

## Context Clues of Discourse Makers

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**Keywords:** Discourse markers, coherence, relevance, context clues

**Abstract:** Recent research on discourse markers is marvelously progressing, but consensus on discourse markers' function has not yet been reached. Generally speaking, two representative groups of scholars, namely coherence theorists represented by Schiffrin, and Fraser, etc., and relevance theorists represented by Blakemore, Sperber, and Wilson, etc., explore discourse markers' main function in different scopes. The former claims that discourse markers' crucial function is to contribute to discourse coherence locally or globally; on the contrary, the latter proposes discourse markers conduce to relevance rather than coherence, which is deemed as derivative and secondary notion. After generalizing these two different views, it is advocated in the paper that discourse markers should be explored in a micro and macro-level of discourse in a wider sense of context so that the core function of discourse markers can be uncovered, i.e., their context clues in the discourse.

### 1. Introduction

Discourse markers (henceforth DMs) are very pervasive in our daily communication, but for a very long time, they had been regarded as the redundancy for they were deemed to contribute nothing to the truth condition of the utterance. In 1953, Randolph Quirk in a lecture first drew attention to some frequent words, such as *you know*, *you see*, and *well* [1]. Since then, these 'useless' and 'meaningless' items begin to attract more linguists' attention, and many scholars commence on attaching considerable importance to their functions. In recent thirty years, with the development of many disciplines, discourse analysis and pragmatics in particular, the research on DMs has turned into a "growth industry" [2].

However, the function of DMs is still of great controversy. Many linguists study DMs from different perspectives, so that their conclusions are rather divergent. Generally speaking, there are two groups of scholars in this field. One is those represented by Schiffrin, and Fraser, etc., who presume discourse markers, although their memberships are not totally the same, do contribute to discourse coherence. The other group represented by Blakemore, Wilson and Sperber, etc., who denominate DMs discourse connectives (hereafter DCs), hold DCs express an inferential connection arising out of the way one proposition is interpreted as relevant with respect to another.

Undoubtedly, these two groups of linguists have made a momentous contribution to the study of DMs. At the meantime, the defects of both groups can never be negligible. For instance, Schiffrin, and Fraser confine the study of DMs to the discourse itself, which diminishes the importance of DMs; Blakemore, on the other hand, advocates the study of DMs within the framework of relevance instead of coherence, but she sorts out DCs from the counterparts with conceptual meaning and she even rejects DMs' contribution to coherence. Hence, even though the two main ideas on DMs have contributed a lot to the research on DMs, further meditation still deserves being taken over DMs, especially their pivotal function.

## 2. Two Views on Discourse Markers' Pivotal Function

### 2.1 Coherence-based View

The view that the functions of DMs are generally based on their contribution to coherence of utterance is generally held by Schiffrin, and Fraser, etc. Schiffrin originally defines DMs as “sequentially dependant elements which bracket units of talk” [3] and later she supplements with a more elaborate description of markers as “proposing the contextual coordinates within which an utterance is produced and designed to be interpreted” [ibid]. Coherence is thus seen by Schiffrin as constructed through relations between adjacent discourse units.

Fraser explores functions of DMs in a series of articles, and discourse markers are claimed to “signal how the basic message relates to the foregoing discourse” [4]. Hence, DMs are seen as the connecting textual elements. Fraser thinks that DMs provide instructions to the addressee on how the utterance to which the discourse marker is attached is to be interpreted. Consider the following example:

- (1) A: Mary has gone home.  
B: a. She was sick.  
b. *After all*, she was sick.  
c. *Thus*, she was sick.  
d. *Moreover*, she was sick.  
e. *However*, she was sick.

Speaker B’s response to A’s assertions that Mary has gone home may take many forms. B may simply uttered (1a), and leaves the addressee with no explicit clues as to what the utterance bears to the former. However, by using a discourse marker, the relationship is made explicit. *After all* in (1b) signals that the utterance counts as an explanation; *Thus* in (1c) signals that it counts as a conclusion; *Moreover* in (1d) signals that there is something more relevant about Mary, besides her going home; and *However* in (1e) signals the contrast to what the addressee might think about when Mary would go home—this time Mary was sick.

