| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Relevance Theory-based Analysis of Mandarin Chinese Discourse Markers in Oral Speech

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| ABSTRACT

This study conducts an examination of Mandarin Chinese Discourse Markers (DMs) within oral speech, guided by the Relevance Theory as proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986). By exploring the pragmatic and semantic layers of DMs, the research clarifies how these linguistic tools streamline communication, ensuring optimal relevance through minimal cognitive effort. The analysis of the research categorizes DMs into eight pragmatic functions, ranging from topic-related markers to illocutionary performatives, each serving distinct roles in enhancing discourse coherence and listener comprehension. This research not only explains the procedural versus conceptual nature of DMs but also reveals a spectrum where Mandarin DMs predominantly exhibit conceptual properties, underlining the critical role of context in DM utilization.

| KEYWORDS

Discourse Markers; Relevance Theory; Pragmatic Functions; Semantic-Pragmatic Analysis

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

1. Introduction

Relevance Theory is a principle proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986) to better elaborate Grice's main statement that people pursue expressions of ideas and others' comprehension in most interactions. It is a contextual and referential process that includes not only basic transmissions and interpretations of messages but also the optimal choice of interpretation to best fit the interlocutor's expectations of relevance. As demonstrated by Relevance Theory, this ostensive-inferential process can be divided into two perspectives— one is for speakers, and the other is for listeners. For the speaker, the nature of interaction lies in the informative intentions, which are able to be understood by the listener, while the listener is expected to arrive at the expected interpretation and obtain information conveyed by the speaker in the utterance. Also, the listener anticipates achieving optimal relevance through a valid contextual effect (Zhao, 2014).

Discourse, as the core of human speech communication, has never been forgotten by linguists and scholars. Henry and Tator (2002) defined discourse as a bridge to convey social information from people's individual world to their external environment, leading to a 'non-neutral' property because of the existence of personal emotions. A special type of expression has been introduced to indicate coherent and cohesive relations and help to convey the interlocutors' attitudes (Crible & Degand, 2019). Such chunks are called discourse markers (hereafter, DMs). DMs can appear in various forms, from a single adverb (e.g., actually, admittedly), conjunction (e.g., because, but, therefore, however), modal particle (e.g., well, yeah) to a short phrase or sentence (e.g., as a consequence of, I think, you know).

DMs were first mentioned by Levinson (1983). However, he did not go deeply into this concept; he simply described the function of this group of words; that is, he indicated the relationship between 'an utterance and its prior discourse'. Due to the different considerations or priorities, there is still no consensus among researchers on the best name or a single definition for DMs. Pragmatics connectives (Stubbs, 1983), pragmatics markers (Schiffrin, 1987), discourse connectives (Blakemore, 1987), and other

similar terminologies have also been employed. As for definitions, Chaudron and Richards (1986) believed that discourse markers were symbols that conveyed information about the overall topics and topic relationships from the functional perspective. Schiffrin (1987) defined DMs as 'sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk'.

Due to the lack of relevant existing research, the current paper aims to analyze Mandarin Chinese discourse markers in oral speech on the basis of Relevance Theory.

2. Literature review
2.1 Discourse markers at the semantic-pragmatic layer
On the basis of Levinson's comment on the function of DMs, that is, they indicate certain relations between utterances and preceding discourse, Zwicky (1985) further proposed a general purpose for DMs. He said that they contribute to 'distributions, prosody, and meaning'. He also mentioned that DMs usually occur at the beginning of an utterance, relying on pauses or intonation breaks to isolate them from the context. They play an important role in involving the extant utterance with a superior discourse (Chen, 2019).

Chaudron and Richards (1986) described DMs as a signal that implies the directions and relations within discourses, which simultaneously reflect the interactive nature of the context of utterances. They also pointed out that DMs appear more frequently in an informal oral style than in a formal written style.

From the perspective of discourse coherence, Schiffrin (1987) proposed several tentative characteristics of DMs in the elucidation of discourse by analyzing eleven expressions such as and, because, or, so, well, and so forth. She claimed that DMs should be commonly used at the start of an utterance, which is accordant with Zwicky's stance, and they should be allowed to be removed from a sentence syntactically. Additionally, she argued that DMs are responsible for demonstrating local relationships (between adjacent representations) and global ones (among several structures of discourse).

