DISCOURSE MARKERS, COHERENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON COGNITIVE INTERPRETATION OF TEXTS

Omisakin Adeyemi Matthew[1*], Olofin Olufunmilayo Lara[2],

Abobarin Adewale Adebanjo[3], and Adesiyan Oyinade Funke[4]

[1,3,4]Department of Languages and Humanities, Directorate of General Studies, Osun State Polytechnic, Iree, Nigeria.

[2]School of Vocational and Technical Education, Osun State Polytechnic, Iree, Nigeria.

[*]Corresponding Author's Email: forwale01@gmail.com; Tel:. +2348033868186.

ABSTRACT: *A successful communication is evaluated by the ability of the audience to effectively comprehend the essence of a communication and to respond accordingly. Meanwhile, a communicative discourse is considered effective in its characteristics of demonstrating natural pauses and fillers, among others, which helps to communicate ideas more easily and naturally. Engaging any kind of discourse in coherent and fluent manners to enhance effective communication is sacrosanct to a communicator. This study focuses on the system of how discourse markers are instrumental to text fluency, coherence and, above all, how they function and are consciously structured to aid effective interpretations of a discourse. The study also attempts to examine the functional complexity of discourse markers in cohesive texts. The work relies on the views of many discourse and stylistic analysts not only to investigate the relationship between discourse markers and textual composition but to also address how instrumental they are to the effective comprehension of a text. The study reveals that Discourse Markers are not only characterised with linguistic devices that enhance textual coherence and fluency but also provide discourse clues that are instrumental to effective organisation of ideas and effective comprehension of meanings in a text.*

KEYWORDS: Discourse markers, Cognitive, Text.

INTRODUCTION

Communicative competence in a language requires more than the mere skills of how words are co joined to form sentences but also covers how a discourse is structured to enhance effective comprehension. Brown and George (2003) posit that a speaker or writer crafts his or her expression to fit the situation or context and objectives in which he or she communicates. In other words, how and what we speak or write is a product of our intentions. Therefore, when undertaking a discourse, communicators have to be consistent in their use of a specific linguistic pattern that is semantic inclined. They have to deploy some cohesive devices to make a comprehensible compact whole of a text. This study understands that cohesive devices as structural and semantic connectors are wide and the explanations become problematic. Different discourse scholars have hence given them various names according to the specific roles played in discourse instances. For example, Blakemore (1987) tags it Discourse Connectives, Schourup (1985) makes a theory of Discourse Particles, Schiffrin (1987) names it Discourse Markers, and Fraser (1996) as well agrees with the term, Discourse Markers. He agrees that each of them is adorned with some principles of meaning, which signals how a speaker intends to make successive utterances relate with the previous discourse. O'Halloran (2003) equally agrees with Fraser's views but gives a slightly different definition of discourse markers as items used to ease the interpretation of utterances. Similarly, Goodin (1982) opines that discourse markers are discourse particles which are used to signal meanings in a communication to enhance audience's adequate interpretations.

This study however seeks to understand the connectors as discourse markers in accordance with the specific roles they play as cohesive devices. Discourse markers can be described as the linguistic devices that are used to hang the pieces of language or expression together. Gerard (2020) posits that discourse markers are words like *however, although, nevertheless*, etc which are commonly referred to as linking words, linking phrases or sentence connectors. They may be described as the structural glue that binds a piece of writing together. Without appropriate use of discourse markers, a piece of writing would be considered to be illogically constructed. They are used in conversation or writing to show or signal the relationship between ideas or information in a given context. Syahabuddin and Zikra (2020) argue that the use of discourse markers in a speech is targeted at creating coherence and cohesion. This is understood to be one of the requirements of a good text. In other words, a text becomes units of a compact whole made with appropriate use of discourse markers. Müller (2005) equally agrees that the use of discourse markers makes the task of textual comprehension easier for an audience. In the same vein, Mushin et al. (2003) posit that discourse markers and particles can also be viewed as cues or signals of discourse structure, and could be considered with reference to how it is positioned and the function performed within a text.

Ang (2014) posits that in discourse analysis, emphasis is often laid on the understanding of cohesion and coherence of the passage, rather than its grammatical structure. Discourse markers, being the linguistic elements within a sentence, carry no syntactic function but rather a grammatical function.

