A Study on the Pragmatic Functions of Discourse Marker Yes in Conflict Talks in English Majors’ Group Discussions

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Abstract: The paper seeks to explore the pragmatic functions of the discourse marker yes in conflict talks of the English major’s group discussions. The research has found that the discourse marker yes has been used mainly to realize the pragmatic functions of affirmation and turn-taking. More attention should be attached to the pedagogical improvement in the teaching of English, especially in non-English majors’ reading and listening sections of the courses.

1. Introduction

The discourse marker, which is to realize a certain variety of pragmatic functions, such as actually, in fact, oh, well, you know, so, because, but, or, yes, etc., is fairly common in verbal language.

Robin Lakoff (1973) pioneered the research of discourse markers by systemically describing her observation in the article about why the discourse markers why and well could be only used under certain conditions. After the maze of discourse markers has been opened, loads of papers and books are written revolving around individual markers and what discourse markers are. The maze is further explored with a great breakthrough by Schiffrin, whose book Discourse Markers (1987) is considered as an icebreaking book in the research of discourse makers. The previous studies have mainly been within the field of classroom or ordinary conversation and the subjects are not selected for the purpose to test the language proficiency of non-native speakers. This study tries to show usage of DMs yes for non-native speakers.

2. Research of DMs worldwide

2.1 Coherence Theory

The representative of coherence theory is Schiffrin, who takes coherence as the integrative property of discourse and reckons discourse markers as the elements contributing in the establishment of discourse coherence. In verbal language, the hearer uses the discourse markers, which functions as the linguistic cues, to contextualize the complications or the meaning of the speaker. According to Schiffrin, discourse markers are “linguistic elements that signal relations between units of talk, relations at the exchange, action, ideational, and participation framework level of the discourse.” (Schiffrin, 2007) and proposes an operational definition for discourse markers as “sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk” (2007, p. 31). Discourse marker contributes to coherence by establishing multiple contextual coordinates simultaneously, thus facilitating the integration of various components of talk.

Schiffrin (1987) claims that when we are studying discourse markers, it is necessary to “try to find common characteristics of these items to delimit what linguistic conditions allow an expression to be used as a marker. But such an approach would require not only discovery of the shared characteristics of an extremely diversified set of expressions, in English; it would require analysis across a wide body of typologically diverse language to discover what other linguistic resources drawn upon for use as markers.” By focusing on sociological conversation and recorded material, Schiffrin initiated to study eleven discourse markers, which are drawn from different categories and she categorized the DMs into some heterogeneous groups, including comprising coordinating and
subordinating conjunctions like and, but, or and because, temporal and conjunctive adverbs such as now, then and so, particles like oh and well, and parenthetical clauses such as you know and I mean.

2.2 Relevance theory

Dan Spencer, a French social and cognitive scientist, is the author of Rethinking Symbolism (1975), On Anthropological Knowledge (1985), etc. Wilson is a linguistic professor in the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics, University College London, whose major works include, Presupposition and non-truth-conditional semantics (1975), Modern Linguistics: The Results of Chomsky’s Revolution (1980), etc.

Sperber and Wilson (1986) proposed the relevance theory in their book: Relevance: Communication and Cognition in 1986, which mainly takes communication as a process in which the speaker can infer the communicative intention from the information provided. Both the parties in the communication can cooperate with each other and understand each other’s implicatures in the conversation. According to this theory, the speaker will try their best to convey the information in order to make the hearers understand the conveyed information at their convenience. The use of DMs can make the speaker realize the purpose of making the hearer understand the related information easily.

Blackmore (2009) writes that conceptual meaning and procedural meaning can be used to explain discourse markers. She holds that there is no single DM and the research of DMs should not only focus on the classification of DMs, but to use DMs to infer and restrain the pragmatic functions.

3. Research design

The present thesis tries to understand or describe the pragmatic functions of the discourse marker yes in the conflict talks of English group discussions, which has been transcribed into a corpus with more than 100 thousand English words (107’524 words and 1053’24’ minutes).