Fraser elaborates DMs’ contribution to discourse coherence more specifically. First of all, DMs are said to signal a relationship between the segment they introduce and the prior segment. So DMs function like a two-place relation, one argument lying in the segment they introduce, the other lying in the prior discourse. In addition, unlike Schiffrin who studies DMs’ contribution to local discourse coherence, Fraser holds that the DMs can contribute to coherence unnecessarily on a local level, because “the segments related by DMs need not be adjacent” [2].

Moreover, Fraser asserts that DMs can either relate messages or topics. DMs can signal the discourse relationship through relating some aspect of the message conveyed by the different segments. The discourse relationship, in some cases, involves the (propositional) content domain like (2a); in others it involves the epistemic domain (the speaker’s beliefs) like (2b); while in still others it involves the speech act domain like (2c) [ibid]:

- (2) a. John wasn’t there. *So* we decided to leave a note for him.  
b. John isn’t here. *So* he has evidently gone home.  
c. We’re on the subject. *So* when was George Washington born?

Moreover, DMs can relate topics. Look at example (3), in which *Incidentally* signals that the second segment is to be interpreted as a digression from the topic of the first segment:

- (3) This dinner looks delicious. *Incidentally*, where do you shop?

All in all, Schiffrin, and Fraser all claim that DMs can contribute to discourse coherence. Discourse coherence is represented by semantic relations that may be explicit or implicit, and discourse markers are a class of language expressions whose function is to make interpretation of semantic relations easier [5]. However, there are two defects in their findings. First of all, their research on DMs is mainly refined to the textual scope, which fails to study DMs comprehensively and accurately. Within textual scope, the connectivity of DMs will lead to a quandary: DMs do not necessarily link more than one unit, because DMs sometimes do link an utterance with a context. Consequently, attempting to study DMs in the textual scope fails to capture the functions of DMs.

In addition, the notion coherence delimited by these coherence-based linguists has also incurred strong criticism. These linguists generally discuss coherence in the textual/discourse scope. For instance, Schiffrin defines coherence as the joint creation and display of connections between utterances, especially the relation between adjacent discourse units, such that what one speaker says can be heard to follow sensibly from what the other has said or what prior utterance(s) can be used to help understand the following utterances.

## 2.2 Relevance-based View

As discussed above, those items elsewhere classed as DMs, within relevance theory (hereafter RT), are referred to discourse connective (DCs). DCs are treated by Blakemore as a type of Gricean conventional implicature, so they don't have conceptual meaning but procedural meaning. In contrast to the coherence-based view, Blakemore asserts that a DC expresses an inferential connection that "arises out of the way that one proposition is interpreted as relevant with respect to another" [6].

Within RT, utterance interpretation is constrained by the assumption that the utterance is consistent with the Principle of Relevance. This principle warrants the hearer of an utterance to assume, firstly, that it will yield adequate contextual effects, and secondly that no gratuitous processing effort will be required of the hearer in the derivation of those effects. More specifically, the Principle of Relevance enables the addressee to assume that an utterance comes with a guarantee of its own optimal relevance. An interpretation is considered to be consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance if the speaker could rationally have intended it to be optimally relevant to the hearer or that interpretation. The presumption of optimal relevance justifies the addressee to expect a level of relevance which is the highest level of relevance that the communicator is capable of achieving his or her means and goals. Having accessed an interpretation consistent with the presumption of optimal relevance, the hearer takes that to be the intended interpretation.

Now, let's look at coherence within RT framework. Coherence is a secondary and derivative notion rather than a discourse relationship. In RT, no appeal is made to coherence relations. Rather than attempting to identify such relations both locally and globally in the discourse, hearers are seen as attempting to determine, for any utterance, how that utterance achieves relevance. Since the interpretation of information which has just been processed provides a highly accessible context for the interpretation of an utterance, coherence can be regarded as the hearer's search for optimal relevance [7]. Consider example (4):

(1) Bill, who has thalassemia, is getting married to Susan. And 1967 was a great year for French wine. [8]

For most coherence-based linguists, (4) is incoherent because two segments are intuitively unrelated. But Wilson thinks there are some circumstances in which (4) would be acceptable and consistent with the principle of relevance, thus coherent. For example, Peter and Mary are catching up on the news of the day while clearing out a kitchen cupboard. Mary is about to tell Peter her news about Bill and Susan, when Peter holds up a bottle of 1967 French wine with a questioning look. She replies Peter in (4). In this case, each discourse segment would be relevant in some context accessible to Peter, although they would not be intuitively related [ibid].

