

The Categorisation of Discourse Markers in the Dissertation Writings of UniMaid Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the categorization of discourse markers in the Master's (MA) dissertation writings of postgraduate students of University of Maiduguri. Discourse markers, including cohesive markers, interactive markers, mood and evaluative markers, play a crucial role in academic writing by providing coherence and cohesion. This paper employs Fraser's (2006) Taxonomy of Classifications of DMs to provide theoretical underpinnings of the study. Moreover, the study also adopts a quantitative approach, analyzing the frequency and distribution of discourse markers in a corpus of MA dissertations of the students. In addition, the study samples six (6) dissertations from the institution using purposive and convenience sampling techniques. The samples are collected from the Departments of English and Literary Studies of the mentioned institution using gender, ethnic background, and area of specialization of each dissertation as the criteria for the selection. The analysis of the data reveals that two hundred and twenty two (222 DMs) are found in the dissertations serving different communicative functions. The findings also suggest that graduate students in this federal institution employ a wide range of discourse markers, with elaborative markers being the most frequently used in the dissertations. The research concludes that discourse markers play a significant role in academic writing, primarily as tools for signaling logical relations, expressing writer's stance, and managing reader's expectations.

Introduction

Generally, the use of discourse markers is an essential aspect of academic writing, in the sense that they provide both coherence and cohesion as well as smooth flow of information or message within a given text. This paper aims to explore the categorization of discourse markers (henceforth DMs) in the M.A dissertation writing of two selected universities in Northern Nigeria.

More specifically, the research examines the specific DMs used by graduate students in their MA dissertations, categorizing them based on their functions and analyzing their frequency and distribution. It is hoped that the findings of this research may provide additional insights on the linguistic influences on discourse marker usage in the region. Discourse markers are commonly used in academic writing across different disciplines and genres, including essays, research articles, and dissertations. They serve a variety of functions including marking transitions, signaling the writer's attitude, and helping to create coherence and cohesion in the text. The use

of DMs can vary depending on the writer's language. Therefore, DMs of different languages are not the same likewise their appearances in different linguistic contexts.

While the use of DMs has been studied extensively in English-speaking contexts, there is the need for further research on the use of DMs in non-native English-speaking contexts, particularly in multilingual societies such as Nigeria. This is because the influence of cultural and linguistic backgrounds may lead to variations in the use of DMs and their categories which can help better understand the communication patterns in different academic contexts.

DMs as viewed by Gerard (2010) are words like '*although*', '*however*' and '*nevertheless*' which are commonly referred to as 'linking words' and 'linking phrases' or 'sentence connectors'. These items may be described as the 'glue' that binds a piece of writing together; making the different parts of the text 'stick together'. He further explains that, without sufficient DMs in a piece of writing, a text would not seem logically constructed and the connection between different sentences and paragraphs would not be obvious. However, scholars in the field of DMs are diverse regarding the definition of DMs likewise the terminology to be used. What are being mostly used are the set criteria by some researchers on words considered as DMs and otherwise. In fact, the role of DMs for effective writing is witnessing a considerable attention from scholars working in this area in recent years. It is now believed that DMs can be used to achieve either cohesive or pragmatic effects or both. Students therefore need not to master only the set rules of a target language, they also have to acquire extra writing skills in order to make their writing more friendly and effective. It is therefore mandatory for graduate students to equip themselves with the knowledge of DMs so as to make reading of their dissertation enjoyable and reader friendly.

Some scholars argue that, DMs are only features of formal writing while other scholars opine that the abundance use of DMs are mostly found in informal settings such as the social media. In whichever way they are used, they serve a variety of cohesive functions and expressing the writer's communicative intentions to mention but a few functions. This paper aims at exploring the categories of DMs that are used in the writings of graduate students specifically, the dissertations from the department of English and Literary Studies of University of Maiduguri.

In terms of empirical review, this paper reviews related works on the use of DMs in academic writings. This is done in order to identify the gap the paper intends to fill.

