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On the Connectivity of Discourse Markers: A Broader Contextual Perspective

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Abstract: Connectivity is widely regarded as one of the most crucial attributes of discourse markers. Nevertheless, as of now, two ostensibly disparate concepts prevail with regard to the connectivity of discourse markers. One is exemplified by Schiffrin's assertion that the connectivity of discourse markers manifests the connection between different discourse utterances (segments). In contrast, the other is represented by Blakemore's view that the connectivity of discourse markers should not be confined to the connectivity of different discourse utterances but rather extend to inferential connectivity. Building upon these two ideas, this paper undertakes a further exploration of the connectivity of discourse markers from a perspective of a broader sense of context, thereby enabling a more comprehensive study of the connectivity of discourse markers and a more complete exploration of their functions.

Key Words: discourse markers; connectivity; coherence; relevance; context

1. Introduction

Since the 1950s, the study of discourse markers has emerged as a prominent area of inquiry within linguistic research, particularly with the advent and evolution of discourse analysis and pragmatics. This subfield has burgeoned into a new industry within the broader discipline of linguistics (Fraser, 1999: 932). Despite the significant advancements in the study of discourse markers over recent decades, scholarly debate persists, with the concept of connectivity being a central point of contention. It is widely acknowledged among linguists that connectivity is an essential attribute of discourse markers. For instance, Hansen (1997: 160) posits that the primary function of discourse markers lies in their capacity to connect discourse segments, while Schourup (1999: 230) notes that connectivity is the most frequently cited necessary feature of discourse markers.

However, interpretations of connectivity vary among theoretical frameworks. Coherence theorists, such as Schiffrin, Fraser, and Redeker, assert that the connectivity of discourse markers is predominantly manifested in the linkage between an utterance and other discourse segments, whether they are immediate or part of the overarching discourse. In contrast, relevance theorists, spearheaded by Blakemore, propose that the connectivity of discourse markers extends beyond mere inter-utterance connections. They argue that it is more fundamentally concerned with the relationship between the propositional content of an utterance and a hypothesis, which is a cognitive process guided by the principle of relevance.

While both perspectives have contributed valuable insights into the connectivity of discourse markers, they are not without their limitations. Consequently, it is imperative to adopt a more expansive analytical framework when examining discourse markers. This broader perspective is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of their connectivity and for elucidating their role and function in the cognitive process of discourse comprehension. Such an approach will facilitate a more nuanced exploration of how discourse markers contribute to the construction and interpretation of meaning within communicative interactions.

2. Ideas from Coherence Theorists

The coherence theorists posit that one of the most important characteristics of discourse is its inherent

coherence. A key proponent of this school, Schiffrin, argues that coherence is constructed through the relationships that exist between adjacent discourse elements (Schiffrin, 1987: 24). Coherence relations are the implicit, intrinsic connections within a discourse series that organically integrate different utterances. Implicit coherence relations are logical connections that inherently exist between different sentences within a discourse, such as cause and effect, contrast, condition, and hypothesis, among others. For example:

Example 1: I'm hungry. Let's go to the Fuji Garden (Schiffrin, 1987: 60).

From the perspective of coherence scholars, example 1 is a coherent discourse. The two sentences imply a "problem-solution" relationship, as the semantic content of the latter sentence, "going to Fuji Garden (restaurant)," serves as a solution to the semantic content of the former sentence, "I'm hungry."

Building on this, coherence scholars believe that discourse markers link different discourse segments, which can be either adjacent or global. Schiffrin (1987: 41) defines discourse markers as markers that depend on the surrounding context and demarcate units of discourse. Redeker (1990: 1168) views discourse markers as "linguistic markers of discourse coherence" and their primary function is to direct the listener's attention to the connection between the subsequent sentence and the preceding discourse context. Fraser (1996: 186) also considers discourse markers as markers of the relationship between the basic information of a sentence and the preceding discourse. Furthermore, Fraser (1999) notes that discourse markers strengthen the connection between one discourse segment (S1) and another discourse segment (S2).

