Use of Discourse Markers in the Speech of Nigerian Students Learning Mandarin Chinese

Dr. Sunny Ifeanyi Odinye
Department of Igbo, African & Asian Studies.
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: ifeanyiodinye@gmail.com

Abstract

The use of discourse markers is common in everyday native speech. If an L2 speaker wants to sound more like a native speaker, one way is to adopt the 'conventiuonal-expressions' (like discourse markers) used by native speakers in the local community. Discourse markers' use is generally agreed to be a feature of oral discourse or impromptu speech, so the ability to use and appropriately apply discourse markers is undoubtedly one aspect of sociolinguistic competence that second/foreign language learners need to acquire. Discourse markers are difficult for second/foreign language learners to acquire if learners are not exposed to natural language environment. The pragmatic functions of these discourse markers are not actually taught in formal language classrooms. This study investigates the use of discourse markers by six Nigerian students (three males and three females) learning Mandarin Chinese at the Confucius institute in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria. The data for the study were collected through the use of interview. The paper is structured as follows: abstract, introduction, discourse markers, discourse markers in Mandarin Chinese, methodology and data collection, findings and discussion, and conclusion.

Introduction

Language is the ability to acquire and use complex systems of communication, particularly the human ability to do so, and a language is any specific example of such a system. Human language has the properties of productivity, recursivity, and displacement, and relies entirely on social convention and learning. Humans acquire language through social interaction in early childhood, and children generally speak fluently when they are approximately three year old.

Although the need to learn foreign languages is almost as old as human history itself, the origins of modern language education are in the study and teaching of Latin in the 17th century. Latin had for many centuries been the dominant language of education, commerce, religion, and government in most of the Western world, but it was displaced by French, Italian, and English by the end of the 16th century. In the past centuries, Latin was the global language. It was promoted

by the Catholic Church. In the recent past, French was once a global language. It was promoted by the French government. The English language has remained the global language without a serious contender. However, in 21st century, China is seriously promoting Mandarin Chinese.

The teaching of Chinese both within and outside China is not a recent phenomenon. Westerners began learning different Chinese varieties in the 16th century. Mandarin Chinese became the official language in the early 20th century within China. Chinese as a foreign/second language is the study of Chinese varieties by non-native speakers. Increased interest in China from those outside has led to a corresponding interest in the study of standard Chinese (Mandarin) as a foreign language, the official language of mainland China and Taiwan. The Chinese government itself has also taken the task to promote Mandarin Chinese, taking it as a way to develop soft image abroad to garner national strength across the board (Ranzy, 2006). As the 21st century is said to belong to China, the Chinese government is not leaving any stone unturned in promoting the Chinese language around the world. The Chinese government is using the Confucius Institute as a vehicle in promoting the Chinese language around the world. In 2008, first Confucius Institute in Nigeria was commissioned at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka to introduce the teaching and learning of Chinese language in Nigeria. The second Confucius Institute was established at University of Lagos in 2009. In 2014, Nnamdi Azikiwe University commenced a degree programme in Chinese Studies. There are thousands of students learning Mandarin Chinese at primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

Discourse markers

The first issue to be addressed here is one of terminology. While some scholars like Schiffrin (1982 , 1987) saw it as 'discourse markers', some authors like (Goldbery, 1980 and Schourup, 1983) called it 'discourse particles'; and other group like (Ostman, 1982) named it 'pragmatic particles'. I have adopted the terminology of Schiffrin because some discourse markers in Mandarin Chinese like *danshi* (but), *keshi* (however), *name* (like that), and others are polysyllabic and containing significant phonetic content. They do not fit the label 'particle'.