Aysu (2023) looks at the analysis of discourse markers in paragraph writings of preparatory elective class students in a state University known as Bir Devlet Üniversitesdenki İstenge Bağlı Hazirik Sinifi. The author aims to scrutinize the use of discourse markers in the paragraphs of high-scored students and low-scored students in an essay of 100-120 words in their final exam. The mixed method study which involves qualitative and quantitative approaches uses asub criteria for evaluating the students that include: accuracy of vocabulary, paragraph structure, linking words, punctuation and capitalization, etc. the study examines 10 papers for high-scored students and also 10 papers for low-scored students. The author concludes that students should be more equipped with semantic and functional correct use of DMs. The study would have been richer if two theories were merged in order to have more research findings from different perspectives.

In another dimension, Lu (2023) also conducts a study of discourse markers employed in College English writing by non-English majors. The research is based on Sperber and Wilson's (1992) relevance theory while also adopting Fraser's (2009) taxonomy of classification of DMs in

analyzing the use of DMs by non-English majors in Guangxi region. The findings reveal that DMs indeed play a crucial role in the utterance process and understanding of discourse, and the appropriate use of DMs contributes to the cohesion of discourse or text and improving the students' writing ability. The study finally concludes regarding Fraser's (2009) taxonomy of DMs where sequential, contrastive, inferential, elaborative, and self-assessment DMs are explored in the data. Despite this study's similarities with the current research in terms of the choice of Fraser's taxonomy of classification, and the choice of academic context, the two studies differ in the choice of the participants where the former used non-English majors, the latter uses dissertations of students from Department of English in a university in northern Nigeria.

In a more recent study, Poyiaka, Kristina and Edang (2024) concentrate on vocational students' use of discourse markers for writing procedural texts. The researchers adopt content analysis approach and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis as the technique for analysis. Interview and documentation are used to gather the data. The findings reveal that "elaborative" discourse markers are the most often used by the students. Another finding also reveals that students face challenges while writing coherent procedure text because they are not familiar with discourse markers and have less competence in English. In addition, the study also indicates that the students' competence affects their use of discourse markers' types in writing. Therefore, the students need more practice in using discourse markers in writing. Lastly, the researchers conclude that the students' cultural background affects their language competence. Although this study adopts Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis on English discourse markers' use by vocational students which implies both study DM in the academic contexts, the current study uses Fraser's (2006) taxonomy of classification of DMs.

In another perspective, Batool, Ajmal, and Ahmed (2024) further investigate the utilization of meta-discourse markers in theses writing taking into consideration abstracts and conclusions sections of 20 theses submitted by M.Phil. English students of Qurtuba University DI Khan, Pakistan. The study utilizes Hyland's (2005) model of Meta-discourse markers. The researchers use mixed-method design to explore the most frequent meta-discourse categories. The study found that the students utilize a few textual and interpersonal markers in their composition writing. Another major finding also reveals that "logical connectives" (and, but, therefore) are being used more by non-native speakers of the English language. The reason behind this is that students do not have the training to use and link their thoughts through proper channels. The findings would have been richer if two theories were grounded and the method of analysis was mixed-method approach. Despite this study's similarity with this research in terms of the use of some major sections of dissertation i.e abstract and conclusion sections in extracting DMs, the two studies differ in the theories used and the choice of the participants.

Lastly, Kurtianti, Raja, Maharani, and Kristina (2024) delve into a corpus-based study of discourse markers and modal auxiliary verbs in the written text made by EFL students with the same level of proficiency. The study conducted on Indonesian EFL learners is meant to identify and analyze how discourse markers facilitate the organization of ideas and reveal the mindset of the text producers. The qualitative corpus-based study uses AntConc.3.2 4w in calculating the words and their frequencies in order to obtain the most frequent words in the corpus. The study's findings reveal that Indonesian EFL learners frequently use the discourse markers "but", "even though", "beside", "so" and "because of". The small amount uses of DMs in their text indicates that students find difficulties in using them. However, the study suffered largely from lack of a

well-grounded theoretical considerations, which allows for a more rigorous and systematic analysis of the data, as the theoretical framework provides a set of tools or instruments for interpreting and understanding the findings.