In other words, discourse markers serve to connect different discourse sentences/segments, thereby providing guidance and markers for discourse comprehension, clarifying the coherence relations between utterances. Schiffrin (1987:318) points out that discourse markers can select semantic relationships from the potential meanings expressed in the discourse content, thereby indicating such relationships. Fraser (1996: 188) also notes that discourse markers can mark how the basic information of a sentence is connected to the preceding discourse. For example:

Example 2: A: Mary has gone home.
B: a. She was sick.
b. **After all**, she was sick.
c. **Moreover**, she was sick.
d. **However**, she was sick.

In Example 2, utterance B has various ways of responding to A. The utterance a. without any discourse markers implies multiple coherence relations. However, the use of discourse markers in utterances b., c., and d. clarify a particular implied coherence relation: b.'s "after all" indicates a causal relationship— "The reason Mary went home is that she was sick"; c.'s "moreover" indicates an additive relationship— "Mary not only went home but was also sick"; d.'s "however" indicates a contrastive relationship— "Mary went home, contrary to A's assumption, that is, 'Mary went home because she was sick, not for any other reason A might have speculated.'"

3. Ideas from Relevance Theorists

In contrast to the coherence theorists, the relevance theorists, represented by Blakemore and others, argue that the connectivity of discourse connectives is not reflected in the connection of different discourse utterances/segments, but rather in inferential connections. The connectivity of discourse markers arises from the understanding of one proposition as being related to another (Blakemore, 2002: 124). Although the coherence school has made valuable explorations of the connectivity of discourse markers, they view coherence relations as inherent, potential, internal connections within the discourse itself, thus, the connectivity of discourse markers has not transcended the realm of connecting different discourse utterances (Schiffrin, 1987: 238). However, limiting the study of discourse markers to the discourse itself has many shortcomings. For example:

Example 3. Context: Peter is back from jogging.
Mary: **So** you're trying to keep fit.

In Example 3, the discourse marker “so” does not connect different discourse utterances/segments, hence, the coherence theorists' explanation of the connectivity of “so” here would seem inadequate. Contrary to the coherence school's view, relevance theorists believe that the connectivity of discourse connectives should not be confined to the connection of different discourse utterances/segments, but should be extended to a kind of inferential connection. Their theoretical basis is Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Relevance Theory posits that one party in communication will express the maximum amount of discourse information to allow the other party to understand at the least cost, thereby achieving the greatest contextual effect and optimal relevance in communication. If optimal relevance cannot be achieved during the communication process, one party will constrain or guide the other's understanding of the discourse in some way. Discourse connectives (another name for discourse markers by relevance theorists) are an important means of constraining or guiding understanding, as Blakemore (2002: 333) points out, discourse connectives are a form of expression that guides the listener to achieve a certain discourse understanding, and in the reasoning process of establishing relevance (between the communicators), discourse connectives play a constraining role on the propositions they introduce.

Relevance Theory views communication as a cognitive inferential process, thus it focuses not only on the discourse itself but on all information associated with the discourse, which includes both verbal and non-verbal information. Clearly, relevance theorists believe that the connectivity of discourse markers should be reflected in inferential connections, which breaks the shackles of studying discourse markers within the discourse itself. However, this school of thought seems to have swung to another extreme. Firstly, as a supplement to Grice's "Cooperative Principle," Relevance Theory focuses more on the implicit meaning in discourse communication rather than the explicit meaning, leading to insufficient attention to the discourse itself. Secondly, under such theoretical guidance, coherence relations between discourses are not important and inherent but secondary and derivative, that is, coherence relations are entirely subordinate to relevance. Therefore, the relevance school's research on the connectivity of discourse markers focuses more on cognitive inference and neglects the study of the inherent relationships within the discourse itself. In this sense, relevance theorists at a large extent negate the connective function of discourse markers for utterances.

