

Discourse Markers in Impromptu Speeches of Chinese EFL Learners of the Advanced Level

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Abstract—Following a function-based model proposed by Fung and Carter in 2007, this research examined the pattern and functions of discourse markers in 21 impromptu speeches delivered by Chinese EFL learners of the advanced level in the 2017 “FLTRP Cup” English Public Speaking Contest. Quantitative methods were used to generate the patterns of discourse markers. Interviews were conducted with three speakers to help explain the patterns. Excerpts from the transcription of the impromptu speeches were used to analyze the functions of the most used discourse markers. The finding shows that discourse markers were used frequently in the context of impromptu speeches but still not as frequent when compared with the use in native settings. The most used discourse markers, *and*, *but*, *so*, *um/uh*, and *actually*, performed interpersonal, referential, structural, and cognitive functions. These functions together contributed to the communication between the speaker and the audience.

Index Terms—Chinese EFL learners, discourse markers, impromptu speech.

I. INTRODUCTION

Discourse marker is a linguistic unit crucial to communication. In the past few decades, researchers of different research backgrounds have referred to it using different terms and have explored it taking different approaches. Generally speaking, the study of discourse markers had taken coherence perspective, cognitive perspective and relevance perspective to examine the patterns and functions of discourse markers [1]. These researches were mostly carried out among native speakers in the context of daily conversations or in the pedagogical settings [2]. Few researches have focused on discourse markers used by Chinese EFL speakers, especially in the context of impromptu speeches, which displays language use.

This study took 21 impromptu speeches from the 2017 “FLTRP Cup” English Speaking Contest, one of the most acknowledged public speaking competition in China, as the material to examine how discourse markers were used by Chinese EFL speakers at the advanced level. Besides, three of the 21 speakers were interviewed to help explain the patterns of discourse markers. The study found that discourse markers are frequently used in the impromptu speeches. The most frequently used ones, including *and*, *but*, *so*, *um/uh*, and *actually*, performed interpersonal, referential, structural, and cognitive functions for the ultimate purpose of

communication. These findings could give implications for further study of discourse markers used by Chinese EFL learners. Moreover, with the use of discourse markers by native speakers as a reference, speakers are suggested to pay more attention to the functions of discourse markers to generate speeches of better communicative effects.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Discourse Markers

The study of discourse markers has taken three main approaches—a grammatical-pragmatic perspective [3], a cognitive-pragmatic perspective based on the relevance theory [4], and an interactional sociolinguistic approach that concerns discourse coherence and their semantic features [1]. The linguistic unit that discourse marker refers to is therefore given different names, definitions, features, categorizations and functions by researchers from the different perspectives. Frameworks and theories are also developed therefrom.

Discourse marker seems to be a “fuzzy concept” [5]. No single unified definition has been suggested and accepted. Schiffrin [1] used “discourse marker” to refer to such a linguistic unit as “sequentially-dependent units of discourse”. Various other terms are used by other researchers throughout the past few decades. The most important ones include pragmatic particle [6], discourse particle [7], pragmatic expression [8], discourse connective [4], discourse operator [9], and pragmatic marker [10], [11]. The researcher will adopt the one given by Schiffrin as the working definition in this study since his definition is effective in analyzing how the addresser and addressee can put form, act, and meaning together to generate communication [2].

The lack of a unified definition put the analysis of the features of discourse markers in a more important position as a test for membership.

Initially, four basic features were recognized [5]. Later in 1996, Brinton proposed a much longer list. He included phonological and lexical, syntactic, semantic, functional, and sociolinguistic and stylistic features [11]. Even though this list was “tentative and sketchy”, the last two features are “predominantly descriptive” and “not suitable as a test for class-membership” [5]. It is acknowledged that features do not necessarily occur in all discourse markers. Yet generally speaking, if a marker contains more features, it can be viewed as a more typical discourse marker.

Based on the definitions and features, discourse markers can be classified into different categories for more effective discussions.