Blakemore (1987) proposed that discourse can encode two basic meanings, conceptual meaning and procedural meaning, from the perspective of cognition. When the information encoding of discourse contributes to the representation and affects the truth conditions of the utterance, it is inclined to have a 'conceptual meaning' such as most lexical items possessing semantic content. For example, the noun 'cat' encodes the concept of CAT; the verb 'run' encodes the concept of the action 'RUN'. On the other hand, if the information can prompt some inferences and manipulate the conceptual representation while failing to influence the truth conditions of the utterance, it is the so-called procedural meaning (Chen, 2019). However, linguists are still debating the relationship between truth-conditionality and conceptuality.

Blakemore did support the coextension of the distinction between conceptual and procedural meaning with the distinction between truth-conditionality and non-truth-conditionality. This position was in opposition to the one proposed by Wilson and Sperber (1993), who claimed that a representation could be both conceptual and non-truth-conditional at the same time. For instance,

(1) **Unfortunately**, you could not get an offer from your dream school.

This sentence, **unfortunately,** is a non-truth-conditional adverbial, but it still encodes the concept that the listener fails to get what he hopes to get.

Under the influence of Grice's 'what is said' and 'what is conventionally implicated' (Chen, 2019), Blakemore proposed that in non-truth conditional representations, procedural meaning is more significant and dominant than conceptual meaning regarding conventional implicature. She agreed that DMs are used by speakers to restrict the cognitive reasoning process of the listeners and thus lead them to the optimal relevance. Therefore, DMs are purely procedural rather than conceptual because they do not contain any propositional content (Blakemore, 1987).

Fraser (1996) chose to explore DMs with pragmatic functions as the starting point. He assumed that DMs did not contribute to the expressive sentence meaning. In other words, DMs do not enjoy conceptual meaning but only have procedural meaning because they provide the listener with instructions on how to interpret utterances attached to the DMs (Chen, 2019), which is consistent with Blakemore's point of view.

Partly based on Fraser's opinion, He and Ran (1999) held that DMs do not have propositional meaning or semantic meaning, and they do not play a role in the semantic contents of a discourse. Rather, DMs merely possess procedural meaning to facilitate and guide the listeners' comprehension of discourse. They not only reflect characteristics and functions in form but feature dynamic,

pragmatic meaning as a part of the discourse information, which to some extent coincided with Hölker's summaries about DMs' features.

Hölker believed that DMs semantically cannot change the truth condition of a discourse or insert any new information into the propositions. They have an expressive function but not a referential, denotative, or cognitive one. They pragmatically focus on 'the speech context rather than the context talked about' (1991, p. 78-79).

Thus, synthesizing the viewpoints of the above scholars, we see that most of them advocate that DMs express neither structural nor conceptual meanings, but rather, they link utterances procedurally to produce a semantically coherent discourse in which the relationships between each syntactic component are obvious and unambiguous. They can be considered a strategy of a speaker whose speech possesses a dynamic, pragmatic characteristic. However, no matter what the conceptual or procedural meaning is, DMs are generated within a specific context and should be analyzed case by case.

2.2 The Interface between Relevance Theory and Discourse Markers
Relevance Theory emphasizes the relevance of utterances that speakers produce, ensuring the information is worth processing by listeners to arrive at the speakers' intended interpretations. Sperber and Wilson (1986) mentioned three core concepts in this theory: contextual implication, explicature, and implicature. Contextual implication refers to the meaningful contextual effect that an assumption probably generates on the basis of its relevance in a context (Sperber & Wilson,1995). There is a balance between the contextual effect and the effort that listeners need to comprehend the utterance. That is the so-called optimal relevance (Zhao, 2014).

The other two concepts are explicature and implicature. The former was explained by Sperber and Wilson (1986) as suppositions obtained from explicit decoding and inference. It contains not only the basic propositions of speech but also the assumptions involved by putting the propositions under speech-act descriptions or propositional attitude descriptions. Such propositions are called higher-level explicature. The latter, implicature, refers to messages deduced by listeners from information hidden behind the utterances during the process in which listeners are expected to choose contextual assumptions to accomplish contextual effect (Zhao, 2014).