The working definition of conflict talks in this thesis is based upon the definition from Muntigl and Turnbull (1998), which explains that current speaker A’s ongoing talk is contested by a speaker B, and then, if speaker A makes a counter-oppositional turn to speaker B’s utterance, this is a conflict talk. Conflict talk is broadly conceptualized here as a situated, local activity, and accomplished interactionally by the participants in English group discussions.

3.1 Corpus building and transcription

In consideration of the percentage of male and female students, the subjects in the experiment are selected according to the simple random sampling (Wen Qiufang, 2004). Four male students and eight female students in their second grade have been selected, who have been grouped into A and B. Their polylogues, talking in English about the given topics, are recorded. The discussions are not limited with any specific requirements. Therefore, the discourse obtained is natural.

To accurately record the group discussions, a non-participating observer is onsite every time. He or she is to record the details, such as facial expressions, commonly used words or expressions, interested topics, body language, etc. Meanwhile, a video camera and an audio recorder are used to record the whole process of every discussion to make the discourse transcription more accurate. The corpus has around 107,524 words and is about 10 hours, which is enough to show the common characteristics of the usage of DMs.

3.2 Discussion topics and subjects

The discussion topics are formal and closely related to daily life of the subjects, which could arouse their interest, facilitate the process of discussions and make the subjects to talk in their normal language level, which in turn make the obtained discourse more natural, convincing and scientific. Every topic, given in advance for a day or two, is discussed for about 60 to 90 minutes by the subjects grouped into A and B in two separate room which happens simultaneously. The six English topics are listed below, as shown in table 1.

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Table 1 Six English topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning for a Donation to the Southwestern Arid Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film Reshooting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Cancel Spring Festival Gala or not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans After Graduation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My views on Online games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological health of university students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The twelve subjects are not mentioned by their names but marked by Asp1, Asp2, Asp3, Asp4, Asp5, Asp6, Bsp1, Bsp2, Bsp3, Bsp4, Bsp5, and Bsp6, for sake of academic ethics. They have average language score and oral English capability. The specific information of the subjects is in Table 2 and Table 3 as follows.

### Table 2 The general information of the subjects in Group A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Asp1</th>
<th>Asp2</th>
<th>Asp3</th>
<th>Asp4</th>
<th>Asp5</th>
<th>Asp6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning orientation</td>
<td>Translation and Interpretation</td>
<td>English and Japanese bilingual studies</td>
<td>English and Japanese bilingual studies</td>
<td>Translation and Interpretation</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Translation and Interpreting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written score of TEM4</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral score of TEM4</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>qualified</td>
<td>qualified</td>
<td>qualified</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3 The general information of the subjects in Group B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Bsp1</th>
<th>Bsp2</th>
<th>Bsp3</th>
<th>Bsp4</th>
<th>Bsp5</th>
<th>Bsp6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning orientation</td>
<td>language and culture</td>
<td>language and culture</td>
<td>English and Japanese bilingual studies</td>
<td>translation and interpretation</td>
<td>education</td>
<td>English and Japanese bilingual studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written score of TEM</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral score of TEM</td>
<td>qualified</td>
<td>qualified</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>qualified</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>excellent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. The pragmatic functions of discourse marker yes

In this chapter, the research is carried out by referring to the files extracted through the lookup function in Word. All the conflict talks have been identified by the author himself and rechecked by his two colleagues in order to be accurate. Altogether 21 yes have been identified in the conflict talks in the corpus with 107’524 words. The pragmatic functions have been analyzed and explained in the following section.

