

Study on the Use of Discourse Markers by Chinese College Students in Prepared English Speeches

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Abstract—As typical speech phenomena, discourse markers are words or expressions which mainly play a procedural role in the process of language production and comprehension, including conjunctions, adverbs, prepositional phrases, and interjections. The employment of discourse markers contributes to the success of communication between the speaker and the hearers. This study makes quantitative and qualitative analyses on the 50 prepared English speeches made by the advanced EFL learners in authoritative English speaking competitions in China. The features and quality of their use of discourse markers are found. And it is expected to shed light on further studies in the teaching and learning of discourse markers.

Keywords—discourse markers; prepared English speeches; the advanced EFL learners

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication is a way of exchanging information, news, ideas, and feelings. According to Hybels and Weaver, it is made up of various elements: senders, receivers, messages, channels, feedback and setting. There are different types of communication and delivering a speech to an audience belongs to public communication, in which the sender (speaker) sends a message (the speech) to receiver (audience) (1986: 18-22). The speech delivered is a highly structured message; sight and sound are usually channels which are exaggerated because the voice of the sender or speaker is louder and his or her gestures are unreserved to influence the audience. However, compared with daily conversations, the speaker receives limited verbal feedback though the audience especially judges in a speaking competition will ask questions at the end of the speech. Besides, in the process of making a speech the speaker is actually doing monologue, occasionally receiving applause. It is evident that the setting is mostly formal.

In addition to the basic characteristics of public communication, each speech made in speaking competitions is also a display of the contestant's language proficiency. The communicative purpose is to provide the most convincing evidence for supporting the contestant's position on the given topic, and to impress the judges to believe that his opinions are the most reasonable and then to accept and support them. This kind of communication requires the best effect achieved by elaborate language. Discourse markers

used in it can not only give judges a good guidance about what message is delivered and where the discourse is moving, but also direct the way of reasoning to arrive at the desired effect. When paying attention to spoken language, one might notice the frequent appearance of "small words" in speech. The occurrence of *well*, *you know*, *and*, *but*, *so* and others is a typical speech phenomenon. These words are termed discourse markers (henceforth DMs) although there are various definitions, names and functions of them given by different scholars because of diverse study perspectives and objectives. How DMs work in this communicative context should be explored.

In this study, fifty prepared speeches made by prize-winners of English speaking competitions serve as the data to carry out a survey on the frequency of occurrence of different types of DMs. These prepared English speeches are mostly taken from the authoritative website of "21st Century Cup" from which videos and texts of the previous speeches can be downloaded freely and books of "CCTV Cup" which are published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (Kang Sushan, Jing Liming & Fan Weiwei, 2006).

As is known to all, prepared English speeches made by college students in speaking competitions is one kind of subject speaking and shares the features of public speaking as well. Although there are still other parts like impromptu speech, question-and-answer or debate in speaking competitions, prepared speech is the focus of the study for it combines both the characteristics of an oral discourse and a written discourse in which DMs will be given close attention. In general, the speeches are concerned with opinions of college students on important domestic and international issues and some issues in their social life, such as globalization, tourism and ecology, college education, dreams and reality, and so on.

In a word, the prize-winners of two competitions represent the highest English speech level of college students in China. The selected speeches of them can be regarded as reliable representatives of the language proficiency of the advanced EFL learners.

II. ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE MARKERS USED IN PREPARED ENGLISH SPEECHES

After a small corpus is set up by collecting 50 prepared English speeches, Word Smith 5.0 and PDF are employed in the present study to find out the frequency of different DMs. The statistical approach to the data of the present study is mainly based on Word Smith 5.0 and PDF files for the purpose of obtaining accurate statistics of DMs and for convenience.

A. Quantitative Results for DMs in Data

After counting the statistics, different frequencies of various DMs are revealed. To compare more clearly, the number of different DMs in the 50 speeches made by advanced EFL learners are also turned into standardized frequencies (shortened s.d. frequency), the number of DMs per ten thousand words. Based on the work done by Word Smith 5.0 and PDF, all the results are shown in "Table I", "Table II" and its diagrams, and "Table III".

TABLE I. GENERAL INFORMATION OF DMs IN 50 SPEECHES

Number of speeches	Tokens	Discourse Markers	Sentences	Number of DMs per sentences
50	26,202	945	1,094	0.86

"Table I" is based on the work done by Word Smith 5.0. It shows that there are altogether 945 DMs used by advanced EFL learners in these 50 speeches. The number of tokens and sentences are 26, 202 and 1, 094 respectively. Taking the total number of DMs and sentences into consideration, the number of DMs per sentence got is 0.86, which means almost every sentence contains a discourse marker. All the figures show that DMs are widely used by advanced EFL learners in their speeches in general.

