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Discourse Markers in Expanded Information Structure Model

(work in progress)

The purpose of this note is to propose an explanation of Discourse Markers (henceforth **DM**s) within an Information Structure model integrated with the notion of illocutionary force and with a re-elaborated version of gricean Relevance Principle. First I will outline the Expanded Information Structure Model (henceforth **EISM**). Then I will consider DMs, departing from the existing literature. Most of the descriptions and typologies proposed are based on the discourse-relations that DMs establish between text spans (like "contrast DMs", "clarification DMs", etc.).

Nevertheless, at a deeper analysis, these classifications seem to be essentially based on the illocutionary force of the utterance where the DM appears. Moreover, the role DMs play in Topic Management, although commonly recognized, is defined in an extremely vague manner: usually it is not well distinguished from the so-called discourse relation level and it is emphasized only when a DM signals a Topic Shift. I will argue that both the illocutionary level and the informational level should be considered in the definition of DMs, while keeping them well distinguished from each other. This approach is possible in the framework of the EISM, where there is a theoretical biplanarity and the utterances are evaluated simultaneously both on the illocutionary level and on the informational level. Within the EISM, DMs have (1) an illocutionary function supporting the illocutionary force performed by the Comment, and (2) an informational function signalling the Relevance degree of the utterance they belong to with respect to the Discourse Topic. Finally I will define the orientation of this work, which pertains to theoretical pragmatics, but it can inspire more empirical treatments in text/dialogue generation and understanding.

1. The Expanded Information Structure Model

In previous works (Bambini 2001) I developed a model for the analysis of the information organization of spoken utterances. The traditional informational dichotomy of Topic and Comment was maintained. Nevertheless, in order to better define them, it has been necessary to expand the realm of Information Structure introducing notions from Speech Act Theory and Gricean Theory. Two postulates are assumed in the model: (i) the *illocutionary principle*, i.e. every utterance performs an illocution, and (ii)

the *isomorphism principle* between prosodic units[1] and informational units, i.e. every prosodic unit corresponds to an informational unit. On this basis, the model states that: (iii) the prosodic/informational unit of *Comment* expresses the illocutionary force of the utterance and (iv) the prosodic/informational unit of *Topic* expresses the semantic-pragmatic scope to which the illocution applies, in other words the Topic represents the Aboutness of the illocution. Moreover, the model tries to specify what kind of relation links the Topic unit and the Comment unit. The idea is that (v) Topic and Comment are linked by a semantic-pragmatic predication that can be formulated in terms of *Relevance*. This Relevance predication has to be understood as being of the same nature of the Gricean Relevance. The difference is that the latter functions between the utterance and the discourse-context, the former functions at a lower level, i.e. inside the utterance, between an illocution (the Comment) and the Aboutness of the illocution (the Topic). In short, in the EISM framework the Topic-Comment informational partition of the utterance is founded on an illocutionary core and built around a Relevance predication.

The idea to define the Comment as the informational unit where the illocutionary force of the utterance is concentrated is due to Cresti (2000). It deserves more attention, because it allows an autonomous definition of the Comment. In this regard the existing literature very often contradicts itself. The Comment is claimed to be the fundamental informational unit (while the Topic is considered optional), but at the same time it is defined as "what is said about the Topic", i.e. as something dependent on the Topic. It remains theoretically unclear how it is possible to have topicless (thetic) utterances, which furthermore seem to be predominant in spoken language (cfr. Bambini 2001 for a test conducted on a sample of spoken Italian).[2] In EISM, the autonomy and the necessity of the Comment are motivated by the assumption that it performs the illocution and there is no utterance without the illocution. The following example illustrates how spoken utterances are analysed in EISM.[3] Speaker C is giving A instructions and

[1] EISM defines the prosodic unit according to Cresti (2000), i.e. on the basis of a catalogue of specific prosodic configurations. For the purpose of this abstract, suffice it to recall the intuitive definition elaborated by the Santa Barbara research team for the so-called *Intonation Unit*, very similar to Cresti's prosodic unit: "a stretch of speech uttered under a single coherent intonation contour" (DuBois *et al.* 1992: 17).

[2] The analysis in Bambini (2001), conducted on a sample of 674 utterances produced during an informal conversation among several participants ("La cena delle zucchine", Cresti 2000, vol. II), showed that 547 utterances were topicless (about 81%). Note that the predominance of topicless utterances in spoken Italian cannot be explained by the fact that Italian is a pro-drop language. In EISM, Topic has nothing to do with syntactic subject. As a matter of fact, we will see that topicless utterances do not totally lack Aboutness, being connected with the Discourse Topic.

