The Basic Characteristics of Colloquialism Discourse Markers

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Abstract. Discourse markers are very common in language communication, especially in the colloquialism expression. In both casual conversation and special conversation, discourse markers occur frequently in the discourse of both sides. In this paper we argue that discourse markers are one of the main features of verbal communication. They have five basic characteristics, namely the omissibleness of structure, procedural semantics, contextual relevance, pragmatic diversity and phonological pause. It is very important to understand and grasp the basic characteristics of discourse markers, which are the key to determine which words or structures belong to discourse markers. Discourse marker is frequently used in oral communication, and its concept meaning becomes grammatical and procedural meaning becomes prominent. It is one of the important means of speaker adaptation to context.

Introduction

In order to make the hearer understand his intentions in the colloquialism, the speak not only needs to express the main message, but also needs to utilize appropriate language means or propositions, which have a significant influence on the hearer's understanding and the communication effect. This kind of information transfer process is dependent on the discourse markers. It's always difficult to define the concept of “discourse markers” formally, as the scope of the term is quite widespread, including a large number of different kinds of words or structures. A lot of researchers have described and summarized this term in different disciplines, from different perspectives and with different methods. As a result, this term has been assigned different names, including logical connectors, semantic connectives, cue words, discourse operators, discourse particles, discourse signaling devices, gambits, pragmatic connectives, pragmatic markers and so on. In Liu Liyan states that “Discourse markers refer to a class of function words (or phrases) peculiar to interactive oral communication. They have relative independence on syntax, and have only procedural meaning and no concept meaning in oral communication. Their function reflects the cognitive subject of meta-pragmatic consciousness.”

Discourse markers are very common in language communication, especially in the colloquialism expression. The colloquialism discourse markers concerned in this paper refer to the discourse markers in oral communication, including casual conversation and special topic conversation. For example:

(1) Zhixin: Dad, the match will be held tomorrow, you should give us a pep talk.
Fulao: When we play tomorrow, ah, well, Zhixin, you are not in this list.
(“I Love My Family”) 

(2) Liu Yifei: Once in the Hong Kong, I promised to send him a set of “The Semi Gods and Semi Devil” as a little gift, and then, I think it makes sense, then, after he finished reading, he was very satisfied with my evaluation, then, I was very happy and excited that day.
(“Story behind”) 

The example (1) belongs to the casual conversation style, where ‘well’ not directly constitutes the content of discourse, and it does not mean ‘correct’. Its role is neither syntactic nor semantic, and it is only a means to regulate the content of discourse, reflecting the speaker’s control of the discourse content. As a result, it is a typical discourse marker in colloquialism. The Example (2) belongs to
colloquialism of a special topic, where 'then' is also a commonly used discourse marker in colloquialism, which does not express any specific semantic relations. The concept meaning of 'then' is weakened and the procedural meaning is highlighted. The frequent use of 'then' indicates the thinking process of the speaker. However, in order to maintain the coherence of the discourse, “then” is used to connect the words naturally, reflecting the speaker’s strategy of organizing discourse.

In both casual conversation and special conversation, discourse markers occur frequently in the discourse of both sides. We argue that discourse markers are one of the main features of verbal communication. Discourse markers should have the following five basic characteristics.

**Omissibleness of Structure**

From the perspective of discourse structure, discourse markers do not directly constitute the content of discourse, and they are not limited by syntactic structure. In general, discourse markers can be omitted and their omission does not change the content of the discourse itself. In other words, omitting the discourse markers does not affect the truth condition of the original sentence. However, its presence can play a role in reminding and emphasizing. For example:

(3)Zhixin: Dad, the match will be held tomorrow, you should give us a pep talk.
Fulao: When we play tomorrow, ah, well, Zhixin, you are not in this list.

(4)Fulao: I have to go to the leadership position, this, the mind is empty, and it should be armed, right? This, since the day is not black, I will go to the Zhongguancun electronic street to have a look.