Firstly, "Table II" shows the distribution of different groups of DMs. According to the classification of DMs discussed in chapter two, there are mainly six categories of DMs in the present study. The frequencies of different groups vary from 278 to 43, and their corresponding standardized frequencies range from 106.1 to 16.4. The "Fig. 1" below demonstrates the distribution clearly:

TABLE II. FREQUENCIES OF DIFFERENT GROUPS OF DMs IN 50 SPEECHES

Groups	Frequency	Sd frequency	Total number of DMs	Percentage
Elaborative markers	278	106.1	945	29.4%
Contrastive markers	192	73.3		20.3%
Temporal markers	187	71.4		19.8%
Inferential markers	179	68.3		18.9%
Fillers	43	16.4		4.6%
Other markers	66	25.2		7.0%

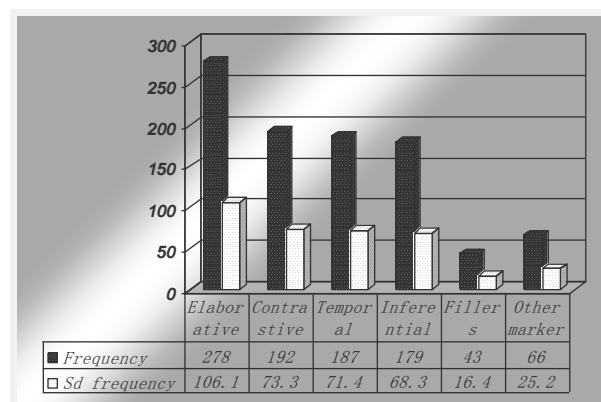


Fig. 1. Distribution of DMs.

Secondly, "Table II" displays the proportion of each group of DMs to the total number of them in the fifty speeches. It is also shown by the "Fig. 2" below. To sum up, among all the groups, elaborative markers have the highest frequency while fillers have the lowest frequency. And the frequencies of contrastive markers, temporal markers, and inferential markers are very close to each other.

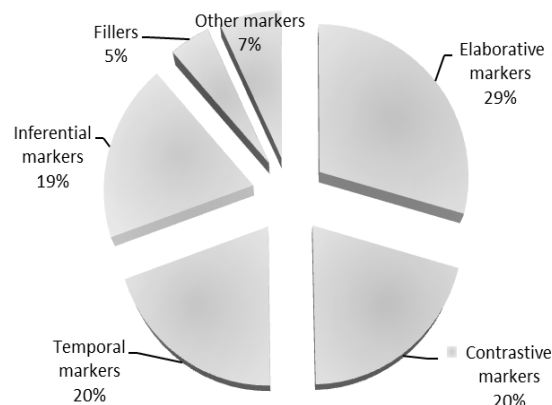


Fig. 2. Percentages of DMs.

TABLE III. FREQUENCIES OF INDIVIDUAL MARKERS IN 50 SPEECHES

Discourse Markers	and	but	however	when	so	if	because	yes	very	total
Frequency	204	126	40	105	51	52	37	11	25	945
Sd. frequency	77.6	48.1	15.3	40.1	19.5	19.8	14.1	4.2	9.5	361

"Table III" exhibits different frequencies of nine individual DMs which are more often used than others in

their own groups. To be specific, and has the highest frequency of 204, with a sd. frequency of 77.6; but ranks the

second-high frequency of 126, with a sd. frequency of 48.1; when is the third to own a high frequency of 105, with a sd. frequency of 40.1. The other DMs such as *if*, *so*, *however*, *because*, *vey*, and *yes* are found to have a comparatively high frequency. In addition, the total number of DMs in the 50 speeches is 945, with a sd. frequency of 361, which indicates there are more than three DMs used within one hundred words by the advanced EFL learners in their speeches.

B. Features of DMs in Prepared English Speeches

On the basis of the analysis of the previous tables and diagrams, the primary features of DMs are revealed as follows:

In the first place, because average frequency of DMs in a sentence is 0.86 and in every hundred words is 3.61, DMs are commonly used by the advanced EFL learners when they are doing prepared speeches in English speaking competitions. Prepared speeches are normally written beforehand, learnt by rote, and delivered fluently, so the contestants who are advanced EFL learners must be conscious of using DMs to facilitate their speeches. The fact that many DMs are used reflects their purpose to impress and convince the audience at the most economical cost of language within so limited time, which is in accordance with Relevance Theory, too.