[3] The analysis in Bambini (2001) has been conducted on Italian data from LABLITA (Laboratorio Linguistico del Dipartimento di Italianistica dell'Università di Firenze) corpus, transcribed with an implemented version of CHAT (Code for the Human Analysis of Transcript) format. The implementation was developed by Cresti's team (see Cresti 2000 for details) in order to allow not only prosodic transcription, but also illocutionary tagging and informational tagging. In this abstract I use English examples in order to avoid translation problems due to the language-specificity of DMs. The examples are taken from Lenk (1998), who exploits data from the London-Lund-Corpus (LLC) of Spoken English. Here the LLC transcription conventions have been roughly adapted to a simplified version of CHAT. On the first line there is the transcription of the text. LLC tone unit boundaries (marked by #) becomes / or // in CHAT. The sign / marks a non-terminal tone unite; the sign // indicates a terminal tone unit, i.e. the end of the utterance. The %ill line shows the analysis of the illocutionary level, while the %inf line shows the informational analysis. Illocutionary tagging is based on a list of about 80 illocutionary profiles prosodically motivated in Cresti (2000). In this list five main illocutionary types are identified: Refusal, Assertion, Direction, Expression,

explanations about the new job and mentions the secretary upstairs and the fact that they (the speaker and the secretary upstairs) have little to do with each other.

(1) C: is held across [dhi] corridor there / in FC three // he gives some of them in this room /
his undergraduates ones //
%ill: Description // Description //
%inf: Comment / Appendix of the Comment // Comment / Appendix of the Comment //
C: he gives in this room / because it's his own group / during the day //
%ill: Explanation //
%inf: Topic / Comment / Appendix of the Comment // (Lenk 1998: 72)

It is yet to be clarified where the semantic-pragmatic scope of the illocution performed by the Comment can be found in the case of topicless utterances. If Information Structure is really built around Relevance predication, which has a dual nature, in the sense that it is established between an illocution and its Aboutness, then topicless utterances cannot totally lack Aboutness. The idea is that in topicless utterances the Aboutness of the Comment has to be found at higher level, in other words the Relevance predication is established between the Comment and the Discourse Topic. EISM assumes a very articulated notion of Relevance. In addition to (a) the original Gricean Relevance between utterance and context and to (b) the utterance-internal Relevance between Comment and Topic, there is also (c) a crossing Relevance, which connects the utterance level and the discourse level, linking the Comment and the Discourse Topic.[4] While (b) is optional (because the utterance Topic is optional), (c) is present not only in topicless utterances but in all utterances, structuring the so-called Topic Management.

2. Reflections on the existing literature about Discourse Markers

In the existing literature about DMs it is possible to identify two approaches. On the one hand there are investigations with a pragmatic and textual orientation, which try to define theoretically the discourse mechanisms governing DMs use. On the other hand there are more empirical studies, often with computational purposes, which concentrate on the lexical aspects of DMs (for example, Stede & Schmitz 1997). It is well known that within the pragmatic/textual orientation there are two distinct approaches: the Discourse-Coherence approach (Schiffrin 1987, Redeker 1991, Fraser 1996) and the Relevance-Theory approach (Blackemore 1987, 1996, 2002).

Ritual. Informational tagging includes prosodic/informational units of Topic and Comment, but also Appendix, which represents a textual integration that can be added both to the Topic and to the Comment.

[4] The semantic-pragmatic computing of Discourse Topic is a very problematic matter and no satisfactory model has been proposed yet. Here we adopt an intuitive notion of Discourse Topic, as a dynamic aggregate of coherently related events, states, and referents that are held together in every stage of the conversation. We assume that every back-channel utterance, together with its specific enunciation context, contributes somehow to its semantic-pragmatic construction.

Leaving aside the numerous theoretical distinctions and looking at the results of the analysis, most DMs descriptions and taxonomies enumerate types of discourse relations between utter

