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On Coherence and the Metalinguistic Function of Conversational Routines

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Résumé

Cet article analyse le rôle métalinguistique des structures figées et semi-figées et la manière dont elles contribuent à la cohérence du texte. Leur fonction métalinguistique paraît être celle d'intégrer les énoncés dans le flux de la conversation et d'aider l'interlocuteur à interpréter le message dans un contexte donné.

Coherence is often described using Halliday and Hasan's framework (1976), which deals with its grammatical and lexical means. These two types of cohesive markers can be supplemented by lexicalised or semi-lexicalised phrases (Keller 1981, Stubbs 1983). Here are a few such examples taken from Romanian and English:

Romanian examples

*ideea este că
dacă mă gândesc bine
da(ti)-mi voie să spun ceva
în ceea ce mă privește
după părerea mea
în opinia mea, etc.*

English examples

*the point is
come to think of it
let me tell you something
as far as I'm concerned
the way I look at it
in my opinion, etc.*

Such phrases introduce what the speaker is about to say, but they can also have some other functions in discourse organisation: they not only organise discourse content but also provide a comment on the message. Such functions enable us to consider them metadiscursive elements or, simply, discourse markers.

The issues that we need to address in relation to these discourse markers is whether they are similar to other markers such as anaphoric nouns, adjectives, demonstratives, etc. Are they necessary in order to understand a text? What is their function? What are their relationships with other linguistic features of discourse? The literature on discourse analysis mentions that coherence is generated not only by special text markers but that it is a text feature expected by the participants in the discourse. The participants have natural expectations concerning discourse coherence, assume that any discourse must be coherent, and interpret it in the light of that assumption. Consequently, they rely on both underlying semantic relations and the formal realisations of the construction of the discourse.

The speaker may use two types of cohesive devices to mark the progress of the text: s/he can mention explicitly what s/he is going to say or how s/he will structure various parts of the text using metalinguistic statements of the kind "I'll first

say A, then B, and I will conclude by saying C". Such a device is characteristic of certain text types, such as public presentations and scientific texts. Sometimes called 'a preface', such a device is typically found before a conversational move (e.g., when someone asks for permission to add something or wants to bring the discussion back to a preceding topic) or at the beginning of a larger text written in formal or scientific style. A preface can also be found in formal types of spoken discourse, such as administration meetings of considerable length which are highly structured. In addition, specific prefaces characterise certain types of texts such as stories and anecdotes (Schiffrin 1987), and jokes (Stubbs 1983). Examples of such prefaces are:

Romanian prefaces

*permiteți-mi să (incep prin a spune/
a întreba...)
dați-mi voie să formulez o întrebare
înainte de toate așa vrea să spun că...
așa vrea să adaug că...
așa dori să revenim la...
pe asta o știți (știți)...*

English prefaces

*let me (begin by saying/asking...)

may I ask you this question...
I have this to say first of all...
may I add that...
let me bring you back to...
have you heard the one about...?*

Another type of cohesive devices are some small words such as *well*, *right*, *OK*, etc, whose role in building coherence and organising discourse is not negligible, either. All discourse markers have contextual properties which account for their contribution to cohesiveness: they can refer backwards and forwards in the discourse context, they are oriented to the speaker and/or the listener, and their function is metalinguistic rather than referential.

Discourse marker: a term difficult to define

The notion of 'discourse marker' is difficult to define, as the term has been used in different ways. It can describe 'small words' – particles or expressions that characterise spoken discourse (Stenström 1994), such as the English *well*, *right*, *you know* (or such Romanian words as: *aha*, *ăă*, *așa*, *bine*, *bun*, *decî*, *ei bine*, *îhî*, *păi*, etc.) Conjunctions such as *and*, *but* and *or* (*și*, *dar*, *sau*) have also been included in the category of discourse markers by van Dijk (1977) and Schiffrin (1987). There is, however, little agreement concerning the common characteristics of these markers or as to what items belong in this category. The methods which could be used to prove membership are also unclear. The question still remains whether criteria such as co-occurrence restrictions or semantic and/or functional ones are appropriate for discourse. Consequently, Schiffrin groups together disparate elements such as *oh*, *well*, *but*, *so*, and *you know*.

