DISCOURSE MARKERS IN ENGLISH AND LITHUANIAN

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The paper is devoted to a contrastive analysis of the use of discourse markers in English and Lithuanian everyday conversation. Though the status of discourse marker in English has not yet been fully clarified, it has been widely discussed. In Lithuanian, however, no attempts have been made to delimit this category. There is a wide range of words and phrases that could be interpreted as discourse markers in both languages. Their main function is to indicate an interactive relationship between the participants of conversation. The study is carried out analysing transcribed conversations in English and Lithuanian. Discourse markers in both languages are mostly words with little lexical meaning that appear on the periphery of clause structure. In both languages, discourse markers can form a separate tone group or be part of a larger unit. Some markers appear to be semantic and functional equivalents of their counterparts in the other language while some do not have equivalents. A number of Lithuanian markers can be used only in a very informal setting, which presupposes more monitoring of speech and, consequently a greater variation in usage, depending on the level of formality of the situation.

1. Introduction

The aim of the present article is to analyse naturally occurring conversation in English and Lithuanian, paying special attention to the use of discourse markers in both languages. Unlike most other types of discourse, everyday talk does not exhibit clearly defined social goals and functions. Casual conversation is understood here, following Eggins and Slade (1997, 19), as talk, which is not motivated by any clear pragmatic purpose. Its primary function then is to establish and maintain social cohesion while sharing experience, yet at the same time it may provide entertainment through jokes and narratives, serve as a means to exchange information, and help to control the behaviour of others (Biber et al. 1999, 1041). Investigating conversation allows to look for linguistic features that are especially characteristic of spoken discourse as compared with other registers. Hesitation pauses, false starts and hedging are just some of the features which are usually mentioned as belonging exclusively to spoken language (cf. Tannen 1984; Diamond 1996; Coates 1997; Biber et al. 1999; Eggins 2000; Markee 2000; Scollon and Scollon 2001).

Discourse markers were chosen for the present analysis because of their important interactive role in conversation since they serve to indicate a relationship between the speaker and the hearer. As Schiffrin (1987) rightly observes, "[t]he analysis of discourse markers is part of the more general

analysis of discourse coherence – how speakers and hearers jointly integrate forms, meanings, and actions to make overall sense out of what is said" (Schiffrin 1987, 49). Moreover, though discourse markers in English have been in the focus of attention of linguists for some time, in the Lithuanian language they have yet not been discussed or delimited as a category.

Every conversation abounds in discourse markers, and, though much has been written about them, linguists still often dispute the actual linguistic items included into this category. They form a multifarious group since a number of them share discourse marker function with an adverbial function, for example *now* and *well* are both circumstance adverbs and discourse markers, functioning as utterance introducers.

The study begins with a presentation of the material, followed by a short discussion of the problem of defining discourse marker in order to better understand and delimit the category; the article then proceeds with an overview of those markers in English that occur most often in the material under analysis. Finally, a tentative list of the discourse markers in Lithuanian is made, drawing some parallels with English.

2. Material and method

The material that serves as the basis for the present analysis includes eight English and eight Lithuanian recorded and transcribed conversations. The length of the conversations varies from 5 to 7 minutes. The English conversations were recorded in the USA in the summer of 2001 and took place between friends and co-workers during lunchtime or at home. They involve both male and female speakers in their early and late twenties who had given permission to be recorded and in some cases self-recorded themselves. The Lithuanian conversations were recorded in the period of 2001-2002 by eight MA students of English at Vytautas Magnus University who conversed with their friends or asked them to self-record themselves under similar informal circumstances. None of the participants knew the purpose of the recordings. The number of the participants of the conversations ranges from two to four. Since all the speakers are of similar age and education, it can be claimed that the role of these two socially relevant variables has been minimized while gender is represented by an almost equal number of males and females (with the exception of one English and one Lithuanian conversations with only female participants).

All the conversations were completely unmonitored and spontaneous, and the topics discussed were not pre-planned in order to minimize the effects of the so-called "observer's paradox" (Labov 1970, 32, as cited in Chambers 1995, 19), which means that the observed conversation should not be distorted in any way through the process of observation.

Using such a comparatively small corpus of material does not allow us to base the analysis on a quantitative account but it also has an advantage since it provides contextual information. Large corpora including conversational material (like, for example, Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus) offer only orthographic transcriptions, but do not give phonetic and prosodic information, which turns out to be very helpful in determining tone units and lengths of pauses.

The material is studied within the framework of Conversational Analysis which is a major present-day empirical approach to spoken interaction relying on close examination of individual cases of real conversations with the aim to establish what linguistic features are used in a systematic way. It is a microanalytic and inductive variety of discourse analysis. The procedures involve the study of transcripts in order to explain the principles of language organization that lie behind the cohesion of spoken discourse (cf. Fasold 1990; Schiffrin 1994; Heritage 1995; Linell 1998).