Language as a strong instrument of communication in human relations is both delicate and very sensitive which is closely tied to contextual and pragmatic influences. One of the linguistic devices that are appropriated to enhance communicative competence is *Discourse Marker*. Discourse marker, as suggested by Schiffrin (1987), is one of the linguistic devices

useful in creating discourse coherence and cohesion in a text. Miller (2005) opines that the use of discourse markers helps to facilitate the skills of comprehending communication in a discourse. It will however not be out of place to state that discourse markers help to create meaning in a text and help to prevent textual misinterpretations. They are therefore the linguistic devices that synchronize discourse elements to make up a whole sense. Chaudron and Jack (1986) posit that skilful speakers use discourse markers to reduce the cognitive efforts required from an audience to interpret utterances as it signals the inferences that reflect more accurately the speakers' meaning.

Discourse markers are words and phrases used to manage and organise the structure and flow of a discourse. More examples are words or phrases like *anyway, right, okay, as I said earlier, to begin with, as well as, I mean, because, however, on the other hand, firstly, in conclusion, for instance* and many others which give attention to the directions of a communicator. These markers play crucial roles in setting the mood for comprehension, making communication clear, and they are coherent enhancers.

It was first theorised by an American linguist, Schiffrin in 1988. It is used to signal the relationship and connections between utterances and ideas in a speech or writing. They serve as a guide to the listeners or readers through the content, clarifying connecting and organising the parts of the conversation or text. Fraser (1999) describes discourse markers as a class of lexical expression drawn mainly from the syntactic classes of *conjunctions, adverbs* and *prepositional phrases.* They often indicate the relationship between the interpretation of the segment they introduce and the previous segment. They are embellished with core meanings of expressions which are procedural and not conceptual. And their interpretations of a text are more negotiated by both the linguistic and conceptual context.

Some of the most commonly used discourse markers are: *well, oh! You know, I mean, because, or so, but, and, now then,*among others. Moder and Aida (2004) argue that discourse markers are conceptualised to be linguistic devices that help to process information that are intended to help a hearer/reader in integrating the units that host the markers into a coherent mental representation of the unfolding discourse. Schiffrin (1987) defines it as sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talks. He argues further that they provide both contextual and semantic coordination for utterances in a text which most effectively help to enhance the understanding of what is being said and how they are connected with what was earlier said. Similarly, Louwerse and Heather (2003) also posit that discourse markers are linguistic elements used by a speaker to condition the psyche of listeners to how the meaning of utterances in a discourse is organised, to identify the processes being used and to uncover a speaker's intention. Georgakopoulou and Dionysis (1997) assert that discourse markers convey two types of information, which are attitudinal comments of a speaker and the information about the connections between the utterances. When used in either case however, they are syntax-independent. Therefore, they can be omitted and when used, they are often marked by some punctuation marks in a written discourse or by a pause in a spoken discourse. They signal utterance motifs in pragmatics. Blakemore (1987) posits that, for a conversational coherence to be effectively organised, discourse markers are made to play a lot of crucial roles. Brown and George (2003) argue that though discourse markers are grammatically optional and could be semantically empty, they are pragmatically useful. They pragmatically impact on the free flow of a discourse and provide tools for effective comprehension of a discourse. (See also Sloan, 1986.) This is because in a spoken text, for

example, they ease the comprehension of the messages as they act to enhance short pauses, which gives the hearers some time to obtain the actual meaning of a discourse among other methods it discharges. They have higher occurrences with spoken discourse than with written.

CLASSIFICATIONS OF DISCOURSE MARKERS

These include:

Additives: This is a set of discourse markers that adds information to an existing information. Examples include *and, in addition to, furthermore, also*, etc.

Contrastive: This is a set of discourse markers that introduce a contrast or contradiction. They include *but, however, on the other hand, although, yet, meanwhile, in other words, in contrast*, and so on.

Sequential Discourse Markers: These indicate sequence or order of occurrence of ideas. They include *first, then, next, finally*, and so on.

Casual Discourse Markers: This category shows cause and effect of issues. They include *because, therefore, so, as a result of,* etc.

Conclusive Discourse Markers: They signal the end, conclusion or summation of a discourse. For instance, *summarily, in conclusion, the summation, with the aforementioned*, etc. are included.

