

Chinese Discourse Markers in Oral Speech of Mainland Mandarin Speakers

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The present paper investigates the frequency and functions of Chinese discourse markers in oral speech of native Chinese speakers from mainland China. Most of the previous studies on Chinese discourse markers examine the speech of Mandarin speakers from Taiwan. Data for the study were gathered using individual sociolinguistic interviews. The native Chinese speakers were ten graduate students at an American university originally from mainland China. Fourteen discourse markers are identified in my data. Each marker is described when it is used as a DM in the data, and its textual and/or interpersonal functions are further analyzed. All the discourse markers used by the participants are ranked by the order of their frequency as well.

1. Introduction

Discourse markers tend to occur most prevalently in impromptu oral speech (Ostman 1982). Research on discourse markers (DM) in the last few decades has become an important topic. Numerous studies deal with definitions and different functions of discourse markers by native speakers (e.g., Schiffrin 1987 on English; Miracle 1991 on Mandarin Chinese; Onodera 2004 on Japanese). However, this is still an area neglected by research in oral speech of native Chinese speakers from mainland China. Most of the previous studies on Chinese DMs examine the speech of Mandarin speakers from Taiwan, according to my knowledge. Therefore, the present paper investigates the frequency and functions of Chinese DMs in oral speech of native Chinese speakers from mainland China.

2. This study

2.1. Definition of discourse markers

The working definition of discourse markers in this study is as follows: first, they are grammatically optional or syntactically independent; without the discourse marker,

the grammaticality of the utterance remains intact. Second, they have little or no propositional meaning. If the discourse marker is removed from the utterance, the semantic relationship between the elements they connect remains the same. Third, they have textual and/or interpersonal functions. Phonological features are a good reference for judgment of a discourse marker; however, since some markers show phonological features more than other markers, phonological features are not a restricted criterion in this study for discourse markerhood.

2.2. Framework of analysis

The analytical framework of my study is based on DM studies of Brinton (1996), Aijmer (2002), and Muller (2005). Their DM analytical methods are all based on Halliday's language functions (1970): ideational, interpersonal and textual functions. Discourse markers in my study will be analyzed for both textual and interpersonal functions. In my analysis, the interpersonal and textual functions are not mutually exclusive, as they can co-occur in the same discourse (Aijmer 2002). Therefore, some markers serve primarily interpersonal functions, some markers signal primarily relationships between clauses, and some markers may have both textual and interpersonal functions.

2.3. The data

The ten native Chinese participants involved in this study were graduate students (five male and five female) at the University of Florida originally from mainland China. The interviewer is the researcher herself. She came from mainland China. She was a graduate student of the same university as the participants. Before the data collection started, the participants were not told by the researcher what she was looking for in their speech, in order to make sure that their speech was not influenced by the study: i.e., they would not produce more or fewer discourse markers on purpose.

Individual sociolinguistic interviews were conducted to elicit discourse markers in this study. Each participant was interviewed for about fifteen minutes. Topics for the interviews were personal in order to elicit an oral narrative register about those topics, such as hobbies, weekends, sports, favorite teachers, favorite movies and TV programs. After all the data were recorded on the cassette tapes, they were digitized in order to be transcribed more efficiently using computer software.

2.4. Results and discussion

2.4.1. Quantitative analysis

Fourteen Chinese lexical units are identified as Chinese discourse markers. The frequency of each marker per person was calculated according to the total tokens per thousand words. Table 1 shows these discourse markers in decreasing order of frequency in the collected Chinese data: *ranhou*, *jiushi*, *nage/zhege*, *wo juede*, *shenme*, *shenme (de)/shenme zhilei de*, *jiushishuo*, *qishi*, *haoxiang*, *dui*, *na*, *suoyi*, *erqie*, and *fanzheng*. As can be seen from the table, *ranhou* (“then”) was used the most frequently, while *fanzheng* (“anyway”) was used at the lowest rate in this study.