4. A Perspective of Context in a Wider Sense

The two perspectives have made beneficial explorations of the connectivity of discourse markers. On the surface, they appear to be opposed, but if discussed from a broader contextual perspective, they can complement each other, that is, discourse markers may not only connect the main clause with the linguistic context (co-text) but also connect the main clause with a broader sense of context (Blakemore, 2002: 160). In other words, the connectivity of discourse markers should be reflected in connecting statements with context. Of course, the context referred to in this paper should be in the wider sense, including not only the linguistic context (involving the different discourse contexts claimed by the coherence school) and the cognitive context (involving the context discussed by the relevance theorists), but also the situational context, etc. (See Figure 1).

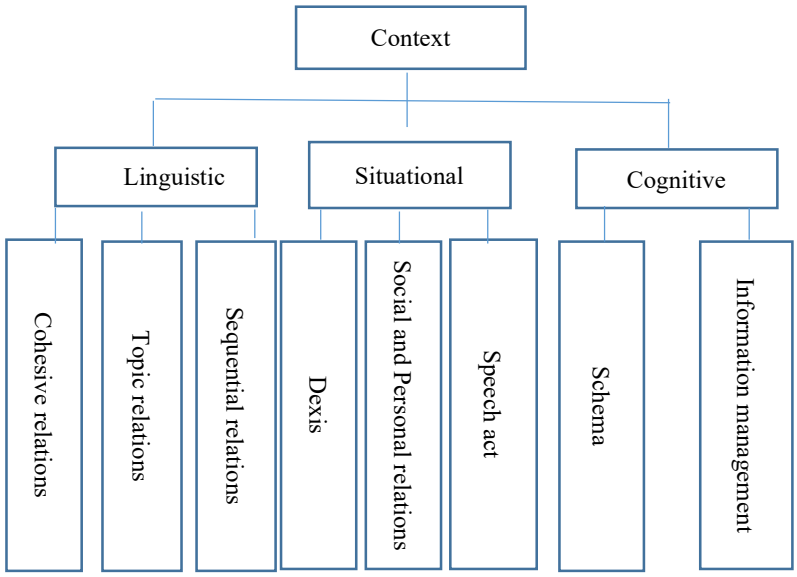

Figure 1 Context model

4.1 Linguistic Context

The linguistic context discussed in this paper mainly includes cohesive relations, thematic relations, and linear relations.

(1) Cohesive relations. According to Halliday & Hasan (1976:4), cohesion is a semantic concept; it is the semantic connection within a text... Cohesive relations are established when the interpretation of one clause is dependent on information contained in a preceding clause. They argue that cohesive relations mainly include reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion, and conjunction. For now, let's not discuss the first four types of cohesive relations and focus only on conjunction. Conjunction primarily refers to the indirect realization of cohesive relations through specific semantic links. In other words, conjunctive elements have specific semantics, and this semantics constrains the existence of other discourse components in the discourse (Halliday & Hasan, 1976:226). Undoubtedly, Halliday & Hasan's exposition on cohesion, especially conjunction, has profoundly influenced the views of coherence school scholars. Firstly, Halliday & Hasan regard cohesion as a semantic relation within a text, which to a large extent dictates the coherence scholars' focus on the discourse itself, neglecting external factors, and this also largely leads the scholars to limit the connectivity of discourse markers to connecting different discourse utterances/segments. For example, Schiffrin (1987: 337) believes that her discourse model is an extension of Halliday & Hasan's textual relations. Furthermore, Halliday & Hasan's view that the semantics of conjunctive elements can constrain the existence of other components of discourse is in line with the coherence theorists' view that discourse markers can select and indicate potential semantics in discourse. Therefore, it is believed that the connectivity of discourse markers expounded by the coherence school is mainly reflected in the connection with a certain clause and the linguistic context, especially connecting a certain clause with the conjunctive relations within the text. As a result, the function of discourse markers is largely equivalent to the function of conjunctive words.

