

## GENDER AND ACQUISITION OF DISCOURSE MARKERS -A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH

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**Abstract:** The present study is an account of the use of discourse markers of English and the implications they have with respect to their function for cohesion, coherence and continuity of discourse in the written texts of the students studying in English medium, urban vernacular medium and rural vernacular medium schools of Assam. The study offers a view of the multilingual setting in Assam in which the teaching and learning of English takes place. This paper focuses on what role the variable of Gender play in the acquisition of discourse markers. The study is based on responses to questionnaire and cloze tests administered in the schools and on an examination of the written texts of the students.

**Key words-** coherence, cohesion, discourse marker, gender, repertoire

**Introduction:** The present study attempts a detailed and comparative study of the discourse markers in English used in the written texts of high school students of Assam. This paper focuses on what role the variable of Gender play in the acquisition of discourse markers. Discourse Markers: Discourse markers are the word insertions that provide continuity in conversations. Discourse markers are also known as words or short 'lexicalized phrases' [Schiffrin 2001:57] that organize texts. This organization is achieved by showing 'how the speaker intends the basic message that follows to relate to the prior discourse' [Fraser 1990:387; Schiffrin 2001:59]. Discourse markers help to create 'cohesion' [Schiffrin 2001:55] and 'coherence' [Schiffrin 2001:58] in a given text by establishing a relationship between the various ideas that are expressed within the text. Schiffrin [1987:31] operationally defines discourse markers as sequentially dependent elements which brackets units of talk. Examples of discourse markers in English would include 'oh', 'well', 'and', 'but', 'or', 'so', 'like', 'because', 'now', 'then', 'I mean', 'you know', 'uh', 'anyway', 'yet' etc. 'Discourse markers' is the term linguists give to the above mentioned words that break our speech up into parts and show the relation between parts. Discourse markers are found in various grammatical categories including conjunctions, interjections and adverbs. Discourse

- to initiate discourse,
- to mark a boundary in discourse (shift/ partial shift in topic),
- to preface a response or a reaction,
- to serve as a filler or delaying tactic,
- to aid the speaker in holding the floor,
- to effect an interaction or sharing between speaker and hearer,
- to bracket the discourse either cataphorically or anaphorically,
- to mark either fore grounded or back grounded information.

markers can 'connect' various units of dynamic meaning (coherence) as well as the surface structure of the text (cohesion). For example, 'oh' prepares the hearer for a surprising or just-remembered item, and 'but' indicates that sentence to follow is in opposition to the one before. However, these markers don't necessarily mean what the dictionary says they mean. Some people use 'and' just to start a new thought, and some people put 'but' at the end of their sentences, as a way of trailing off gently. Discourse markers also occur when speakers shift their orientation to information. In this case the markers alert the listener that something within the speaker has changed.

Discourse markers are usually polyfunctional elements. Discourse markers can be understood in two ways. First, as elements which serve towards the union of utterances. Secondly, as elements which serve to a variety of conversational purposes. Discourse markers are linguistic expressions used to signal the relation of an utterance to its immediate context, with the primary function of bringing to the listeners' attention a particular kind of linkage of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context.

Simone Muller [2005:09] made a list of how discourse markers function. He stated that discourse markers are used

For a long time, English was considered a language that lacked particles [Lenk 1988:38]. Subsequent studies of discourse markers in English have meanwhile pointed out that this is indeed not the case: although the propositional content of a sentence might not be altered by the addition or deletion of a discourse marker, discourse markers in English, nevertheless, fulfill an important pragmatic function in the conversational interaction [Lenk 1988:38]. Discourse markers are linguistic expressions used to signal the relation of an utterance to its immediate context, with the primary function of bringing to the listeners' attention a particular kind

of linkage of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context. Thus, it is seen that discourse markers help to create 'cohesion' [Schiffrin 2001:55] and 'coherence' [Schiffrin 2001:58] in a given text by establishing a relationship between the various ideas that are expressed within the text. During the last two decades, analyses of discourse markers have occupied a large space in the literature on pragmatics. And discourse markers have been considered from a variety of perspectives and approaches.

Stenstrom [1994:17] says that a conversation is "much less lively and less 'personal' without [discourse markers] signaling receipt of information, agreement and involvement."

The present study incorporates a detailed analysis of the discourse markers and the implications they have with respect to the attributes of cohesion, coherence, and continuity of the discourse in the written texts of the male and female students studying in English medium, urban vernacular medium and rural vernacular medium schools of Assam.