Table 1. Frequency of Chinese Discourse Markers in the Chinese interviews (per 1,000 words)

Speaker	<i>ranhou</i> 'then'	<i>jiushi</i> 'precisely be'	<i>nage/ zhege</i> 'that/this'	<i>wo juede</i> 'I think'	<i>shenme</i> 'what'	<i>shenme (de)</i> 'referent- final tags'	<i>jiushishuo</i> 'that is to say'
1 Dong	7.9	2.6	7.1	0.4	0.4	2.6	1.5
2 Feng	3.1	1.6	4.7	0	3.1	1.9	0
3 Bing	3.2	5.2	2.1	2.1	4.2	4.2	2.5
4 Lian	15.8	5.8	13.6	7.1	4.5	2.3	2.3
5 Xia	16.3	5.5	5.5	1.3	1.0	2.0	1.5
6 Qiu	11.5	8.3	9.5	2.0	0.3	0.6	0.3
7 Peng	12.1	1.6	3.9	3.9	1.2	0.8	0.8
8 Jun	9.3	11.9	4.0	4.0	1.7	0.7	2.0
9 Fang	14.4	14.5	1.4	5.1	1.4	0.9	0
10 Juan	8.7	8.9	2.5	6.9	1.0	0.3	2.5
Total	102.3	65.9	54.3	32.8	18.8	16.3	13.4
Average	10.2	6.6	5.4	3.3	1.9	1.6	1.3

Table 1 (continued)

Speaker	<i>qishi</i> 'actually'	<i>haoxiang</i> 'seem'	<i>dui</i> 'yeah'	<i>na</i> 'in that case'	<i>suoyi</i> 'so'	<i>erqie</i> 'more- over'	<i>fanzheng</i> 'anyway'	Total/1,000 words
1 Dong	0.4	0	0.8	0.8	0	0	0	24.5
2 Feng	0	0.4	0	0	0	0	0	14.8
3 Bing	0.7	0	0.7	0.7	0	0	0	25.6
4 Lian	0	2.6	1.3	0.3	0	0.6	0	56.2
5 Xia	0.8	0.3	0.3	0	1.0	0	0	35.5
6 Qiu	3.8	0	0	0	0.3	0.6	0	37.2
7 Peng	1.6	0	0	0	0	0	0.4	26.3
8 Jun	1.0	1.7	2.7	0	0.3	0	0.3	39.3
9 Fang	0.5	1.4	1.0	0.5	0	0	0	41.1
10 Juan	3.0	1.2	0.2	0.3	0.3	0	0	35.8
Total	11.8	7.6	7.0	2.6	1.9	1.2	0.7	336.3
Average	1.2	0.8	0.7	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.1	33.6

2.4.2. Qualitative analysis

In the following section, the use of each lexical unit as a discourse marker will be discussed. In the examples, (...) is the symbol of the omitted utterances in that turn by the speaker.¹ The following are the abbreviations of the Mandarin Chinese gloss when there is no lexical English equivalent (Li & Thompson 1981: xxiii).

CL	classifier
COMP	comparative
CRS	currently relevant state (le)
CSC	complex stative construction (de)
EXP	experiential aspect (-guo)
GEN	genitive (-de)
NOM	nominalizer (de)
PFV	perfective aspect (-le)
PL	plural
PRT	particle

Ranhou (“then”)

DM use of ranhou. Wang (1998) suggests that the discourse function of ranhou marks a temporal succession between prior and upcoming topics in discourse. She also claims that the core meaning of ranhou is to mark continuation (Wang 1998). Su (1998) finds that ranhou has three functions as a DM: condition or concession, verbal filler and topic-succession. However, in my view her first function overlaps with the third one. Therefore, I argue that in my data, ranhou serves two textual functions: topic-succession and verbal filler. In (1), Dong tells the interviewer the reasons why he likes San Francisco the most among American cities. He uses ranhou to mark the sequence of his thoughts or ideas. Ranhou loses its temporal meaning here, and it serves the function of topic-succession. In (2), Jun tells the interviewer what type of teacher he likes. There is an obvious pause after ranhou here indicating that the speaker needs time to search for the following words. It is used as a verbal filler in this case. In addition, the fact that it is collocated with another connective, *yinwei* (“because”), also indicates its filler function here.

¹ The purpose of omitting some sentences in an example is that the complete utterances of an example are too long.