ances and previous context. Sometimes the analysis starts from discourse relations, specifying the DMs they are conveyed by: for example, *Contrast* results from DMs such as *on the contrary, still, instead, on the other hand*; *Elaboration* results from *moreover, further*; *Inference* from *after all, so*; *Cause* from *because*, etc. Other times the investigation starts from a single DM, enumerating the discourse relations it can convey. For example, the DM *well* can signal *Exclamation of Surprise*, *Disapproving*, *Narrative*, *Disagreement*, etc. (Bolinger 1989, Jucker 1993). Although these descriptions are undoubtedly subtle, the list of possible discourse relations seems to be unlimited (as explicitly admitted in Rhetorical Structure Theory). The resulting scenario is extremely fragmented, and it would require a more compact approach to notions such as Elaboration, Disapproving, Narrative, etc. A more global pragmatic consideration reveals that the existing DMs analyses are essentially based on the illocutionary force expressed by the utterance. For instance, to say that a DM signals a Contrast relation between two text spans means that the utterance performs an illocutionary act of Contrast. Some researchers have considered the illocutionary value of DMs. Within a coherence-based approach, Schiffrin (1987) discussed about *action structure* referring to one of the "plans of talk" in which DMs locate the utterance; Redeker (1991) proposed a *rhetorical structure* concerning the illocutionary intentions between two discourse units. With a more lexical approach, Bolinger 1989 analysed DM *well* as an epistemic adverb transferred from the locutionary plan to the illocutionary sphere. Nevertheless the illocutionary aspect of DMs is considered peripherical with respect to discourse functions (except for illocutionary adverbs like *frankly* and *sincerely*) and there is no general agreement on this point.

As far as the relation between DMs and Information Structure is concerned, frequently it is assumed that DMs play a role in Topic Management, but this function is explicitly emphasized only when the DM signals a topic-shift (or a temporary topic-shift, i.e. a digression). A common implicit assumption seems to be present: the default option is that the DM maintains the current Topic under discussion. Very few analyses have concentrated specifically on DMs contribution in Information Structure (cfr. He & Lindsey 1998 for an analysis of *you know* as a marker of information status in terms of saliency and newness; Horne *et al*. 2001 for a study of Swedish *men* as a topic unit marker, taking into account prosodic aspects as well).

The illocutionary value and the Topic Management emerged as two essential characteristics of DMs neglected in the existing literature. They both should be considered in order to explain DMs use systematically, but their different status should be clearly maintained.

In concluding this section, it is worth mentioning the proposal in Lenk (1998), an attempt to combine the discourse-coherence approach (essentially based on illocutionary values) with Topic Management issues. Nevertheless the result is an extended detailed description that lacks global theoretical features. By simply looking at the contents page of the book, *actually* is analysed "as opinion marker" (i.e. "with objections" and "with self-corrections,") and "introducing a new topic-shift," mixing the illocutionary level and the informational level without theoretical motivation. According to Lenk, the following examples show respectively an instance of *actually* as

opinion marker and as topic-shift marker. To my opinion, the two functions are present in each of the examples: *actually* in (2) signals a topic-shift, non only a self-correction, and *actually* in (3) marks a self correction, in addition to a topic-shift.

(2) A: so I went to the School of Applied Linguistics # in Winchester #
d: [m]
A: **actually** # I applied to the British Council # and I failed to get in # and I found that they send people up there # (LLC; Lenk 1998: 172)

(3) B: well he's the one who went to Vietnam # and then that was too much for his system #
[…] he didn't work afterwards # and now he's become a carpenter # Eileen says he seems quite happy # and he's just got married again # **actually** he's still only twenty-six # he's on his second marriage # and he's twenty-six # (LLC; Lenk 1998: 178)

3. The biplanarity of Discourse Markers

In the EISM framework, where the illocutionary level and the informational level cooperate in structuring information, DMs find a precise pragmatic characterization. Since DMs prototypically constitute independent tone units (Hansen 1997: 156), they are treated as autonomous informational units according to the isomorphism principle mentioned in (ii).[5] They are optional (the only necessary informational unit is represented by the Comment), but, when they are used, they help the information structuring process in two simultaneous ways. (1) *Illocutionary function*. A DM takes part in the illocutionary act performed by the utterance increasing the illocutionary force expressed by the Comment. Not only DMs like *frankly* and *sincerely*, but every DM has illocutionary value. Nevertheless attributing autonomous illocutionary force to DMs is incorrect. Their illocutionary role is auxiliary with respect to the Comment. DMs tend to have the same illocutionary force as the Comment (for example *actually* used in an utterance with objection illocutionary force), but sometimes they have a more generic directive force (cfr. *see*, *listen* or Italian *guarda*). In both cases they aim to support the illocution of the Comment, which is the utterance core. (2) *Informational function*. DMs have a role in Topic Management signalling how the illocution of the Comment is linked to the Discourse Topic. More specifically, they indicate the degree of Relevance established between the illocution of the Comment, i.e. the illocution of the utterance, and the Discourse Topic. It is possible to create a spectrum extending from DMs signalling the highest degree of Relevance to DMs indicating the minimum degree, i.e. the total lack of Relevance between utterance and Discourse Topic. The spectrum comprises topic-refocusing DMs (prototypical topic-refocusing DMs are *in fact*, *indeed*, *now*), topic-maintaining DMs, topic-resuming DMs, topic-ending DMs, temporary topic-shift DMs, topic-shift DMs, new-topic-establishing DMs. DMs are chosen according to the phases of Topic Management, which is essentially based on Relevance relations.

