

The paradox of Discourse Markers. Evidence from production under cognitive load

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On the basis of my (mainly) functionally oriented corpus-based work on Discourse Markers (both onomasiological and semasiological) (see e.g. Bolly et al., 2017; Crible & Degand, 2019, in press; Degand, Cornillie & Pietrandrea, 2013; Degand & Fagard, 2011; Pander Maat & Degand, 2001), I started developing the idea of “the paradox of discourse markers”. The paradox consists in the observation that DMs are highly frequent in language in use, thus informing us of a crucial inherent aspect of human language. At the same time, DMs appear to be optional at the sentence level (syntax and semantics), thus challenging grammatical description. It follows that we are facing the paradox of an inescapable linguistic category without consensual linguistic description. To resolve this paradox, I believe we need more (fine-grained) knowledge about the ways DMs are used in different communicative contexts. Despite an impressive quantity of work starting in the early 1980s, the linguistic description of DMs remains scattered, most and foremost because the bulk of research on this linguistic class consists of a multitude of case studies of particular DMs in a diversity of languages (for a recent overview, see Blühndorn, Foolen, and Loureda 2017; Fischer 2014; Maschler and Schiffrrin 2015). Much less of the work has been concerned with the categorical description of DMs as a linguistic class (notable exceptions are Crible, 2017; Fischer, 2014; Fraser, 1999). It is this latter line of research that I will follow here to illustrate how the study of DMs in spoken language, in our case French, can bring us closer to descriptively and explanatorily adequate language theory. The second goal of this talk is to show how such a systematic study of DMs can learn us more about the underlying cognitive and functional principles of human communication, as I assume that DMs are (also) indices of fundamental cognitive processing during (spoken) language production. Here too, we need insight in the ways speakers use DMs in different contexts, including contexts with high and low cognitive load.

The analyses I will present are based on a functional description of 1782 DMs identified and annotated in the multi-genre corpus LOCAS-F (Degand, Martin, Simon, 2014). This is a relatively small corpus of a little more than 40.000 words and 3h30 of speech that is richly annotated with prosodic, syntactic, and discursive features. The originality of the corpus is that it contains 14 different types of discourse (spontaneous conversation, political address, radio interview, conference talk, ...) described along independent situational dimensions, such as degree of preparation, degree of interaction, the public or private nature of the communicative context, etc. In order to test the hypothesis that high and low cognitive load communicative situations have an influence on the type of DMs used, we collected an additional sample of elicited speech in different types of (experimental) settings: monologue high/low cognitive load vs. dialogue high/low cognitive load.

The functional annotation of the DMs rests on an annotation model distinguishing between two independent layers of analysis, i.e. domains and functions (Crible & Degand, 2019, in press). The domains of use are of four types reflecting different ways in which speakers use DMs in speech: ideational (concerning states of affairs in the world), rhetorical (reflecting the speaker's attitude and reasoning), sequential (concerned with the structural organization of discourse), and interpersonal (reflecting speaker-hearer management). The second layer of analysis are 15 discourse functions expressing the DMs' senses. The originality of the annotation model is that all functions can combine with all domains, giving a potential of sixty functional meanings, which can grasp both the multifunctionality of the DM class and the polyfunctionality of individual DM types. Table 1 gives an overview of the potential available (for a detailed description and operationalization, see Crible & Degand, in press),

and Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the 1782 DMs in our sample across the four domains and functions.

Domains	Ideational	Rhetorical	Sequential	Interpersonal
Functions	Addition, Alternative, Cause, Concession, Condition, Consequence, Contrast, Hedging, Monitoring, Specification, Temporal, Agreeing, Disagreeing, Topic, Quoting			

Table 1: Domains and Functions of DMs in spoken language

Figure 1 displays the distribution of the domains and functions in our data set.

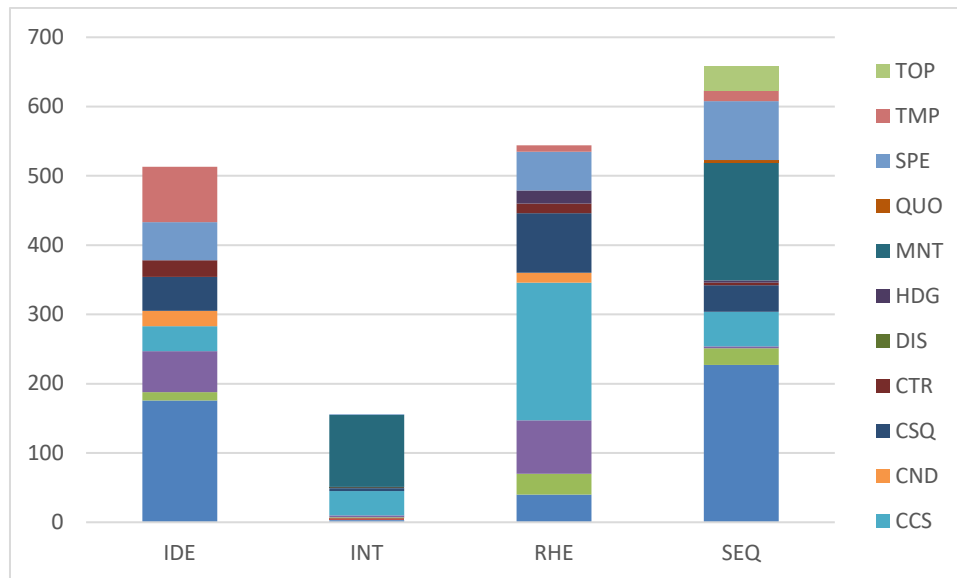


Figure 1: Distribution of Domains and Functions in LoCAS-F

In the presentation, I will develop how specific contextual features (degree of preparation, degree of interaction, high or low cognitive load) influence the type of DMs, the domains in which they are used, and the functions they express. Thus, it will be shown that, in line with Fischer (2014: 290) “individual items and their uses can be located on several corresponding dimensions, clustering into highly interconnected groups. This allows us to assume that discourse markers form a single, yet heterogeneous class.”

References

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