

A Functional Study of Chinese "Personal Pronoun + Know" Discourse Markers from an Interactional Perspective

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Abstract: This research paper delves into the multifaceted roles played by the Chinese linguistic construction known as "personal pronoun + know" discourse markers within the realm of spoken communication. It thoroughly investigates how these markers function as contextual cues, as they help to set the stage for the conversation by indicating the speaker's stance or attitude. Furthermore, the paper examines their contribution to the progression of topics, showing how they can be used to smoothly transition from one subject to another, thereby maintaining the flow of dialogue. The study also highlights their use in seeking agreement from the interlocutor, which is a subtle way of building rapport and consensus within the conversation. Additionally, these markers are seen to play a significant role in the provision of information, often signaling the speaker's intention to share knowledge or clarify points. The analysis is grounded in empirical data, providing a robust foundation for understanding the pragmatic implications of these markers. The results of the study indicate that despite the conceptual meaning of the "personal pronoun + know" structure being somewhat diminished due to its frequent use and inherent subjectivity, it continues to serve as a vital pragmatic tool in everyday language use. This is evidenced by its ability to facilitate verbal interaction and enhance the coherence of discourse, making communication more efficient and effective.

1. Introduction

At present, within the academic community, there is a lack of a universally accepted definition for the term 'discourse markers'. In the view of Liu Liyan^[3], as expressed in the year 2005, discourse markers can be characterized as "a distinct category of functional words, or phrases, that are peculiar to interactive spoken communication. These elements are relatively independent in terms of syntax, do not convey any conceptual meaning within oral discourse, and instead, they only possess procedural meaning. The functions of these markers are reflective of the metapragmatic awareness of cognitive subjects." ^[3]

When it comes to the fundamental functions of discourse markers, there are two principal viewpoints that are prevalent within the academic sphere. One perspective posits that the primary

function of discourse markers is to ensure discourse coherence. In contrast, the other perspective contends that their main role is to demonstrate the relevance of cognitive and psychological factors between speakers and listeners. Based on these divergent viewpoints, research on discourse markers has diverged into two distinct schools of thought—the coherence approach and the relevance approach. Although these two schools have differing perspectives, both have contributed significant insights by examining discourse markers from their respective specific angles.

This paper conducts an analysis of the functions of "personal pronoun + know" discourse markers in verbal interaction. The analysis is based on data sourced from dialogue and interview transcripts within the Media Language Corpus of Communication University of China, as well as spoken language materials from the CCL Corpus of Peking University. The paper aims to extend the exploration to discourse markers and their varied applications across different contexts and cultural backgrounds, thereby enriching our understanding of the nuances of spoken language.

2. The Significance of "Personal Pronoun + Know" Discourse Markers

The structure that consists of "personal pronoun + know" embodies a conceptual meaning and can serve as a significant component within a sentence. For instance:

(1) Emperor Wu of Liang finally understood and angrily exclaimed, "Do *you know* who I am?" Master Bodhidharma smiled faintly and shook his head, "I don't know." (Unless otherwise noted, the examples selected in this paper are sourced from the Media Language Corpus of Communication University of China or the Peking University CCL Corpus.)

In this particular example, the phrase "you know" acts as a subject-predicate unit that carries a concrete meaning and plays a crucial role in the sentence's structure. If this phrase were to be omitted, the sentence would lose its completeness and coherence; therefore, it cannot be considered merely as a discourse marker.

Due to high frequency of use and subjectivity, the conceptual meaning of "know" in the "personal pronoun + know" structure has weakened, gradually evolving into a discourse marker usage. Discourse markers such as "we know" no longer carry conceptual meaning but only procedural meaning.^[12] Procedural meaning was proposed by Blakemore (1987), referring to "linguistic encoding that guides the hearer's comprehension and inference of the utterance."^[6] In fact, Blakemore's procedural meaning aligns largely with the pragmatic meaning proposed by Fraser (1990).^[1]

Because the grammaticalization process of these discourse markers is still in progress, there are instances where the structure operates both as a subject-predicate phrase with a literal meaning and as a discourse marker in practical usage. However, we can ascertain whether the "personal pronoun + know" structure qualifies as a discourse marker by referring to the established definition of discourse markers.

This paper primarily focuses on the "personal pronoun + know" structure as a discourse marker. In the next chapter, we will examine the main functions of this type of discourse marker, using "we know(women zhidao)," "everyone knows(dajia zhidao)," and "you know(ni/nimen zhidao)" as examples.

3. The Pragmatic Functions of "Personal Pronoun + Know" Discourse Markers

3.1 Contextualization Cue

The "personal pronoun + know" type of discourse markers serve the function of providing contextual cues. These particular markers are instrumental in offering insights into the situational context of a conversation, thereby playing a significant role in identifying and distinguishing the

speech style being utilized. ^[10] They can help to clarify the nature of the interaction, whether it is formal or informal, and can guide the listener or reader in understanding the tone and intent behind the words being spoken or written.