In the second place, the group of elaborative markers enjoys the highest frequency, far exceeding other groups. Then follow contrastive markers, temporal markers and inferential markers. Noticeably, these three groups of DMs are very similar to each other in frequency, with respective percentages of 20.3%, 19.8% and 18.9%. In Fraser's opinion, DMs signal the relationship of the basic message to the foregoing discourse (Fraser 1996: 167-190). Elaborative markers, contrastive markers, temporal markers and inferential markers can be "signpost" to the basic relationship between the message and the discourse. For this reason, they rank the top four level of high frequency and the three of them are slightly different in their frequencies.

In the third place, fillers are found to have the lowest frequencies among all the DMs in prepared speeches of English-speaking competitions. Its standardized frequency is only 16.4, which means there are only about one filler used within 1,000 words in these speeches. Those contestants don't use such markers in their speeches too often, because unlike daily conversations, those speeches are delivered by contestants only, which resembles monologue. For instance, the filler *um* is often used when one is thinking about the question the other side raises and when one is trying to prolong the time to make a response. But in speaking competitions contestants prepare speeches carefully in advance. It is not necessary for them to employ DMs that characterize daily conversations. Another reason is that speeches of this kind requires formal language, the contestants have to give the audience a clear direction about where the speech is going, and the basic message should also be conveyed clearly to the audience throughout the speech. Take *you know* as an example, it appears only once in the fifty contestants' speeches. However, fillers do exist.

According to Jucker, they are employed to signal how a discourse should be managed for the audience (1993).

Lastly, among all the individual DMs studied, *and* has the highest frequency of 204, with a sd. frequency of 77.6. The use of it is almost 2 times than *but* and 19 times than *yes*. In Wang Lifei & Zhu Weihua's corpus-based study, *and* is found to be most commonly used by Chinese English learners in retelling stories, and making conversations and dialogues (2005). Despite the discourse differences between conversations or dialogues and public speeches, *and* is extensively employed by Chinese students orally. This is maybe because *and* serves a lot of functions in both interactive discourse like conversations or dialogues and monologue discourse like public speaking (Dorgeloh 2004: 1761-1779).

C. Quality of DMs in Prepared English Speeches

As is shown above, DMs used by the advanced EFL learners in speaking competitions are great in number as a whole. Are they appropriately employed? The quality of the use of DMs will be analyzed in terms of their positions and diversity.

Regarding the position of DMs within a discourse, it is accepted that DMs are generally supposed to be at the beginning of a sentence. Only some of them are found in the medial and even fewer in the final positions. For instance, expressions like *I mean* and *you know*, which are closely studied by Schiffrin, are most frequently positioned in the middle of an utterance (1987, 2001).

Nine particular DMs — *and*, *or*, *but*, *however*, *when*, *so*, *if*, *because*, *yes* are closely examined for the reason that they have higher frequencies and their different positions can be detected closely. The total number of them is 582, taking up 61.6% of all the DMs in the fifty speeches. Except for the fact that few DMs appear in the final position of a discourse unit, these nine DMs are found in every situation of S1. DM + S2, S1, DM + S2, DM + S2, S1 and in the medial position of a sentence. Therefore, it is possible to safely come to the conclusion that DMs used by advanced EFL learners in their speeches have diversified positions. The result may be because prepared speeches often require not only formal usage of words or phrases but also highly structured format to make a more effective way of delivery. Another reason is Chinese learners of English are taught to use various sentence patterns when writing or speaking.

Second, as far as diversity is concerned, many DMs within the same category can be exchangeable under some circumstances without affecting the meaning of the utterance. What has been listed in the classification of DMs in chapter two shows to us that some linguistic expressions have the similar pragmatic function in instructing the audience to choose the inferential route in spite of the subtle differences among them. In these 50 speeches there are roughly 62 types of DMs used by the advanced EFL learners in different frequencies. But there are all together 103 types of DMs are listed by Fraser (Fraser, 1996). This means of all types 60.2% DMs have been employed and 39.8% are left untouched.