3. Defining discourse markers

Two claims are often made about discourse markers: first, that they are non-truth conditional, i.e. they do not contribute to the truth conditions of the utterance that contains it, and, second, that they encode a relationship between the utterance that contains them and the preceding text or discourse (Fraser 1990; Blakemore 1996). One of the best-known definitions of discourse markers is given by Schiffrin (1987) who defines them as "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk"(Schiffrin 1987, 31). The deliberately vague term "unit of talk" implies here that they are independent of sentence structure – though markers often precede sentences, removal of a marker from its sentence initial position leaves the sentence structure intact (ibid.). In addition, sentences may be difficult to identify in everyday conversation because they often exhibit indeterminate connectivity, ellipsis and intercalation of structures, which can obscure syntactic boundaries. Thus units of talk, as defined by Schiffrin, could be full clauses, elliptical or unfinished clauses or tone units. Bracketing implies taking into account the anaphoric and cataphoric character of discourse markers dynamically adapting the utterance to the ongoing exchange. Such an interpretation of discourse markers allows us to understand them as units that signal the pragmatic role of the speaker's utterance but remain on the periphery of a syntactic structure.

There is no complete list of linguistic units indisputably accepted as discourse markers. They include various inserts that carry little inherent meaning and in the given context have merely interactive function (*well, right, oh, okay*) as well as phrases (*I mean, you see, you know*). It seems best to accept a wide interpretation of the category and, taking into consideration the features mentioned above, to make use of the context in determining what elements should be treated as discourse markers.

4. Discourse markers in English

According to the findings of the Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus (LSWEC), the most common discourse markers both in American and British English are (in the order of their appearance) *well, you know, I mean* (Biber et al.1999, 1096). All these markers also turned out to be most frequent in the conversations under analysis, only the phrase *you know* was used more frequently (73 occurrence) than *well* (60) occurrences.

A full list of discourse markers found in the analysed conversations with numbers of their occurrences is given in Table 1.

The most typical function of *well* appears to be that of a response marker since it is mostly used in utterances given as a reaction to the previous speaker's turn and shows the speaker's awareness of the

Table 1. **Discourse markers in the English conversations**

Discourse markers	Number of occurrences
you know	73
well	60
I mean	26
so	18
okay	8
see	7
er	4
now	2
um	2

need to provide a coherent response. However, the exact interpretation of its use may be that of conceding, as exemplified in (1), hesitation, as in (2), or simply the speaker's need to briefly consider the question or topic discussed, as in (3).

(1) *S1:* *doesn't that bother- bother you at all? / not at all? /*
     S2: *well okay / we can pick him up later on if you want/*

(2) *S:* *no actually it's okay / well it's- it's just tha- that it's kind of too short*

(3) *S1:* *you mean the translation? / could you understand the translation? /*
     S2: *well / it's subtitled/ but it's good translation /*

The phrase *you know* implies shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer, as in (4), yet this implication is often lost ant the expression merely fulfils the function of bracketing a clause or a phrase (examples (5) and (6)). On the other hand, *I mean* marks the speaker's orientation towards the meaning of own talk, usually by elaborating or explaining a previous thought, and this meaning of the expression tends to be preserved. Its other function seems to be to allow the speaker to make a new start after an unfinished clause (note example (8) below).

(4) *S1:* *who is locked to the table?*
     S2: *it's like for little kids/ you know you cannot go until you finish eating everything*

(5) *S1:* *there was a lot of popcorn no? coca cola?*
     S2   *a lot of popcorn <LAUGHING> and ((xxx))*
     S3: *you know throwing tomatoes <ALL LAUGH>*

(6) *S1:* *you know the play was good- the plot- I liked that / I liked the idea itself. but I think that the actors were really bad /*

(7) *S1:* *and this thing is really bad / I mean to have her away for two weeks /*

(8) *S1:* *but it's- I mean on the whole I liked the atmosphere /*

The analysis has shown that other comparatively frequently used markers (in the order of their frequency) are *so*, *okay* and *see*. The marker *so* seems to have two main functions: to introduce a question and to indicate the initiation of a new topic:

(9)   *S:* *so did you notice that before? This morning?*

(10) *S:* *so / tell me about your new boyfriend/ what's he like?*

Such often-mentioned discourse markers as *right* and *now* turned out to be uncommon. *Right* is often used at the beginning of a turn to convey decisiveness or even to initiate some kind of action (cf. Biber et al. 1999, 1087), thus its absence in casual relaxed conversation might be predicted. *Now*, as an utterance launcher, may indicate a change of topic, as in example (11):

(11) *S:* *now look at my shoes / just. just look at them /*

A closer look at the conversations also shows that it is possible to treat the hesitators *er* and *um*, appearing at the beginning of a tone group as discourse markers since they enable the speaker to pause while at the same time signalling the speaker's wish to continue speaking. The utterance sometimes continues as a paraphrase of the previous thought, e.g.:

(12) *S:* *that public reaction / er er it was like- er it was kind of strange /*

The discourse markers in English, identified in the material under analysis, make up a list of inserts and phrases that do not differ greatly from lists offered by linguists working in this area of research (cf. Schiffrin 1987). A question that remains to be answered concerns their status in a clause. Should discourse markers be treated as elements belonging to the clause or as extra-clausal units? The analysis carried out shows that prosodically they can both make a separate tone group, especially

at the beginning of a turn, or be part of a larger group. It is suggested here that in the first case they can be treated as nonclausal units while in the latter they belong to the clause. In addition, there appears to be a tendency to use different markers in a different way. Thus *well, so* and *okay* prosodically stand apart more often than *you know* and *I mean* which are usually integrated into a larger tone group.