Example (1):

Dong: (...) ta you shan, you kaojin hai, ranhou, lishi shang ta
it have mountain also near sea then history on it

you you tade zhege ... zhege chengshi qishi zai meiguo lai shuo
also have its this this city actually in America come say

suan shi ye bijiao lao de yi ge chengshi. (...)
count be also comparatively old NOM one CL city

‘(...) It has mountains. It is also near the sea. And then its history has its ...
actually in America this city is considered relatively an old city too. (...)’

Example (2):

Jun: wo zai meiguo de hua, yinwei cai gang lai ma, ranhou ...
I at America if because only just come PRT then

yinwei mei ge xueqi zhi neng xuan jiu ge xuefen
because every CL semester only can choose nine CL credit

de ke, bijiao xihuan de hua, yiban wo xuan de
NOM class comparatively like if generally I choose NOM

ke dou shi wo xihuan de ke.
course all be I like NOM course

‘In America, because I just came here, and then ... because I can only choose
nine credits of courses each semester, the teachers I like, generally speaking, the
courses I choose to take are what I like.’

Na (“in that case”)

DM use of na. Miracle (1991: 92) suggests that na establishes “the connection of
and thus the relevance of the following unit of talk to a prior unit of talk.” In my data,
when na is used as a connective and loses the implied result meaning, it is considered a
DM. Furthermore, na is not stressed when it is used as a DM. It is found to have two

textual functions. First, within a turn, na is used for topic shifting or introducing a new aspect of the topic. In (3), Juan replies to a question about her hobbies. Na functions as a frame marker, indicating a shift in the topic. It has already lost the semantic meaning “in that case.” Second, na is used to initiate a new turn. It is only used by the interviewer in the data to initiate a new question for the interviewee, as in example (4).

Example (3):

Juan: yeyu aihao a, na wo juede, ting ge a,
extra hobby PRT in that case I think listen song PRT

ranhou ... kan shu. (.....)
then read book

‘Hobbies, I think, listening to music, and ... reading. (...)’

Example (4):

Binmei: na riben you shenme haowan de?
in that case Japan have what fun NOM

‘What does Japan have for fun?’

Suoyi (“so/therefore”)

DM use of suoyi. Fang (2000) finds that suoyi is bleached in some cases and it serves the function of going back to the previous topic. Wang and Huang (2006) find that suoyi is a topic initiator and functions to mark topic shift. In my data, Wang and Huang’s (2006) “topic initiator” function is not found. Fang’s (2000) use of suoyi is found in my data, but could be more correctly interpreted as “closing the current topic.” I illustrate this textual function with the following examples. In (5), the speaker talks about her experience of choosing a major at the university. Suoyi is used at the end of her turn indicating that she is ready to give the floor to the hearer. Therefore, here, it serves the function of closing the conversation. In this situation, suoyi is not stressed.

Example (5):

Qiu: (...) houlai fanzheng ye jiu jieshou le zhege
afterward anyway too just accept PFV this

mingyun, jiu jue le. Suoyi.
 fate, just wonderful CRS So

‘(...) Afterward I accepted this fate anyway. It is just wonderful. So’

Erqie (“moreover”)

DM use of erqie. Fang (2000) finds that erqie is used for topic shifting when it is semantically bleached. In my data, it is found to have the same textual function of topic shifting when used as a DM. For instance, in (6), the speaker at first wants to talk about the features of Jiangsu province. He feels that it is not easy to explain because the province is divided into two parts (south and north) and each part has its own features. Therefore, erqie here is used not to add further information to his previous utterance; instead, after erqie, there is a different aspect of the topic.

Example (6):

Jun: Jiangsu de tedian, qishi gen qishi gen mei ge sheng de
 Jiangsu GEN feature actually with actually with every CL province NOM

wenhua shi bu tai yiyang. Jiangsu sheng de hua, en erqie
 culture be not very same Jiangsu province if uh moreover

Jiangsu sheng fen jiang nan jiang bei. Jiang nan de tese,
 Jiangsu province divide river south river north river south NOM feature

(...)

‘As to the features of Jiangsu province, actually every province’s culture is not quite the same. As to Jiangsu province, uh moreover Jiangu is divided into South and North. The characteristic of south of Jiangsu, (...)’