According to RT, for the sake of interpretation of utterance, the principle of relevance comes first rather than discourse coherence. Since discourse coherence relations have no appeal for relevance theorists, they will certainly doubt the rationality of DMs' contribution to discourse coherence. A DC is seen, instead, as expressing an inferential connection that "arises out of the way that one proposition is interpreted as relevant with respect to another", even when the other proposition is not, for certain DCs, communicated by means of a foregoing utterance. DCs are one of the linguistic devices the speaker may use to facilitate these contextual effects, just as Blakemore asserts [6]: "Their sole function is to guide the interpretation process by specifying certain properties of context and contextual effects. In a relevance-based framework, there the aim is to minimize processing costs, the use of such expression is to be expected. "

DCs' procedural meaning as a constraint on contextual effects has been reformulated by

Blakemore to include all information about the inferential processes involved in utterance interpretation, including context selection. Blakemore explains it as follows: DCs directly specify the kind of contextual effect that is intended; on the other hand, contextual effect achieved depends on the contextual assumptions used as premises in this deduction, so DCs could constrain relevance by directly specifying the properties of the contextual assumptions which are intended to be used. Blakemore discusses DCs like *but* and nevertheless to suggest that DCs' constrains on relevance is "not only on contextual effects but also on context" [9]. Consider (5):

(2) She's a linguist, *but* she's quite intelligent.

The hearer of (5) is, on the one hand, expected to interpret the second segment as communicating a proposition that contradicts a proposition derived from the first, and, on the other hand, the marker *but* also makes a constraint on context only derivatively, namely, the hearer is expected to access the contextual assumption (6) rather than (7):

(3) A linguist is usually not intelligent.

(4) A linguist is usually intelligent.

To sum up, within RT, communication is seen as an ostensive-inferential process. Speaker and hearer both seek the optimal relevance principle, i.e. the largest contextual effects and the least processing effort. To this extent, interpretation of utterance is not limited to text/discourse itself, but within the scope of cognition. Under this theoretical guidance, DMs' functions are not necessarily confined to inter-utterances with sole contribution to discourse coherence, but extended to context in a larger sense. Since a DC is seen as expressing an inferential connection arising out of the way that one proposition is interpreted as relevant with respect to another, it should not be necessarily claimed to be a means of linking foregoing and upcoming verbal propositions. This is why Blakemore can give a comparatively reasonable explanation of function of *so* in (8), while the coherence-based theorists will feel awkward to interpret it.

(5) (Context: Peter is back from jogging)

Mary: *So* you're trying to keep fit.

However, relevance-based view on DCs' functions has also some deficiencies. The relevance theory, which is held by Sperber & Wilson to be monolithic and omnipotent to interpret all the communications, has incurred great doubt about its omnipotence. Verschueren comments [10], "...tight restrictions are imposed, for instance, by relevance theory which limits pragmatics to whatever can be said in terms of a cognitively defined notion of relevance." Moreover, within RT framework, coherence is regarded to be secondary and derivative, so the value of coherence is understated or even denied. Giora contends that coherence is an independent notion and that there is a dissociation between coherence and the notion of relevance, because a discourse may be relevant to an individual, but nevertheless judged incoherent by the very same individual, and vice versa: a discourse may be irrelevant to an individual, but nevertheless judged coherent by that individual [11].

### 3. Context Clues of DMs

#### 3.1 Context Clues

Two ideas above on DMs seem contrary to each other but there is one thing fundamentally in common, namely, DMs' function is both presented in terms of context: in the eyes of Schiffrin, and Fraser, discourse markers usually link the utterance with prior or following ones in the discourse; as for Blakemore, discourse markers can relate the host utterance to context and provide constraints on the discourse interpretation; in other words, they can supply the clues to understanding the utterance. Hence, if DMs' function is to be explored in context in a wider sense, both linguistically and extra-linguistically, it can be congruously concluded that discourse markers' primary function is to provide clues to the discourse interpretation in various contexts. In other words, discourse markers' crucial function is to offer context clues to discourse interpretation.