[5] When a DM doesn't constitute an autonomous prosodic unit, but it appears inside another prosodic-informational unit, the illocutionary value is maintained, although the Topic Management role is reduced (see utterance 2; B in example 4). Frequently, an expression usually considered as a DM functions as a Comment unit (for example in an utterance like "*Well...*" answering the question *Do you like it?*).

The following example shows that the biplanarity of the prosodic/informational units of DMs is highly compatible with the analysis of spoken utterances provided by EISM, which is biplanar itself. Speaker B is talking about the disgusting food one has to eat when you are invited for dinner abroad. He adds a summarizing comment using *anyway*, and then speaker A starts building a new Discourse Topic introducing two new utterance Topics. *Anyway* performs the subsidiary illocutionary role supporting the illocutionary force of Conclusion expressed by the Comment; at the same time it signals the end of the topic development.

(4)
	1; A:	but I'm dying to know / what the sheep's eyes looked like //
	2; B:	I can't honestly remember // it was years ago // I just know it smelt like horrid // […]
	3; E	it's just like very large / frogspawn //
	4; B:	yes // I suppose it's a bit // **anyway** / it's horrid // simply horrid //
	%ill:	Agreement Expression // Explanation // **Conclusion** // Confirmation //
	%inf:	Comment // Comment // **topic-ending DM** / Comment
	5; A:	Dan / a couple of years ago / was / walking down Old Brompton Road of all //
	% ill:	Narrative //
	%inf:	1st Topic / 2nd Topic / Comment divided in 2 prosodic units // (Lenk 1998: 60-81)

In example (4) it is evident that the DM performs both the illocutionary function and the informational function. Nevertheless, usually, one of the two functions is prevalent. For example, very often in topic-maintaining DMs the illocutionary value is clearer than the informational value (as in *Frankly / I disagree*). On the other hand, in new-topic-establishing DMs, the function of Topic Management emerges more evidently (as in *Changing topic / the school / how is it going?)*. Every DM has the property of biplanarity, i.e. it exhibits a mixture of illocutionary features and informational features. The proportion of this mixture depends on discourse priorities and lexical constraints. I will call this characteristic of the biplanarity *modulability*. The modulation of informational role and illocutionary role may also be realized by generating chains of DMs, where the two functions are distributed on more than one DM. In such cases, each DM assumes a specific function, whether informational or illocutionary. For instance, in chains such as *so anyway* and *well anyway*, the first elements have informational value and the second elements illocutionary value.

It is my purpose to show that, in order to explain DMs systematically and exhaustively, it is important to integrate both the illocutionary aspect and the informational aspect in a compact pragmatic theory. This integration is possible in EISM due to its intrinsic biplanarity. EISM is a theoretical model of analysis of spoken utterances, with a bottom-up approach to Information Structure: from utterance level to discourse level. Consequently, in the framework of the EISM, DMs are explained first with crucial reference to the local level of the utterance. This approach makes the EISM analysis of DMs more suitable for computational treatments than explanations in term of global discourse structure. Nevertheless, more empirical descriptions of the computing of the illocutionary force and more detailed analysis of the Topic Management phases would be required.

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Appendix
Examples from spoken Italian

In this Appendix examples of Italian DMs in the LABLITA corpus (Cresti 2000, vol. II) are provided. DMs are in bold types and the utterances where they appear are tagged according to the EISM model. On Italian DMs the reader may refer to Berretta (1984) and especially to Bazzanella (1995).