Dui (“yeah”)

DM use of dui. To my knowledge, there is nothing in the literature yet about this marker. In my study, dui is used as a DM inside a turn when it can be omitted from the utterance and the utterance retains its semantic intactness. And it is never stressed in the

data. It occurs either sentence-initially or finally. Dui serves a textual function—a pause filler or a delay device. In (7), the speaker talks about what type of music she likes to listen to. She tells the interviewer at the beginning of the turn that she wants to listen to American music because she is abroad now. And then she tells the interviewer that she doesn't like Chinese pop songs. Dui serves a pause filler at the beginning of her sentence.

Example (7):

Lian: biru shuo wo ting xiang ting yixia en...jiu shuo
 example say I very want listen a while uh precisely say

meiguo zhe zhong didao de yinyue. (...) Zai wang shang
 America this type authentic NOM music at internet on

keyi ting yixie nage bieren gei tuijian de gequ a
 may listen some that others give recommend NOM song PRT

shenme zhilei de. Dui, zhongwen ge wo zai guo nei ye qushi hen
 things like that yeah Chinese song I in country in also indeed quite

shao ting.
 seldom listen

'For example, I really want to listen to uh ... authentic American music. (...) I listen to the songs recommended by others through the internet and things like that. Yeah, I seldom listened to Chinese songs even when I was in China.'

Nage/zhege ("that/this")

DM use of nage/zhege. Huang (1999: 88) analyzes the distal nage and the proximal zhege as a pause marker by speakers to "make a lexical choice or to formulate a syntactic frame or to gather their thought." In my data, nage/zhege are found to serve a textual function: that of verbal filler. The speaker often pauses after nage or zhege and nage/zhege are not stressed when used as DMs. In (8), Qiu tells the interviewer about her hobbies. She uses nage for a lexical or content search.

Example (8):

Qiu: hua hua a, chang ge, chang jingxi,
 paint picture PRT sing song sing Beijing opera

ranhou nage ... qishi wo ting xihuan yundong de. (...)
 then that actually I quite like sports NOM

‘Painting, singing, singing Beijing Opera, and then ... actually I like sports too.
 (...)’

Jiushi (“precisely be”)

DM use of jiushi. Jiushi consists of the adverb *jiu* (“precisely”) and the copula *shi* (“be”). According to Fang (2000), the information after jiushi is half-new information and half-old information; therefore, the function of jiushi is helping to establish the semi-active topic. Biq (2001) analyzes the grammaticalization of jiushi and suggests that it becomes a DM when it is semantically reduced and serves as a pause filler or floor holder. In my data, jiushi is found to have two textual functions. First, it functions as a pause filler/floor holder and second, it helps to refer to an earlier topic. There is often a pause after jiushi when it is used as a pause filler and it is not stressed when used as a DM. In (9), the speaker talks about a movie she likes very much. There is a pause after each underlined jiushi indicating that the speaker needs time to search for the following words. In (10), the speaker talks about her trip to Sichuan province. Before jiushi, she mentions that “the people there are relatively naïve.” After jiushi, she tells the hearer that the people she mentioned before are Zang people. Here, jiushi loses its original semantic meaning. Instead, its function is to refer to a topic that already exists.

Example (9):

Qiu: (...) nage nage pai de hen hao. Ta jiu _____ shi .. yinwei
 that that shoot CSC very good it precisely be because

nage xiaoshuo wo jiu hen xihuan. Nage xiaoshuo, ta jiushi
 that novel I precisely very like that novel it precisely be

ta na xiaoshuo xie de xiang sanwen. (...)
 he that novel write CSC similar essay

‘(...) That movie was shot very well. It .. because I like the novel very much. That novel, it .. his novel was written like an essay. (...)’

Example (10):

Lian: (...) wo juede na difang nage fengjing tebie xiuli, ranhou
I think that place that scenery very beautiful then

na bian ren bijiao chunpu. Jiu shi nage .. zang zu
that side people relatively naïve precisely be that Zang clan

ren, tongbao ta bijiao chunpu.
people fellowmen he relatively naïve

‘(...) I think that place, the scenery is particularly beautiful, and then the people there are relatively naïve. The Zang fellowmen are relatively naïve.’