Blakemore (1987) analyzed DMs using the combination of Relevance Theory. She pointed out that DMs are capable of leading listeners to reach the speakers' expected intentions by restraining the potential occurrence of different interpretations towards the same utterance. In 1992, she came up with three main approaches to link DMs with Relevance Theory, including 'presenting contextual implications (e.g., therefore, consequently), reinforcing the existing utterances (e.g., moreover, in addition) or rejecting them (e.g., nevertheless, but)' by using various DMs.

To sum up, the core of Relevance Theory is the accomplishment of relevance for both speakers and listeners. The speaker tries to convey ostensive and relevant messages to the listener by using an ostensive stimulus such as a DM while the listener manages to interpret the utterance, making the least effort using the contextual assumptions and thus realising the optimal relevance (Zhao, 2014).

3. Analysis
The analytical scaffold of this paper is constructed based on Blakemore's (1987) conceptual-procedural distinction within the relevance-theory framework. Discourse markers will be scrutinized and analyzed from the perspective of semantics and pragmatics. Liu (2009) pointed out that in a discourse, the conceptual and procedural functions are not supposed to be considered separate or independent of each other, as DMs could play an interpersonal or textual role severally or conjointly.

Chinese linguist Ran (2003) divided Mandarin DMs into eight types: (1) topic-related markers; (2) evidential markers; (3) inferential markers; (4) reformulation markers; (5) manner-of-speaking markers; (6) contrastive markers; (7) self-assessment markers; and (8) illocutionary performatives. Typical examples will be provided for each type of DM, and all of the DMs in examples will be underlined and in bold.

3.1 Topic-related Markers
Topic-related markers, also called 'discourse markers' by Ran (2003), refer to a class of words or phrases to convey the speaker's objectives with regard to the coming topic of discourse (Fraser, 2009).

(2) 一个　　提醒　　而已,　别　　忘了　　丢　　垃圾。
　　yīgè　　tíxǐng　　éryǐ,　bié　　wàngle　　diū　　lājī.

one-CL   reminder   just don't   forget   throw   rubbish

'Just a reminder, don't forget to throw out the rubbish.

(3) — 我 很 担心 成绩。 —别 想 了, 反正 提交 了。

    wǒ hěn dānxīn chéngjì.   bié xiǎng le, fǎnzhèng tíjiāo le

    I very worry grade   don't think PRT, anyway submit PRT

    'I am worried about my grade.'   'Don't think about it anyway we have [already] submitted it.'

From the perspective of Sperber and Wilson's (1986) theory regarding cognition, a discourse could encipher either conceptual meaning or procedural meaning. DMs in examples (2) and (3) above represent two different meanings. The discourse marker *yīgè tíxǐng* (just a reminder) encodes concepts and contributes to the utterance's basic explicature that the listener needs to throw out the rubbish. For *fǎnzhèng* (anyway) in example (3), it obviously has procedural meaning because it does not link conceptual contexts in the interpretation process while operating a representation to make the hearer understand the speaker's intention.

Fraser (2009) summarized four basic functions that topic-related discourse markers can have. They can be used to signal speakers' intentions to (1) go back to prior topics, (2) supplement the current topic, (3) wander from the current topic, and (4) initiate a new topic. The above two examples, *yīgè tíxǐng éryǐ* (just a reminder) and *fǎnzhèng* (anyway), serve a textual function, playing a role in introducing a new topic and adding a comment to the current topic, respectively. Due to the flexibility of syntax in Mandarin, DMs are allowed to occur anywhere in a sentence, initially, medially, and finally, which are usually followed by a pause (Liu, 2009). Topic-related markers also include *shùnbiàn yītí* (by the way), *huídào shàng yī diǎn* returning to the last point), *huàn gè huàtí* (to change the topic), *jìxù* (continuing).

3.2 Evidential markers

Berglind Söderqvist (2020) described the evidential marker as a linguistic expression by which speakers obtain evidence to support or oppose 'the truth of a proposition', including three subtypes of markers: sensory evidentiality (*I saw* Lily clean the room), hearsay evidentiality (*They said* Lily cleaned the room), and inferential evidentiality (Obviously Lily cleaned the room). Like the bolded words in English, the corresponding Mandarin examples also make sense.

