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Investigating acquisition of discourse markers through a developmental learner corpus

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ABSTRACT

Despite the importance of discourse markers for pragmatically effective communication, surprisingly little research has been conducted on the acquisition of these markers by immigrant second language learners. The present paper approaches this understudied research area by using a developmental learner corpus (Belz and Vyatkina, 2005, 2008) to examine discourse marker use by one naturalistic adult language learner for one year. Results show very different patterns of use and development among three focal discourse markers. You know was heavily overused by the participant although its occurrences declined by 50% over the year; like increased from almost zero uses at the beginning of the year to over 2300 occurrences per 100,000 words by mid-year, then dropped by 50% by the study's end; well was not used at all as a discourse marker. Possible reasons for these patterns are discussed, including the participant's need for pragmatic coping devices as a naturalistic language learner, or the more nuanced functions of well compared to like and you know. Overall, the paper aims to show the usefulness of developmental learner corpora as a tool for studies of pragmatic acquisition, as well as the importance of considering naturalistic learners in our picture of second language pragmatics.

1. Introduction

Within the field of second language pragmatics, the study of discourse markers has proved fruitful in understanding differences in the ways that native speakers and language learners use conversational language. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that not only do discourse markers (DMs) perform essential and nuanced functions in speech, but that non-native speakers very often do not use these pragmatic markers in the same way that native speakers do (Fung and Carter, 2007; Gilquin, 2008; House, 2009; Müller, 2005; Romero Trillo, 2002). Due to the relationally important functions of DMs, their underuse or misuse in conversation can lead to semantic or pragmatic misunderstandings, which can in turn have negative consequences for non-native speakers who do not use these markers in expected ways (Lam, 2010; Wierzbicka, 2003). The continued study of non-native speaker (NNS) learning and use of discourse markers, therefore, has important implications for helping language learners to communicate effectively in a target-language community.

While a good deal of research has been conducted on DM use in native speech and even English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, surprisingly little research has been aimed at the development of discourse marker competence in one important group: immigrant language learners. Immigrant learners are, by definition, those who intend to make their home permanently in a new country, with the ramification that they will likely benefit by gaining and applying pragmatic

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knowledge in the host discourse community. For those immigrants who wish to participate in their host country's culture, discourse markers can serve both as an aid in the expression or negotiation of meaning, and as a signal of competence in the host culture's dominant language.

To my knowledge, only one major study investigates DM use among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners (Hellermann and Vergun, 2007), and its focus is on reporting use rather than describing development of competence. This lack of longitudinal, development-oriented research may simply reflect trends in the study of pragmatics in general, as there seem to be very few longitudinal studies of pragmatic development (Taguchi, 2010; Vyatkina and Belz, 2006). This curious dearth of truly developmental studies means that while we are beginning to understand how and why speakers (both native and non-native) "do" pragmatics through language use, we do not yet know how this competence might develop in second language speakers.

The present study seeks to narrow this gap by following the discourse marker development of an immigrant second language learner in the United States. The focal participant was recorded in informal conversation every two weeks over a one-year period, allowing for dense, longitudinal analysis of his use of discourse markers over time. Below, I outline existing research on NNS use of discourse markers, introduce the three focal DMs, and then explain the methodology used in the study, a developmental learner corpus. I then introduce the study and its results, suggesting implications for pragmatic development as well as paths for future developmental learner corpus research.

2. Discourse markers and non-native English speakers

Discourse markers are perhaps one of the most ambiguous of pragmatic phenomena, having been described and categorized differently by various authors over the past three decades (Aijmer and Simon-Vandenbergen, 2011; Müller, 2005; Schourup, 1999). In general, they are considered the pragmatic 'glue' of conversation (Schiffrin, 1987), indexing the speaker's attitude toward the listener and the discourse (Aijmer, 2002; Fraser, 1990). Although DMs do not in themselves contain grammatical or semantic meaning (Romero Trillo, 2002), they are multi-functional and can be crucial in expressing a speaker's intentions (Müller, 2005; Fung and Carter, 2007). As Wierzbicka (2003) notes of discourse markers, "their meaning is crucial to the interaction mediated by speech. . .If learners of a language failed to master the meaning of its particles, their communicative competence would be drastically impaired (p. 341)." Although they elude simple definition, for the purposes of this study discourse markers will be considered pragmatic devices which convey no semantic meaning but which perform expressive or interactional functions in discourse.

Because of the vital pragmatic functions that discourse markers serve, researchers in second language pragmatics have begun to study non-native speakers' competence in using DMs in conversation. However, these have almost always been conducted in EFL and/or classroom settings. Romero Trillo (2002), for example, used a corpus-based approach to compare English discourse markers used by Spanish adults and children to those used by British and American adults and children. He found that while the native-speaking and non-native-speaking children used English DMs in similar ways, the Spanish adults used common English discourse makers very infrequently and used uncommon discourse markers more frequently than native speakers. This lack of English pragmatic competence on the part of the Spanish adults could lead to communicative failures, Romero Trillo concluded, and should be remedied by appropriate and scaffolded instruction in discourse markers.

Perhaps the most in-depth exploration of differences in NS and NNS use of discourse markers is Müller (2005), in which the English speech of German university students is compared to that of American university students. As part of a larger corpus collection project, Müller elicited descriptions of a film from students by asking them to describe the plot to a classmate, a scenario designed to simulate a genuine communicative context. She found significant differences in the usage of the four focal markers, *like*, *you know*, *well*, and *so*. *So* was used twice as often by the native speakers as the non-native speakers, and *like* and *you know* were used almost five times more frequently by NSs as NNSs, although interestingly, the German students used *well* twice as often as the native speakers in its discourse marker function. Müller suggests that discourse markers can only be properly taught through native speaker contact and outside of a classroom, and that much more research is needed to understand NNS learning of them.

Fung and Carter (2007) also examined DMs in an EFL context, this time among undergraduate students in Hong Kong. By comparing the speech of these students to that of native British English speakers using the CANCODE corpus, Fung and Carter found that the NNS students used certain functional discourse markers (including *but*, *ok*, *because*) more than the NSs. At the same time, the Hong Kong students significantly underused frequently occurring DMs from the British corpus such as *really*, *sort of*, *well*, *right*, and *actually*, resulting in a wide discrepancy between NSs and NNSs in both frequency and breadth of discourse marker use. The authors believe that, although Hong Kong English speakers should not necessarily strive to emulate British English, they should receive more instruction on discourse markers to facilitate their real-world interactional competence.

Several authors have taken advantage of the Louvain Corpus of Native English Conversation (LOCNEC; De Cock, 2004) and Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage (LINDSEI; Gilquin et al., 2010) to compare British English with European learners of English. In particular, Gilquin's (2008) study of what she calls hesitators—pauses, smallwords, and miscellaneous hesitation devices—provides further confirmation that EFL learners tend to use a smaller range of discourse markers than native speakers. In this case, French EFL learners overused *well* at the expense of other markers with comparable functions, something that Gilquin (following Hasselgren, 2002) calls the "lexical teddy bear" effect. Similarly, Aijmer (2011) found that Swedish learners of English used *well* more frequently than British native speakers as a speech