However, we could identify and discuss a subgroup of markers which signal boundaries in discourse; these have been called 'illocutionary adverbials' (Mittwoch 1977), and share the grammatical function of adverbials. Phrases like *to bring you back to...* or *to come back to that subject...* (*să ne întoarcem la...*, *revenind la subiectul...*) have a function that can be described only in terms of the broader discourse context, as it signals the speaker's intention of returning to a previous topic. *As I was saying* or *as I say* (*așa cum spuneam*) perform the role of focusing the interlocutor's attention on the upcoming message. Such phrases perform similar functions to those of small words like *well* or *right* (*ei bine*, *bun*, *decî*, *și atunci*). The difference between the small word discourse markers and these adverbial markers is

that the latter preserve some of their literal meaning, and it is still possible to understand what they mean on the basis of their constituents.

As not all of the adverbial discourse markers have a completely fixed form, many of them displaying a semi-fixed or variable characteristics, it is difficult to compile a complete list. They range from completely fixed phrases such as *in any case, by the way, after all* (*în orice caz, fiindcă veni vorba, à propos, la urma urmelor*) to semi-fixed phrases or stems. They belong in the same set of discourse markers as the one-word particles, but they can be considered conversational routines.

Discourse markers: functional classes

Discourse markers can be grouped into two functional classes: micro-markers and macro-markers (Chaudron and Richards 1986) or local and global markers (Schiffrin 1987), depending on whether they mark the relationship between utterances or elements of the macro-structure. A few examples from English and Romanian follow:

Micro/local markers		Macro/global markers	
<i>so far as I/one could tell</i>	<i>aş/s-ar putea spune că...</i>	<i>in other words, to put it another way</i>	<i>altel spus</i>
<i>as X has mentioned</i>	<i>aşa cum am (aţi, s-a, etc.) mai spus</i>	<i>again (as) I say, there again</i>	<i>din nou, continuînd ideea...</i>
<i>as X has suggested</i>	<i>aşa cum s-a (am, aţi, etc.) sugerat</i>	<i>in other words</i>	<i>cu alte cuvinte</i>
<i>as I believe</i>	<i>aşa cum cred că...</i>	<i>now you come to mention it</i>	<i>dacă veni vorba</i>
<i>needless to say</i>	<i>ca să nu mai vorbesc/spun/mentionez/ adaug că</i>	<i>to follow up that to begin (with), firstly, in the first place</i>	<i>în continuare în primul rînd</i>
<i>come to think</i>	<i>cînd te gîndeşti că...</i>	<i>secondly</i>	<i>în al doilea (rînd)</i>
<i>believe it or not</i>	<i>cred (credeţi, credem, etc.) sau nu</i>	<i>once again</i>	<i>încă o dată, repet</i>
<i>of course</i>	<i>cu siguranţă</i>	<i>going back to this</i>	<i>întorcîndu-mă la...</i>
<i>as far as I (you, we) can remember</i>	<i>daca imi (iţi, ne, etc.) amintesc bine</i>	<i>in a word</i>	<i>într-un cuvînt</i>
<i>if I understand correctly</i>	<i>dacă înţeleg (înţelegi, etc.) bine</i>	<i>first of all</i>	<i>mai întîi (de toate)</i>
<i>come to that /if it comes to that</i>	<i>dacă veni vorba despre</i>	<i>in short</i>	<i>pe scurt</i>
<i>if you ask me</i>	<i>dacă mă întrebaţi</i>	<i>to come back to</i>	<i>revenind la...</i>
<i>if I might say so</i>	<i>dacă mă pot exprima astfel</i>		
<i>if I may say so</i>	<i>dacă pot spune</i>		
	<i>aşa/acest lucru</i>		
<i>when you think</i>	<i>dacă te gîndeşti</i>		
<i>since you mentioned</i>	<i>dacă tot veni vorba</i>		