Jiushishuo (“namely/that is to say”)

DM use of jiushishuo. Biq (2001: 64) suggests that when jiushishuo is used as a discourse marker, the speaker uses the expression to “claim the floor, or to tell the interlocutor, ‘I have got things to say.’” In my data, it is found to serve the textual function—helping the speaker to hold the floor. In (11), Lian talks about whether she likes New York or not. She feels that it is good to go shopping, etc. there, but living there is not good. So jiushishuo in this case does not have its original function—further elaboration. It is used as a floor holder.

Example (11):

Lian: en niuyue wo juede nage difang, shopping a, ranhou nage chi
uh New York I think that place shopping PRT then that eat

chi fan a, keneng bijiao hao. Danshi jiushishuo nage ..
eat dinner PRT perhaps relatively good but that is to say that

en zhu zai niuyue, (...) naxie difang bu shihe shenghuo. (...)
uh live in New York those place not suitable living

‘Uh I think New York, that kind of place, it is perhaps fine to go shopping and have dinner. But uh living in New York, (...) those places are not suitable for living. (...)’

Haoxiang (“seem”)

DM use of haoxiang. No previous study has analyzed haoxiang as a DM, to my knowledge. When it is considered a DM in my data, it is used with an interpersonal function—to mitigate the speaker’s opinion, thus making the utterance indirect and more polite. In (12), the speaker talks about his new hobby—swimming. But he also complains that the pool near his home is not clean. By using haoxiang, he softens his opinion and seems more indirect.

Example (12):

Jun: (...) haiyou zai zhe haiyou yi ge aihao. Houlai, chabuduo
 also in here also one CL hobby later almost

xue hui le. Danshi nage youyong chi haoxiang bu tai ganjing,
 learn can CRS but that swim pool seem not very clean

gao zai shen shang dou shi yi gen mao yi gen mao de. (...)
 make at body on all be one CL hair one CL hair NOM

‘(...) Here I have another hobby. I almost learned how to swim later, but the swimming pool doesn’t seem very clean. So my body was covered with some feathers after swimming. (...)’

Fanzheng (“in any case/anyway”)

DM use of fanzheng. To my knowledge, analysis of this marker is not found in the literature. In my data, when it is considered a DM, it serves a textual function—holding the floor; and closing some part of the conversation and at the same time opening up a new slot in the discourse. It is often followed by a pause. In (13), the speaker is asked to talk about what sports he likes. After volleyball occurs in the list, he pauses. Fanzheng is used to hold the floor for the speaker and to close the previous part of the conversation

and continue a new part of the topic. It loses the original meaning and thus becomes a DM in this case.

Example (13):

Peng: (...) ranhou ...haiyou shenme, wo chuzhong de shihou ye
then also what I middle school NOM time too

da paiqiu. Houlai bu da le. En ... fanzheng ... Youyong wo
play volleyball later not play CRS uh anyway swim I

ye xihuan.
too like

‘(...) And then ... what else? When I was in middle school, I played volleyball too. Later I stopped playing. Uh ... I like swimming too.’

Qishi (“actually”)

DM use of qishi. No previous study has analyzed qishi as a DM, to my knowledge. In the data, when qishi is used as a DM, it serves an interpersonal hedging function—making the speaker’s utterance more indirect—and a textual function on holding the floor. In (14), Peng tells the interviewer that he came to study in the U.S. earlier than his college classmates. The interviewer then asks him if this is because his English is good. If qishi is omitted in this sentence, his reply lacks modesty to the hearer. With qishi in the reply, Peng makes himself more indirect. So qishi functions as a mitigator. On the other hand, there is a pause after qishi. The pause allows the speaker to search for words, so it also functions as a floor-holder.

Example (14):

Binmei: yinwei ni yingyu hao, shi ma?
because you English good right PRT

‘Because your English is good, right?’

Peng: wo yingyu qishi .. hai xing, (...)
I English actually still fine

‘My English is fine. (...)’

Wo juede (“I think”)

DM use of wo juede. In the literature of Chinese discourse markers, no previous studies have been published about this expression, to my knowledge. Wo juede literally means “I think.” It can be placed sentence-initially, medially and finally. All uses of wo juede in my data are considered DMs and it serves an interpersonal function: it expresses one’s deliberative thoughts; on the other hand, it is also used to mitigate one’s opinion because its user doesn’t want to impose his/her opinion upon the hearer. In (15), the speaker makes comments about his teacher. He doesn’t think one of his teachers is responsible enough. By using wo juede, the speaker means only that he thinks that the teacher is not responsible; his opinion may not include anybody else’s.