Context clues, According to Richards and Schmidt [12], refer to "information from the immediate

setting surrounding an item in a text and which provides information that can be used to understand the meaning of an item. Such clues may be lexical or grammatical. In speech context clues include the verbal, paralinguistic and non-verbal signs that can help speakers understand the full meaning of a speaker's utterances in context".

### 3.2 DMs' Context Clues in Different Contexts

Context "is commonly defined as a series of factors that contribute to reconstructing the meaning intended by a speaker in a communicative exchange" [13]. Contexts in this essay fit into three kinds: linguistic context, situational context, and cognitive context.

Three different relations contribute to overall configuration of linguistic context: cohesive relations, topic relations, and sequential relations. Cohesive relations are established when interpretation of an element in one clause presupposes information from a prior clause [14]. According to Halliday&Hasan [ibid], there are generally five cohesive relations in a text: reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion, and conjunction. Among these five cohesive relations, only conjunctive items in certain circumstance can be regarded as DMs. So cohesive relations here only refer to conjunction. Conjunctive elements are cohesive by indirectly virtue of their specific meaning, i.e. they express certain meanings which presuppose the presence of other components in the discourse. Conjunctive items include additive (e.g. *and*, *besides*), adversative (e.g. *yet*, *in fact*), causal (e.g. *so*, *because*), temporal (e.g. *then*, *soon*), and those continuatives like *well*, *now*, *of course*, *anyway*, *surely*, which are 'reduced' forms (unaccented and with reduced vowel values), and have backward-linking function. All the conjunctives have a structural relation, and they do not change the truth-conditional value of the utterance. But what we intend to emphasize here is that not all the conjunctives under any circumstances are all DMs; only those conjunctives that introduce a separate message with its own propositional content can be grouped into DMs, which will be in line with Fraser's idea that a DM introduces a separate message with its propositional content.

The second unit in linguistic context is topic relations. Topic relations involve continuing the topic, ending the topic, changing the topic, or going back to the previous topic, etc. Fraser examines some topic orientation markers [2]. Fraser shows that some DMs can really signal the topic relations. For example, such DMs as *and*, *but*, *or*, *so*, and *then*, can function as the topic orientation markers.

The third unit in linguistic context is the sequential relations. Sequential relation is the linear ordering of constituent parts of the linguistic utterance. The sequencing of those parts, therefore, is always a meaningful aspect of linguistic context [10]. But here we have to extend the sequential relations to a larger sense. Since we agree with Fraser's idea that DMs link different discourse segments with their own propositional contents, the sequential relations here we are discussing refer to co-occurrence and dependence of different discourse segments rather than different parts in the same discourse segment. In this sense, we are consistent with Schiffrin's idea that "sequential dependence [is] to indicate that markers are devices that work on a discourse level: they are not dependent on the smaller units of talk of which discourse is composed" [3]. DMs can provide some constraints or expectations on the sequential relations. Take *well* in question/answer pairs for example, Schiffrin generalizes that *well* is used more frequently when the options offered by questions are not precise or an answer with a minimal token of acknowledgement to the question, which can be respectively exemplified in the following example:

- (1) A: Are there any topics that you like in particular about school, or none.  
B: *Well...* gym!

Another kind of context is situational context, which consists of deixis, social-personal relations, and speech act. The deixis of situation mainly includes four dimensions: speaker, hearer, time, and place. Utterances are inherently presented by the speaker to hearer at a certain time and in a certain place. But when DMs' function on deixis is taken into account, we only briefly discuss how DMs define the deictic center of utterance. Undoubtedly, the deictic center of an utterance can be defined by deictic elements, such as personal pronouns, temporal expressions (including tense), and locative expressions; besides these elements, DMs can also index deictic center. The claim by Schiffrin that markers all have indexical functions mainly refers to the phenomenon that markers can index deictic

center. Take two dimensions of context for instance- participation (speaker and hearer) and text (the preceding and the upcoming): a marker can show that an utterance is focused on either the speaker (proximal), or the hearer (distal), or possibly both, and a marker can index its containing utterance to whatever text precedes it (proximal), or to whatever text is to follow (distal), or to both. So DMs function as traffic lights or landmarks and they are used to achieve situated interpretation of utterances. *Oh*, for example, focuses on the speaker-for it marks the speaker's recognition, receipt, and so on, of information.

