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Discourse Markers in the Classroom

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Discourse markers (DMs) such as *well*, *you know*, and *I mean* are extremely frequent in spoken interactions (McCarthy, 2010) and are key indicators of fluency (Hasselgreen, 2004). The ability to use common DMs in a naturalistic way is a basic skill for students. However, teachers and coursebooks often neglect DMs in favor of lexis that is more traditional and grammar-based lessons, and DMs may be frowned upon and stigmatized when seen as signals of disfluency. This paper discusses the meaning(s) and usages of DMs in spoken English and suggests that attention to DMs should be a constant feature of all speaking classes. The author details practical ways in which DMs can be taught to students, including analysis of short video clips, comparison with the L1, teacher monitoring, and intervention in spontaneous student conversations.

談話標識（DM；Well, you know, I mean など）は会話において非常に頻繁に用いられ（McCarthy, 2010）、流暢さの重要な指標であり（Hasselgreen, 2004）、DMを自然に使用する能力は、語学学習者にとって基本的なスキルである。しかし、DMは従来の語彙や文法の指導を重視するため、教師や教科書によって扱われないことが多く、非流暢さを示すものとして好まれなかったり、否定的なものと見なされることもある。本論文では、会話におけるDMの意義と使用法について議論し、すべてのスピーキングクラスでDMに常に注意を払うべきであることを提案する。どのようにDMを学生に教えるのかについての具体的な方法を、ビデオクリップの分析、母語との比較、学生の自然会話における教員のモニタリングと介入などを含めて紹介する。

When enquiring about a person's foreign language proficiency, the question posed usually focuses on speaking ability. That is, we usually ask someone, "Can you *speak* French / German / Japanese?" The question takes the same form in other languages: *Parlez-vous français? Sprechen sie Deutsch?* As Wood (2010, p. 87) remarked, "Speech is the primordial form of human communication, predating the earliest efforts at written communication by thousands of years." Yet, despite the centrality of speaking, the nature of spoken language has been largely hidden from analysis until comparatively recently. Memory limitations have meant that analysis of spontaneous spoken interactions was not possible in the past and language researchers had to rely on intuition or analysis of the written form of language. The situation changed in the second part of the 20th century, with the advent of recording technology. Halliday (1994) remarked, "Perhaps the greatest single event in the history of linguistics was the invention of the tape recorder, which for the first time captured natural conversation and made it accessible to systematic study" (p. xxiii).

This technology has revealed the nature of spoken language and the ways in which speakers use language to cocreate meaningful interactions. The insights gained are of vital importance to inform language teachers of the things that learners need to know in order to interact in a naturalistic way. Analyzing spoken language has given valuable insights into such things as turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), repair (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977), formulaic utterances (O'Keefe, McCarthy, & Carter 2007; Taylor, 2012) and discourse markers (DMs). In the following section, I will focus on the significance of DMs to meaningful language interactions.

Discourse Markers

Any analysis of natural, spontaneous spoken interaction will quickly reveal the ubiquity of certain words and expressions. The most commonly occurring of these are items such as *well, you know, like, I mean, and actually*. These words are referred to by terms such as DMs, pragmatic markers, and smallwords. McCarthy (2010) referred to the extremely high frequency of these words in daily speaking and found that *you know* accounted for over half of all occurrences of the word *know* in a large general corpus. Other DMs have similar levels of frequency.