5. Discourse markers in Lithuanian

The list of the Lithuanian discourse markers was made using the same defining criteria that were applied to the English material, i.e. elements loosely, at times only prosodically attached to the clause structure and indicating the pragmatic role of the speaker's utterance were singled out. The full list of these elements with their approximate translations into English and numbers of occurrences is presented in Table 2.

Since Lithuanian spoken discourse is not yet represented by a standardised corpus, one can assume that the list is not complete. Still, a closer look at the elements singled out allows us to draw the conclusion that they exhibit a number of similarities with the English markers. Like their English counterparts, the Lithuanian discourse markers are mostly inserts with little lexical meaning. Some of them can be considered equivalent in both meaning and function to the English ones. For example, *žinai* '(you) know' is a counterpart of the English *you know*, and, in addition, both appear at the top of the corresponding frequency lists. However, it should be noted that in a small corpus quantitative results might be influenced by the personal habits of individual speakers. Thus, for example the phrase *ta prasme* 'in that sense, that is' was used mainly by one person in a comparatively short piece of talk.

The Lithuanian *na/nu* 'well, so', which turned out to be the most frequently used discourse marker in the analysed conversations, has the same function as the English *well*: it mostly signals a need to stop briefly before an upcoming utterance, as in example (13). Yet, in general, its function is more restricted than that of *well* – it cannot be treated as a response marker. On the contrary, it may be used to encourage the other participants to contribute to conversation (example (14)). Though *well* can also be used in this function, such cases were not recorded.

(13) *S:*   **nu tai aš galvoju . gal kūr- kūrinį kokį nagrinėt ar ką / 'well I'm thinking of analysing some work of fiction or something' /**

(14) *S:*   **nu / tai pasakok / grįžai gi / 'well / tell us / you've come back haven't you?' /**

Table 2. Discourse markers in the Lithuanian conversations

Discourse markers	Number of occurrences
na/nu/nu tai 'well, so'	41
žinai '(you) know'	29
taigi 'so, thus'	9
va/tai va 'here, so'	6
žinok 'know'-Imperative	4
matai '(you) see'	4
supranti '(you) understand'	4
ta prasme 'in that sense, that is'	4
žodžiu 'in a word'	3

On the other hand, there are notable differences between the two languages. Thus Lithuanian does not have a colloquial marker that could be comparable with the English *I mean*. Lithuanian also has more discourse markers oriented towards the hearer: *žinai* '(you) know', *žinok* 'know' – Imperative, *matai* '(you) see', and *supranti* '(you) understand'. Here are some typical examples:

(15) *S:* **žinai / aš tai norėjau kažkaip susirasti legaliai /**
'(you) know / I wanted to find [a job] legally somehow' /

(16) *S:* **žinok / jinai išvažiavo gal- ta konsultantė kokią pusę devynių / '(you) know [Imperative] /**
this consultant- she left maybe half past eight' /

(17) *S:* **supranti / nežinojau aš šito visai/**
'(you) understand / I didn't know that at all' /

Finally, the strong colloquial character of the majority of the Lithuanian discourse markers should be noted. Thus *žinok* 'know'–Imperative can only be used while talking to a close friend. Moreover, since Lithuanian makes a distinction between grammatically "singular you" *tu* and "plural you" *jūs* which also mark a distinction "familiar" vs. "polite", the familiar forms *žinai* '(you) know', *supranti* '(you) understand' and *matai* '(you) see' are unacceptable in a more formal setting or even when one casually converses with a stranger.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, the analysis of everyday conversation in English and Lithuanian revealed both parallels and differences in the use of discourse markers in the two languages.

(1) Discourse markers in both languages are mostly words with little lexical meaning that appear on the periphery of the clause structure.

(2) The less definite lexical meaning a discourse marker has, the more functions it seems to be able to perform.

(3) In both languages, discourse markers can form a separate tone group or be part of a larger unit.

(4) Some markers can be seen as functional equivalents of their counterparts in the other language while some do not have equivalents.

(5) A number of Lithuanian markers can be used only in a very informal setting, which presupposes more monitoring of speech and, consequently a greater variation in the use of discourse markers in Lithuanian, depending on the level of formality of situation.

Transcription conventions

The transcription conventions used for the conversational data are based on Coates (1996).

A slash (/) indicates the end of a tone group.

A hyphen indicates an incomplete word or utterance.

Short pauses are indicated by a full stop.

Where material is impossible to make out, it is presented as (xxx).

Angled brackets (< >) give additional information.

S means speaker. When the example involves more than one speaker, they are numbered (S1, S2).

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DISKURSO RIBAS ŽYMINTIEJI ŽODŽIAI ANGLŲ IR LIETUVIŲ KALBOSE

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