(2) Topic relations. Cohesion mainly refers to semantic connections, while the topic usually refers to a matter that is being discussed or written about (Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 73). Topic relations mainly involve the continuation, end, and change of the topic. Some discourse markers (e.g., "and," "but," "or," "so," "now," "then") can connect a certain clause with topic relations, thereby indicating the continuation, end, and transition of the topic. In the following example, "now" indicates the end of the theme:

Example 4. A: I don't know whether it's the Jew or the Catholic. Because they're pretty well prejudiced.
B: No. the Catholic is—**Now** hold it. It varies.

(3) Sequential relations. Sequential relations refer to the sequential arrangement of constituents in a clause. Therefore, the order of these constituents is usually a meaningful aspect of the linguistic context (Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 108). However, the sequential relations discussed in this paper are not limited to the sequential arrangement of different constituents within the same clause but are appropriately expanded, that is, sequential relations refer to the co-occurrence and dependency relationships between different discourse fragments/clauses in the same speech. Such sequential dependency relations indicate that discourse markers function at the level of speech: discourse markers do not depend on smaller units of speech (Schiffrin, 1987: 37). In other words, discourse markers are almost unrestricted by their position within the same clause, but they are constrained by the co-occurrence or dependency relationships between different clauses/fragments in the same speech, such as question-answer, greeting-greeting, offer-acceptance, etc. Discourse markers can connect different clauses/fragments in a certain sequential relationship and provide help for discourse understanding. For example, in the question-answer sequential relationship, the discourse marker "well" usually indicates the respondent's disagreement with the question as shown in example 5(Schiffrin, 1994: 108):

Example 5. A: Are there any topics that you like in particular about school, or none.
B: **Well**... gym!

4.2 Situational Context

Situational context mainly includes deixis, social and interpersonal relationships, and speech acts.

(1) Deixis. Situational deixis mainly includes personal deixis, temporal deixis, locative deixis, verbal deixis, and social deixis. Discourse markers can connect discourse with situational deixis, thereby aiding in the understanding of discourse. According to Schiffrin (1987), all discourse markers have a deictic function, that is, they can all mark the deictic center. Taking verbal deixis (preceding and following discourse) and personal deixis (speaker and hearer) as examples: any discourse marker can indicate whether a statement focuses more on the speaker (proximal) or the hearer (distal); whether it focuses more on the preceding discourse (proximal) or the following discourse (distal). For instance, the discourse marker “oh” mainly focuses on the speaker because it indicates the cognitive and receptive degree of information. Therefore, in the process of discourse communication, discourse markers plays a role akin to traffic signals or landmarks; their presence helps to achieve discourse coherence and interactive understanding of discourse (Schiffrin, 1987: 83).

(2) Social and interpersonal relationships. Social and interpersonal relationships mainly include social background, the speaker’s role and social status, the familiarity and relationship between the interlocutors, etc. Thus, social and interpersonal relationships are a general concept that reflects and embodies the identity of the interlocutors through verbal communication. It reflects a series of cultural and social characteristics. Social and interpersonal relationships are related to the participation framework (mainly referring to the turn-taking in conversation) and conversational structure (the way the speaker and hearer are interconnected) proposed by Schiffrin in her discourse model. Discourse markers are always used in different social and conversational contexts and among speakers with different social relationships and roles. Therefore, specific discourse markers can connect different social interpersonal relationships and indicate and reflect specific social and interpersonal relationships in verbal communication. For example, Redeker (1990) found that if discourse markers are divided into two categories: one indicating ideational structure, such as conjunctions and temporal adverbs (e.g., “but,” “and,” “meanwhile”); the other indicating pragmatic structure (e.g., “well,” “oh”), then discourse markers indicating pragmatic structure are used much more frequently among friends than among strangers; Fuller (2003) also believes that the speaker's role and the relationship between the speakers have a significant impact on the use of specific discourse markers. For example, in interviews, interviewees use “oh” and “well” relatively less, while interviewers use them more frequently; and in casual conversations, friends or family members use “oh” and “well” much more frequently than they do in interviews as the interviewees.

