

# The Study of Discourse Markers on Passage Reading of College English Test

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**Abstract:** This paper, based on the scholar, Fraser's theory on classifications of discourse markers, targets CET-4 passage reading from 2014.6 to 2019.6 and analyzes the characteristics of discourse marker application. The results present that topic markers, contrastive markers, elaborative markers and inferential markers are distributed in the passage reading of CET-4 with different frequency, among which contrastive markers and elaborative markers are more frequently employed. The research plays key roles in language acquisition and language pedagogy.

## 1. Introduction

CET-4 is a nationwide exam spread in advanced education in China, aiming to test the none-English major students' comprehensive proficiency. Specifically, the ability to write, listen, read and translate are included. Passage reading is the last part of reading comprehension in CET-4, which consist of two passages and ten questions based on the two passages. While, students get used to read passages from sentential point of view instead of discourse perspectives. Hence, this paper mainly studies the textual functions of discourse markers which are presented in CET-4 passage reading.

## 2. Theory on Discourse Marker and Classification of Discourse Markers

Quite a few scholars in the discourse analysis have supplied definitions in regard to discourse markers. Redeker in 1991 defined the discourse markers as linguistic expressions that are used to signal the relation of an utterance to the immediate context with the primary function of bringing to the listener's attention a particular kind of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context.

According to Vande Kopple, discourse markers are a kind of linguistic times which appear both in spoken and written language, and can help the readers or listeners organize, interpret and evaluate the information.

Michael Halliday (1985) divides language into three major metafunctions, and they are ideational, interpersonal and textual respectively. This concept of language function lays the theoretical foundation for DMs (discourse markers).

Fraser (1996) might be the most influential. Based on Fraser, DMs can be classified into the following types: topic markers, contrastive markers, elaborative markers and inferential markers.

## 3. Research Target

This paper takes the CET-4 passage reading from 2014.6 to 2019.6 (33 passages in total) as the research target, by means of the software AntConc and Excel, aiming at analyzing the application characteristics of DMs.

## 4. Analysis Results

The statistics of DMs distributions are analyzed from the perspectives of topic markers, contrastive markers, elaborative markers and inferential markers and how they are presented in the passage will be studied.

### 4.1. Topic Markers

Topic markers, as Fraser sees, are one set of DMs (e.g., before, I forget, incidentally) indicating that

the speaker sees the following utterances as a departure from the current topic. [1] A smaller subgroup of topic markers is seen as focusing attention on a part of the current topic (e.g., in fact, indeed, now; 1988:28). The usage of topic markers in CET-4 are as follow.

Table 1: Distributions of topic markers in CET-4 passage reading (2014-2019)

Topic markers	Figure
in fact	11
now	38
actually	14

As is shown in Table 1, topic markers *in fact*, *now* and *actually* are shown in the passage reading of CET-4. The marker *actually* are the most frequently applied with 38 times in the 33 passages. For instance, in June of 2019, *Now known as "New York's shared space for art and play," the island, which... is closed to cars but open to summer tourists who ...* In this sentence, the word *now* appears at the beginning to remind readers the starting of the statement and from this sentence on, the topic is the island. Besides, another case is *There are now large strips of the country where daycare for an infant costs more than a tenth of the average married couple's income.* And *now* is after *there are*, as a transitional structure, to presuppose what the discourse participants are talking about at any time and provides the contextual information required for comprehension. Furthermore, *in fact* and *actually* are with the similar meaning, and usually they are used in the middle of the sentence. For example, *actually* in the sentence *Once driverless cars are actually available for sale, the early adopters will be the people who can afford to buy them.* and *in fact* in the sentence *In fact*, it isn't ever their primary tool. are used as a topic change marker to presumably serve to relate a single utterance to a property of a longer stretch of discourse and mark the pairwise relations between utterances.