Rabab'ah, Ma'touq, and Alghazo (2022) expound discourse markers in narrative essays using a case study of EFL Jordanian high school. The study tries to explore the functions and use of DMs in 85 narrative essays of Jordanian high school students adopting Fraser's (2006) framework. One of the major findings indicate that the most frequently used DMs are elaborative DMs with (55%), and then followed by temporal markers with (31.4%), inferential markers represent (9.3%) as the third category, and lastly, contrastive markers with only (4%). In addition, regarding the functions of DMs, the findings that the subjects employ elaborative markers to express additional information, temporal markers to sequence the events, inferential markers to introduce reasons or results, and contrastive markers to express or show contrast. The study concludes and recommends that English textbooks should incorporate more attention to DMs, particularly from the functional perspective.

From the Nigerian contexts, there are some studies conducted on discourse markers. Some researchers explore different aspects of DMs from the Nigerian context. For instance,

Adeyemi' (2018) research focuses on the use of DMs in writing and answering essay questions among undergraduates in Ondo State University of Science and Technology in Okitipupa, Nigeria. The study examines the students' level of mastery of DMs in writing and answering essay questions. The study adopts the survey research design where the population consists of all Ondo state University undergraduate students of science and technology Okitipupa. 265 students across the four departments in the faculty of science are sampled using GST examination question as an instrument. The data is collected and analysed using frequency count, simple percentage, and ANCOVA. The findings show that 141 representing 53.2% of the respondents have low understanding the majority are of the view that lack of mastery of the various connectors is a major barrier to effective writing and answering questions.

At this juncture, it is important to note that despite the fact that most of these previous studies focus on academic writing from different dimensions using almost one analytical framework which is Fraser's taxonomy of classification, and the studies also concern themselves with the application of DMs in teaching. Considering the polysemous nature of DMs, one analytical framework cannot adequately provide exhaustive analysis and interpretation of messages embedded in the DMs. In order to elaborate more on this issue, the research combines two different frameworks of analysis in order to provide holistic analysis from both pragmatic and semantic point of view. Thus, considering the identified gap in studying DMs' literature, this study has the potential to provide a better theoretical and analytical understanding of DMs which has now become an important research area, but with specifications whereby DMs are only identified to answer the research questions on uses and functions in the dissertations only without engaging in their use in the classroom setting.

From the foregoing, we can see that DMs have also been investigated in the Nigerian context in both written and spoken platforms. However, Fraser's (2006) taxonomy of classifications of DMs has not been used extensively looking how Nigerian students use abundant DMs especially in academic writing. Finally in this section, this paper uses Fraser's (2006) taxonomy of classifications of DMs. This is because the theory provides different categorizations of DMs

based on four types. Consequently, the four types of DMs identified by Fraser have been found serving different communicative functions.

Fraser's (2006) Taxonomy of Classifications of DMs

Fraser's (1990, 1998) perspective on discourse markers is embedded within a large framework that impacts upon the analysis of markers. Fraser's theoretical framework concerns the meaning of sentences, specifically how one type of pragmatic marker in a sentence may relate the message conveyed by that sentence to the message of a prior sentence.

Fraser's framework depends upon a differentiation between content and pragmatic meaning. Content meaning is referential meaning: "a more or less explicit representation of some state of the world that the speaker intends to bring to the speaker's attention by means of the literal interpretation of the sentence" (1990, p.385). Pragmatic meaning on the other hand, concerns the speaker's communicative intention, the direct (not implied) 'message the speaker intends to convey in uttering the sentence' (1990, p.386). Fraser sees DMs as one type of commentary pragmatic markers: they are "a class of expressions, each of which signals how the speaker intends the basic message that follows to relate to the prior discourse (1990, p.387). Fraser's more recent work (1998) builds upon the sequential function of discourse markers, such as that discourse markers necessarily specify (i.e. provide commentary on) a relationship between two segments of discourse: this specification is not conceptual, but procedural which provides information on the interpretation of messages. Hence, this present study also adopts Fraser's (2006) taxonomy of classifications of DMs which incorporates four functional classes that include: contrastive, elaborative, implicative, and temporal markers. This framework provides a syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic framework for the properties of DMs. This approach is further seen by some researchers as the most comprehensive taxonomy for the classification of DMs and highly relevant to academic written discourse.