If you omit the “well” in the third case, the content of the original statement isn't changed, and this means that Fulao suddenly remembered that Zhixin did not participate in the competition. In addition, the “well” reflects the trace of the speaker’s discourse organization in the brain. It does not mean “right”, and its function is mainly pragmatic. “This” in the fourth case reflects the delay and even pause caused by the speaker's thinking blank. In the oral communication, the speaker is usually speaking and thinking in the same time, and the occasional interruption in the discourse is a normal phenomenon. However, in order to maintain the coherence of the discourse, the speaker will choose the discourse markers with no real meaning to reflect the procedure, such as, “this” “that” “that is” and so on. Whether or not they exist, discourse markers have no influence on the content of the whole discourse, and they do not affect the truth value of the original sentence.

**Procedural Semantics**

The procedural here refers to the procedural of the meaning, that is to say, discourse markers are meaningful for procedure. Sperber and Wilson distinguish between concept encoding and procedural coding, and point out that a discourse can encode the meaning of the two basic meanings: conceptual meaning and procedural meaning. “The former plays an important role in the explicit and also implicit information of discourse expression, and increase the relevance of explicit communicative behavior by increasing the relevance hypothesis. However, the latter is useful in constraining and guiding the process of understanding the explicit information and reasoning the implicit information, so that the hearer can pay less effort to obtain greater context effect.” The words or structures serving as discourse markers individually have certain meaning. For example, “then” is a conjunction, meaning that after one thing another thing happen, “let alone” means “stop speaking”; and “well” means “right”. In the specific discourse, when they appear as discourse markers, their original conceptual meaning is lost or even completely disappeared.

(5)Yuanyuan: Now, I am going to find Kouzi to explore some of the problems of navigation, anyway, I am determined to go, even if I have no money, if you do not want me have a rough time, please!
Heping: Go back, one, two, two point five……
Fulao: There is no big deal with this, ah, children are all like this, three minutes of fresh vigor.
Heping: I see, it is impossible, this time she is make up her mind, I know my girl.

(“I Love My Family”)

(6)Lu Yu: when to take wedding photos?
Lu Yi: There are some studios in Shanghai, and we need to look for some models to take some wedding photos, then they will give us a certain cost, then, we did it.

(“A Date with Lu Yu”)

“I see” in the fifth case is to express the speaker’s attitude and view, and “I” refers to the speaker, and the concept of “see” here is blurred. “I see” is not followed by a specific transaction, but by the subjective judge of the speaker in the specific context. “I see” has only procedural meaning and is used to connect the discourse. “Then” in the sixth case as a conjunction of semantic has been weaken, and there is no sequential time relation between two 'then'. It only refers to the speaker’s psychological order, and used to maintain the discourse coherence. The discourse markers in the fifth and sixth cases are useful in restricting and guiding the explicit and implicit information. As a result, they have only procedural meaning and no conceptual meaning.

**Contextual Relevance**

Discourse markers, which have no meaning or little meaning, can only be understood by context and situational cues in oral communication. The use of discourse markers by the speaker and the understanding of the discourse markers by the hearer are all related to the context. For example:

(7)Fulao: About the smell of gas in cooking, I have called them three times, but they do not appear. Everybody should abide by the rules, how can they be thus unshakable?
Heping: Dad, you can direct us, you think, you cannot direct the gas company. I will go there tomorrow by myself.

(“I Love My Family”)

(8)Zhixin: What should we do? I am here. When Mr. Meng step into the room, let's critic and educate him. If he forsake heresy and return to the truth this time, we will let him go. But if he say “no”, come on, hey, he can not go.
Heping: Ah, ah, hey, hey, go to the balcony to do radio gymnastics.
Zhixin: This is called martial arts (the bell rings), that, I go inside to practice martial arts……

(“I Love My Family”)

(9)Wenyi: Former classmate, Jingxian, do you remember when we are young students in our prime? At that time we hand in hand with each other on the way to school. We also date each other in the night, I am afraid, we are not only classmates……
Fulao: Of course, we are more than classmates……

(“I Love My Family”)