Expressions such as "we know," "everyone knows," and "you know" are frequently used in dialogic speech styles, where the exchange of ideas and information is ongoing between two or more parties. These phrases are often employed to establish a sense of shared knowledge or understanding among the participants. Additionally, "we know" and "everyone knows" are also applicable in speech-like or presentational styles, where a speaker may be addressing an audience and attempting to create a sense of unity or common ground with them.

Consider television interview programs as an illustrative example. Their situational contexts can be divided into two distinct categories: mass communication contexts and interpersonal communication contexts. The mass communication context refers to "the verbal environment where communicators and audiences interact through television media," which encompasses the broader dissemination of information to a large audience. The interpersonal communication context, on the other hand, refers to "the verbal environment where, against the backdrop of mass communication, hosts and guests engage in face-to-face conversations in a studio or a specific setting," which involves a more personal and direct form of interaction.

Generally, "We know" and "everyone knows" can be used in both mass communication and interpersonal communication contexts, whereas "you know" is generally limited to interpersonal communication contexts.^[7] Within these contexts, "we know" and "everyone knows" can be used in both mass communication and interpersonal communication contexts, serving to reinforce a collective understanding or agreement among the participants. These phrases can be particularly effective in bridging the gap between the speaker and the audience, creating a sense of inclusion. In contrast, "you know" is generally limited to interpersonal communication contexts, where it is used to establish a more personal connection with the listener or to imply a shared experience or knowledge base that is not necessarily known to the broader audience.

(2) Host: Restoration.

Zhang Yansheng: Right. Because *you know*, this restoration is a matter of very high political and social risks...

(3) Host: As everyone *knows*, Wu Shuzhen relies on a wheelchair due to a car accident. So why is Wu Shuzhen, who has limited mobility, so well-informed?

In Example (2), the guest, Zhang Yansheng, is replying to the host's inquiry, with the immediate audience being the host. The phrase "you know" acts as a contextual cue, signifying that the dialogue is taking place within a one-on-one conversational setting. In Example (3), the host's use of "as is widely recognized" not only steers clear of subjectivity in their own remarks but also serves as a contextual cue. "As is widely recognized" should be considered a discourse marker aimed at engaging the audience.

Furthermore, "we know" is applicable in a broader range of contexts compared to "everyone knows." In addition to highly interactive conversational settings, "we know" also appears in contexts such as news commentaries.

(4) *We know* that a characteristic of joint-stock companies in a market economy is the separation of ownership and management, where the relationship between owners (shareholders) and managers (general managers) is one of principal-agent.

This illustrative example has been extracted from a news commentary corpus, which is a collection of articles and commentaries that provide analysis and interpretation of current events. In this context, the phrase "we know" functions as a discourse marker, a linguistic device that is used to signal to the reader or listener that the speaker or writer is about to introduce a piece of information that is generally accepted or understood within a particular community or field of

knowledge. It serves to draw the reader's attention and prepare them for the information that is to follow, often to establish common ground or to set the stage for further discussion or analysis.

3.2 Topic Progression

The "personal pronoun + know" type of discourse markers also function to advance topics, including initiating and shifting topics. They are instrumental in guiding the flow of conversation and helping to structure the dialogue in a coherent manner.

Firstly, these discourse markers can initiate topics. Their strategic use can effectively capture the listener's attention and set the stage for what is to come in the conversation.

(5) Yin Naijing: Hello, everyone.

Host: *We know* that the Taipei Palace Museum delegation will visit Beijing for the first time on the 14th to engage in exchanges with the Beijing Palace Museum...

This example occurs at the beginning of an interview. The host employs the phrase "we know" to introduce relevant background information, thereby serving the function of topic initiation and setting the context for the audience.

Additionally, the "personal pronoun + know" discourse markers can also shift topics. Additionally, the "personal pronoun + know" discourse markers can also shift topics, (Strictly speaking, changing the topic can actually be considered a way of initiating a topic. However, topic shifting is a process of moving from one subject to another, serving as a transition from the old topic to a new one.) allowing for a smooth transition from one subject to another within the conversation.

(6) Host: Huangguoshu has experienced flow interruptions.

Wu Xiancheng: No, there's only one very tall waterfall, about ten zhang high, even taller than Huangguoshu.

Host: *We know* that besides the main waterfall, Huangguoshu also has smaller waterfalls—a waterfall cluster.

Wu Xiancheng: Our area also has a waterfall cluster, and it's the most diverse. Chishui has over 3,000 waterfalls of varying sizes.

In Example (6), the discussion initially revolved around the interruptions in the flow of waterfalls, but the host later shifted the topic to the waterfall cluster. Here, the phrase "we know" was effectively used to serve the function of topic transition, guiding the conversation towards a new, yet related, subject.