One of the early classifications categorized these language

units into four types of “pragmatic markers” [10]. But this categorization rejected some typical members like *well* and *so* on the one hand [12], and failed to examine discourse markers on its relationship with discourse coherence on the other. To avoid these defects, a more specific classification was proposed from the coherence perspective [1] and has been widely accepted [2]. Functions of discourse markers were later included as a standard to classify to facilitate the discussion and application of discourse markers. Interpersonal function, referential function, structural function, and cognitive function were recognized as the four major types. This classification is in line with those of the most cited researchers such as Schiffrin [1], Brinton [11], and Müller [13] in the study of discourse marker. In this paper, the researcher adopted this classification to study discourse markers in the context of impromptu speeches.

B. Empirical Studies of Discourse Markers in EFL Context

The important functions of discourse markers in native English indicate that it could also be crucial for foreign language learners to acquire [13]. ESL and EFL speakers also need to notice that using discourse markers consistently could have textual and interpersonal effects thus facilitate communication under certain circumstances [14]. The success in foreign language learning is graded in terms of how similar the linguistic behavior of the learner is to that of the native speakers. Apparently, discourse markers are one of the behaviors and serve as the standard of evaluation [13].

It is true that research on discourse markers has experienced rapid development since the late 1980s [15]. However, only in recent years has the scope of the study been broadened to include non-native speaker discourse as well [2], [13], [15]. Although there are still debates going on about the theoretical aspect of discourse markers, the discipline seems to have matured to investigate discourse markers in languages other than English, including Indonesian by Wouk [16], and Spanish by Cuenca and Marin [17]. Besides, some researches broadened the scope to other language varieties, i.e. learner language [18]. However, the present studies within EFL context mainly focused on the acquiring of such competence and the description of the performance.

In the native Chinese context, studies are more focused on the description of the command of English discourse markers at different levels in daily conversations [19] or the use of discourse markers in classroom settings [20]. However, registers examined by researchers are limited. Few researches were done in the context of public speaking, especially on impromptu speeches made by EFL speakers of the advanced level. The ones that did research on discourse markers in public speaking mainly adopted the grammatical-pragmatic approaches and the perspective of relevance theory. This research would, therefore, combine the coherence perspective and cognitive approach and try to fill the gap.

C. Impromptu Speech

Impromptu speech is a form of public speaking. Public

speaking is “a deliberative type of communication” [21]. Before delivering a speech, the speaker will set the goal of speech, prepare the speech, finally, move on to delivery. It is commented by Dance that public speaking is the art of using oral language to communicate with others at the same time [22]. Lucas defined public speaking as a way of making one’s ideas public, which means to share them with other people and to influence other people [23]. It is usually considered as a unified strategy aimed to achieve a specific effect, informative, persuasive, or others. At the same time, the speeches are to be clear, interesting, credible and appropriate for the audience within a given time limit. As for the feature of public speaking, as analyzed by Miller, should include speaker, message, audience, channel, feedback, noise, and the setting [24]. All these are necessary in delivering a good public speech. For impromptu speeches, they have such above features of public speaking but are spontaneous and are presented without written scripts.

Even though public speaking is thought to be a form of one-way communication [25], it still has a lot in common with the daily exchange of conversations. They both require speakers to organize thoughts logically and deliver the message to the audience in a suitable manner. Besides, speakers should adjust their speaking according to the listener’s feedback. Schramm [26], using his content analysis approach, analyzed that both the speaker and listener have a field of experience that can last for long time by means of experience with the increase of education among people. The shared experience between speakers and listeners is a way of producing effective communication. However, there are indeed differences between public speaking and daily conversations. Public speaking is “more highly structured” and includes “more formal language” [23]. Moreover, it is usually delivered in the more restrained manner with the speaker deliberately holding back vocalized “*um*” and “*eh*”.

Previous studies on public speaking and impromptu speeches have mainly focused on style, genre, etc.. Danielle analyzed the pause in speech, pointing out that there is certain regulation in distribution of pause and duration of pause from the perspective of syntactic structure of the speech [28]. Yet, few researches have focused on how discourse markers promote interaction in impromptu speeches.

III. METHODOLOGY

Based on the literature reviewed above, two research questions were raised to study discourse markers in impromptu speeches in Chinese EFL speakers of the advanced level. Textual data were collected from the impromptu speeches of the 2017 “FLTRP Cup” English Public Speaking Contest. The collected data were transcribed verbatim, coded, categorized and analyzed under a function-based framework proposed by Fung and Carter [2]. Besides, to better analyze the reasons and functions for the using of discourse markers, online interviews were conducted with three of the 21 speakers. Data from the interview were transcribed to facilitate the analysis.