Discourse markers have been studied by different researchers and in different languages. They are also known by a variety of other terms, such as clue phrases, discourse connectives, pragmatic connectives, to name just a few. Several researchers have attempted to characterize discourse markers in a more general way; however, there is no general agreement on definition, classification and terminology of discourse markers. Discourse markers tend to occur most prevalently in impromptu oral speech (Ostman, 1982). Research on discourse markers in the last few decades has become an important topic. Numerous studies deal with definitions and different functions of discourse markers by native speakers (see Schiffrin, 1987 on English discourse markers; Miracle, 1999 on Mandarin Chinese discourse markers; Onodera, 2004 on Japanese discourse markers). Discourse marker's use is generally agreed to be a feature of oral discourse (Brinton, 1996). The ability to use and appropriately apply discourse markers is undoubted one aspect of sociolinguistic competence that second/foreign language learners need to acquire.

In *Practical English Usage*, Swan (2005) defines a discourse marker as 'a word or expression which shows the connection between what is being said and the wider context'. For him, a discourse marker is something that either connects a sentence to what comes before or after, or indicates a speaker's attitude to what he is saying. He gives three examples: on the other hand; frankly; and as a matter of fact. According to Fraser (1999:750):

> "…discourse markers as a pragmatic class, lexical expressions
> drawn from the syntactic classes of conjunction, adverbials,
> and prepositional phrases. With certain exceptions, they signal
> a relationship between the segment they introduce, S2, and the
> prior segment; S1. They have a core meaning when is procedural,
> not conceptual, and their more specific interpretation is
> 'negotiated' by the context, both linguistic and conceptual'

Schiffrin (1987:3) defines discourse markers as 'sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk'. According to Miracle (1991), the key terms in this definition are 'sequentially dependent' and 'units of talks'. 'Sequentially dependent' is used to indicate that discourse markers operate on an extra-sequential level and are not wholly dependent on the sentences in which they occur. That is to say that the positioning of discourse markers relative to some

preceding segment of talk and some following segment of talk plays a significant role in the functioning of the discourse marker. 'Units of talks' is an intentionally broad term used to include speech act, utterances, turns, sentence, and smaller syntactic units, and discourse markers can be used at different times to 'bracket' all of these units. With respect to particular sentences, the discourse markers can occur sentence initially, finally and within sentences, depending on the sentence's relationship to the relevant 'unit of talk'.

The working definition of discourse markers in this study is as follows: first, they are grammatically optimal or syntactically independent; without the discourse markers, the grammaticality of the utterance remains intact. Second, they have little or no propositional meaning. If the discourse marker is removed from the utterance, the semantic relationship between the elements they connect remains the same. Third, they have textual and/or interpersonal functions.

Discourse Markers in Mandarin Chinese

Mandarin Chinese is logographic and does not use inflection, relying on generating meaning through word order, which can often be quite flexible. Moreover, the positioning and order of connective markers is very fluid and syntactically they can take many positions including: 'the initial position, the predicate-initial position, and the final position' (Li, 2008).Mandarin Chinese uses a rich array of discourse markers to link parts of speech in both simple and complex sentences (Tsou, 1999). Mandarin Chinese conjunctions appear into two main types: those linking words or short phrases (simple conjunctions) such as: he (and), gen (and/with), huo (or) as in dao he cha (knife and fork), and those that link clauses (composite conjunctions). Conjunctions are also used often appearing in the main (usually second) clause of sentence and link back to the previous clause (Po-ching, 2004).

In general, discourse is used to signify an arbitrary length of coherent language-base communication consisting of phrases, sentences or utterances. On a fundamental level, discourse is linked in a meaningful way (lexical cohesion) by discourse markers (also known as discourse

connectives), which separate the discourse into discourse segments or language structures, each of which contain a local coherence are context (Tsou, 1999). Research in Mandarin Chinese discourse marker's use is gradually gaining more grounds. Miracle (1987, 1991) was among the first scholars to syntactically investigate Chinese discourse markers. He applied Schiffrin (1987) discourse marker framework to the analysis of discourse marker's use in Chinese conversations. The discourse markers examined in his studies include: *hao* (good, yes), *danshi* (however), *keshi* (but), *buguo* (but/however), and *name* (so/then). Other examples of discourse markers in Mandarin Chinese are: *ranhou* (then), *neige* (that), *jiushi* (that is), *suoyi* (so), *jieguo* (result), *hoaxing* (like), *houlai* (later), and so many others.

