

Discourse Markers as markers of (dis)fluency: The role of peripheral position

Liesbeth Degand, University of Louvain

Studies on the relationship between discourse markers (DMs) and (dis)fluency have a Janus-headed face. On the one hand, DMs are described as structuring devices key to the local and global organization of discourse. As such, they contribute to its overall fluency. On the other hand, they have been described as traces of impediments in the speech production process, thus signalling disfluency. In other words, DMs are characterized by “functional ambivalence”, a notion reflecting their effects as *symptoms* of production difficulties and as *signals* of inferences to be made (Crible, 2018, p.3, see also Clark & Fox Tree, 2002).

Starting point of this presentation is the observation that DMs occur overwhelmingly in initial position of their host unit, where they fulfil specific discourse functions. Discourse Markers may also occur in a functionally-motivated way in final position, but less frequently. The simplified hypothesis of this study is that DMs in peripheral position have a fluent signalling function, while DMs in non-peripheral position are symptomatic of disfluent use. We will show that this dichotomy needs to be fine-tuned considering the type of host unit under study. On the basis of previous work investigating the relationship between DM function, DM position and the linguistic type of host unit (syntactic clause, intonation unit or speech turn) (Degand & Crible, in press), the hypothesis is that DMs work as functional boundary markers at the syntactic (clause) and the interactional (turn) levels, but not at the prosodic (intonation unit) level. Other (medial) uses should be less functionally motivated and be considered as symptoms of disfluency. Fluent and disfluent use will be evaluated in context, considering co-occurrence with other disfluency markers (Crible, Degand & Gilquin, 2017).

A systematic study of the functional distribution of DMs in spoken French will show that this hypothesis is at least partially borne out.

References

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