Hasselgreen (2004) gave a working definition of what she called *smallwords*: "small words and phrases, occurring with high frequency in the spoken language, that help to keep our speech flowing, yet do not contribute essentially to the message itself" (p. 162). Hasselgreen's definition highlights a vital point for language teaching, namely that DMs do not have a single, simple meaning that can be taught to learners or be looked up by them in a dictionary. Despite the frequency of these words in daily conversation, there is real difficulty in teasing out the various meanings of DMs. Heritage (2015, p. 88) noted that the DM *well* has been extensively researched over many decades by numerous scholars, which gives some idea of the depth and complexity of this DM. The same difficulty is true for other common DMs. For language learners, this poses a problem. As Hasselgreen remarked,

> Smallwords have traditionally been neglected in the language classroom, partly through genuine difficulties involved in teaching them . . . and the fact that they are not generally found in the written language and the written word has traditionally enjoyed a higher academic status. (p. 238)

In addition to their polysemy and context-bound nature, other factors render DMs difficult to teach. Firstly, DMs appear to be somewhat inaccessible to intuition. Lindsay and O'Connell (1995) reported that transcribers routinely and systematically omit DMs (as well as hesitations and restarts) from transcripts of spoken discourse. Omission of DMs also occurs in other contexts. For example, in reported speech, DMs are unlikely to appear in direct reports. Norrick (2016, p. 104) gave an example from a spoken narrative (Excerpt 1). Norrick observed the unlikelihood of the reporter remembering that the original utterance contained five repetitions of the word *and* in line 15 and also noted the unlikelihood of the DM *y'know* (or *you know*) in line 13 also being remembered from the original utterance, and this DM would thus be ascribed to the reporter, not the original utterance.

Excerpt 1

12   Kyle   and he said,
13   I suddenly felt so ill, y'know
14   and I was shaking,
15   and, and, and, and, and obviously started running a temperature and,

A further example of systematic omission of DMs can be seen in the subtitling of spontaneous speech on television programs. It seems to be the case that DMs are often omitted when subtitle writers are pushed for screen space and time (see Appendix A for examples).

DMs' articulation in speech (often uttered more quickly and quietly than the surrounding discourse), their local relevance, and the omission of DMs in writing seems to make DMs slip beneath the awareness of language users, which may explain the marginal nature of DMs in the consciousness of many teachers and curriculum designers, despite the centrality of DMs in spoken language.

There is also often a negative stance taken towards DMs, manifesting itself in various ways. The terms such as *discourse markers* and *pragmatic markers* have a ring of academic respectability, but other terminology is less validating. DMs have been called *fillers*, suggesting valueless padding, and other even less flattering terms have been employed: *throwaways*, *exasperating expressions*, *pollution* (cited by Gilquin & De Cock, 2013).

Hasselgreen (2005) stated, "There is still a tendency for non-native teachers to regard the use of these as a weakness, and not something they would encourage in their students" (p. 238). Speakers may openly criticize DM usage by others even while expressing their criticisms, such as Watts's (1989) detailed occurrences of this practice as indicated in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2

M: 'you know' is-is a (0.6) a terrible- (0.5)

W: but you know all the footballers use it (0.5) all the time (p. 231).

Watts pointed out that W's utterance is not a citation of the DM under critical scrutiny by the speakers, but rather an instance of a DM used in its natural environment. Schiffrin (1988) also detailed the negative evaluative stance often taken towards DMs and suggested reasons why *you know* and *I mean* are stigmatized.

Thus, despite the high frequency of DMs in conversation, they are relatively underrepresented in teaching materials and syllabi. The reasons for this neglect may be: (a) DMs are characteristic of spoken language, and written language is privileged in many language programs; (b) DMs are extremely polysemous and context dependent, making teaching difficult; (c) DMs also seem to fall beneath a cognitive horizon, with many people being unaware of their ubiquity in spoken language; and (d) DMs may be stigmatized as disfluency markers and their use discouraged by language teachers. Understanding these reasons may help teachers and syllabus designers understand that these apparently mundane items are unlike other items of the lexicon.

Discourse Markers: Meanings

Not all items of the lexicon of language users are equal in their accessibility. Some mundane words are easier to define and understand than others. The verbs *run* and *walk* are relatively easy to differentiate compared to *see*, *look*, and *watch*. The common DMs found in English are similarly hard to define and therefore teach, being (a) features of spoken language and therefore impermanent, (b) highly context dependent, and (c) capable of omission without affecting the propositional content of an utterance.