1. The following example show a case of DMs chain. (*Di Pietro*, 45-46)

*AD2: io le vorrei porre una domanda / senza malizia // mi creda // io / sono certa che lavorerò per la sua campagna elettorale // ne sono orgogliosa // lo ripeto // e lo ribadisco **//**

*****AD2 **però / siccome** / ritornando un attimo indietro al suo intervento / quando appunto lei poneva / i problemi che noi abbiamo / oggi / con la situazione di Bertinotti / eccetera / **quindi** / il rafforzamento dell' Ulivo / che lei sta proponendo / appunto / di fare / io / vorrei porle questa domanda //

%ill: Obiezione interrogativa

%inf: catena di 2 DM di elaborazione di TD / Topic1 / Appendice di Topic1 scandita in 5 unità tonali / DM di focalizzazione di TD / Topic2 / Appendice di Topic2 scandita in 3 unità tonali / Topic3 / Comment

2. The following example shows that the same lexical item can be used both as a DM and as an autonomous unit of Comment. The word *infatti* is in bold character when function as DM and it is underlined when represents a Comment. (*Operatori sociali*, 89-90)

*DAR: perché questa storia di essere / venduta ...

*ILA: [<] ha detto che è una casa / poi in via Poverelli / cioè / non è che sia ...

*DAR: essendo venduta / se loro c' abitavano / o ne erano / dentro abusivamente !

*ILA: **eh** / <u>infatti</u> //

%ill: Assenso

%inf: DM di elaborazione del TD / Comment

*GIU: in subaffitto //

*DAR: in subaffitto / o qualcosa del genere // quindi loro / non hanno nessuna carta in mano / per cui ... e quindi [//] perché / anche l' immediatezza della cosa // guarda che / a Firenze / non stanno facendo sfratti / quasi niente / proprio niente // ma [/] ma anche di chi ha / proprio +/.

*ILA: **infatti** / una cosa che +/.

%ill: Conferma

%inf: DM di elaborazione di TD / Comment

*DAR: cioè la necessità / no / no comune // ma la necessità / i' privato / pe' dire / che c' ha già lui / uno sfratto / già incasinato / roba di' genere // che ha comprato / pe' dire / un immobile occupato / diec' anni fa / e non riescono a fa1' gli sfratti // perché ›n [/] non c' è // non esiste //

*ILA: **ma infatti** / è una cosa che puzza / parecchio //

%ill: Conferma

%inf: catena di 2 DM di elaborazione di TD / Comment scandito in 2 unità

3. The following example shows that it is not possibile to define a list of DMs on a lexical base. For instance, the predicate aggiungo ("[I] add") can be used a DM. (*Porta a Porta*, 228)

*BER: aggiungo / l'Europa / non è [!]/ presente in Albania / perché non ci sono tutti [!] ipaesi europei //

%ill: Precisazione

%inf: DM di fissazione di sotto-TD / Topic / Comment scandito in 3 unità tonali

4. The following example illustrates very clearly the role of DMs as Topic-Management device. It is a case of task-oriented dialogue and the flow of information provided and requests is signalled by DMs. (*Il prestito*)

*COL: sono Valerio Vallesi // sono un tuo collega qui del dipartimento // volevo avere qualche informazione sull [//] che possibilità ci sono insomma / per chiedere una cessione / del quinto //
*IMP: <&e>+/.
*COL: [<] **e** / **in** > **particolare** / per / l' acquisto della casa //
%ill: Richiesta d'informazione
%inf: DM di elaborazione di TD / DM di focalizzazione di sotto-TD / Comment scandito in 2 unità
*IMP: **ecco** / ti interessa per l' acquisto della prima casa / eh ?
%ill: Richiesta di conferma
%inf: DM di focalizzazione di sotto-TD / Topic / Comment
*COL: sì / per l' acquisto della casa //
*IMP: **allora** / **senti** / per l' acquisto della prima casa / ci sono vari documenti da presentare //
%ill: Istruzioni
%inf: catena di 2 DM di elaborazione di sotto-TD / Topic / Comment
*COL: uhm //
*IMP: **innanzitutto** / la domanda //
%ill: Elencazione
%inf: DM di fissazione di sotto-TD / Comment //
[sviluppo del sotto-TD "la domanda"]
*IMP: **e** / questa **diciamo** / è la domanda in se stessa //
%ill: Conclusione
%inf. DM di scioglimento di sotto-TD / Topic / Comment
*COL: sì //
*IMP: **poi** / ci sono vari documenti da allegare / tra cui / il più importante / per l' acquisto della prima casa / è il contratto//
%ill: Elencazione
%inf: DM di fissazione di nuovo sotto-TD / Comment / Appendice del Comment scandita in 4 unità tonali
*COL: il contratto // uhm //
%ill: Accordo raggiunto // Accordo raggiunto
%inf: Comment // Comment
[elaborazione del sotto-TD "il contratto e di altri sotto-TD]
*IMP: **eh** / basta //
%ill: Conclusione
%inf: DM di scioglimento di TD / Comment