Thus, the parameters mentioned above yielded a detailed and comprehensive database for a comparative analysis in the usage of discourse markers and their implication in the written texts of the High school students in the context of a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic state like Assam.

In Assam, apart from the Assamese community there are the Bodos', Rabhas', Manipuris', Missings', Miris', Deoris', Morans', Karbis', Kacharis'. There are also a huge number of people from the Bengali, Bihari and Nepali communities. Moreover, in the more recent times, a fairly large scale migration of people from other parts of India like the Santhals', Gonds', Mundas' etc. from Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh has been noticed, they were mainly brought as indentured labourers for teagardens. These people have also carried their own distinct cultural heritage and language to the state. Thus, by this study on discourse markers, an attempt has been made to evaluate the prevailing state of education and training with respect to the teaching of English as a second language in the state. As English is one of the official languages of the country, with the status of associate national language and mastery of English is considered a social and educational accomplishment, as accurately described by Kudchedkar's [2002:45] as follows:

*...English plays a very important role in education, business and administration. It is the medium of instruction for higher education-both academic and technological. Those who seek jobs in private companies or professions must be proficient in English. It is recognized as an official language for purposes of administration at the national level. It would follow*

*that it should be considered as a second language rather than a foreign language.*

*...Today, it is difficult to think of success in any career in India without adequate proficiency in English.*

In short, Kachru's pronouncement (1986:32) that English has now become an integral part of India's linguistic repertoire is all the more true today.

**Data Analysis The Sample:** The data has been elicited from two hundred subjects (students). These subjects have been categorized into three different groups based on their school, medium of instruction and demographic location. These subjects are studying in standard 8, 9, and 10. Broadly the three different groups are-

1. English Medium (EM)
2. Urban Vernacular Medium (VM-U)
3. Rural VernacularMedium (VM-R)

(Note-there were no rural English medium schools)

**English Medium:** In the group of English Medium (EM) students (subjects), there are total 86 students. Out of which, 57 students are female and 29 are male. There are 31 Non-Assamese students. Out of which, 27 students are female and 7 are male. There are 52 Assamese students, out of which, 30 are female and 22 are male.

**Urban Vernacular Medium (VM-U):** In the group of Urban Vernacular Medium (VM-U) students, there are total 56 students. Out of which, 27 students are female and 23 male. There are 5 Non-Assamese students. Out of which, 4 students are female and 1 is male.

There are 45 Assamese students. Out of which, 23 students are female and 22 are male.

**Rural VernacularMedium (VM-R):** In the group of Rural Vernacular Medium (VM-R), there are total 58 students. Out of which, 32 students are female and 26 are male. There are 10 Non-Assamese students. Out of which, 6 students are female and 4 are male. There are 48 Assamese students. Out of which, 26 students are female and 22 are male.

For the purpose of data elicitation from the subjects, a questionnaire containing both subjective as well as objective questions, was prepared (the questionnaire is attached in Appendix 1). This questionnaire was taken to the field and the subjects from the Urban English medium (EM), the Urban Vernacular medium (VM-U), and the Rural Vernacular medium (VM-R) Schools were asked to fill it up. Second, a cloze test was prepared, wherein a portion of a text with the discourse markers removed, was given to the subjects. The subjects were asked to replace the missing words with appropriate discourse markers (a copy of the cloze test is attached in Appendix 2). Third, the subjects from all the three groups, i.e., EM, VM-U, VM-R, were asked to write a letter, story and an essay. Taking their (the subjects) letter, story and

essay as a specimen, the frequency of their usage of ‘Discourse Markers’ was analyzed.

**The Data:** After the analysis, it was seen that the most frequently used and popular discourse markers among the subjects are- *and, but, so, therefore, however, whereas, then, like, anyway, because* (both in oral and written texts). Again, the subjects often used the discourse markers *consequently, as a result, in addition, nevertheless, moreover, furthermore, nonetheless, regarding* more in their written texts and less in their oral texts.

**Analysis:** The acquisition of discourse markers by non-native learners of English is dependent on differences on the medium of instruction and another very important variable such as gender differences.

The subjects were asked specific questions regarding this hypothesis, wherein they were enquired – which

discourse markers do they use even while communicating in a language (including mother tongue) other than English? [Appendix 1 – Q.No.16]

The subjects used ‘*well, ok, so, now, I mean, anyway, then*’ extensively even while communicating in a language other than English. A comparative analysis between all the three groups—the English medium, the urban vernacular medium, the rural vernacular medium (EM, VM-U, VM-R) shows that the subjects from the VM-U group used maximum number of discourse markers even while communicating in a different language other than English. As out of 56 subjects of this group, 34 subjects gave correct answers. Whereas, in the EM group, out of 86 subjects, 45 subjects gave correct answers. Similarly, in the VM-R group, out of 58 subjects, 33 gave correct answers.