A detail systematic description of discourse markers in Chinese is still under investigation (Feng, 2008). Studies on Chinese discourse markers tend to undertake pre-existed analytic and theoretical framework without taking too much consideration of the symbolic nature of the language itself (Su, 2002; Wang et al, 2007; Wei, 2011). Feng (2008) presents a typology of pragmatic markers in Chinese. In his discussion, there are four properties relating to their characteristics, namely: non-truth-conditionality, propositional scope, syntactic dispensability, and semantic dependency. A distinction between conceptual pragmatic markers and non-conceptual pragmatic markers are made on the basis of inherent semantic meanings. Feng (2008) categorized Chinese discourse markers as follows:

i. Conceptual pragmatic markers:

   a). Epistemic pragmatic markers: *yexu* (perhaps), *shishishang* (in fact), wokan (I think), xianran (obviously),

   b). Evaluative pragmatic markers: *jingqideshi* (amazingly), *yuchundeshi* (stupidly), *congmingdeshi* (cleverly).

ii. Non-conceptual pragmatic markers:

   a). contrastive pragmatic markers: *danshi* (but), *raner* (however), *buguo* (but), *buliao* (unexpectedly),

b). Elaborative pragmatic markers: *yejiushishuo* (that is to say), *biru* (for example), *tongyang* (similarly), *yonqi* (particularly),

c). Inferential pragmatic markers: *yinwei* (because), *suoyi* (so).

Methodology and Data Collection

Ostman (1982) has correctly argued that while discourse markers are present in all forms of language, they are most prevalent in and perhaps characteristic of impromptu speech. For this reason, an in-depth study of Mandarin Chinese discourse markers can most efficiently and reliably derive from the analysis of a considerable body of natural conversation in Mandarin Chinese.

There are six participants in this study. The participants are students learning Mandarin Chinese at Confucius Institute in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria. Out of the six participants, three students are female while other three students are male. All the participants are Nigerian, of Igbo ethnic group. The oldest among them is twenty years while the youngest one is sixteen years old. They have learned Mandarin Chinese for two years. All the participants have sat and passed HSK (Mandarin Chinese proficiency test), level four, and at the time of carrying out the research, they are preparing for HSK level five. The researcher is the writer and also a teacher at the Confucius Institute. He is also a Nigeria, of Igbo ethnic group. The researcher has been studying Mandarin Chinese for a decade, and he has taught it for more than five years at Nnamdi Azikiwe University.

The method of data collection for this study is an interview. Before the data collection started, the participants were not told by the researcher. What he was looking for in their speech, in order to make sure that their speech was not influenced by the study. That is, they would not produce more or fewer discourse markers on purpose. An interview is chosen as a method of data collection in order to elicit discourse markers from the students' speeches. Each participant was interviewed for about ten minutes on the same topics: how was their HSK test, and why they study Mandarin Chinese? The interview was recorded without their notice.

Findings and Discussion

The aim of this is simply to investigate whether Nigerian students learning Mandarin Chinese make use of discourse markers in their speech. After the data collection through the method of interview, the researcher listened to the recorded interview for each of the participant for several times in order to check if there is any use of discourse marker(s) in their speeches. It was found that all the six participants make use of one discourse marker or the other in their speech. Most of the participants use the same discourse marker: *ranhou* (then), *souyi* (so), and *nage/zhege* (that/this). The other discourse markers used by only two participants are: *na* (in that case) and *erqie* (moreover).

I shall discuss each of the five discourse markers identified in the speech of the Nigerian students learning Mandarin Chinese. The first discourse marker for discussion is *ranhou* (then). Wang (1998) suggests that the discourse function of *ranhou* (then) marks a temporal succession between prior and upcoming topic in discourse. She claims that the core meaning of *ranhou* (then) is to mark continuation. I agree with her. However, Su (1998) finds out that *ranhou* (then) has three functions as a discourse marker: condition or concession, verbal filler and topic-succession. From this study, *ranhou* (then) has the highest frequency of usage.