4.1 Turn-taking

In discourse analysis, turn refers to the period of talk in the conversation or polylogue. Conversation is comprised of the exchanging turns between at least two speakers and ideally only one person takes the turn at a time. In formal circumstances, like formal meetings, rituals,
ceremonies or public lectures, turns are often assigned or allocated by a moderator or determined in advance. In natural or instantaneous conversation, however, it is the speaker’s decision about when or whether to take the turn, which is highly influenced by various factors, such as the speaker’s understanding of the language they use, especially the pragmatic functions they can apply on as taking turns or transferring turns so that he or she can express their views or to show their politeness in the conversation to communicate more effectively and appropriately. Here, the DM yes functi

<Asp6>I don't know why should they donate money through us they can donate money directly</Asp6>

</interrupted>

<Asp1>yea</Asp1>

<Asp5>yes-yes so why I said that why should they help us</Asp5>

<Asp4>we have er-er advertisement</Asp4>

<Asp3>[yeah]</Asp3>

</interrupted>

<Asp5>[yea] it’s kind of commercial advertisement</Asp5>

The above excerpt of the discussion from group A is the topic about donation. Here speaker 1, 5, and 3 both used yes, yea or yeah(yea and yeah are the informal forms of yes to realize the pragmatic function of turn-taking, which is in accordance with the coherence theory. They may not know the specific function that yes, yea or yeah can perform, and here the DMs are probably used to grasp the turn-right, or just show that they are following the conversation or to show they are thinking.

4.2 Affirmation

Speaker Asp5 uses yes to show that he agrees with Asp3. The discourse marker yes is ahead of the laughs, which shows that he is totally positive with the standing that the TV soaps should not be reshot. He expressed his firm view by using yes to show his affirmation of Asp3’s idea.

<Asp3>maybe we want to clear it</Asp3>

<Asp5>Yes, < laugh></Asp5>

<Asp3>But actually, I think on this level, it does not change it’s just that people want to see something new because now we have so many ways to entertain ourselves. …</Asp3>

Another example below, Asp4 gives a firm response to Asp3 to make a confirmation. In this example, yes collocates with en, which is a common collocation in the discourse. This can be explained that students are influenced by the their mother tongue, Chinese, which means “yes” in English.

<Asp3>So your point is that the remaking of these things are good</Asp3>

<Asp4>En yes.</Asp4>

<Asp3>But, en actually, I support to make en like remake some TV series like Journey to the West, because the old one was quite old fashion that when Sun Wukong is flying we can see that he is like fly-flying on a piece of paper. But en actually, I think nowadays the remaking is actually terrible, kind of terrible.</Asp3>

<Asp5>[I think]</Asp5>

5. Conclusions

Aijmer (2002) proposes”Discourse particles are different from ordinary words in the language because of the large number of pragmatic values that they can be associated with. Nevertheless speakers are not troubled by this multifunctionality."Students may not know what kind of language proficiency they have in terms of pragmatic functions which are realized by using discourse markers unconsciously.

For English teacher, it is critical for us to know what’s the situation or whether students have grasped the usage of discourse marker. The college English course should be resigned with the introduction of discourse marker as fixed modules rather than give the task of showing students the
use of discourse marker, which is hard to ensure that every teacher follows the requirements. The corpus of the present study is composed of the interlanguage learners, and therefore it is fairly enlightening for all English learners, especially Chinese learners. It is high time for English teachers to lead students to boost their awareness of the pragmatic functions of discourse markers, and try to apply the discourse markers consciously in the daily communication or in classroom interactions. It is also worthwhile mentioning that student’s listening ability is really weak, which is compounded to explain here within one thesis, but it is firmly sure that teachers should lead students about how to get the main idea in the listening materials. Discourse marker is one of the clues for students to hang on, which is proved in the author’s courses which are mainly for non-English majors. Therefore, the study is enlightening to the study of spoken language as well as for the teaching of oral English.

For the limit of time and space, the present study has been done mainly from the perspective of pragmatic functions. Besides, in order to investigate the specific function, the focus is on the discourse marker yes in conflict talks, which is rarely done domestically or abroad, and this is a breakthrough.

References