**4.2. Contrastive Marker**

Fraser (1996) considers contrastive markers such as *but*, *conversely*, *nevertheless*, as signals to indicate a denial or a contrast of some proposition associated with the preceding discourse. [2] Fraser classifies the contrastive into two types, including some which signal a sharp contrast in message content (*conversely*, *in contrast*, *on the contrary*) and others which symbolize a sharp but unexpected contrast (*still*, *instead*). Contrastive markers are distributed as follow.

Table 2: Distributions of contrastive markers in CET-4 passage reading (2014-2019)

Markers	Contrastive markers	Figure
A sharp but unexpected contrast	instead	11
	yet	12
	the same	21
	still	32
A sharp contrast	compare with/compare to	12
	but	158
	however	14

In the Table 2, contrastive markers covering the sharp contrast and the sharp but unexpected contrast are both exhibited in passage reading in the 33 passages, among which the figure of *but* appears with the most frequency (147), implying that the sharp contrast are more frequently used in CET-4 such as *compare with* and *compare to*. Besides, the conjunctive *however*, with 13 times, aims to point out the contrastive relationships between the former and the latter sentences. For example, *However, online CBT programs have been gaining popularity ...* Moreover, the markers *instead*, *yet*, *the same* and *still* are employed for 75 times from 2014 to 2019, signifying the unexpected contrast. For instance, *The same can be said of their ability to dominate the corporate boardroom.* The common frequency of contrastive markers suggests that students should locate the transitional expressions with the comparative meanings when reading the passage to analyze the logical relations

among the written discourse.

**4.3. Elaborative Markers**

Elaborative markers are those that indicate that the following utterance “constitutes a refinement of some sort on the preceding discourse” (1996). [3] Specifically the usage of the contrastive markers are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Distributions of elaborative markers in CET-4 passage reading (2014-2019)

Elaborative Markers	Figures
further/moreover/ in addition/next	18
first/in the first place	27
and/also	831

From the table, it is clear that the elaborative marker *and, also* occurs for 831 times in sentences with an orientation of showing the sequence or boundaries of units in the passage, adding information to the former contents. E.g. *It's also not all about work-life balance. Although economic research and previous survey findings have shown that ...in their careers and compete for top executive jobs.* In addition, the reinforcing conjunctions like *further, moreover, next* and the enumerative items such as *first* and *in the first place* are adopted to operate on linguistic levels.

**4.4. Inferential Markers**

Based on Fraser’s theory, the expression like *as a result*, with the function of indicating the force of the utterance is a conclusion which follows from the preceding discourse. In CET-4, the passages are characterized by the following inferential markers.

Table 4: Distributions of contrastive markers in CET-4 passage reading (2014-2019)

Inferential Markers	Figures
after all	4
as a result	5
so/therefore	41

As is seen in the Table 4, *after all, as a result, so* and *therefore* are the representatives of inferential markers to cover the term for relations of result, reason and purpose. In such kind of markers, the conjunctive element *so* and *therefore* are comparatively frequent. E.g. *so* in the sentence *so it's not entirely reliable* signals the conclusion resulted from the proposition or the relations between the two sentences are causal. The case in *above all* is *The tradeoff (交换) might be worth it in some cases; after all, the health and safety of children should probably come before cheap service.* It is used for premise for the deduction of the proposition.

**5. Conclusion**

Discourse markers have both semantic properties and structural properties. The four types DMs including topic markers, contrastive markers, elaborative markers and inferential markers are applied in the CET-4 passage reading from 214 to 2019, implying that DMs are typical and critical for reading comprehension. The study lays the foundation for teaching and acquisition. First, teachers’ emphasis on the DMs plays key roles in teaching efficiency and students’ locating the key words or expressions, resulting in removing students’ confusion and improving their capabilities to rise to the reading comprehension. Meanwhile, there are limitations to be promoted in this paper such as the statistics analysis. A case in this point is that the applications of *first* in *According to the first research, Architecture is first and foremost about thinking*, are not the indicator of DMs, instead, it is an adjective modifier. But the subtle differences have little effect on the overall result. The precise data leaves room for the future researchers.

**References**

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