Suoyi (so) is also used by all the students and it has the second highest frequency. Fang (2000) finds out that *suoyi* (so) is bleached in some cases and it serves the function of going back to the previous topic. Wang and Huang (2006) find out that *suoyi* (then) is a topic initiator and functions to mark topic shift. In this study, it is also found out that *suoyi* (then) only serves the function of giving back to the previous topic. Another discourse marker identified in the speeches of all the participants is either *nage* (that) or *zhege* (this). Huang (1999) analyses the distal *nage* (that) and the proximal *zhege* (this) as a pause marker by speakers, to 'make a lexical choice or to formulate a systematic frame or to gather their thought'. From my data, the use of *nage/zhege* (that/this) goes beyond the function as a pause marker but also serves as verbal filler.

The other discourse markers found only in the speech of two participants are *erqie* (moreover) and *na* (in that case). Fang (2000) finds out that *erqie* (moreover) is used for topic shifting when it is semantically bleached. In this study, it is true that *erqie* (moreover) is used for topic shifting. This was seen when one of the participants wanted to shift her topic: past HSK level four to the new topic: forthcoming HSK level 5. The last discourse marker for discussion is *na* (in that case). It was only used only two of the participants. Miracle (1991) suggests that *na* (in that case) establishes 'the connection of and thus the relevance of the following unit of talk to a prior unit of talk'. From my data, I find out that *na* (moreover) is also used for topic shifting or introducing a new aspect of the topic.

Conclusion

Achieving speech fluency and coherence in a target language is an important yet difficult task for second/foreign language (L2) learners. Studies have shown that discourse markers' use is a significant feature of oral discourse and colloquial speech (Brinton, 1996; Schiffrin, 1987, 2001) as well as an integral part of sociolinguistic and stylistic variation (Andersen et al, 1995, 1999; Stubbe & Holmes, 1995). Consequentially, for second language learners, mastery of appropriate discourse marker's use is an important and integral aspect of sociolinguistic and communicative competence. Discourse markers are seldom part of the curriculum in the classroom in spite of the important role they play in spoken discourse. As de Klerk (2005:275) observes, the reason might be because their lack of clear semantic denotation and syntactic role, which makes formal or explicit commentary on their use fairly difficult. As discourse markers are not explicitly taught in class and L2 speakers can speakers can speak grammatically without the use of discourse marker, discourse markers are usually invisible for L2 speakers who learn the language in a formal classroom setting.

In conclusion, the study found out that Nigerian students learning Mandarin Chinese at the Confucius Institute in Nnamdi Azikiwe University make use of discourse markers in their

speeches. This linguistic competence is achieved due to their exposure to natural linguistic environment with Chinese teachers at the Confucius Institute. Although none of the students has traveled to China before this research yet they could make use of discourse markers in their speeches. The scope of the study was limited only on investigating whether Nigerian students learning Mandarin Chinese make use of discourse markers, therefore it calls for further studies. Since there is a lack of instruction on the use of discourse markers in formal language classrooms and the use of discourse markers is nevertheless important in foreign/second language learning. Previous studies have suggested that if an L2 speaker is more acculturated to the L2 culture or wants to sound more like a native speaker, he or she may pick up how 'things are said' and adopt those 'conventional expressions' by the native speakers in the community (de Klerk, 2005; Hellermann and Vergun, 2007).

References

Andersen, E., Brizuela, M., DuPuy, B., & Gonnerman, L. (1995). *The acquisition of discourse markers as sociolinguistic variables: A crosslinguistic comparison.* Paper presented at the 27th Annual Child Language Research Forum 27, Center for the Study of Language and Information, Palo Alto, CA.