**Table 1**

The table presents the performance of male/female and Assamese/non-Assamese subjects

GROUPS	TOTAL SUBJECTS	MALE SUBJECTS	FEMALE SUBJECTS	ASSAMESE MALE	ASSAMESE FEMALE	NA-MALE	NA-A FEMALE
EM	86	16	39	12	19	4	10
VM-U	56	15	19	15	18	-	1
VM-R	58	17	16	16	13	1	3

Gender differences do prevail in the use and repertoire of discourse markers and they may serve to be important indicators as to gender based differences in communication and understanding.

Out of the six determining questions and tests, the data shows that the female subjects fared better than the male subjects. (The most common discourse markers among the female subjects were-*like, ok, so, well, anyway*).

**Table 2**

The tabulated form with percentage

GENDER	TOTAL	Q.15	Q.16	Q.17	Q.18	CLOZE TEST	NO. OF DM'S USED
MALE	78	55	48	53	33	13	30
PERCENT AGE (MALE)		70.51%	61.53%	67.94%	42.30%	16.66%	38.46%
FEMALE	116	55	74	70	55	44	69
PERCENT AGE (FEMALE)		47.41%	63.79%	60.34	47.41%	37.93%	50.86%

**Table 3**

The tabulated form of the male/female analysis

GENDER	Q.NO.15	Q.NO.16	Q.NO.17	Q.NO.18	CLOZE TEST	NO. OF DMs USED IN WRITTEN TEXTS
M-	M	--	M	--	--	--
F-	--	F	--	F	F	F

- M- Male
- F- Female

**Conclusion:** The study reveals that the Discourse markers in English do serve as connectors and aid successful communication in the mother tongue and other languages of the student. The subjects from the urban vernacular medium (VM-U) have proved this correct by using maximum number of discourse markers even while communicating in a different language (including mother tongue) other than English.

On the basis of the present study it was found that the most frequently used and popular discourse

#### Appendix 1 Questionnaire:

1. Name:
2. Father's Name:
3. Mother's Name:
4. Date of Birth:
5. Male/Female:
6. Class:
7. Ambition:
8. Occupation of Father: Govt./Private/Business (tick one)
9. Occupation of Mother: Govt./Private/Business/Home maker (tick one)
10. Since when have you lived here?
11. Which languages do you speak?
  - a) at home
  - b) at school
  - c) with friends-
12. List the languages you know?
  - a) well:
  - b) so-so:
  - c) not so well:
13. What languages do you use at home?
  - a) with grandparents:
  - b) with parents:
  - c) with siblings:
  - d) with relatives:
  - e) with servants(if any):
  - f) with pets(if any):
14. Do you sing in the bathroom (if yes, in which language do you sing)?  
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15. What words do you use to connect sentences in English?  
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16. Which of these English words do you use even while talking in a language other than English?  
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17. How often do you use the following words while writing answers, essays, stories?  
[Very often/often/occasionally/never]  
a) Well b) Ok c) Actually d) And e) Like f) Now g) But h) Because i) Then j) Yet k) Anyway  
l) I mean m) So n) While o) Whereas p) Nonetheless q) However r) Moreover s) Therefore  
t) Furthermore
18. Which are your favourite sentence connectors?

#### Appendix 2(Cloze Test)

##### Fill in the blanks with appropriate sentence connectives:

.....our efforts to improve the local economy, we have made some benefits.....the latest market figures, we can see that our company is progressing. We have been steadily improving our customer service center,....., our shipping department needs to be redesigned. I would like to say that ....., I am concerned, we should continue to develop our resources. Our energy bills have been increasing steadily.....these costs, our telephone costs have doubled over the past six months. I warned Amy not to

invest all his savings in the stock market....., he invested and lost everything. Amidst these, his problems with his parents are extremely frustrating. ...., there seems to be no easy solution to them. I assured him that I would come to his presentation. .... I also invited a number of important representatives from the local chambers of commerce. We have almost lost 3,000 customers over the past six months. ...., we have been forced to cut back our advertising budget. The government has drastically reduced its spending. ...., a number of programs have been cancelled.

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