A. Research Questions

After reviewing the literature and identifying the research

gap, the researcher proposed research questions as follows:

- 1) What are the patterns of discourse markers in impromptu speeches of Chinese EFL speakers of the advanced level using that of native speakers in daily conversations as a reference?
- 2) What are the functions of the most frequently used discourse markers in impromptu speeches of Chinese EFL speakers of the advanced level?

B. Data Collection

There are altogether two kinds of data collected in this research. The textual data to analyze patterns of discourse markers were retrieved from the clips in the official website of “FLTRP Cup” (ucourse.unipus.cn) and then transcribed. Interviews were used to facilitate the analysis of function.

The 2017 “FLTRP Cup” English Public Speaking Contest is one of the most influential English public speaking competitions in China. Winners of this competition present speeches of both good content and proficiency in language, thus can be regarded as the advanced English learners. In this research, the 21 impromptu speeches delivered by the top 24 contestants in this competition were used as materials. Three speeches were excluded because they were not made by native Chinese speakers. Specifically, these impromptu speeches were delivered based on the video clips or paragraphs. The topics are often controversial ones, thus persuasion through reasoning or story-telling is the major content of the speech. Contestants are given 15 minutes to prepare before the three-minute speech. This length of preparation time is only enough to work out a structure, not to write down specific words and phrases. Besides, scripts or frameworks were not allowed to bring on stage. In total, 64 minutes and 14 seconds of speeches were transcribed, yielding a material for a study of 9929 words.

The retrospective interview was conducted with three of the 21 speakers—F, W, and C. They ranked, respectively, the first, second to ninth, and tenth to twenty-fourth in the competition. These interviews were carried out in Chinese, mother tongue of the interviewees, for them to better express themselves. Due to time limit, the researcher only conducted online interviews. Each conversation lasted only for about 10 minutes. First of all, the researcher played several parts of the participants’ impromptu speech, especially the parts with the use of discourse markers. Then questions concerning the reason for the choice of discourse markers were asked. Interviews were only partly transcribed and translated into English by the researcher when needed for the analysis.

C. Analytical Framework

Discourse markers are meaningful units in discourse. Their functions could give us implications for future studying. This research is based on a functional classification, adopting the list of Fung and Carter [2] to analyze the patterns and functions of discourse markers (Table I). This framework is effective in that it “provides a descriptive model to analyze DMs on different levels” [29].

D. Procedure of Analysis

For this analysis, quantitative and qualitative methods were combined.

TABLE I: FUNCTION-BASED FRAMEWORK (BASED ON FUNG AND CARTER [2])

| Categories | Functions | Examples |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Interpersonal Category | mark shared knowledge | you know, you see, see, listen |
| | indicate attitudes of the speaker | well, I think, you know, sort/kind of, like, just, to be frank |
| | indicate a stance towards propositional meanings | basically, actually, really, obviously, absolutely, exactly |
| | indicate responses like agreement, confirmation, and acknowledgement | OK/okay, oh, I see, right/alright, oh great, yeah, yes, great, sure |
| Referential Category | cause | because/cos |
| | consequence | so |
| | contrast | but, and, however, yet, nevertheless |
| | coordination | and |
| | disjunction | or |
| | digression | anyway |
| Structural category | comparison | similarly/ likewise |
| | signpost the opening and closing of topic | now, OK, right, well, by the way, let’s start, let me conclude the discussion |
| | Indicate sequential relationships | firstly, finally, next, secondly, then |
| | mark topic shifts | so, now, and, what about, how about |
| | mark continuation of the current topic | yeah, and, cos, so |
| Cognitive category | summarize opinions | so |
| | denote thinking process | well, I think, I see, and |
| | reformulate | I mean, that is, in other words |
| | elaborate | like, I mean |
| | mark hesitation | well, sort of |
| | assess the listener’s knowledge about utterances | you know |

The researcher first transcribed the videos verbatim. Then, the transcription was coded under the framework proposed by Fung and Carter [2]. The coding was accomplished by the researcher and two other coders who had been instructed the coding scheme and explanations of the basic definition, features, and functions of discourse markers. Later, the coding was carried out by the three coders independently and simultaneously. After coding 10% of the material, the coders compared notes and the rate of concordance reached was 74.6%. For the differences, the coders discussed and settled on the same standard. Then they moved on to code another 15% of the material. After the independent coding, the concordance rate of coding was checked again and reached 91%. Later, coding for the rest material was finished by the researcher alone following the agreed-upon standard.