(3) Speech acts. In this paper, speech acts are not limited to language embodying some action, but also involve which actions come first or later in verbal communication, and which actions the speaker wants to express. In verbal communication, discourse markers can indicate the communicative effect the speaker wants to achieve on the hearer, and discourse markers can make the actions the speaker wants to express more explicit. Therefore, in this sense, the connection made by discourse markers here is neither semantic nor interpersonal relationships, but speech act actions. In Example 6, the discourse marker "and" helps to indicate the subsequent speech act, that is, when the husband decides to come home in the evening, the wife will have dinner ready for him.

Example 6. Husband: I'll be home this evening.
Wife: **And** I'll cook supper at home.

4.3 Cognitive Context

(1) Schema. Schema refers to the cognitive structures into which people process experiences and information into some kind of conventional form, which can be stored in memory for a relatively long period (Schank & Abelson, 1977: 175). Schema is largely equivalent to the context studied by the relevance theorists such as Blakemore, because for relevance theorists like Blakemore, context does not include external situations, cultural factors, etc. Context is seen only as a cognitive environment, implying the availability of environmental factors internalized in an individual's cognitive structure in thought (Blakemore, 2002: 471). Some discourse markers, especially those that Blakemore considers to have procedural meaning, can connect utterances with schema (cognitive environments). Procedural meaning is the language encoding that guides the hearer’s understanding and inference of the utterance, and it involves how language structural elements are directly mapped onto an individual’s thought processes (Blakemore, 2002: 144). Therefore, discourse markers with procedural meaning can connect utterances with schema, thereby providing guidance for the understanding of

discourse. Consider the example provided by Blakemore:

Example 7. a. Tom can open Bill's safe.
b. He knows the combination (Blakemore, 2002: 333).

In Example 7, if the propositional content of utterance a serves as the context for understanding utterance b, then there are two interpretations of Example 7: "Tom can open Bill's safe because Tom knows the combination" and "Tom can open Bill's safe, so Tom knows the combination." The relationship between a and b in Example 7 can be either a "conclusion—premise" relationship or a "premise—conclusion" relationship. However, if we change the example to the following two utterances, the relationship becomes clear. This shows that discourse markers such as "after all" and "so" play a significant role in restricting the mapping of speech propositions onto an individual's thought processes and in interpreting speech propositions in example 8 and example 9 respectively:

Example 8. a. Tom can open Bill's safe.
b. **After all,** he knows the combination.

Example 9. a. Tom can open Bill's safe.
b. **So,** he knows the combination (Blakemore, 2002: 245).

(2) Information management. Information management primarily refers to the organization and management of knowledge and meta-knowledge. Some discourse markers can connect utterances with an individual's information management state, thereby reflecting the speaker's thought processes, mental states, and information management strategies. Take the discourse marker "oh" as an example; it is often considered a marker of information management because "it signals a shift in the speaker's information orientation (Schiffrin, 1987: 100). In conversations, "oh" is generally used to show that new information replaces old information or to indicate the acceptance of new information and its integration into the existing knowledge base. Therefore, "oh" often appears before self-corrections and other-corrections of information like in example 10 (Schiffrin, 1987: 76):

Example 10. Jack: How about uh… Death of a Salesman?
Freda: Well that was a show, sure.
Jack: **Oh,** that was a movie, too.

5. Conclusion

The connectivity of discourse markers is one of their essential characteristics, but discussions of this connectivity should not be confined, as coherence school scholars might suggest, solely to the connection between different utterances/segments within the discourse. Nor should it be entirely detached from the internal connections of discourse utterances, as relevance theorists propose, and thus resorts to inference-based connections. The connectivity of discourse markers should be reflected in linking a particular discourse utterance with a broader context, enabling it to better guide and facilitate discourse comprehension within a specific context, thereby promoting the smooth progression of verbal communication.

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