USES OF DISCOURSE MARKERS

Gee (1999) explains that a speaker or writer crafts whatever is expressed to fit the situation or context in which he/she communicates, hencethe use of discourse markers as instruments of crafting senses with sentences to suit motifs of communications. Discourse markers are useful tools in making speech and writing both logical and coherent texts. They help to smooth the flow of, and in connecting structures and ideas that make up a text, such as words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs of a text which in turn makes discourse ideas clearer and more comprehensible.

Discourse markers, acting as a linking mechanism, not only help listeners to understand the meaning with little effort but also make a writer structurally sequence ideas with convenience. It is understood that discourse markers may not affect the overall meaning of sentences, notwithstanding, they do give significant clues to the listeners about the attitude of the speaker. They are systemically used at different positions in a sentence and it may have a different function. It may start a discourse, change the topic, end a discourse, express a response, bracket a response or specify a boundary in discourses. The use of discourse markers when communicating helps to make a speaker/writer sound more fluent, helps to engage the reader/listener and helps to successfully communicate how one feels about a conversation.

In communication, a speaker can use discourse markers to attract listeners' attention while the discourse still flows normally. It is also used to coordinate the relationship between a speaker and the audience in an oral composition. Discourse markers can help to disclose the author's emotion and attitudes. It also helps to pontificate the direction of an author of a discourse. It can improve the oral coherence of language users and could still maintain the relevance of the content, especially for *dumb language users*.

Discourse markers can be said to have miscellaneous functions extending from signals, which function as hesitation filters, to clausal expressions, which are always used or found in interactions. Blakemore, D. (2002) argues that discourse markers enable speakers to make their presence felt in a discourse. They are deployed to give guidance to the audience in respect of how a discourse is organised and to explain the processes that are used to produce a text. He further pontificates the speakers' intentions and attitudes regarding the subject matter of a discourse. Discourse markers are used to initiate successive ideas in a discourse such as found in the use of markers like *so, meanwhile, therefore,* etc.

DISCOURSE MARKERS AS INSTRUMENTS OF FLUENCY IN SPEECH MAKING

Fluency pontificates an ability to keep speaking at a natural speech rate without pausing, repeating, or stopping for extended periods to think of what to say. An oral communicator is expected to deploy appropriate pauses in a natural manner to enhance free flow of thought, which in turn will aid effective understanding of the messages. Such pauses help the listener to understand that a speaker is either rounding off a sentenceor starting a new one, which is similar to using punctuation in a written text. However, a speaker may use longer pauses as an instrument for thinking about what to say or as an instrument to access vocabulary and grammar; such could impact on the overall speech delivery. A smart speaker can as well deploy some *stalling phrases* to enhance spoken performance. Meanwhile, they are used to organise and manage a speech using words and phrases to connect ideas and to express how we feel about what we are saying. They are also used to help speakers think about what to say next, using fillers correctly to sound natural in a delivery. Let us consider the choice of discourse marker in the following sentences:

The examination I wrote seems unsatisfactory; ***probably I didn't prepare very well***; ***unfortunately***, *I am not expecting any good result.* ***The first thing*** *I am going to do is to demonstrate how Eba is prepared,* ***then*** *to state its nutritional benefits and* ***finally, to explain the nutritional components***.

The first sentence expresses uncertainty and sadness using *hedging language* in the form of adverbs. **Probably** is used to demonstrate the factor behind the unsatisfactory attempt in the examinations which is not quite known, while **unfortunately** is used to demonstrate his ultimate expectations. The second sentence uses discourse markers to sequence the steps that are going to be presented. Discourse markers are used to express functions of speech and therefore help to organise what is said, while signaling the attitude of the speaker. Brown and Levinson (1987) resolve that the skilful use of discourse markers is usually an indicator of a higher level of fluency and an ability to produce and understand standard linguistic prowess in communication. They also suggest that it can also be used as a 'stalling' device, allowing you some time to think of what to say, for example,

… I need a moment to think about this ….