The use of language and the understanding of language cannot be separated from the context. Language selection in verbal communication and language decoding and reasoning in language understanding are subject to the constraints of contextual factors. Discourse markers are no exception. The use of discourse markers reflects the speaker's adaptation to the context. “Adaptability refers to the ability of language users to make flexible choices from the language items that can be chosen to meet the communicative needs. Choice includes not only the choice of language form, but also the choice of strategy…… Choice is a kind of conscious, with a certain tendency of behavior.” In the seventh case, “you think” as a discourse marker here does not mean that Fulao really wants to command the gas company. It is just a language means adapted to the context in order to increase the cognitive commonness between the speaker and the hearer. In the eighth case, before the doorbell rang, Zhixin opinionated bragging about how to teach a lesson to Mr. Meng in a while. When the doorbell rang, he knew that he was guilty, and immediately wanted
to escape, showing some psychological panic and exhibiting incoherent in language. In this context, it is a response to the context and a linguistic strategy to choose the “that” to connect the following discourse. In the ninth case, Wenyi uses “afraid” as the discourse marker to ease the speech tone. It also indicates the speaker's uncertainty in her opinion, conveying her speculation and hinting Fulao himself to admit that they are more than classmates. Here, in order to guide Fulao to get the expected context, Wenyi uses “I am afraid” as the discourse marker, which adapts to the context and helps to achieve the purpose of communication.

**Pragmatic Diversity**

As mentioned above, the omission of discourse markers does not change the content of the discourse itself, and does not affect the truth value of the original sentence. But their existence is not redundant. In verbal communication, discourse markers is used to control language and the interaction of discourse in various ways. They have a negligible effect in the pragmatic diversity. For example:

(10) Aunt Yu: you see, you one by one, are not willing to say something. Does something happen at home?
   Everybody: no, no.....
   Laofu: we're just talking..... talking.....
   Aunt Yu: Well, I will leave, are you sure everything is OK?
   Everybody: Everything is OK......

(“I Love My Family”)

(11) Heping: Granny, that, I have a question......
   Granny: Oh, wait, you should ask in order.....one couple after another.

(“I Love My Family”)

(12) Female Interpol: Don't be nervous. We just ask something......
   Heping: This, why should I be nervous...... I have no reason to feel nervous. I've been trying to make some contribution to the protection of our social security. I've never had a chance. We, this, the situation is very good, right? Ah? This comprehensive management of early is successful, right? Is anything wrong? Are the bad guys doing well?
   Female Interpol: I have not asked you a question, how do you ask me?

(“I love my family”)

In Example (10) the “well” does not mean that the speaker agree with the reply that the family is talking. It is a kind of helpless, because the speaker has no choice but to leave. The “Well” connects the conversion so that people do not feel so suddenly and the two sides will not be too embarrassed. In Example (11) Heping uses “that” at the beginning to ask a strange granny. It is a pragmatic strategy to reduce the scope of discourse comprehension and increase the information needed by the hearer. In Example (12) “this” is used to fill the gap caused by the speaker's thinking and hesitation. It is helpful in maintaining the discourse coherence and winning time for the speaker to organize discourse. Therefore it is a means to keep communication smooth, reflecting its pragmatic function as a discourse marker.

**Phonological Pause**

Discourse markers are one of the main features of oral communication. Therefore, there is a great relationship between the use of discourse markers and pauses in speech. For example:

(13) Heping: Dad, don't you know your own son? Do you think he is easy? It is true that he looks like easy in the past ten years. But that is because he is afraid of you. You are the stone to suppress the monster.
   Fulao: ......
   Heping: Oh, you say, if we move and leave your correct guidance, he will rebel and call him a king, who dare to offend you? Some one may want to live with the sin, but I don't!
In Examples (13) and (14) there are brief pauses after the "you say" and "that". Together with the four features mentioned above, we regard them as discourse markers. Generally speaking, discourse markers are followed by pauses, which can be short or long. This feature can be well judged in oral communication.

According to the five basic features of discourse markers, we can determine which words or structures belong to discourse markers and which does not. At the same time, we believe that in order to be regarded as discourse markers, the words and structures must possess all the five features. Otherwise, they cannot be identified as discourse markers. Colloquialism discourse markers are an evident feature of oral communication as they are used in oral communication with much higher frequency than in written language. Due to their frequent use, discourse markers are gradually solidified in oral communication, and their conceptual meaning is weakened and their procedural meaning is highlighted. They become an important means of the speaker to adapt to the context.

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References