After the coding, the researcher counted the numbers of discourse markers in each speech and the number of discourse markers for each specific category and then calculated their frequency. A more detailed examination was done studying the co-text qualitatively to explore the functions of discourse markers performed in the discourse. Results of discourse markers in a sub-corpus of CANCODE (Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English) (460055 words in size) reported by Fung and Carter [2] were

used as a reference for the analysis. Interview data were combined in this phase for better understanding.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

A. Patterns of Discourse Markers

To answer the first research question about patterns of discourse markers in impromptu speeches of Chinese EFL speakers of the advanced level, the number and frequency of the discourse markers are explored. Discourse markers occur frequently in impromptu speeches, with a similar proportion of markers performing interpersonal, referential, and structural functions but only half the amount performing cognitive functions. Table II shows the general features of discourse markers in the material.

TABLE II: GENERAL INFORMATION OF THE DISCOURSE MARKERS

| Number of speeches | Total words | Total discourse markers | Sentences | Discourse markers per sentence | Discourse markers per 1000 words |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 21 | 9929 | 575 | 610 | 0.94 | 57.91 |

Generally speaking, discourse markers appeared quite frequently in the material. In the 21 speeches, there were 575 occurrences of discourse markers, which amounted to 57.91 discourse marker tokens per 1000 words. The sentence number was calculated by Readability Analyzer 1.0. There is an average of 0.94 discourse markers in one sentence. However, the number of discourse markers per 1000 words is still significantly smaller than that in CANCODE, which reached 110 [2]. This is partly because data collected in CANCODE involve much interaction between the speakers, adding markers like *yeah*, *right*, and *oh* that mark responses to the list. Besides, in speeches, contestants are widely trained to refrain themselves from using too many *well* or *uh* to show their fluency. Moreover, the acquisition of discourse markers was perhaps not yet complete by EFL learners.

Markers of different categories also appeared at different levels of frequency as is shown in Table III.

TABLE III: FREQUENCY OF DISCOURSE MARKERS IN DIFFERENT CATEGORIES

| Category | Total number | Frequency (per 1000 words) | Percentage in all discourse markers |
|---------------|--------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Interpersonal | 152 | 15.31 | 26.43% |
| Referential | 163 | 16.42 | 28.34% |
| Structural | 181 | 18.23 | 31.49% |
| Cognitive | 79 | 7.96 | 13.74% |
| Total | 575 | 57.91 | 100% |

Discourse markers that serve interpersonal, referential, and structural functions appear at similar levels of frequency, with less than 20 but more than 15 markers every 1000 words. Discourse markers of structural functions occurred most frequently, accounting for 31.49 percent of the total markers. Markers of interpersonal functions take up 26.43 percent whereas markers of referential functions take up 28.34 percent of the total number. Discourse markers for cognitive

functions occur significantly less frequently than the other three categories. It is about half the frequency of the other ones. Of every 1000 words, only 7.96 markers of this kind are used.

Besides, in the interview with W, when he talked the reasons for the difference in his use of discourse markers of different categories, he said,

“In my speech...I stress my personal stance not only to give personal opinions...but also to avoid being blamed...It is a personal view, and personal views differ. There is no right or wrong...Our teacher once trained us about restraining the use of *well*, *um*, the so-called ‘fillers’. She said showing too many signs of thinking would be treated as less capable in the speaking competition. After the training, we would rather pause and say nothing than revealing any signs of thinking.”

Another interviewee, F, gave different descriptions of her mentality in the interview. She said,

“Every time I am not so sure or get a little confused myself, I would naturally use *I think*, *so*, *right*, and words like these to collect myself and either paraphrase and conclude the previous points or start some new points. The use of *firstly*, *also*, etc. is for similar reasons. I need to be clear myself. These words are rather to help get my own logic clear.”