It is much better to use a phrase like this, rather than pausing for seconds, or using intrusive fillers like '*umm... / err...*' However, it is important to learn how to use discourse markers appropriately and not to overuse them, so they become noticeable and repetitive like in the example below:

First and foremost, *I actually prefer rice and beans.* **Firstly**, *it is delicious;* **secondly** *it is nutritious;* **again**, *the preparation is simple; and* **finally**, *it is a balanced diet.* **However**, *I must say that I find it foreign because of these four factors.* **Firstly**, *the component;* **secondly**, *it is not traditional to us;* **thirdly** *… and* **fourthly** *….*

Learning a range of discourse markers that can be used when communicating is a very important step to take if one wants to become more fluent. In Millis and Just (1994)'s examination of whether the presence of discourse markers, such as **because**, in-between two sentences could create the activation of information given in the first sentence. The result reveals that the mentioned discourse markers led to reactivation of contents of the first of two statements to be integrated and the discourse marker versions in the study did not only lead to faster recognition of facts but further served as clues to effective interpretation of the content.

COHERENCE AND DISCOURSE MARKERS

Coherence is understood to be a system of organising and presenting one's thoughts and ideas in a structurally free flow manner. This could entail an ability to use appropriate discourse markers and linking phrases to enhance effective communication. Omaggio(2000) describes coherence as the way contextual meanings are related and linked in a discourse. Meanwhile, discourse markers are understood to be one of the most potent linguistic devices that enhance the textual coordination which cohesion refers to. Carell (1982) identifies the textual relationship between coherence and cohesion; he states that cohesion is the relationship of linguistic elements within a text, while coherence reflects the consistency of meaning. Halliday and Hasan (1976) argue that conversational coherence is the result of a dynamic process that takes place among the interlocutors where discourse markers play a very crucial role. Similarly, Chafe (1994) opines that discourse markers are linguistic devices available for a writer to structure a discourse. In the same sense, Brown and Levinson (1987) resolve that the skilful use of discourse markers is usually an indicator of a higher level of fluency and an ability to produce and understand standard linguistic prowess in communication, showing that discourse markers are used to express functions of speech and therefore help to organise what is said, while signaling the attitude of a speaker. They can also be used as a *stalling device* which allows the speaker some time to think of what to say. For example expression such as:

'Allow me a moment to think about that please.'

Discourse markers are grammatical or function words. Unlike content words, they neither convey meaning on their own nor change the meaning of a sentence. They only play a grammatical role of linking ideas in a text. Most discourse markers signal textual continuity to the audience or pontificate the relationship between the preceding statement and the successive ones. Longacre and Robert (1983) conclude that discourse markers are key elements in speech writing, as they help to connect ideas and give flow to the text.

DISCOURSE MARKERS AND TEXTUAL COMPREHENSION

Schiffrin (1987) posits that the audience could easily comprehend the substance of an utterance when properties of a discourse are considered with linguistic properties of an expression, that is, the meaning and/or the grammatical properties which generate the indexical functions of discourse markers. He argues further that discourse markers perform important functions in a conversation because they provide contextual coordinates which aid in the production and interpretation of coherent conversations. Katz (2003) attempts to classify some of the roles played by discourse markers in a text. The understanding of these can easily enhance textual interpretations. These include:

toemphasise(emphasize, intensify), *to minimize* (mitigate, qualify), *to refute* (disprove, discredit) or *to hedge* (be tentative), etc. (See also Mushin et al., 2023.) They contend that discourse markers provide signals for discourse structures and are often analyzed with reference to its positions and function within a text. Analyzing from this perspective shows that the markers exert a disproportionate influence on the emergence of textual meanings. Hence, it provides a linguistic instrument for translation, interpretation, and for effective communication. Similarly, Givon (1993) opines that discourse markers instruct discourse participants about how to investigate the semantic disposition of an upcoming utterance to the previous ones, thereby providing a path toward the integration of different components of language use into one coherent discourse. (See also Louwerse& Mitchell, 2003.) Let us consider this statement culled from a novel to explain the above assertion:

A poor little Dele whose parents died in a ghastly car accident was the only surviving child. Dele, a five year haggard and mean looking boy, is always seen scavenging and begging for alms around Gbagi Market to fight for his survival. **Unfortunately**, *he could not survive the life bearing hardship* **as a result of** *the continuous aggravated deteriorating socio-economic situation in the country….*

The choice of adverbials **unfortunately** and **as a result of**, as discourse markers, go a long way not only to provide semantic clues to setting the mood for understanding the goal of misfortune or tragedy that the writer intends to project as caused by the unceasing socio-economic hardship in the nation and to expose the terrible situations that many orphans go through, but also to also provide a clue for apt interpretation of the message and to create the sense of textual coherence through the creation of awareness of the successive utterance from the previous ones.