More specifically, the percentage of the previous individual DMs in their respective groups will be given to check the diversity. This is based on "Table II" and "Table III" and is shown by "Table IV":

TABLE IV. PERCENTAGES OF INDIVIDUAL MARKERS IN EACH CATEGORY OF DMs

Classification of DMs	Number	Individual markers in the group	Number	Percentage
Elaborative markers	278	and	204	73.4%
Contrastive markers	192	but	166	65.6%
Temporal markers	187	when	105	56.1%
Inferential markers	179	because, so, if	140	78.2%

To sum up, DMs used by the advanced EFL learners in their speeches are not so diversified because near 40% of the total DMs are not employed and those individual markers as *and*, *but*, *when*, *because*, *so*, *if* take over 50% of each classified group. That is to say some DMs are overused and some are underused. The reasons may be two-fold:

For one thing, giving a speech to an audience is a kind of public communication which resembles daily conversation in their common goals to inform or to persuade (Lucas, 2006). In order to communicate more naturally the contestants in the speaking competitions may depend on DMs that are often used orally to give clues to audience for their interpretation. In Chen Xinren and Wu Jue's study, *so* as an oralized DM is much often used than *therefore*, *thus*, *as a result*, *hence* and *consequently* that share the same procedural meaning with *so* but are more formal (2006). In a word, the diversity may be affected by the choice of DMs according to the formality.

For another, DMs are not taught explicitly in language teaching classroom and even excluded from the teaching materials. As a result, Chinese English learners may lack the conscious perception of them. This accounts for the limited knowledge of the advanced EFL learners in choosing appropriate DMs when preparing speeches for their competitions. This is also illustrated and pointed out in both He Anping & Xu Manfei and Li Qiaolan's studies (2003, 2004).

Until now, people have learned the quantitative and qualitative features of the use of DMs by the advanced EFL learners in English speaking competitions. It is concluded that DMs in 50 prepared speeches abound in number and vary in position, which reflects the pragmatic competence of the advanced EFL learners. However, these DMs are not diversified for objective and subjective reasons. They call for attention both in language learning and teaching.

III. CONCLUSION

Among various linguistic phenomena DMs have become one of the highly explored ones, but researches on them are far from being unified, and from being complete. Taking research subjects who are advanced EFL learners attending

English speaking competitions into consideration, our focus should be both the speaker's production of speeches and the audience's interpretation of them. Based on what has been discussed previously, the major findings are as follows:

First, after quantitative investigation into the data, it is shown that DMs are widely used in prepared English speeches as in daily conversations. As a whole, average frequency of DMs in a sentence is 0.86 and in every hundred words is 3.61, which means one DM can be found in almost every sentence and there are at least three DMs used in public speeches within one hundred words.

Second, another finding of quantitative investigation into the data is that different classes of DMs have different frequencies. While delivering a speech, the speaker has to elaborate or explain or reason the message in the discourse himself, so it is not surprising that the highest frequency is found with elaborative markers, followed by contrastive markers, temporal markers, and inferential markers. Among these categories of DMs, each specific DM takes up a large proportion of each group. This concentration of DMs on certain types and on certain individuals reflects that they are not diversely used by contestants in their speeches for some objective and subjective reasons.

Third, combining results of quantitative and qualitative investigations into the data, fillers are found to have the lowest frequencies among all the DMs in prepared English speeches. Particularly, fillers like *you know*, *you see*, *yah*, *um*, *er* are hardly employed in the context of speaking competition due to their informality. On the other hand, formal expressions like *therefore*, *thus*, *as a result*, *hence* and *consequently* have much lower frequencies than oralized *so*; *on the condition that/ in the case* are also used less than *if*. In a word, the choice of DMs differs according to their formality in different communicative context.

Fourth, the qualitative investigation into the nine particular DMs — *and*, *or*, *but*, *however*, *when*, *so*, *if*, *because*, *yes* shows that these nine DMs are found in every situation of S1. DM + S2, S1, DM + S2, DM + S2, S1 and in the medial position of a sentence, which indicates that DMs used by advanced EFL learners in their speeches have diversified positions. And analysis of the examples taken from the data reveals that in the context of public communication DMs play three main functions as introducing contextual implications, increasing strength of the existing assumptions, and contradicting or denying the preceding assumptions. Judging from the diversified positions and various functions of DMs used in prepared English speeches, it is known that the advanced EFL learners can use DMs flexibly.

However, DMs are not taught explicitly in language teaching classroom and even excluded from the teaching materials. As a result, Chinese English learners may lack the conscious perception of them (He Anping & Xu Manfei and Li Qiaolan's, 2003, 2004). The present study shows that even for the advanced EFL learners some DMs are overused and some are underused. In short, the proper use of DMs contributes to successful communication. Nowadays the essential thing in Chinese students' English learning is to

improve their communicative skills. But little attention is paid to the use of DMs, which is a very important tool in communication among native speakers. To improve EFL learners' communicative skills, it is one of teachers' major tasks to instruct students how to apply DMs in communication.

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