(4)我 看见 他 偷 钱 了。

   wǒ kànjiàn tā tōu qián le.

   I see he steal money PRT-PST.

   'I saw him steal the money.'

(5) 新闻 上 说 动物园 重新 **开**放 了。

   xīnwén shàng shuō dòngwùyuán chóngxīn kāifàng   le.

   news on say zoo again open PRT-PERF

   'It said on the news that the zoo has reopened.'

(6) 众所周知, 地球 围绕 太阳 转。

   zhòngsuǒzhōuzhī, dìqiú wéirào tàiyáng zhuàn.

    as we all know earth go sun around

    'As we all know, the Earth goes around the Sun.'

The bolded words above exemplify sensory, hearsay, and inferential evidential DMs, respectively, which all provide evidence to support the speaker's proposition. Even though these markers belong to different subclasses of evidential DMs, all of them possess procedural meaning. They encode information about how these representations are being used in reasoning that brings about propositions (Chen, 2019). They are actually constraints on explicatures to guide the listener to reach an optimal relevant interpretation.

3.3 Inferential markers

Inferential markers refer to a group of words or phrases that function to convey a consequential message and reveal causation related to the prior discourse. This was associated with the most conventional implicatures by Grice (1981). Sanz and Fernández (2007) proposed that the function of inferential markers is to offer prominent inferential and relevant connections among propositions. From this claim, it is distinct that inferential DMs should be categorized into conceptual representations.

(7) 庄家 缺 水 因此 死 了。

   zhuāngjià quē shuǐ **yīncǐ** sǐ le.

    crops lack water as a consequence of die PRT-PERF

    'The crops have died as a consequence of the lack of water.'

(8) 经过　努力　学习，　他　取得　了　好　成绩。
　　jīngguò　nǔlì　xuéxí,　tā　qǔdé　le　hǎo　chéng jì.
　　　after　hard　study　he　get　PRT-PST　good　grade
　　　'After studying hard, he got a good grade.'

yīncǐ (as a consequence of/ as a result) and *jīngguò* (after) are two typical instances of inferential markers. The first one demonstrates the reason that the crops died lies in the lack of water, and *jīngguò* (after) indicates the logical causality. Both of them have a truth-conditional effect and build a relation between two propositions.

3.4 Reformulation markers

Reformulation is the process of reinterpretation, in which the contents of an utterance are rephrased in another way to express the same meaning (Urgelles, 2009). It promotes the interlocutors' comprehension and makes the communication smoother. Ensuring coherence of the re-elaboration and minimizing potential factors that may affect understanding are the priorities of reformulation (Cuenca & Bach, 2007). Reformulation markers are a class of DMs that aims to specify the scope of an utterance and facilitate cohesion in discourses. With respect to Relevance Theory, Sperber and Wilson (1986) supplemented another function of reformulation markers. They agreed that the markers suggest relevant explicature and implicature by illustrating involved presuppositions and verdicts'. Blakemore (2002) believed that reformulation markers are conceptual and have the property of being non-truth conditional. However, scholars such as Murillo (2004) also affirmed the procedural meaning of reformulation markers in terms of the 'procedural indication of the recovery of higher-level explicatures'. Thus, it is still controversial, and one cannot rush to conclude that reformulation markers are either conceptual or procedural.

(9) 新的　政策　起作用　了。　　换句话说，　　经济　正在　复苏。
　　xīnde　zhèngcè　qǐzuòyòng le.　huànjùhuàshuō,　jīngjì　zhèngzài　fùsū.
　　new　policy　work　PRT-PST,　in other words　economy　AUX　recover
　　　'The new policy worked. In other words, the economy is recovering.'

In example (9), the reformulation marker *huànjùhuàshuō* (in other words) is inclined to be conceptual, and it contributes to the explicature that 'the new policy took effect'. This reformulation marker shares a common feature with inferential ones because the utterance (the economy is recovering) after the marker can also be regarded as a result of the first utterance (the new policy worked). Given the fact that procedural information cannot be associated with other words, such as negation, to produce more complex utterances, a negation-test can be used here. However, this marker *huànjùhuàshuō* (in other words) is not allowed to be combined with negative words, which is contrary to the abovementioned characteristic of procedural information. Therefore, the marker *huànjùhuàshuō* (in other words) has conceptual meaning in this utterance.