Gibbs (1994) contends that some discourse markers signal the relationship between entities of a text. Items such as *therefore, moreover, consequently, on the other hand,* etc. are referred to as sequence marking phrases that play such discourse roles. Meanwhile, markers such as *to summarize, after all said and done, at the end of the day,* etc. are used to signal a rounding off of a discourse.

Some discourse markers are used to maximise or minimise the thematic function of a text. These could include items such as *absolutely, totally, definitely, exactly, precisely,* etc. In a similar effort, Katz (2003) identifies some types of hedging such as *appraisal, epistemic status, evaluation, evidentiality, intensity, modality, qualification, vagueness,* etc. Edging is often conducted through deploying downgraders, downtoners, indirectness, mitigation, tentativeness, and understatement. Examples can be found in phrases such as *frequently,*

possibly, sometimes, tentatively, reportedly, apparently, it appears that, it is assumed, etc. Somemodal auxiliaries such as *should, could, would, may, or might,* etc.are also instruments of edging.

Discourse markers function as guides to a listener or reader of text by clarifying, connecting, and organizing the parts of a conversation or text. They provide clues into the mood or the mind of a text, thereby enhancing easy access to interpreting the messages of a text. For example, if a discourse uses markers such as ***in contrast***, it simply attempts to hint the audience about an **opposing argument** to an initial one. ***Furthermore*** wishes to **expand** on the initial information, ***as follows*** intends to provide or list out some **informative items**, while ***because*** is to advance arguments about the **reason(s)** behind a decision. These and many more can be described as the systems of discourse markers which not only provide clues to the hearts of the messages but also function as instruments of textual coherence.

Walrod (2004) explains that discourse markers serve as cues to interpretation or text processing and may signal attitudes and emotions. Markers such as *awesome, cool, all right, marvelous, great, quiet, extraordinary, incredible,* etc. are very emotive.

Hall (1987:45) argues that markers such as ***yeah, mhm, right, fine, okay, well, so, see, oh I know***, etc. can be very formulaic and be functioning at a purely interactional level rather than having any function of communicating at lexico-semantic level.

In the views of Fairclough, N. (1995), he contends that discourse markers such as *Anyway, so, yeah, mhm, right,* and so forth function to create cohesive relations. They are fairly neutral with respect to attitude and emphasis. They serve as linkages. For instance, in an expression such as in the following:

Anyway, *I was just so tired, so I had to withdraw to bed.*

Anyway, *I went to the cafeteria to take my lunch, came back, and got set for another round of work.*

The choice of ***anyway*** as the discourse marker in the two sentences above performed two different roles: the first as a marker to round off an exercise while the second was to start another effort aside from being textual connectors. ***Anyway*** can as well be used as a semantic waiver to ward off any negative consequence and to forge ahead. For example:

Anyway, *whatever the circumstance, we must forge ahead*.

Ricouer (1976) contends that a skilful use of discourse markers enables the speaker or writer to manipulate the strength and influence of the contextual cues and promote effective and persuasive communication. Such textual skills and clues equally enhance cognitive interpretation of text as they provide signals of textual mood and directions. For example, the choice of additives such as *and*, *in addition to, furthermore, also,* etc. are cues to the audience that subsequent statement(s) will only add information to the previous one. Furthermore, any communicative text that is dispersed of discourse markers is often considered to be boring. Though written communication is said to use fewer discourse markers than oral communication, finding the optimal distribution of DM's and DP's in written texts was found to be extremely important by mother tongue translators.

CONCLUSION

Drawing from a hypothesis that discourse markers indicate effective communication between the author and the audience and that they belong to the system of devices that ensure cohesion and coherence and have polyfunctional attributes in making texts, the study concludes that discourse markers provide contextual coordinates which enhance effective generation and interpretation of a coherent conversation. The study further reveals that linguistic markers, such as *Signaling Phrases* and *Discourse Markers* help readers in both L1 and L2 to form a coherent cognitive representation of the information in a text, and the presence of discourse markers are observed to influence the construction of a coherent mental representation of a discourse.

The study further concludes that the apt use of discourse markers provide sufficient contents or signals to make the subsequent information more salient or meaningful from the previous ones in a text, which enhances an achievement of cohesion and coherence in textual functions. Not only that, they assist readers to increase their reading speed because they are usually made up of commonly used words and can be easily understood.

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