Although no definitive account of the meanings of common DMs is possible here, research by scholars has teased out some of the main features of the most common DMs. The following section details some of these findings.

Well

Well is an extremely frequent DM in English that has been extensively researched. *Well* is commonly found in the turn initial position and serves a variety of interactional purposes. Some of the main findings are summarized by Heritage (2015): "Well-prefaced turns will have an indirect, 'insufficient' or otherwise 'complex' relation to a prior, will involve disagreement or disaffiliation in relation to the prior, will be expanded, will initiate a new departure (including within narratives) or involve 'resuming'" (p. 89).

In a concrete example, Schegloff and Lerner (2009) referred to *well*-prefaced responses to *wh*-questions in which "*well*-prefaces operate as general alerts that indicate nonstraightforwardness in responding." (p. 91.) Excerpt 3 illustrates the practice: Two friends are having a telephone conversation and talking about the possibility of playing golf that afternoon (line numbers in the original).

Excerpt 3 (Schegloff & Lerner, 2009, p. 93.)

12	Jon	What time yih wanna ↑go↓:.
13	Guy	We:ll?
14		(0.5)
15		hWe'd haftuh call'n find o:ut
16		(0.9)
17	Guy	yihknow (.) whe:n

In this case, Jon's question would clearly presuppose an answer from Guy deciding upon a time to play golf. However, Guy's response deviates from this trajectory and he answers in a nonstraightforward manner, "We'd have to call them to find out when [they can accommodate us]." The *well* in line 13, according to Schegloff and Lerner (2009), serves to warn the recipient that the question is not going to be answered in the expected way, that is, a time when they will play golf. These are the kinds of functions that *well* can perform.

You Know

As with *well*, there has been a wealth of scholarship investigating the meaning and usages of this extremely common DM. In a survey of the literature, Hellermann and Vergun (2006) stated,

> *You know* has been noted as a marker focused on the recipient, used when a speaker is assessing the relationship of his/her message to the recipient's local status of knowledge . . . *You know* has also been claimed to be used to present given information . . . or when a speaker orients to changing the information status from the recipient's perspective to given. (p. 159)

These definitions may be rather too abstract to be accessible to language learners. Schiffrin (1987) detailed one of the uses of *y'know* that may be more teachable:

> In sum, *y'know* is used to create a situation in which the speaker knows that the hearer shares knowledge about a particular piece of information. Because it may induce a hearer to attest to that knowledge, *y'know* also displays the speaker as an information provider who depends upon hearer reception of information. (p. 274)

That is to say, where generally known or understood information is presented, *y'know* may be introduced into an utterance to check that comprehension is occurring on the part of the hearer and then the talk may proceed.

I Mean

In Schiffrin's (1987) account, the expressions *y'know* and *I mean* are included in the same chapter. This is related to their function in spoken interaction. Schiffrin explained, "*I mean* marks speaker orientation to own talk, i.e. modification of ideas and intentions. . . . *I mean* maintains attention of the speaker" (p. 267), and continued, "*I mean* marks a speaker's upcoming modification of his/her own prior talk" (p. 296).

In short, *I mean* can be taught to students as a phrase to be inserted while working through an utterance in real time, rather than deploying silence or L1 expressions as work is done on the reformulation.

Like

The DM *like* is an extremely polysemous word. It has socially ratified meanings such as *I like sushi* and stigmatized meanings, such as its quotative function (see Romaine & Lange, 1991). The negative assessments of this DM notwithstanding, its use is widespread in the spoken form of the language. McCarthy, McCarten, and Sandiford, (2006) gave an overview of the functions of *like* based on corpus analysis: (a) similarity, 34%; (b) highlighting, 18 %; (c) exemplifying, 16%; (d) quoting, 10%; (e) approximating, 5%; and (d) all other meanings, including the verb *like*, 18%. In my experience, the DM *like* is one of the main language items that students returning from studying abroad have acquired, entirely in keeping with the language use of English L1 young adults. *Like* is also one of the more heavily stigmatized markers.