3.5 Manner-of-speaking markers

Fraser (1996) defined manner-of-speaking markers as signs by which the interlocutors are able to indicate their comments and thoughts about the manner in which the message is being delivered. There is no big difference between Mandarin and English in terms of using manner-of-speaking markers to encode conceptual information 'which can be either true or false in its own right without influencing the overall truth-conditions' (Chen, 2019).

(10) 说实话，　我　也　不　能　完成　这个　作业。
　　shuō shíhuà,　wǒ　yě　bù　néng　wánchéng　zhègè　zuòyè.
　　honestly　I　either　NEG　can　finish　this　assignment
　　　'Honestly, I cannot finish this assignment either. '
(11) 坦诚地　说，你的　文章　太　差。
　　Tǎnchéngde shuō,　nǐde　wénzhāng　tài　chà.
　　frankly　speaking　your　article　very　bad
　　　'Frankly speaking, your article is very bad.'

In these two examples, the manner-of-speaking markers convey the speaker's personal and emotional comments. There is logic hidden behind the markers because they, to some extent, depict a certain state of affairs in the utterances, and they conduce to the basic explicature of the uttered sentences. However, these types of markers can have different pragmatic functions in different contexts.
In example (10), the marker *shuōshíhuà* (honestly) aims to put emphasis on the speaker's true intention or purpose – showing honesty, regardless of the credibility of what the speaker says. As for (11), the marker *tǎnchéngdìshuō* (frankly speaking) emphasizes the truth of the information contained and suggests its pragmatic implication in the discourse despite the fact that the meaning

expressed by the marker is largely subjective. Xi and Liu (2008) pointed out that sometimes manner-of-speaking markers will be used in front of the 'fact' that the speaker thinks is crucial to his point of view or position. This is in order to encourage or even foster the transition of the listener's thoughts about the 'fact'.

3.6 Contrastive markers
As the name of contrastive markers indicates, their function is related to making contrasts. Lakoff (1971) claimed that contrastive relations between two utterances can be expressed by contrastive discourse markers and that the speakers' emotions can also be implied by them. Corresponding to English 'but/however', Mandarin has many different literal translations, '*kěshì /zhīshì /dànshì /ránér*'. All of them are categorized as conjunctions lexically to link two utterances, and they operate almost the same way at the syntactic and semantic-pragmatic levels，i.e., by being used to present contradictions, though there are tiny distinctions between the degree of formality and informality. Given that this paper mainly focuses on oral speech, all aforementioned contrastive markers are available in oral daily communication.

(12) 这个　　题　　很　　简单，但是　我　不　会　　做。
　　　zhègè　tí　hěn　jiǎndān, dànshì wǒ bú huì zuò.
　　　this　problem very easy, but　I　NEG can　solve
　　　'This problem is very easy, but I cannot solve it.'
(13) 这个　主意　很　好，然而　　不　易　实施。
　　　zhègè zhǔyì hěn hǎo, ránér　bú yì shíshī
　　　this　method very good nevertheless NEG easy practice
　　　'This is a good method, nevertheless it is difficult to put it into practice.'

Blakemore (1987) agreed that the more intimal a contrastive marker is, the more inclined it is to be equipped with conceptual meaning. On the contrary, the more peripheral a contrastive marker is, the more likely it is to be procedural. However, in Mandarin, all the contrastive markers are located in front of the subject of the second utterance, functioning as a clausal connective to link two utterances. That is, contrastive markers of Mandarin are prone to carry procedural information because they neither join two propositions nor contribute to the explicature. They contain the emotions and attitudes of the speakers and design a path for the listeners that will take them to the speaker's expected intentions.

3.7 Self-assessment markers
Ran (2003) divided Mandarin self-assessment markers into two subclasses, including evaluative discourse markers and hermeneutic markers. The former is mainly used to reflect the speaker's subjective or emotional evaluation, attitude and opinion towards an event, such as affirmation, negation, support, and objection. The latter plays a role in expressing the speaker's personal suggestions and opinions (Xi & Liu, 2008). Examples will be provided for each subclass.

