JOURNAL OF ADVANCED LINGUISTIC STUDIES
VOL. 12, NO. 2, JUL-DEC 2025 (ISSN 2231-4075)

The Role of Discourse Markers in Structuring Pragmatic Meaning: A Functional-Pragmatic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Discourse markers (DMs) are key components in managing cohesion and pragmatic meaning across spoken and written discourse. Although often perceived as superfluous or informal, these linguistic elements serve fundamental pragmatic roles – organizing speaker intent, managing discourse coherence, signaling logical and emotional connections, and facilitating interpersonal interaction. This paper investigates the functions and distribution of DMs in English discourse through a qualitative and corpus-assisted analysis. Drawing from the British National Corpus and a collection of spontaneous spoken interactions, the study identifies functional categories and contextual uses of DMs, focusing on their contribution to pragmatic meaning. The results support the view that discourse markers are integral to effective communication and are vital tools for structuring meaning beyond propositional content.

Keywords: Discourse markers, pragmatics, coherence, interactional linguistics, conversation analysis, spoken discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Discourse markers (DMs) such as “however,” “so,” “well,” “I mean,” and “you know” have long intrigued linguists due to their elusive yet pervasive nature in natural language use. While they

often lack clear syntactic roles and do not contribute to truth-conditional meaning, their pragmatic significance cannot be overstated. DMs function primarily at the discourse level, linking propositions, managing speaker-hearer relationships, and facilitating coherent communication (Fraser 1999; Schiffrin 1987).

In pragmatic terms, DMs are indicators of speaker intention, cues for processing, and strategies for interpersonal engagement. For instance, "well" often signals hesitation, mitigation, or a topic shift, while "but" introduces contrast. These markers serve as discourse-organizing devices that help listeners infer implicit meaning and follow the flow of interaction (Blakemore 2002).

Despite their widespread use, DMs have frequently been dismissed in prescriptive grammar as signs of hesitation or redundancy. However, research in pragmatics and discourse analysis increasingly highlights their essential role in meaning-making processes. This study aims to offer a comprehensive account of how DMs function pragmatically to structure spoken and written English discourse, drawing from authentic data to illustrate their multifaceted roles.

This article explores the pragmatic functions of discourse markers in English. It examines how discourse markers contribute to the coherence and interpretation of discourse. Additionally, it investigates whether discourse markers function differently in spoken and written registers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data sources

This study used a mixed-methods approach, combining corpus data and conversation transcripts. Two main sources were analyzed:

- **The British National Corpus (BNC)**: A 100-million-word collection of spoken and written British English from diverse genres, including academic texts, fiction, newspapers, and conversations.

- **Transcribed conversations**: 25 informal conversations (5–10 minutes each) between native speakers, recorded in casual settings like homes and cafés.

These datasets enabled comparison of discourse marker use across spoken and written registers.

Analytical framework

Discourse markers were identified and categorized based on established pragmatic taxonomies (Schiffrin 1987; Fraser 1999; Aijmer 2002). The classification focused on four principal pragmatic functions:

1. **Structural/organizational**: Managing discourse structure (e.g., topic shift, sequence).
2. **Logical/relational**: Expressing contrast, cause, result, elaboration.
3. **Interpersonal**: Managing politeness, face, mitigation, involvement.
4. **Cognitive/processing**: Signaling reformulation, clarification, or hesitation.

Each occurrence of a discourse marker was analyzed within its immediate context to determine its dominant pragmatic function. Frequency data were supplemented with qualitative examples.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of discourse marker frequency

The table below presents the relative frequency of selected discourse markers in spoken and written English from the BNC sample:

Marker	Spoken Freq. (per 10k words)	Written Freq. (per 10k words)
Well	52.1	2.3
So	41.7	14.8
But	35.5	27.6

I mean	30.2	0.9
However	5.4	33.1
You know	48.8	0.3

These figures support the notion that spoken English relies more heavily on interpersonal and cognitive DMs ("well," "you know," "I mean"), whereas written English employs more logical DMs ("however," "but") for structuring arguments.

Structural functions

DMs such as "well," "anyway," and "so" were frequently used to manage turn-taking, topic shifts, and narrative transitions in spoken discourse. For example:

A: "Do you think we should go now?"
B: "So, as they say, money talks, wealth walks."

"So" signals that what follows is either a conclusion, a shift in topic, or an illustrative point (in this case, a proverb or saying). It's "not causal in a strict logical sense," but more conversational – helping to guide the flow of ideas.

In everyday speech, this ***so*** makes the tone more natural and signals that the speaker is about to refer to a proverb or shared wisdom that supports their point.

Logical-relational functions

"But," "however," and "so" connect clauses logically, signaling contrast, consequence, or cause.

Example (written)
"Money can't buy happiness, but it sure makes misery easier to bear."
But is a **contrastive conjunction** here. It shows a contrast or **opposition** between two related ideas

Interpersonal functions

"You know," "I mean," and "like" often occurred in interpersonal contexts, used to maintain solidarity or seek shared understanding.

Example:
"I was so embarrassed, you know? Like, everyone was watching."
You know appeals to shared experience or empathy, positioning the listener as co-constructor of meaning.

Cognitive and processing functions
Markers like "I mean," "actually," and "you see" assist in organizing thought and clarifying statements.

Example:
"He was late again – I mean, not really late, but later than usual."
I mean serves to correct or refine a previous utterance, helping listeners adjust their interpretation.

Register variation
Spoken language favored DMs that manage interaction and processing, while written registers emphasized logical cohesion. This reflects the spontaneous, face-to-face nature of spoken discourse versus the planned, edited nature of writing.

Moreover, academic writing favored formal DMs such as "furthermore," "nevertheless," and "in contrast," often excluded from casual speech. This highlights the register-sensitivity of discourse marker usage.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that discourse markers are far from superfluous; they are integral to constructing pragmatic meaning and maintaining discourse coherence. DMs operate on multiple levels – structural, logical, interpersonal, and cognitive – allowing speakers and writers to navigate interactional dynamics, signal relationships between ideas, and manage processing load.

Importantly, the frequency and function of DMs vary significantly across spoken and written genres, underlining the need to study them in context. For language learners, educators, and discourse analysts, understanding the pragmatic functions of DMs is essential to mastering natural and effective communication.

Future research should consider cross-linguistic comparisons and the developmental trajectory of DM use among second language learners, which could provide deeper insight into their cognitive and communicative foundations.

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