In impromptu speeches, speakers are required to take a stance and show their opinions. The speakers would choose to mark themselves and their roles in the interaction with the audience. The use of markers for interpersonal function not only allows the speaker to give information and their own reasoning but also promotes the effectiveness of communication. Moreover, both marking the logical connection between sentences and giving the audience signs of the speech structure would help achieve more efficient communication.

Ultimately, the purpose of these impromptu speeches is to communicate with the audience and the judges to win high score. By adopting discourse markers of the first three categories, speakers can guide and constrain the audience’s interpretation of their utterances. The markers can disclose their communicative intention to facilitate the successful communication with the audience in their impromptu speech.

However, revealing the cognitive state of the speaker, as is mentioned by interviewee W, is a sign of breaking the coherence and continuity of utterances. This happens in impromptu speeches because the sentences and contents are not fully prepared. But speakers would use other tactics, pause or finish the sentence even it is wrong, to hide such inconsistency and disfluency. This explains the comparatively small proportion of markers of this kind.

Throughout the speeches, 52 different markers were spotted by the researcher. Of all the discourse markers used by the speakers, 18 of them occurred more than five times. They are *and*, *but*, *so*, *uh/um*, *actually*, *because*, *like*, *just*, *I think/thought*, *really*, *firstly*, *also*, *let’s say*, *however*, *you know*, *for me*, *well*, and *second* as listed in Table IV below.

These 18 different markers added up to 526 occurrences, accounting for 91.48% of the total markers. The other 34 different markers make up only 8.52% of the total number. Thus they are not listed and discussed. The discourse marker that occurs most frequently is *and*. It consists of 22.61% of all

occurrences, twice the proportion of the second most used marker *but*. *So* and *uh/um* have similar frequencies with the proportion of 7.83% and 7.65% of all markers used. *Actually* consists of 5.56% of the total number. These five discourse markers alone account for more than half of the discourse marker occurrences in the material. These five markers are also among the 23 most used markers from CANCODE listed by Fung and Carter [2], suggesting that the use of EFL learners' discourse markers is close to that of native speakers.

TABLE IV: THE MOST FREQUENT DISCOURSE MARKERS

| Discourse markers | Number | Frequency (per 1000 words) | Percentage |
|-------------------|--------|----------------------------|------------|
| and | 130 | 13.09 | 22.61% |
| but | 65 | 6.55 | 11.30% |
| so | 45 | 4.53 | 7.83% |
| uh/um | 44 | 4.43 | 7.65% |
| actually | 32 | 3.22 | 5.56% |
| because | 31 | 3.12 | 5.39% |
| like | 30 | 3.02 | 5.22% |
| just | 30 | 3.02 | 5.22% |
| I think/thought | 23 | 2.32 | 4.00% |
| really | 19 | 1.91 | 3.30% |
| first/firstly | 13 | 1.31 | 2.26% |
| also | 13 | 1.31 | 2.26% |
| let's say | 11 | 1.11 | 1.91% |
| however | 10 | 1.01 | 1.74% |
| you know | 9 | 0.91 | 1.57% |
| for me | 7 | 0.71 | 1.22% |
| well | 7 | 0.71 | 1.22% |
| second | 7 | 0.71 | 1.22% |

Still, there are differences in language use between EFL speakers and native speakers. First of all, frequencies for most markers are half the number of those in the list retrieved from CANCODE. This indicates that learners might not have fully acquired the pragmatic use of such language units. Yet, as is listed in Table V, the markers *but*, *I think*, and *actually* have similar frequencies when compared with the native use. The marker *actually* even occurred more often in the impromptu speech context. These markers in EFL impromptu speeches, in all, take up a proportion larger than that in the native context.

TABLE V: CONTRAST BETWEEN FREQUENCIES OF DISCOURSE MARKER

| Discourse marker | Number of discourse markers per 1000 words in impromptu speeches | Number of discourse markers per 1000 words in CANCODE |
|------------------|--|---|
| and | 13.09 | 25.50 |
| so | 4.53 | 9.60 |
| but | 6.55 | 6.90 |
| actually | 3.22 | 1.90 |
| I think | 2.32 | 2.30 |

The frequency of *and* is 13.09 per 1000 words in impromptu speeches whereas the number reaches 25.50 in CANCODE. However, *but* has the frequency of 6.55 per 1000 words in impromptus whereas 6.90, only slightly more, in CANCODE. *Actually* goes to another extreme, with the occurrence of 3.22 times per 1000 words in the impromptu material whereas only 1.90 per 1000 words in CANCODE.