Methodology

This paper employs a quantitative research design in order to cater for the frequencies and percentages of DMs' categories as identified by Fraser. Therefore, the quantitative method of analysis is employed to enable the study examines the various variables while including numbers, frequency of occurrences as well as statistics in order to analyze the data. The use of a simple descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages as the main forms of data analysis in quantitative research is carefully utilized to answer research question that focuses on the most used category of DM in the data.

In terms of sampling, purposive sampling is also utilized in this paper. Purposive sampling as typically used in qualitative research involves the selection of the subjects based on the study purpose with the expectation that each participant provides unique and valuable information to the study. Purposive sampling otherwise known as judgmental because it involves a deliberate choice of participants due to the qualities the participants possess. Hence, the present study richly exploits purposive sampling across the universities to arrive at the selection of a federal institution and the Department of English among other departments in the institutions. This is because the study assumes that graduate students at master's level sufficiently equip themselves with more extra writing skills like DMs which may not be part of the rules of the target language. Therefore, six dissertations are selected where three for males and three for females in order to have a fair representation of the population.

Finally, ethical consent was sought before the data collection from the department of English and Literary Studies. They were assured that the names of the dissertation owners (the students) will not appear anywhere in the research, otherwise known as confidentiality.

Analysis of the Data

This section provides the analysis of the data and the summary of the whole findings.

Table 1. Fraser's (2006) Taxonomy of Classifications of DMs

S/N	Discourse Markers	Definition	Examples
1.	Elaborative Discourse Markers (EDMs)	EDMs signal a quasi-parallel relationship between S2 and S1 that S2 constitutes an elaboration of S1.	In fact, besides, for example, above all, correspondingly, equally, furthermore, indeed, and, in addition, in other words, in particular, likewise, moreover, for instance, also, alternatively, similarly, meanwhile, in the same vein, again, henceforth,
2.	Contrastive Discourse Markers (CDMs)	CDMs signal that the explicit interpretation of S2 contrasts with an interpretation of S1.	Although/though, but, in contrast, despite, however, conversely, in spite of, nevertheless/nonetheless, on the other hand, yet, actually.
3.	Implicative Discourse Markers (IDMs)	IDMs signal S2 conveys a message which is, in some sense consequential to some aspect of S1.	After all, as a result, hence, consequently, therefore, then, so, thus, because, accordingly, to this end,
4.	Temporal Discourse Markers (TDMs)	TDMs signal that the event in S2 is temporary related to some occurrence in S1.	Finally, firstly/secondly/thirdly, and if, so if, in summary, in my opinion, in summary, perhaps, lastly, in conclusion/to conclude, in view of the above, in my own view.

The above table presents the analysis of DMs based on Fraser's (2006) taxonomy of classifications of DMs. The table shows four (4) categories of DMs which include "elaborative" DMs, "contrastive" DMs, "implicative" DMs and "temporal" DMs. Each category is represented

by the DMs found in the six dissertations. In addition, the functions of each category of DM is also presented in the above table for easy identification and understanding.

Summary of Findings

Scholars argue that DMs do not only have an important role in spoken communication, but they are also vital in written communication that is why it is important to study DMs in academic writing from different perspectives. For example, Schourup (1999, p. 234) argues that, “no principled grounds exist on which to deny DM status to similar items that are largely found in written discourse such as “*moreover*”, “*consequently*”, “*contrariwise*” etc. Similarly, Fox Tree (2015) also argues that cohesive markers function potentially in both spontaneous speech and spontaneous writing. Similarly, this paper found different DMs serving different communicative functions such as elaboration, contrastive function, implicative and temporal function using Fraser’s 2006 taxonomy of classification of DMs. One of the major findings indicates that two hundred and twenty two (222DMs) are found in the six dissertations of these students. This is an indication that the students really harnessed DMs in their academic writing. Another finding also shows that “elaborative” DMs are the most used category of DMs used in the six dissertations of these students. This could perhaps mean that the students write with clarity of expression and detailed explanation thereby giving more examples for elaboration purpose.