3.3 Seeking Consensus

"Seeking consensus" is one of the primary pragmatic functions of discourse markers such as "personal pronoun + know." ^[11] These markers are frequently employed by speakers in order to bridge the gap between themselves and the listener, with the aim of gaining the listener's agreement and fostering a sense of shared understanding. ^[2] "Personal pronoun + know," particularly the phrase "you know," serves to emphasize that the information which follows is mutually understood by both parties, ^[4] thereby drawing the listener into a shared participation in the current event or conversation. This encourages the listener to understand and agree with the speaker's perspective ^[5].

(7) First, we should have a correct understanding of competition. *We know* that where there is competition, there are winners and losers. The key is to handle failure properly and maintain a spirit of striving to keep up.

In the aforementioned example, the speaker utilizes the phrase "we know" to introduce a viewpoint that is widely accepted and acknowledged—namely, "where there is competition, there are winners and losers." Building upon this commonly held belief, the speaker proceeds to offer

advice on how individuals should correctly handle failure, thereby promoting the importance of maintaining a positive and determined attitude in the face of setbacks.

3.4 Providing Information

In terms of content, discourse markers such as "personal pronoun + know" can serve a variety of functions within a text. They can provide explanations, clarifying the reasons behind certain statements or actions.^[8] Additionally, these markers can offer commentary, giving the speaker's perspective or opinion on a particular subject.^[9] They are instrumental in guiding the listener through the conversation, signaling shifts in focus, and helping to establish the speaker's stance or attitude towards the information being presented. By using these markers, the speaker can create a more coherent and engaging narrative, making the conversation easier to follow and understand.

(8) Audience Member 1: It shouldn't have gotten better. He said it would take 100 days, but I recovered in just three days. At the general hospital, I spent two weeks with no improvement—still in pain.

Ji Xiaolong: *You know*, any inflammation in the human body has its ups and downs.

(9) Yu Yisheng: Our relationship with them is like fish and water.

Zhang Yun: As we all know, Chinese farmers have a relatively low level of organization and engage in decentralized production. However, given the current trends in agricultural development, large-scale and specialized production must be achieved. In this process, leading enterprises like theirs are needed to guide thousands of farmers.

In Example (8), Ji Xiaolong's response provides an explanation to the audience member's question. "You know" introduces this explanation, making the dialogue less abrupt. In Example (9), Zhang Yun's statement is a commentary on the "fish-and-water" relationship between farmers and enterprises, with "as we all know" serving as a marker for delivering evaluative information.

From the perspective of information novelty, discourse markers like "personal pronoun + know" can introduce either unknown information or unactivated known information.

Although "know" is used, such markers often present information that is actually unknown to the listener. The speaker assumes the listener is already familiar with it, thereby increasing the accessibility of the information and making it more acceptable.

For instance, in Example (8), the information following "you know" is something the listener likely does not know. Yet, the speaker uses "you know" to frame it as shared knowledge, enhancing its acceptability.

Conversely, there are cases where the speaker genuinely references known but unactivated information. By using "personal pronoun + know," the speaker reactivates this shared knowledge to pave the way for introducing new, critical information.

Take Example (7). Here, the information after "we know" should be common knowledge, though unactivated before the speaker mentions it. The discourse marker "we know" serves to reactivate this knowledge, facilitating smoother dialogue progression.

Additionally, in daily life, humor can sometimes be achieved by presenting unconventional "known" information. Literary works, such as skits or TV dramas, exploit this to create comedic effects. Below is an example from the TV series *Love Apartment* to illustrate how this humor is achieved.

(10) "Hey!" Zhanbo felt a headache coming on. "Didn't you watch cartoons as a kid? This is Optimus Prime."

Wanyu perked up and began improvising: "Oh, I remember now! Actually, I loved them. *You know*, every girl dreams of marrying a Transformer when she's little!"

"...Really?" Zhanbo was stunned... (*Love Apartment (Season 1)* script)

In this example, the "known" information following "you know" contradicts common knowledge. The speaker sets up an expectation in the first half of the sentence, leading the listener to anticipate the second half. However, the speaker then deviates from this expectation, creating humor through the mismatch with shared reality.

This chapter analyzes the functions of "we know," "as we all know," and "you know" in verbal interactions. While they differ in specific usage—such as "you know" often appearing in response turns, whereas "we know" and "as we all know" are not restricted—all three serve to contextualize, advance topics, seek consensus, and provide information. Overall, employing "personal pronoun + know" discourse markers helps propel verbal interactions and achieve desired conversational effects.

4. Conclusion

This paper provides an in-depth exploration of the multiple functions of "personal pronoun + know" discourse markers in oral communication, including contextual cues, topic progression, seeking agreement, and information provision. Through the analysis of these discourse markers, we can not only better understand their roles in actual language use but also recognize their significance in facilitating verbal interaction and enhancing discourse coherence. Although academic circles still hold divergent views on the definition and functions of discourse markers, this study offers new perspectives and empirical analyses for this field, contributing to the further advancement of discourse marker research. Future studies may continue to explore other types of discourse markers and their usage in different contexts and cultural backgrounds, thereby more comprehensively revealing the complexity and diversity of discourse markers in interpersonal communication.

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