For *but*, contestants may have used it to stress and

emphasize on their points while showing their comprehensive way of thinking. Interviewee C alone used seven "*but*"s in his speech. In the interview, he mentioned, "Saying *but* sounds strong...stressing the points I made. It's like calling for attention from the audience."

Indeed, speeches in competitions require contestants to attract attention from the audience. By using *but* to contrast, speakers can not only get the ideas across to the audience but raise their attention the point following *but*.

The more frequent use of *actually* by L1 Chinese speakers can also be explained by communicative purpose. *Actually* is often used to express certainty. Delivering impromptu speeches requires contestants to at least appear and sound certain about what they are talking about, which would give the audience a sense of certainty to believe in what the speaker is saying.

I think indicates the personal attitude of the speaker. This might be comparatively used more frequently not for communicative purposes, but because of the influence of speakers' first language—Chinese. L1 Chinese speakers using the deliberative function of *I think* (whereas the native English speakers did not as frequently) may have transferred their use of *I think* from their L1 "*wo juede*" [20].

B. Functions of the Frequently Used Discourse Markers

It is listed in Table IV that discourse markers occurring at the top five frequencies are *and*, *but*, *so*, *um/uh*, and *actually*. To answer the second research question, the following section details the core functional paradigm of discourse markers in the context of impromptu speeches based on the functional model proposed before. Examples are retrieved from transcriptions of the 21 speeches to illustrate that different functions performed by the discourse markers can all contribute to facilitating communication between the speaker and the audience.

1) *And*

As the discourse marker that appeared most frequently in the impromptu speeches, *and* has performed a variety of different functions, including referential ones that denote coordination, structural ones to mark topic shift or continuation of a certain topic, and cognitive ones to denote thinking process.

First and most significantly, *and* performed the structural functions, signposting the opening and closing of a topic.

(1) Have you ever heard about Daka? Ok, the answer is obvious. *And*, um, actually Daka is a, um, daily, daily check-in (number 151).

In this excerpt, *and* has signaled the opening of the speaker's main body of the speech. Previously, she was simply engaging with the audience and did not start her own statement. The *and* here prepared both the audience and the speaker for the starting of the new topic later. In the sentences after *and*, she described what Daka is to approach her topic.

And also functions to signal the shifts in topic.

(2) Losses and, and eh, failures might be, eh, might appear to be a curse in life, but they are actually blessings in disguise. *And* now to my fellow contestants some of us might not be able to proceed into the next round after today's competition (number five).

Before *and*, the contestant was still talking about the body

part of the speech with a focus addressing the good side in “losses and failures”. After *and*, she switched from discussion of the “losses and failures” to the description of the specific situation at hand, which is a shift. Without *and* as a sign, reminding the audience that there might be such a shift in topics, it might be too abrupt for the listeners to understand.

Besides, the continuation of a current topic can also be marked by *and*.

(3) I learned about pragmatics, learned about semantics. *And* more importantly, I learned that there are few outstanding linguists in China right now (number 79).

In the first sentence of this excerpt, the contestant was sharing the knowledge she has learned in college by listing the names of fields in linguistics. What follows still belongs to the topic of sharing the things she has learned after entering college. The *and* here is a notice in advance. It gave information to the audience that the speaker might continue to talk about the same topic but with different contents.

2) *But*

Compared with *and*, *but* performs much simpler functions despite its high frequency of occurrence. It is used for referential functions to show contrast between language units.

(4) “Hey son, are the judges impressed by your performance?” “Well, I hope so.” Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I was texting with my dad, *but* not by a word *but* by all the emojis (number 29).

The two *but* in this excerpt of impromptu speech were all meant to show contrast between meanings. The author shared with the audience a dialogue between his father and him in the beginning. He later disclosed to the audience that contrary to the common idea. This conversation did not happen via words. The language unit “not by a word” is quite the opposite from what the audience believed to be true. With *but* as a marker of contrast, it became easier for the audience to comprehend.

3) *So*

So is also a widely used discourse marker. It performs both referential and structural functions, especially for the purpose of constructing the structure of discourse.