Andersen, E., Brizuela, M., DuPuy, B., & Gonnerman, L. (1999). Cross-linguistic evidence for the early acquisition of discourse markers as register variables. *Journal of Pragmatics, 31*(10), 1339-1351.

Brinton, L. J. (1996). *Pragmatic markers in English: Grammaticalization and discourse functions*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

De Klerk, V. (2005). Procedural meanings of well in a corpus of Xhosa English. *Journal of Pragmatics, 37*, 1183-1205.

Fang, Mei. 2000. Ziran kouyu zhong ruohua lianci de huayu biaoji gongneng [Reduced conjunctions as discourse markers]. *Zhongguo Yuwen* [Chinese Language] 5. 459-470.

Feng, Guangwu (2008), Pragmatic Markers in Chinese, *Journal of Pragmatics* 40: 1687-1718.

Fraser, Bruce (1999), What are discourse markers?, *Journal of Pragmatics* 31: 931-952.

Goldberg, J.A. (1980). Discourse Particles: An Analysis of the Roleof 1' 'Know, "I Mean, "Well and 'Actually' in Conversation. Ph.D. Dissertation. Cambridge University, England.

Hellerman, J., & Andrea, V. (2007). Language which is not taught: The discourse marker use of beginning adult learners of English. *Journal of Pragmatics, 39*, 157-179.

Huang, S. (1999). The emergence of a grammatical category definite article in spoken Chinese. *Journal of Pragmatics* 31. 77-94.

Li, X. (2009). *Do they tell stories differently?: Discourse marker use by Chinese native speakers and non-native speakers.* International Communication Studies XV111, Michigan State University, USA.

Miracle, W. C. (1991). Discourse markers in Mandarin Chinese. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State University—Columbus.

Onodera, Noriko. 2004. *Japanese discourse markers: Synchronic and diachronic discourse analysis*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Östman, Jan-Ola. (1982). "The symbiotic relationship between pragmatic particles and impromptu speech". In Enkvist, Nils Erik (ed.). *Impromptu speech: a symposium.* Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 147-177.

Po-Ching, Y., Rimmington, D. (2004) A Comprehensive Grammar. Routledge, London.

Ramzy, A. (2006). Get Ahead, Learn Madarin. Times Magazine, 4-50. Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Schiffrin, D. (1982). Discourse markers: Semantic resources for the construction of conversation. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennysylvania.

Schiffrin, D. (1987). *Discourse markers*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Schourup, L. (1983). Common Discourse Particles in EnglishConversation. Ohio State University Press.

Stubbe, M., & Holmes, J. (1995). 'You know', 'eh' and other 'exasperating expressions': An analysis of social and stylistic variation in the use of pragmatic devices in a sample of New Zealand English. *Language and Communication, 15*(1), 63-88.

Su, Lily I-wen. 1998. Conversational coherence: The use of *ranhou* in Chinese spoken discourse. In Shuanfan Huang (ed.), *Selected papers from the second international symposium on languages in Taiwan*, 167-181.Taipei: Crane.

Tsou, B., Gao,W., Lai, T., Chan, S. (1999) Applying Machine Learning to Identify Chinese Discourse Markers, in International Conference on Information, Intelligence and Systems, Chania Crete, Greece.

Wang, Chueh-chen. & Lillian M. Huang. 2006. Grammaticalization of connectives in Mandarin Chinese: A corpus-based study. *Language and Linguistics* 7(4). 991-1016.

Wang, Yu-fang (1998). The functions of *ranhou* in Chinese oral discourse. *Proceedings of the 9th North American Conference on Chinese Linguistics: Volume 2*. 380-397. Los Angeles: University of Southern California.

Wang, Yu-Fang et al. (2007), «From informational to emotive use: meiyou ('no') as a discourse marker in Taiwan Mandarin conversation», *Discourse Studies* 9(5): 677-701.

Wei, Ming (2011), Investigating the oral proficiency of English learners in China: a comparative study of the use of pragmatic markers, *Journal of Pragmatics* 43: 3455-347