

Developing pragmatic competence in English as a lingua franca: Using discourse markers to express (inter)subjectivity and connectivity

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Abstract

The paper investigates how ELF speakers improve their pragmatic competence by using the discourse markers *yes/yeah, so* and *okay* as expressions of (inter)subjectivity and connectivity. The data discussed in this paper stems from university consultation hours, and it is part of a larger project conducted at the University of Hamburg on multilingualism and multiculturalism in the international university. Findings of the case studies described in this paper suggest that speakers of English as a lingua franca in academic consultation hours tend to strategically re-interpret certain discourse markers in order to help themselves improve their pragmatic competence and thus function smoothly in the flow of talk.

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1. Introduction

In this paper I want to demonstrate how speakers of English as a lingua franca (ELF) learn how to function smoothly in a type of interaction in which none of the participants are native speakers of the language used. The data reported on in this paper is part of a larger project on multilingualism and multiculturalism in the international university. I will here look at how international students and academic staff participating in academic consultation hours conducted in ELF manage to develop pragmatic competence via the use of certain high-frequency discourse markers as indicators of (inter) subjectivity and connectivity. The findings of the analyses of this data reveal how ELF users come to effectively vary native English use of these markers for their own benefit by strategically re-interpreting them both for their own and their interactants' purposes in discourse.

Before tackling the data, I will first briefly deal with the phenomena relevant to this paper: (inter)subjectivity, connectivity, ELF and the larger project context from which the present data is taken.

2. (Inter)subjectivity and connectivity

Subjectivity was defined by Benveniste (1966) as the ability of a speaker to present himself or herself in and through language as a 'subject', and to indicate his or her attitude towards, and assessment of the proposition in an utterance. Benveniste set up an apparatus of 'enunciation' consisting of deictic elements that point to things that are physically

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present in a face-to-face situation, the deictic pronoun first person singular, the local and temporal adverbs referring to the *here* and *now*, as well as items such as (in their English equivalents) *you*, *over there*, *immediately* or certain adverbial expressions of opinion such as *for instance*, *in my opinion*, *honestly* etc.

Smith (2002) has examined subjectivity firstly in terms of ‘point of view’ in which a certain way of looking at what is expressed in a text or discourse is revealed either directly in acts of communication or indirectly as contents of mind and evaluation, and secondly as ‘perspective’ which refers for instance to reports of personal experience that may be direct, indirect or inferred. According to Smith, every linguistic element can be used to express point of view or perspective as long as processes of thinking are always involved.

In systemic-functional linguistics, subjectivity relates to the interpersonal metafunction, and to the dimension of Tenor, specifically to Stance, i.e. the cognitive and affective attitude of a speaker towards the events and states of affairs s/he is describing when producing or receiving an utterance (Halliday, 1994). Subjectivity in this understanding also relates to the function certain linguistic elements have in influencing the hearer or addressee in interaction such that there exists a close relationship between subjectivity and addressee orientation, and thus to what one may call ‘intersubjectivity’. In any interaction, speakers use many linguistic means to express this intersubjectivity: personal pronouns, temporal and local adverbials in order to guide their interactants’ interpretation of events and states of affairs expressed in the discourse. On many different linguistic levels, the expression of (inter)subjectivity is part of speakers’ concern with positioning themselves in the discourse, and via this positioning guiding and influencing interactants’ inferencing processes. Another means of expressing intersubjectivity in the sense of guiding addressee through the discourse has been referred to as ‘connectivity’. I define ‘connectivity’ as a linguistic phenomenon subsuming linguistic devices that interconnect units of text and discourse and create relations between these units.

The concept of connectivity has recently been described with particular reference to its role in multilingual communication by House and Rehbein (2004) and Rehbein et al. (2007). In its broad sense, connectivity is concerned with phenomena of linguistic interaction in different aspects of grammar, prosody, text and discourse. Important is here the role played by various linguistic elements used for interconnecting units of text and discourse as well as the linguistic forms employed and their functions. An example would be the use of the discourse marker *so* to create connections between stretches of discourse – which will be discussed in detail below. Connectivity has recently received increasing attention by researchers who focused on typological and contrastive phenomena (cf. e.g. Berman, 1998; Behrens and Fabricius-Hansen, 2002) and on aspects of the meaning and function of discourse or pragmatic markers (cf. e.g. Fischer, 2006; Aijmer and Simon-Vandenberg, 2006). As House (2006) and Rehbein et al. (2007) point out, connectivity is by no means identical with ‘context’ – the latter being a much broader and more elusive concept which goes beyond the linguistic phenomena we are trying to capture here with the concept of connectivity. In a sense, we can say, with Rehbein et al. (2007: 3), that the linguistic means of connectivity make a text or discourse at least partially independent of context.

Having briefly described what I mean by (inter)subjectivity and connectivity as the phenomena for which the acquisition and use of the discourse makers to be investigated will be important, I will now take a closer look at the genre in which these markers have come to be used.

3. Academic consultation hours as an instance of institutional discourse

Early research into academic consultation hours focused on the advisors’ positions of authority in the institution for which they act as ‘gate-keepers’ (Erickson and Shultz, 1982; Kerekas, 2003). One of the major objectives of these studies, most of which originated in the United States, was students’ competence in English and the native-versus-non-native issue. Thus, for instance Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (2005) discuss interlanguage pragmatics phenomena in academic discourse between native and non-native English interactants. In the context of academic advising sessions in the MUMIS project, which I will describe below, we are dealing with ELF interactants none of whom has English as their native language.

In a European context, research into academic institutional discourse in the international university has shifted away from the native-non-native paradigm. An example of this new research interest in academic institutional discourse is the work done inside the CALPIU – Cultural and Linguistic Practices in the International University – Research Center at Roskilde University (see e.g. Mortensen, 2010; Preisler et al., 2011). Other important work in this area has been done by Mauranen and her team with the ELFA and SELF projects (cf. e.g. Mauranen, 2012).

What happens in academic consultation hours? Typically, such interactions are concerned with students’ current states of affairs, their study situation, qualification and certification issues, students’ future activities, as well as learning problems, their causes or potential solutions. The interactional role of counseling in academic consultation hours typically offered by university professors includes displaying expertise and “emphasizing their engagement with the addressee” (Bolden, 2006). Turn-taking, topic introductions, pauses, overlap, interruptions and various linguistic expressions used to indicate interactants’ positioning in the discourse are some of the indicators for the progression of the covert or overt interactional agenda of academic advisors and advisees.

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