So can be used as a simple conjunction to denote the consequences.

(5) I play guitar but I play very badly. *So* every time when I play guitar my roommates want to kill me (number 72).

In this sample, the author was trying to tell the audience the effect that musical instruments could bring to other people. He first stated the fact that he could not play the guitar very well. Later, he shared with the audience that because of his terrible skills, his roommate would show resentment every time he plays the guitar. *So* here informed the audience in advance of the consequence coming next.

So as a discourse marker can also mark the topic shifts.

(6) First, let's see what will libertarianism tell us? *So* today if the violinist got the violin, he will play beautiful songs (number 72).

In the example above, the author started with talking about the libertarianism view towards the problem stressed in the given topic. However, he later shifted the topic to analyze the

actions of the violinist and the rich guy. *So* gave the audience a hint to follow this frequent shifts of topics.

So can also signal the summary of a whole paragraph.

(7) When I have the golf balls there, I could better, uh, plan my life. And when I have the pebbles, my health, there, it is, it is actually also beneficial for my, uh, golf balls, for my study. *So* these things are not isolated. They can actually be reciprocal (number 79).

In case (7), the first few sentences are illustrating with detailed examples of how different elements in life can influence one another. *So* marks that the previous discussion has come to an end and prefaces a summary of the opinions. This gives the audience a signpost of the conclusion to facilitate understanding.

4) *Um/uh*

The functions performed by *um/uh* are rather fixed. For most of the times, it performs a cognitive function to denote the thinking process of the speaker.

(8) However, that proves the urgency of us to, *um*, take advantage of the fear (number 138).

Um in this sentence is a vocalization uttered by the speaker when he was trying to figure out what exactly is urgent for us to do. It gives the speaker time to plan and phrase the sentence as a hesitation device and also shows the audience that the speaker is thinking. On the one hand, it might prepare them to follow the speaker's line of thoughts. On the other, it might leave the impression that the speaker is not as fluent.

5) *Actually*

The marker *actually* is used to indicate attitudes and stance of the speaker towards the situation he or she is talking about.

(9) If we take a look in the ancient time, the frescoes of Michelangelo in the ceiling of the church in Rome, it was *actually* originally for the religious purpose (number 29).

Actually in this sentence enables the speaker to show his certainty towards the propositional meaning of the sentence. The speaker was sure that the original purpose of the fresco was for religion. The use of *actually* gets the certainty of the speaker across to the audience.

V. DISCUSSION

Following the function-based model which combines relevance theory and cognitive perspective, this research found that discourse markers are first of all, frequently used in the impromptu speeches studied. They are not rejected by speakers although there are personal differences in the preference of markers.

Still, these discourse markers are generally not used as frequently when compared with the use of native speakers and the range not as diverse.

The description of the pattern of discourse markers used by L1 Chinese speakers is in line with the study of similar subjects in other settings. In pedagogical settings, for example, there is a “restricted range of DMs used” and the frequency of markers “reflect focus on the literal or propositional (semantic) meanings of words” [2]. In the context of the daily conversation, the number of discourse markers used by native English speakers is averagely larger than that of L1 Chinese speakers [27].

The discrepancy in the amount of occurrences could be attributed to the negligence in the acquisition of pragmatic use of discourse markers. In impromptu speeches, people have previously emphasized too much on the precision and conciseness of the language. They prefer that impromptu speeches are delivered as elaborately as the prepared ones. However, one of the major functions of talking and speaking, especially in public speaking setting, should be communicating, sharing ideas and influencing others [23]. Impromptu speeches would particularly require the “rapid processing of spoken discourse”. That is to say, all the utterances must be generated by the speaker in a very short time in the impromptu speech. But still, a meaningful text should be organized. Therefore, discourse markers, which are not much emphasized and recognized by Chinese speakers even of the advanced level, are actually the relevance constraints imposed on the utterance production and interpretation.

The discourse markers used by the speakers performed the four categories of functions under the analytical framework and helped in constructing better communication on both textual level and interpersonal level. Even though impromptu speech seems to be a one-way communication with only the speaker delivering, it is still crucial for a speaker to engage with the audience and get the information across to the audience. Indeed, cases from the 21 materials showed that discourse markers exploited by L1 Chinese speakers not only “provide contextual coordinates for utterances” [1], but also “encode instructions for processing propositional representations” [30]. Speakers use discourse markers to impose constraints on the audience’s choice of searching for the relevance, ensuring that the audience can learn the meaning with the minimum of effort.

