lived with that. I wouldn't've liked it, but I could've lived with it.

If a stance marker is a clause, there are good chances that it will be treated as a separate intonation phrase, especially if it is used to introduce an important piece of information which is in contrast with the general idea, as in (18), or common knowledge, as in (19):⁵

(18) Margaret: I don't want to feel better. I'm apologizing for my behaviour, not my life. Oh! *The* ↘↗ *truth is* | I wanted to show Lionel that I didn't remain the dull, boring wife you always thought I was.

(19) Margaret: Well, | *oddly e*↘↗*nough* | I do remember what information I managed to wring out of you last night. It's a love story?

In both cases the contrastive meaning is highlighted by means of the fall-rise tone.

5.3 Interjections

Interjections are frequently used in speech if speakers want to express their emotional excitement about the message or when they want to warn the addressee about something. Due to this function, they are always treated as separate intonation phrases while the default tone is the fall, as in (20):

(20) Margaret: ↑↘*Oh!* | You're always hungry! | ↑↘*Hey!* | Why don't we all make an evening of it?

⁵ Margaret, Lionel and Jean know that Margaret had a bit too much to drink the previous night.

Since interjections are emotional and attitudinal expressions, other pitch contours are also possible. In example (21) the interjection *oh* is pronounced with the rise-fall indicating Margaret's amazement about the fact that Jean does not dye her hair but is happy with her natural colour:

(21) Margaret: What's your natural colour, Jean?

Jean: This.

Margaret: ↗↘ Oh!

An additional attitudinal dimension is provided by the key or the pitch height at which the interjection is said. If an interjection is pronounced with the low key, it often sounds either very formal or unimpressed, as in example (22):

(22) Margaret: But I don't think I ever said I found you a very dull, boring husband.

Lionel: ↓↘ Oh!

6. Conclusion

In the paper I tried to shed some light on the prosodic features of pragmatic markers, i.e. those lexical items which are indispensable elements in speech but which at the same time stand out of the sentence or clause structure. I followed the division of pragmatic markers into discourse markers, hedges, stance markers and interjections, as suggested by Carter and McCarthy (2006).

The prosodic analysis which I carried out on a sample of the BBC TV series *As Time Goes By* has shown that the intonation of pragmatic markers is not very straightforward but very dependent on the speaker's perception of how important a particular marker is. There are, however, some prosodic patterns which are more typical of discourse markers on the one hand, and other pragmatic markers, on the other.

Discourse markers whose function is to open or close a conversation or to mark transitions from one topic to another are most likely to be treated as separate intonation phrases. The same goes for those markers whose function is to make reference to shared knowledge between the speaker and the listener. Stance markers and hedges are often incorporated in the same intonation phrase unless the speaker feels the need to highlight a marker for some particular reason.

If a pragmatic marker is treated as a separate intonation phrase, it may be said in a variety of tones; the choice depends on the function as well as the meaning of the marker. Thus the falling tone is expected for those discourse markers which function as openers, closers of topics or conversations, as well as when they function as focusing devices. For discourse markers whose function is to refer to the shared knowledge between the speaker and the listener, two or even three tones are possible; if the speaker assumes that the addressee shares the same information and hence does

not expect a response, the falling tone will be used. If the speaker wants to elicit the addressee's response in order to check the common knowledge, the rise or the fall-rise will be used.

Stance markers and hedges are treated as separate intonation phrases either when they express the speaker's hesitation or when their contribution to the discourse is so important that they warrant special emphasis. In the former case they are often said with the level tone, whereas in the latter, they may be said either with the fall or the fall-rise. The fall introduces a new point of view, whereas the fall-rise is likely to be used when the marker introduces a contrasting stance.

In conclusion I would like to stress the fact that there is some correlation between the intonation of pragmatic markers and their position and function in the discourse. Although the interface is rather arbitrary, there are, nonetheless, some general guidelines which speakers are likely to follow.

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