<i>whether I like it or not</i>	<i>dacă vă (îmi, ne, etc.) place sau nu</i>
<i>as a matter of fact</i>	<i>de fapt</i>
<i>in (actual) fact</i>	
<i>as the case may be</i>	<i>după cum vine cazul</i>
<i>as far as memory goes</i>	<i>după câte îmi amintesc</i>
<i>as far as I can gather/understand</i>	<i>după câte îmi dau seama</i>
<i>as far as I could tell</i>	<i>după câte se pare</i>
<i>as far as I know</i>	<i>după câte știu/ după știința mea</i>
<i>as you know</i>	<i>după cum știți</i>
<i>as I (you, etc.) said before</i>	<i>după cum spuneam (spuneai, etc.)</i>
<i>the point is</i>	<i>ideea este că</i>
<i>since you mentioned it</i>	<i>fiindcă veni vorba</i>
<i>far more important</i>	<i>mult mai important/ esențial</i>
<i>as far as I am (you are, etc.) concerned</i>	<i>în ceea ce (mă, te, etc.) privește</i>
<i>basically</i>	<i>în esență</i>
<i>generally (speaking)</i>	<i>în general</i>
<i>in any case</i>	<i>în orice caz</i>
<i>strictly between us</i>	<i>între noi fie vorba</i>
<i>after all</i>	<i>la urma urmei</i>
<i>far more important</i>	<i>mult mai important</i>
<i>let us remember</i>	<i>să ne amintim că, etc.</i>

All these discourse markers can be recognised by their metalinguistic function.

The metalinguistic function of discourse markers

Although not all metalinguistic phrases are discourse markers, there is a close connection between discourse markers and the metalinguistic function. Discourse markers do not have a referential function; they have either a metalinguistic, an expressive one, or both. The distinction between the referential function and the other functions goes back to Jakobson (1960), who distinguishes seven functions: expressive/ emotive, directive/conative/persuasive, poetic, contact, metalinguistic, referential, contextual/situational.

Certain words, phrases and clauses can have a metalinguistic function, among which verbs like *to tell*, *to formulate*, *to ask*, *to add*, etc. and nouns such as *point*, *idea*, *question*, *problem*, *fact*, etc. A clause like *"The point is that..."* can function anaphorically, as a cohesive device, which refers to preceding discourse, or it can be a transition element for subsequent discourse. The metalinguistic function is also illustrated by phrases used to check the communication channel, as this is in itself an aspect of communication (Stubbs 1983). In a broad sense, the term 'metalinguistic function' can be used to characterise speech acts in which the speaker adds an idea or an argument, summarises what has been already said, recapitulates, clarifies or reformulates a preceding utterance. The problem is how to

delimit the set of 'metalinguistic elements' and how to analyse their structuring and deictic characteristics as they do not create or build a structure by themselves. They are inserted in a discourse structure where an utterance refers to a preceding one and takes over from the antecedent the appurtenance to the text, signalling to the hearer where to look for interpretation. They help the hearer to make inferences about what the speaker intends to communicate and how to interpret the message. The message can be clarified by reference to the context in which it is produced. The definition of the context includes not only the physical environment but also the context and the speaker's and interlocutor's presuppositions, which differ with their background knowledge, beliefs and attitudes.

To understand why an interlocutor gives a certain interpretation to a message, we need to consider Grice's maxim of relevance (1975). This maxim is counterbalanced by that of brevity. The interplay of these two maxims explains why the interpretation of a message can be difficult, and why discourse markers can play an important role. They act as signposts, indicating how the speaker understands the preceding contributions and they prepare their interlocutor for the following utterances. They are used by the speaker in order to make the interlocutor's understanding easier and to maintain the interlocutor's interest. Words and phrases like *actually, as I was saying, as far as I am concerned, I mean to say that...* (*de fapt, după cum spuneam, în ceea ce mă privește, vreau să spun că...*) help the hearer in interpreting the message. They are used as a result of the way in which previous utterances are interpreted as having certain contextual effects.

To conclude, the main function of discourse markers is to integrate utterances in the flow of conversation and to help the interlocutor to interpret them in the given context. They accompany the breaks in discourse cohesion, which may be caused by speaker or topic changes. They accompany additions, misunderstandings, digressions, false starts, self-corrections, etc.

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