(14) 大家　说　这　是　一部　好　　电影，可惜　我　没　　看。
　　　dàjiā　shuō zhè shì yībù　hǎo diànyǐng, kěxī wǒ méi kàn.
　everyone say this　is a one-CL　good movie; unluckily I NEG watch
　　　'Everyone said it was a good film unluckily I did not watch it.'

kěxī (unluckily) here expresses the speaker's regret and pity from the perspective of pragmatics. *zàiwǒ kànlái* (in my opinion) in the following sentence is used to highlight the speaker's suggestion and opinion. Additionally, the self-assessment marker also conveys a pragmatic implication that the speaker is holding an opposite or different opinion from that of the listener.

(15) 在我看来，　你　不　需要　对　未来　太过　担心。
　　　zàiwǒ kànlái,　nǐ　bú xūyào duì wèilái tàiguò dānxīn
　　　in my opinion, you NEG need about future much worry
　　　'You don't need to worry too much about the future.'

No matter what subcategory of self-assessment the markers belong to, they are supposed to be analyzed as only encoding conceptual meaning (Fraser, 2006). According to Fraser's argument, assessment adverbials, which contain conceptual meanings such as fortunately and amazingly, are limited and are only involved in larger compositional expressions. Conceptual DMs are expressed on the basis of entailment, explicature, and the implicature, which are constrained to procedural DMs (Moeschler, 2016). In example (14), the marker *kěxī* (unluckily) contributes to the explicature that the speaker did not see the film, and in example (15), the marker *zàiwǒ kànlái* (in my opinion) indicates the implicature that the speaker does not worry about the future.

3.8 Illocutionary performatives.

In oral communication, the DMs can not only be used to express subjective intentions, but they can also function as saying-doing, such as commands, requests, and warnings. Illocutionary performatives are also addressed as 'warning markers' by Xi and Liu (2008). The main pragmatic functions of this type of marker are to remind listeners to pay attention to what the speakers are saying and to ask the listeners to provide truthful information. Generally speaking, illocutionary performatives have more of a procedural meaning than a conceptual one.

(16) 听着！ 你　 现在　 应该　　学习　 了。
　　 tīngzhe! nǐ　xiànzài yīnggāi　xuéxí　le.
　　　 Listen! you　now　　should　 study　PRT
　　　 'Listen! You should study now.'

The marker *tīngzhe* (listen) entails an illocutionary force with the speaker's emotional intention, asking the hearer to focus on the content of the utterance.

(17) 钱　丢　了。　 坦诚地　　说, 你　偷　 钱　　没　 有？
　　 qián diū le.　tǎnchéngde shuō, nǐ　tōu　qián　méi　yǒu?
　 money lost PRT　frankly speaking you steal money NEG　do
　'The money is lost. Frankly speaking, did you steal the money or not?'

The marker *tǎnchéng dìshuō* (frankly speaking) is being used here to request authentic information. It functions differently from the same phrase in example (11). In this example, the listener is required to provide true information. However, the marker has no truth-conditional effect. It has procedural meaning and does not demonstrate the basic explicature of the utterance, yet the same marker in (11) provides obvious explicature.

4. Conclusion

This paper identified and analyzed several Mandarin discourse markers that are commonly used in oral speech from eight different pragmatic perspectives. Within the framework of Relevance Theory, the semantically conceptual meaning or procedural meaning that these DMs have has been investigated. This analysis shows that there are inconsistencies between it and the conclusions of previous studies: that DMs usually possess procedural meaning was not found to be the case, and Mandarin DMs are more inclined to take the role of conceptual meaning, though some of them do have procedural meaning. In addition, the use of DMs not only enhances the coherence and cohesion of discourse but also guides the listeners to reach optimal relevance of the utterances with as little processing effort as possible. This promotes and improves the smoothness of communication.

Further research could be conducted within different frameworks, such as Grice's conversational implicature and Schiffrin's coherence theory. Moreover, if the examples used in this paper were collected from numerous native Mandarin speakers in authentic and simultaneous oral communication, the results of the analysis would be much more convincing and trustworthy.

Implications are also provided in this paper from a pedagogical perspective. The first one is that teachers are encouraged to pay attention to not only the semantic meanings of discourse markers but also their pragmatic functions. Besides, authentic teaching materials are supposed to be presented and applied in curricula (Liu, 2009).

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