Table 2. DMs found in the Dissertations

Dissertation no.	DMs F
Dissertation one	59 DMs
Dissertation two	25 DMs
Dissertation three	24 DMs
Dissertation four	27 DMs
Dissertation five	49DMs
Dissertation six	35DMs
Total no. of DMs	222DMs

The above table displays the number of DMs found from dissertation one to six. DMs are found in almost every section of the dissertation serving different communicative function in different linguistic environments.

Table 3. Frequencies and percentages found in the Dissertations

DMs Category	Frequency	Percentage
EDMs	95	43%
CDMs	63	28%

IDMs	55	25%
TDMs	09	4%
Total	222	100%

The above table shows the frequencies and the percentages found in the dissertations of these students. The data shows that Elaborative DMs (e.g. *moreover, in addition, in fact*, etc.) are the most used DMs with “43%”, followed by contrastive DMs (*however, but, in contrast*, etc.) with “63%”, and then implicative DMs (*hence, after all, consequently*, etc.) with “55%”, and lastly, temporal DMs (*in conclusion, in summary, in view of the above*, etc.) score the least number of DMs used in the dissertations of these students with only “9%”. This shows that elaborative DMs are the most used category of DMs in the students’ dissertations. They are mostly harnessed perhaps because the students use them to express themselves and give examples for more elaboration and clarification. This finding corroborates with the findings of Manan and Raslee (2016) who also found that “*elaborative*” DMs are the most used in writing among Malaysian ESL learners. Aysu’s (2017) also confirms this current finding where they found “*elaborative*” DMs appear as the most used category of DMs in the writing of Turkish elementary-level students. Similarly, Alahmed and Kirmizi (2020) also found that “*elaborative*” DMs score the highest frequency with (64%) occurrence in the L2 English writing of Iraqi postgraduate students at Karabuk University. These and many other findings could support the claim that among the four categories of DMs of Fraser (1999, 2006, 2009), “*elaborative*” DMs score the highest frequency especially in writing.

The overall findings of this research suggest that there are several implications for the use, functions and influence of DMs in the students’ writings. Based on the analysis of the discourse markers, they are believed to enhance smooth flow of ideas in different sections of the dissertations. The use of DMs helps in enhancing and facilitating the organization of thoughts by signaling common grounds and clarifying the relationship between different ideas. Moreover, facilitation of the discourse markers can help to structure and organize academic discourse by indicating the different functions that each part of the discourse serves.

In addition, the findings also suggest that there is the need for English language tutors to pay more attention and encourage the use of linguistic items like discourse markers. This will help students overcome some challenges especially in writing long essays such as dissertations. It will also help them to be more aware of the use of DMs because some students are not aware of their existence. The summary of findings can be seen below in line with the study’s objective:

The research question and objective center on the type of DMs frequently used in the whole dissertations based on Fraser’s (2006) taxonomy of classifications of DMs. The finding reveals that “*elaborative*” DMs are the type of DMs that is used frequently in the dissertations. This implies that the students have created a technique of writing style by using more elaborative DMs in order to give detailed explanation, elaboration and examples in their writing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown that discourse markers play a vital role in the writing of M.A dissertations in a northern Nigerian university popularly known as UniMaid. They enable

students to organize their ideas effectively, engage with their readers, and express their opinions and evaluations. This study contributes to our understanding of discourse markers in Nigerian academic writing and may inform pedagogical approaches for teaching academic writing skills in the region. The findings suggest there is the for greater emphasis on the effective use of discourse markers in academic writing instruction in northern Nigeria, in order to help students develop more academic writing skills and produce high quality written work.

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