Example (15):

Peng: (...) you yi ge laoshi, wo juede ta bu shi na zhong tebie
 exist one CL teacher, I think he not be that kind very

fu zeren de. Yinwei si zhou xialai, ta zhi
 take responsibility NOM because four week since he only

chuxian guo yici. (...)
 appear EXP once

‘(...) One of the teachers, I think he is not the kind of very responsible teacher, because he only appeared once during four weeks. (...)’

Shenme (“what”)

DM use of shenme. Literature on the discourse marker of shenme does not exist, to my knowledge. In my data, it is found to have two functions: the first is an interpersonal one—it is used as a hedge to express weak commitment; the second is a textual one—it can be a pause filler. In (16), the speaker talks about his English study when he was in China. Shenme does not have any particular semantic meaning in this case. It is used as a hedge, which makes it possible for the speaker to be less abrupt. In (17), the speaker talks about a TV show he and his roommate often watch together at dinner time. Shenme

becomes a pause filler for the speaker to search for words. It is always followed by a pause when shenme is used as a filler.

Example (16):

Bing: (...) wo men gaozhong hai gen Aodaliya yi ge gaozhong
I PL high school even with Australia one CL high school

hai shenme lian yi xuexiao ne. (...)
even what connect friendship school PRT

‘(...) My high school and a high school even in Australia are sister schools.’

Example (17):

Bing: (...) jiushishuo ... women jiu shi chi fan de shihou
that is to say we precisely be eat meal NOM when

kan kan, zhenghao zhenghao zai nage shenme ..en wancan shijian
watch watch exactly exactly at that what uh supper time

de shihou, hui hui he wo de roommate kan zhe yige jiemu. (...)
NOM when will will with I NOM roommate watch this one show

‘(...) That is to say, we watch the program when we have dinner because the show time is exactly .. uh our supper time. I watch this show with my roommate. (...)’

Shenme/shenme de/shenme zhilei de (“referent-final tags”)

When shenme, shenme de or shenme zhilei de are used at the end of a list, they function as the same referent-final tag DMs in English as were analyzed at the end of the English DM part of this section. All uses of them are considered DMs in the data. These discourse markers have not been discussed in the literature yet, to my knowledge. Shenme/shenme de/shenme zhilei de has an interpersonal hedging function which takes one of two aspects: invoking common ground between the speaker and the hearer; and marking approximation. For example, in (18), the speaker talks about what hobbies he has. He thinks of the hobby “surfing the internet” and shenme de indicates something

similar which he likes to do at home. Shenme de could function to let the hearer infer other similar examples, and also could signal to downplay the importance of what has been said.

Example (18):

Feng: (...) zai jia. aihao, hai zhen xiang bu dao you shenme aihao. chang
at home hobby yet indeed think not up have what hobby sing

ge tiao wu dou bu gan le, mei yisi. Ranhou shang
song dance dance all not do CRS not fun then surf

shang wang shenme de. Zhe suan yeyu aihao ma?
surf internet that sort of thing this count extra hobby PRT

‘(...) At home. Hobby, I really can’t think up anything. Singing, dancing, I don’t do them anymore, because they are not fun. And then surfing the internet that sort of thing. Does this qualify as a hobby?’

3. Conclusion

The study has identified and analyzed fourteen Chinese discourse markers in the oral speech of mainland Mandarin speakers. Some of them haven’t been discussed before in the literature, for example, dui (“yeah”), haoxiang (“seem”), fanzheng (“anyway”), wo jue de (“I think”), shenme (“what”), shenme/ shenme de/shenme zhilei de (“referent-final tags”).

Discourse markers are difficult for foreign/second language learners to acquire if learners are not exposed to natural Chinese. The pragmatic functions of these markers are not taught in formal language classrooms, nor do they appear in Chinese learning dictionaries or textbooks. One pedagogical implication of this study is that curriculum writers and teachers should put more focus on the pragmatic functions of discourse markers (Hellermann & Vergun 2007) rather than just focus on semantic meanings of these words in textbooks and classrooms. Another implication of the study is that curriculum writers and language teachers should use more authentic listening and speaking materials (He & Xu 2003).

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