



Book review

Discourse Markers in Colombian Spanish: A Study in Polysemy

Catherine E. Travis, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, 2005, 327 pp., US\$ 128.00

Many scholars position pragmatics as an autonomous branch of linguistics that has little or nothing to do with semantics. However, it seems to me that, to understand language use, one would first need to understand language meaning. As one who sees an inextricable link between semantics and pragmatics, I welcome Catherine Travis' publication, which attempts to show how pragmatics can be fruitfully pursued through semantics. The aim of this book is "to identify the "conversational conditions" under which a set of discourse markers is used in Colombian Spanish, and, on the basis of those "conversational conditions", to determine and explicate the meanings of these markers" (p. 2). I find this book particularly important because it makes a conscious effort to "demonstrate that the pragmatics of use of the discourse markers under consideration is semantically driven: the use of discourse markers is determined by their inherent meanings, which interacts with context-driven features to give rise to different pragmatic functions" (p. 2).

The discourse markers which Travis selects for study are *bueno* (roughly, 'well', 'alright', 'OK', 'anyway'), *o sea* (roughly, 'I mean', 'rather', 'that is to say'), *entonces* (roughly, 'so', 'then'), and *pues* (roughly, 'well', 'so', 'then'). As outlined in Chapter 2, the data are primarily collected from 12 h of audio recordings of informal Colombian Spanish conversations.

In Chapter 3, Travis reviews "some of the most influential literature on discourse markers from a range of different theoretical approaches" (p. 7) and critically notes that most of these studies "adopt a pragmatic, rather than semantic, approach" (p. 2). In other words, these studies mainly look at the functions performed by discourse markers without describing meaning, or describing it only "in very loose and technical terms" (p. 2). Chapter 3 also gives a brief outline of the metalanguage that Travis uses to state the meaning of the discourse particles under study, natural semantic metalanguage (NSM). NSM comprises a set of semantic primes and a relatively simple grammar of combinability that is available in all languages. Because of this, if we use NSM to state meaning in the form of a paraphrase, what we get is an expression of meaning that is easy to understand and can, in theory, be directly translated into any language without any change in meaning, which serves to minimize ethnocentrism. Additionally, as Travis shows us in this book, NSM allows meaning to be formulated from the first person's perspective. This is something that most other approaches to semantics and pragmatics are not predisposed to do.

Interestingly, in this chapter, Travis claims that researchers "have been unable to identify any linguistic features (phonological, morphosyntactic, semantic or *pragmatic*) that exhaustively delimit the range of items that are used as discourse markers" (p. 27, my italics). Surely, if they can be referred to as discourse markers, they must exhibit some common pragmatic features that

allow them to be identified as such. The fact is that in section 3 of Chapter 3, entitled “Characteristic features of discourse markers” (p. 47), Travis outlines at least three common pragmatic features of discourse markers. According to the author, discourse markers are “words or expressions which (a) indicate how an upcoming or prior utterance is to be understood in the context of the surrounding discourse; and (b) in so doing, can indicate the speaker’s attitude to the message content as well as to the addressee; and (c) thereby can also be used by the speaker to appeal to the addressee to play the participatory role the speaker desires” (p. 48).

Chapters 4–7 comprise the main body of the book. Each chapter focuses on one discourse marker: *bueno* (p. 77ff), *o sea* (p. 125ff), *entonces* (p. 171ff), and *pues* (p. 227ff). In each of these chapters, Travis traces the development of the discourse marker, looks at the range of the functions it performs, works out the number of related meanings the word represents, and proposes a paraphrase to describe each of these meanings. For example, in Chapter 4, the author begins by looking at the relationship between the discourse marker *bueno* and the adjective of the same form, which means ‘good’ (p. 78), and tries to argue that the discourse marker derives from the adjective. She then performs discourse analysis on her data, identifies six functions associated with *bueno*, and proposes four related meanings with the common semantic component “I say: this is good” (p. 122). In the subsequent three chapters, Travis proposes “three related meanings” for *o sea* (p. 133), “three core meanings” for *entonces* (p. 172), and “two-way” polysemy for *pues* (p. 240).

I find Travis’ book highly recommendable for two main reasons. First, it shows us that, contrary to what some linguists might think, discourse markers are not void of semantic content. Many linguists, presumably because they are unable to capture the meaning of discourse markers, conclude that these words lack semantic meaning. Examples are not difficult to find. After giving a rather comprehensive overview of the word’s functions, Schiffrin concludes, “*Well* can be used for so general a discourse function because it has no inherent semantic meaning” (1987:127). Brinton, while conceding that “[pragmatic markers] serve a variety of pragmatic functions”, holds that these words are “semantically empty” (1996:35). However, Travis’ study not only tells us that discourse markers have meanings but also shows how such meanings can be clearly and precisely stated from the first person perspective. Second, Travis’ book showcases stages of semantic change and the development of pragmatic meaning, which gives the study a historical linguistic perspective. Travis uses NSM as a tool to construct the paths of semantic developments for the discourse markers under study. For example, she hypothesizes that *bueno₄* is a development of *bueno₂*, which itself is a development of *bueno₁* (p. 123). By using NSM to state the new and old meanings of each discourse marker in the line of development, Travis is able to show precisely how semantic change takes place; in each new phase of development, one or more core components remain, some old components may be discarded, and some new components may be acquired.

For theoretical semanticists, Travis’ book additionally raises the question of what goes into word meaning. Presumably, many linguists would draw a distinction between lexical meaning and intonation meaning. After all, it seems to be commonly accepted that intonation is associated with the sentence and is certainly not an inherent part of the word. However, it seems that Travis blurs the distinction between word meaning and intonation meaning. As a result, it seems to me that she has identified a larger number of distinct, though related, meanings than is necessary. For example, Travis proposes four different, if related, meanings for the discourse marker *bueno* (*bueno₁₋₄*). However, it seems to me that *bueno₂*, which is used to “preface a dispreferred response” (p. 96), can be unproblematically analyzed as *bueno₁*, which is used to “accept” a speech act (p. 87). Consider now the following proposed paraphrases or explications of *bueno₁*

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