Besides performing the general function to facilitate communication, for markers used in the context of impromptu speeches, some functions are more important and more often performed than others because they achieve better communicative effects. In daily conversations, *yeah, ok*, etc. are frequently used to signal response [2]. However, these are not the major functions needed in impromptu speeches since the direct interaction rarely happens. Functions of signposting opening, closing, shifting, and summarizing of topics, are, on the other hand, more often used. This indicates that for different contexts and communicative purpose, markers of different functions can be used because ultimately, discourse markers are to facilitate communication.

VI. CONCLUSION

In order to contribute to the study of discourse markers to facilitate oral production of Chinese EFL speakers, this research adopted the function-based framework to analyze the patterns and functions of discourse markers in the 21 impromptu speeches selected from the 2017 “FLTRP Cup” English Public Speaking Contest. The discourse markers in the corpus CANCODE were used as a reference to examine learner’s use of discourse markers. Interviews with three of the 21 speakers also helped explain the patterns of discourse markers.

A. Summary of the Major Findings

It was found that the discourse markers were used frequently in the material with 57.91 occurrences for every 1000 words. Yet this number is only half of that in the context of daily conversations of native speakers. Four categories of discourse markers were all covered in the impromptu speeches. Those of interpersonal, referential, and structural functions occurred more frequently, accounting for about 30 percent of the total number. Cognitive markers, on the other hand, were used with only half the frequency of the first three kinds because public speakers are trained to hide signs of thinking to avoid being considered as disfluent in contests. The most frequently used markers in the impromptu speeches are also among the ones most used in CANCODE. As for the functions, discourse markers used in impromptu speeches performed a variety, including interpersonal, referential, structural, and cognitive functions. The performing of these functions together promoted communication and facilitated understanding between the speaker and the audience.

B. Implications

For the theories, findings of this research can, first of all, confirm the previous conclusion that discourse markers used by L1 Chinese speakers have frequent occurrences but not as frequent as the use of native speakers’. Besides, the framework proposed by Fung and Carter [2] initially for pedagogical settings is also proved applicable to analyze discourse markers in impromptu speech. What can be added to this framework is to note that the four categories and the sub-categories are not equally distributed. These functions are performed differently to serve diverse purposes of the specific discourse. The framework should be largely context-bound.

For practical implications, the pattern of discourse markers studied in this research reveals to both the language learner and the trainers of public speaking that some pragmatic uses of discourse markers deserve more attention. To achieve effective communication, speakers could learn to utilize discourse markers rather than avoiding them. The markers are not necessarily negative in their meanings. For speakers to have better command of English or to achieve higher in public speaking contests, improving their ability to use language in culturally, socially, and situationally appropriate ways are necessary [31]. These are not simply for the cohesiveness of discourse and effectiveness in communication. More importantly, the ultimate goals of making impromptu speeches should be for achieving interpersonal and cross-cultural interactions.

C. Limitations

Admittedly, this research has its limitations.

First of all, the material used in this research and the corpus used as a reference are not quite equivalences. The sizes of the samples are not equivalent. This research is conducted using a relatively small sample. Only 21 speeches of 9929 words were used as the material. This sample is significantly smaller than that of CANCODE, rendering the results weak and less valid. Moreover, the contexts of the samples are different. The one studied in this research is impromptu speech whereas the one used as a reference is the daily

conversation. Even though the influence of different contexts have been taken into consideration, and explained in the analysis, a study on more corresponding samples might reveal the subject matter more accurately.

Secondly, the framework used in this research was originally designed to analyze discourse markers in pedagogical settings. Indeed, this framework is one of the most developed frameworks that combines coherence theory and the cognitive approach. But it is not the perfect match for the study of one-way communications like public speaking. If one could read and learn enough about discourse markers and have enough experience of doing researches, he might be able to generate a theory that is more applicable to specific speech context based on bottom-up observations.

Despite these limitations, this research still provided implications for both academic study of discourse markers of L1 Chinese speakers and using discourse markers to improve performance and facilitate communication in impromptu speeches.

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