Social-personal relations involve social settings, the role and status of speaker, formality level, the relation between speaker and hearer. So the social-personal relations here are a gross oversimplification of the various levels of identity which are reflected, and allowed to emerge, through talk. They encode a wide range of social and cultural features. Specifically speaking, they could be cultural, social, political, ritual, religious, economic or ecological. So social-personal relations involve Schiffrin's participation framework and part of exchange structure. DMs are always used in different social and conversational contexts, between speakers with different sorts of social relationships and speaker roles. So DMs can function to mark and negotiate certain social-personal relations, for example, the role and status of speaker, and the relation between speaker and hearer. Schiffrin finds that *well* and *y'know* can primarily function in the participation framework of discourse, namely, these two markers can essentially mark the relations either between speaker and hearer or between speaker and utterance [3]; Fuller shows that the role of speakers in an interaction, as well as the relationship of the interlocutors, plays a role in the use and distribution of certain DMs: specifically, for instance, DMs *oh* and *well* are used relatively infrequently in the interviews by the interviewees, but at high rates in these same interactions by the interviewer; moreover, *oh* and *well* are also used more frequently by the research participations in their roles as a friend or family member in casual conversation than in their role as interviewee [15].

The last element in situational context is speech act. This is about context where speech act is situated. It studies what action precedes, what action is intended, what action is intended to follow and so on. Some DMs can serve to announce what sort of effect the speaker intends on the hearer and they are employed to make it clear what actions the speaker intends to perform. For example, such markers as *and*, *but*, *so*, *then*, etc. can indicate the intended actions.

The last kind of context is cognitive context. Cognitive context is activated in two basic units: psychological schema and information management. Psychological schema is the conceptualization or experience of states, events and actions in the real world. It is the internalization of real world. Information management involves the organization and management of knowledge and meta-knowledge. Some markers can reflect speaker's mental or psychological state or particularly the strategy of information management. For example, *oh* is regarded as a marker of information management by Schiffrin, because "it marks shifts in speaker orientation (objective and subjective) to information which occur as speakers and hearers manage the flow of information produced or received in discourse" [3].

Although cognitive context is regarded as encompassing internal and cognitive factors, we'd better not neglect or discard external factors. This means two points: for one thing, when context is discussed, cognitive one should not be as exclusive as what some cognitive linguists have claimed. For example, Sperber & Wilson [16] define context as "the set of premises used in interpreting it [an utterance]"; it is a cognitive construct and a "subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world". Hence, for Sperber & Wilson, context does not comprise external situational, cultural factors but is rather conceived as a "cognitive environment", implying the mental availability of internalized environmental factors in an individual's cognitive structure [13]. For another, cognitive context should be combined with external factors to interpret discourse, namely, they exert effects on each other. As for Blakemore, and Sperber & Wilson, context is bound up with assumptions used by hearers to interpret utterances, and all interpretive efforts are made on the basis of the relevance of given assumptions, i.e. the likelihood that adequate contextual efforts. In their opinion, relevance is given and context is chosen: people expect the assumption being processed to be relevant, and they try to select a context in which that expectation can be justified, namely a context through which

they can maximize relevance. When context is regarded as chosen, the participants in a dialogue have to choose the context which maximizes the relevance of an utterance: Utterance=>Context. However, context also plays a vital role in utterance, because context can influence or even determine the utterance. So the formula should be changed into, as Bosco et al. suggest: Utterance<=>Context (ibid).

#### 4. Conclusion

DMs are omnipresent in daily communication, so what a role DMs can really play particularly deserves a further explorative effort. The further research on DMs' function should integrate those ideas from coherence linguists with those ideas from relevance theorists. On the basis of these two ideas, the author explores DMs' primary function in context in a wider sense so as to probe into DMs' functions more comprehensively.

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