

THE INTERACTION OF DISCOURSE MARKERS AND PARALINGUISTIC  
CUES IN SPOKEN ENGLISH

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**Annotation:** *This article examines the interaction between discourse markers and paralinguistic features in spoken English, arguing that meaning in discourse is inherently multimodal. While traditional approaches view discourse markers such as well, so, and actually as structural or pragmatic elements, this study demonstrates that their interpretation is highly dependent on paralinguistic cues including intonation, stress, rhythm, and pauses. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from discourse analysis, pragmatics, and interactional sociolinguistics, the article integrates perspectives from scholars such as Schiffrin, Fraser, Blakemore, Crystal, and Gumperz. Special attention is given to the concept of contextualization cues and the role of delivery in shaping meaning. The findings support the view that discourse markers and paralinguistic features operate as a unified interpretative system, reinforcing the idea of language as a dynamic and multimodal phenomenon in real-time communication.*

**Keywords:** *discourse markers, paralinguistics, multimodal discourse, spoken English, intonation, pragmatic meaning, contextualization cues, interactional sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, communication.*

Discourse markers such as *well, so, actually, and you know* are a pervasive feature of spoken English. Traditionally, they have been analyzed as linguistic elements that organize discourse and signal relationships between utterances. However, their meanings often appear vague, context-dependent, and difficult to define in isolation. This raises an important question: how do discourse markers convey meaning in real communication?

According to this article, discourse markers cannot be understood solely as linguistic components. Rather, their perception develops through interaction with paralinguistic elements such as rhythm, emphasis, intonation, and pauses. This research shows that meaning in spoken English is intrinsically multimodal and dynamically created in interaction, as seen through discourse markers and paralinguistics as a unified system.

Discourse markers are "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk," according to early research by Deborah Schiffrin<sup>1</sup>. Instead of adding lexical meaning, this perspective highlights their function in discourse structure. In a similar vein, Bruce Fraser contends that discourse markers connect an utterance to its context by indicating relationships among discourse segments<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Deborah Schiffrin, *Discourse Markers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 31-35

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Fraser, "Pragmatic Markers," *Pragmatics* 6, no. 2 (1996): 167-190.

Diane Blakemore suggests that discourse markers restrict interpretation rather than adding propositional substance from a relevance-theoretic standpoint. To put it another way, they don't contribute semantic information; instead, they help the hearer digest an utterance<sup>3</sup>. Although these methods offer insightful information, they also draw attention to a drawback: discourse markers seem to be semantically underspecified, necessitating additional cues for complete interpretation.

Vocal and nonverbal components like intonation, pitch, stress, pauses, and speed are examples of paralinguistic qualities. According to David Crystal, intonation frequently shapes how an utterance is understood beyond its literal meaning by revealing details about a speaker's attitude and emotional involvement<sup>4</sup>.

John J. Gumperz introduces a particularly significant idea: contextualization signals, which are characteristics like intonation, rhythm, and timing that indicate how discourse should be perceived in context. In interaction, these cues work in tandem with verbal patterns to create meaning.<sup>5</sup>

Despite extensive research, discourse markers and paralinguistic traits are frequently handled independently, they work as a cohesive interpretative framework. While paralinguistic elements clarify and enhance their meaning in real-time communication, discourse markers offer procedural advice.

Discourse markers can be viewed as multimodal signals from the standpoint of a coupled system. The discourse marker (lexical form), intonation and pitch, time and pauses, stress, and rhythm all interact to produce their meaning, which is not fixed in the lexical item itself. This viewpoint coincides with Erving Goffman's interactional approach, which highlights that the way something is expressed is a crucial component of its meaning. Discourse markers are therefore interpreted based on their paralinguistic reality, which either activates or alters their pragmatic function.<sup>6</sup>

This section examines how certain discourse markers' meanings change based on paralinguistic characteristics in order to demonstrate this unified system.

## 1. "Well"

The marking well is frequently linked to topic shift, hesitancy, or mitigation. However, delivery has a major role in its precise function, for instance:

A: *Will you be attending the meeting?*

B: *Alright. I have a lot of work to do.*

The pause that follows clearly indicates reluctance. Reluctance is suggested by a declining tone. Overall, this results in a more gentle rejection. Instead, it might indicate a neutral transition or a change in topic if good is generated rapidly with rising intonation.

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<sup>3</sup> Diane Blakemore, *Understanding Utterances: An Introduction to Pragmatics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 85-90.

<sup>4</sup> David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 172-178.

<sup>5</sup> John J. Gumperz, *Discourse Strategies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 130-152

<sup>6</sup> Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), pp. 124-159.

This lends credence to the idea that paralinguistic signals influence the marker's perception and that the marker itself is underspecified.

2."So"

The marker can indicate the following examples of inference, conclusion, or topic management: *You're heading out, so.*

Simple confirmation is in a neutral tone, growing intonation is for astonishment or incredulity, stressed so suggests assessment or judgment. In this case, intonation establishes whether it serves as an emotive stance marker or a logical link.

3."Really"

Actually, the marker is frequently used for contrast or correction, for instance, *"Actually, I don't agree."*

Delivery that is neutral is for factual rectification. Strong emphasis on the actual is a blatant contradiction and gentle disagreement with a softer tone. According to politeness theory, speakers use verbal and paralinguistic techniques to lessen potentially face-threatening behaviors, which helps to explain this difference.

The significance of paralinguistics is further supported by conversation analysis. Meaning develops through sequential arrangement and timing in contact, according to academics like Emanuel Schegloff.<sup>7</sup> Similar to this, Gail Jefferson's transcription norms emphasize pauses, overlaps, and stress as elements that are important for analysis.<sup>8</sup> These components are essential to the interpretation of discourse markers; they are not incidental. This idea is further supported by Harvey Sacks' research, which shows that meaning is derived from even the smallest elements and that conversation is methodically structured.<sup>9</sup>

Discourse markers by themselves do not convey consistent or comprehensive meanings, as the analysis shows. Rather, how linguistic form and paralinguistic manifestation interact determines how they should be interpreted. This explains why discourse markers, which lack or minimize paralinguistic cues, frequently appear confusing in written language. Speakers try to make up for this lack in written communication by using formatting, punctuation, or digital alternatives like emoticons. Nevertheless, the richness of spoken conversation is only partially replicated by these techniques. According to this viewpoint, miscommunication can occur when paralinguistic signs are absent or misunderstood. This reinforces the necessity of examining discourse markers within a more comprehensive multimodal framework.

Discourse markers in English should not be regarded as solely linguistic components. It has shown that their meaning develops through interaction with paralinguistic elements

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<sup>7</sup> Emanuel A. Schegloff, *Sequence Organization in Interaction: A Primer in Conversation Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1-25

<sup>8</sup> Gail Jefferson, "Glossary of Transcript Symbols with an Introduction," in *Conversation Analysis: Studies from the First Generation*, ed. Gene H. Lerner (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), pp. 13-31

<sup>9</sup> Harvey Sacks, *Lectures on Conversation*, vol. 1, ed. Gail Jefferson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 3-15

including intonation, pauses, and stress, drawing on knowledge from discourse analysis, pragmatics, and interactional sociolinguistics. We can better understand how meaning is created in spoken communication by considering discourse markers and paralinguistics as a unified system. This method emphasizes how language is intrinsically multimodal and recommends that future studies keep examining the dynamic interaction between linguistic and paralinguistic resources.

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