Actually

The word *actually* can appear in various turn positions (see Oh, 2000). In a turn initial position it can combine with the DM *well*, the canonical order being *well + actually*. Swan (1980, section 9) briefly stated that *actually* is used (a) to correct misunderstandings (e.g., "Hello John, nice to see you again" "Actually, my name is Andy"), (b) to introduce unexpected information (e.g., "Can I speak to Mary?" "Well, she's on holiday, actually"), and (c) to break news gently in apologies (e.g., "How did you get on with my car?" "Well actually, I'm terribly sorry, I'm afraid I had a crash"). The underlying use of *actually* seems to indicate that a speaker understands that the prior speaker had some expectations of the current speaker's talk. The initial speaker in these exchanges expected (a) the person to be called John; (b) that Mary would be available; but (c) did not expect that the car had been in a crash. Whether the expectations were met or not is secondary to the fact that expectations about content were perceived to be present. (For a comparison of the differences between *actually* and another similar DM, *in fact*, see Oh, 2000).

This has been a brief view of some of the meanings and usages associated with the most common DMs. Other explications can be found concerning other common DMs such as *oh* (Heritage, 1984) or *uhm* as markers with interactional meaning rather than empty fillers (Schegloff, 2010).

Teaching DMs

From the above, it can be appreciated that DMs occupy a unique place in language teaching. Despite their ubiquity, they are largely unobserved in daily discourse, often stigmatized when they are observed, extremely polysemous and multifunctional, and highly context dependent. Yet, they are central to facilitating smooth interactions and their absence can lead to impressions of disfluency. It is the omission of DMs that may impede progressivity in conversation rather than the occurrence of mundane grammar errors such as singular–plural agreement. Such errors occur even in the speech of native speakers and are often left unrepaired in spontaneous talk (see Campbell-Larsen, 2017). Some suggestions for teaching DMs to language learners are described in the following section.

Use of Video Data

DMs are prime examples of living language, and as such do not naturally lend themselves to the permanence of the printed word. Teachers should attempt to source video material of spontaneous spoken interaction in the target language. Sites such as YouTube have a wide variety of materials available. In my case, the BBC discussion program *Dateline London* proved a valuable resource. Readily available on YouTube, with good sound quality, it features spontaneous, naturalistic interactions replete with DM usage. Familiarization with an episode, transcription of segments of talk, and repeated viewing and analysis can habituate learners to the sheer frequency of DMs in English and demonstrate the temporal, phonetic, and sequential characteristics of common DMs. Appendix B shows my transcription of short sections of an episode (the original video is available at http://youtu.be/Jl3T-b2s9LA). Students watched the contextualized sections repeatedly and then analyzed the meanings and usages of the DMs. By contrast, many language-learning conversation videos on YouTube are devoid of DMs, another case of systematic omission. I have sourced YouTube videos both in English and in Japanese purporting to show daily conversation, but they are notable for the fact that DMs are usually entirely absent or unnaturally sparse.

It is also useful to source publicly available videos of spontaneous interactions in the students' L1. This will demonstrate the ubiquity of DMs in all languages and may serve as a useful point of comparison. For example, the turn initial DM *well* in English bears some similarity to the Japanese turn initial marker *ma.*

