

# Effect of first language on the use of English discourse markers by L1 Chinese speakers of English

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## Abstract

This study investigates the effect of native language (Mandarin Chinese) on the use of English discourse markers by L1 Chinese speakers of English. Few previous studies have been conducted on this area. Data for the study were gathered using individual sociolinguistic interviews with five native English speakers and ten L1 Chinese speakers. Results show that three Chinese discourse markers were found to have some influence on their corresponding English expressions. The L1 Chinese speakers using the deliberative function of *I think* in medial or final position (while the native English speakers did not) may have transferred their use of *I think* from their L1 *wo juede* because *wo juede* can mark the deliberative meaning in medial or final position. Second, the L1 Chinese speakers used *yeah/yes* as a backchannel after the interlocutor's reaction "uh huh" or "ok" while the native English speakers did not. This use may be transferred from the corresponding Chinese expression *dui* because *dui* was found to have the same use in the data. Finally, *ah* was found to perform a clause-medial function (followed by self-correction) by the L1 Chinese speakers; however, the native English speakers did not use *ah* for that function. The corresponding Chinese expression *a* was found to have the same correction function.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on discourse markers (DM) in the last few decades has become an important topic. Numerous studies deal with definitions and different functions of DMs by native speakers (e.g., Schiffrin, 1987 on English; Miracle, 1991 on Mandarin Chinese). Studies of DM use by L2 speakers are gaining more and more attention too (e.g., Aijmer, 2004; Fuller, 2003a; Fung and Carter, 2007; Hays, 1992; He and Xu, 2003; Hellermann and Vergun, 2007; Liao, 2009; Müller, 2005). In order to examine what factors might influence the use of DMs by L2 speakers, we need to examine the use of DMs in their L1 to see if some markers are similar semantically and functionally in both languages. However, few studies have been conducted on the effect of Mandarin Chinese DMs on the use of English DMs by L1 Chinese speakers of English. Thus the goal of this study is to fill this gap.

## 2. Language transfer

Transfer is the influence which results from the similarities and differences between the target language and other languages that have been previously acquired (Odlin, 1989). Positive transfer refers to the transfer when the learner's L1 facilitates L2 learning. The facilitative effect of the L1 is evident when learners show correct use of an L2 feature if this

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feature corresponds to an L1 feature (Ellis, 1994). Negative transfer or interference traditionally refers to the errors learners make because of L1 transfer.

Sankoff et al. (1997) is one of the few DM studies which examined the effect of L1 on L2 use. They examine DMs in the speech of seventeen Anglophone speakers of Montreal French. They find that the native English participants' use of some French markers is influenced by their native language. For example, L1 English speakers use *comme* ("like") as an introducer of reported speech, while L1 French speakers do not use *comme* in that way. Researchers explain that this is a feature of *like* in American English. Their study serves as a pioneering study for my research. In my study, I first examine which English DMs are different in use between native English speakers and L1 Chinese speakers of English; and I then assess the effect of Mandarin Chinese on their English DM use by comparing these English markers with corresponding Chinese expressions.

### 3. Definitions of discourse markers

There is no agreement as to which linguistic items are considered DMs or pragmatic markers. For instance, for Schiffrin (1987), a wide range of elements can be used as DMs. Her analysis includes eleven English DMs—*oh*, *well*, *and*, *but*, *or*, *so*, *because*, *now*, *then*, *I mean*, *y'know*. Fraser (1988) excludes *oh* because it is an interjection, and *because* as it is a subordinating conjunction expressing content. Ostman (1982) sees pragmatic particles as a category which has prototypical, core members and less prototypical, peripheral members. A consequence of these different viewpoints is that two of Schiffrin's markers (*now* and *but*) would not be in the core list of pragmatic particles for Ostman. Therefore, deciding whether a linguistic item is considered a DM has been no easy task. Given this, I offer below a working definition of DMs which is used in the present study.

#### 3.1. Phonological features

Schiffrin (1987:328) suggests that DMs "have a range of prosodic contours, e.g., tonic stress and followed by a pause, phonological reduction." However, Erman (1992:219) only mentions that "*you know* tends to form a separate tone unit." Müller (2005:5) concludes that "the majority of researchers in this area do not dwell on phonological features for a definition of discourse markers." In the present study, some markers show phonological features more than other markers. For example, when *but* is used as a DM, it is never stressed and it is very often followed by a pause in my data. An example<sup>1</sup> is "John<sup>2</sup>: I'm sure I .. would make his day better if I just keep my mouth closed sometimes, but . . . Yeah it's fun." However, when *but* is not considered a DM, it is stressed. An example of a non-DM *but* is "John: my favorite one singular, there is only one of the movies is 'Mary Poppins.' But I like the 'Star Wars' stuff." Participant John even stressed this non-DM *but* to mark the disagreement with his own previous discourse in the data. In contrast, *well* does not show a phonological difference when used as a DM or a non-DM. For example, *well* is not considered a DM when used in "as well as" or as an adverb in my data. When it is used as a DM, it does not have distinctive differences phonologically from a non-DM *well*. An example of a DM *well* is "Sue<sup>3</sup>: uh in Europe I've been I lived a year in Germany, well ten months technically." Therefore, phonological features are not a restricted criterion for a DM. However, in my study, phonological features are sometimes good indicators for the judgment of discourse markerhood.

#### 3.2. Syntactic position

Schiffrin suggests that a DM "has to be commonly used in initial position of an utterance" (1987:328). However, Erman (1986) finds that DMs such as *I mean* and *you know* are most frequent in the middle of an utterance or turn. Brinton (1996) agrees that markers appear sentence medially and finally as well, although it is often said that markers are restricted to sentence-initial position. In my study, DMs do not have restricted positions in an utterance.

#### 3.3. Syntactic optionality

Discourse markers are almost universally considered as syntactically optional. For instance, Schiffrin (1987:328) claims that "it has to be syntactically detachable from a sentence;" Brinton (1996:34) claims that one characteristic of DMs is that they "occur either outside the syntactic structure or loosely attached to it and hence have no clear

<sup>1</sup> The examples on *but* and *well* in this section are drawn from my data. For the transcription convention, please refer to Appendix B.

<sup>2</sup> John is an American participant in my study.

<sup>3</sup> Sue is an American participant in my study.

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