Demonstrating DMs in Use

For teachers who are able to use their students' L1, a useful comparison can be made between marked and unmarked utterances. For example, a student asks a question in Japanese regarding weekend activities. I respond with an account of a social event, rendered in Japanese, but completely devoid of Japanese markers. The student then re-asks the question, again in Japanese, and I give the same answer in terms of content, but this time using Japanese markers such as *ma, etto, anno*, or *nanka* (roughly, *well, you know, I mean*, or *like*). The students can then be asked to give a show of hands to indicate which version, marked or unmarked, was preferable. When I have done this activity, the students almost uniformly chose the marked version as preferable. The exercise can be repeated with the same question asked, this time in English, and the teacher can give two versions of the same answer, first without any DMs and second with DMs. Again, the students can be asked which is preferable. In my experience, students usually chose the marked version, but sometimes a small number of students have disagreed with this consensus, perhaps reflecting some innate negative stance towards DMs. A further extension of this activity can be to run through the sequence again, either in Japanese or in English, but this time to mark the answer with DM from another language. In my case, this has taken the form of answering in Japanese but marking with German discourse markers such as *nat*ü*rlich* [naturally], *eigentlich* [actually]*, and *und so weiter* [something like that]. This serves to illustrate the dissonant effect caused by using DMs in one language to mark speech in another language, a regular feature of Japanese students' talk in English, which often includes L1 markers such as *etto, ano,* and *jya* (roughly corresponding to *well, you know,* and *like*). English speakers habituated to Japanese DMs may overlook them, but to anyone not familiar with Japanese DMs, this practice can be disconcerting.

Intervention

Rather than teaching DMs in a stand-alone class lesson and then moving on in subsequent lessons, DMs should be a feature of all class activities based upon speaking. The teacher should constantly monitor ongoing interactions for DMs use. Because of the spontaneous nature of DM usage in unfolding interactions, I suggest that direct teacher intervention during classroom interactions can help students habituate themselves to DM usage. The excerpt in Appendix C was taken from a video recording I made during a classroom speaking activity. The target of the activity was to practice creating interactive questions that consist of a question, one or two exemplar answers, and a general extender such as *something like that* (see Overstreet, 1999, for an account of these expressions and their functions in English discourse). The sequence unfolds over several iterations of the same question and answer adjacency pair. The students then proceed to a third iteration of the sequence in lines 27-31, this time making full use of the appropriate markers.

This excerpt shows the kinds of real-time interventions that can bring about gradual habituation of DM usage in students. Although time intensive and rather drill-like in nature, I suggest that interventions such as these are the most efficacious means of promoting DM usage. In my experience, by the end of a semester of such instruction, DM usage has usually increased in most students past zero, which is the common starting point of many English language learners in Japanese university settings, regardless of their English level as traditionally measured by written placement tests and other such instruments. To move away from zero DM usage is a vital first step.

Repeated Exposure and Practice

In the preceding section, I recommended that DMs should be repeatedly taught throughout a course, rather than in a stand-alone lesson. Appendix D demonstrates how this can be achieved. Although the ostensible target is verb transformations in present perfect questions, DMs are incorporated into the answer schema, by means of a 5-step template. This schema can be reproduced in all handout materials for speaking activities, whatever the grammar or vocabulary target, to habituate speakers to using DMs.

For a description of the increased usage of DMs by learners after implementing these classroom activities see Campbell-Larsen (2013), which detailed an increase from zero or near-zero DM usage to high frequency usage of selected DMs.

Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to raise awareness of the nature of DMs and suggest some reasons why these important items have been relatively neglected in many language-learning programs in the past. For many teachers, students, and material writers, awareness of DMs is often either absent or extremely patchy. Complexity, extreme polysemy, systematic omission, and stigmatization differentiate DMs from many other items of the lexicon of a language. Some of the meanings of some of the main English DMs were sketched out but these were, by necessity, extremely brief. Teachers wishing to teach DMs are encouraged to investigate the relevant literature. Finally, some concrete suggestions for classroom applications were provided. DM usage, when repeatedly attended to, is teachable. Despite being challenging, in my experience learners generally adopt a very positive stance towards incorporating DMs into their active speaking repertoire. I can also testify from my own foreign language learning that the ability to use

DMs naturalistically in a second language is a deeply satisfying accomplishment and a concrete sign of development of interactional skills.

Bio Data

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Appendix A
Omission of DMs

The following excerpts were transcribed from the BBC current affairs program Dateline London broadcast on Sunday, July 24, 2016. The transcript of the actual utterance is given along with its corresponding subtitle.

Excerpt A1

```
01. G:    I'm interested in if it happens because >you know<
02.       there are those who think (.) those who voted for
03.       Brexit were going to get
```

Excerpt A1 Subtitle

I'm interested in if it happens because there are those who think those who voted for Brexit

Excerpt A2

```
01. M:   I think politically people who voted for Brexit (.)
02.      hhh. >I mean< it.it has to be seen to be beginning
03.      to happen
```

Excerpt A2 Subtitle

And politically people who voted for Brexit. It has to be seen to be beginning to happen.

Excerpt A3

```
01. J:   That was a complete bluff. I mean there is no way
02.      that the Scot. Scots Nats would call another
03.      referendum.
```

Excerpt A3 Subtitle

That was a complete bluff. There is no way that the Scot Nats would call another referendum.

Appendix B
Discourse Markers

Watch the video clips and discuss the meanings of the following discourse markers:

G: Well, some Arab commentators suggested

G: Jonathon?

   J: Well, it's ah, that's absolutely right, it's

3.   P: On the [secular side   ]

            [Well, I mean, ah], it's not an Arab country

4.   G: Jonathon

      Well, I. I, I'm not saying that there is a

5.   B: Yes, you know, unemployment in in Egypt more than 20

6:   B: It is, it is you know those very very sophisticated

7.   P: Even if they can, you know, it didn't need Twitter to start the French revolution

8   J: It's incredibly scary and, you know, sitting here in London it's very easy to watch these images on the TV

9:   G: They haven't said it in, erm, you know in any kind of specific way

10   G: Coincidentally no doubt this week, I mean….ah, i, i,i they are the kingmakers, aren't they?

11   B: And also the Ame- you know, the west lost more than two trillion dollars until (Sacerdoti, 2011)

Appendix C
Teaching Discourse Markers: Classroom Transcript. Intervention

```
01. S1:  What time do you usually go to bed on weekends?
02.      Eleven o'clock or twelve o'clock or something like
03.      that?
04. S2:  About one one thirty something like that
05. S1:  Oh great.
06. S1:  [Laughs]
07. S2:  [Laughs]
08. T:   Ok a:nd (.) you forgot the discourse marker We::ll
09. S2:  Ah:: [Matta] ((Oh Again))
10. T:       [Okay ] one more time
         ((Lines omitted))
11. T:   Okay same question, this time use a discourse marker
12.      in your answer yeah?
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```
13.        ((Lines omitted))
14. S1.    What time do you usually go to bed on weekends?
15.        Eleven o'clock twelve o'clock and so on?
16. S2.    I mean [about ]
17.             [Uh uh¯]We::ll Ha ha OK. One more time
18.        question. start with well yeah okay? So and because
19:        she gave you a time but it's not your time you can
20:        say well actually=
21: S2:    =Oh
22. T:     That's a good way to start it. She says eleven or
23.        twelve you say well actually one. That's a way.
24.        Okay so kay one more time (.) and so on it's a more
25.        spoken style (.) something like that.
           ((Lines omitted))
26. T:     Okay right one more time. Question.
27. S1     What time do you usually go to bed on weekends?
28.        Eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock something like that?
30. S2:    Well actually about one or one thirty something like
31.        that.
```

Appendix D
Present Perfect Questions

Choose the correct form of the verb in brackets and then ask your partner.

Answer the questions. Use discourse markers in your answers and give a five-step answer.

Example:

Q: Have you ever ***done*** any adventure sports, you know, like skydiving or bungee jumping or anything like that?

1. DM.   Well, actually, _____
2. Answer: Yes, _____
3. DM.   I mean, _____
4. Information: I did parasailing when I was in Australia. It was scary but exciting.
5. DM: You know? _____

1. Have you ever (break) a bone, or (have) stitches or anything?
2. Have you ever (be) to a foreign country?
3. Have you ever (eat) Thai food or some other kind of spicy food?