

THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCOURSE MARKERS

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The Importance of Discourse Markers in Spoken Language

Effective communication goes beyond the mere use of correct grammar or an extensive vocabulary. It involves how well ideas are organized, connected, and conveyed. Discourse markers are one of the key elements that ensure smooth, coherent, and natural speech. Despite being small and sometimes overlooked, discourse markers play a crucial role in making spoken language more fluent and comprehensible.

What Are Discourse Markers?

Discourse markers are words or phrases used in spoken language to organize speech, manage the flow of conversation, and create a coherent structure. They help speakers transition between ideas, express personal attitudes, and even buy time to think without causing awkward pauses in conversation. While discourse markers don't alter the core meaning of a sentence, they provide critical signals that guide the listener on how to interpret the speaker's message.

Common examples of discourse markers include words like 'well,' 'so,' 'actually,' 'anyway,' 'you know,' 'in fact,' 'however,' and 'on the other hand.' These small words serve a variety of functions that can make speech more interactive, organized, and engaging.

Discourse markers allow speakers to:

1. Transition seamlessly between ideas.
2. Add or contrast information.
3. Express emotions like agreement, uncertainty, surprise, and more.
4. Maintain listener attention.
5. Create a more interactive conversational tone.

The Functions of Discourse Markers

To understand the significance of discourse markers, it's important to recognize the different roles they play in spoken language. These functions include organizing speech, linking ideas, managing emotions, and engaging listeners. Let's examine the key functions of discourse markers:

1. Organizing Speech

One of the primary functions of discourse markers is to structure speech into a logical sequence. Whether in a casual conversation or a formal speech, discourse markers guide the listener through different stages of the conversation.

Examples: 'First of all,' 'Secondly,' 'Finally,' 'In conclusion.'

These markers help to present ideas in a clear, step-by-step manner, making it easier for listeners to follow the speaker's train of thought.

2. Indicating Relationships Between Ideas

Discourse markers help to show how two ideas are connected. They indicate whether the ideas are contrasting, complementary, or result from one another. This makes conversations more coherent and easier to understand.

Examples: 'However,' 'Therefore,' 'On the other hand,' 'As a result.'

For instance, if you say, 'It was raining. However, we decided to go hiking anyway,' the discourse marker 'however' signals that the second statement contrasts with the first one.

3. Expressing Personal Attitudes and Feelings

Certain discourse markers convey the speaker's emotional tone or level of certainty about the information being shared. This adds a personal touch to conversations, allowing listeners to gauge how the speaker feels about a topic.

Examples: 'Honestly,' 'Frankly,' 'Apparently,' 'To be honest.'

An example could be: 'Honestly, I didn't expect him to win.' The marker 'honestly' helps convey the speaker's true feelings.

4. Managing Interaction

In face-to-face communication, interaction management is vital. Some discourse markers help engage the listener by prompting responses, checking understanding, or softening statements to avoid sounding too abrupt.

Examples: 'You know,' 'I mean,' 'Right?,' 'See what I mean?'

These markers make speech sound more collaborative and less one-sided, encouraging active participation from both speakers.

5. Gaining Time to Think

In spontaneous spoken language, it's natural for a speaker to need time to think. Instead of awkward silences, discourse markers such as 'Well,' 'Let me think,' or 'You know' provide a moment for the speaker to collect their thoughts while still maintaining the flow of conversation.

Example: 'Well, let me think about that.'

These markers ensure that the conversation continues smoothly while giving the speaker the time needed to formulate their response.

Types of Discourse Markers

Discourse markers can be categorized based on their function in the conversation. There are several types of discourse markers, each serving a specific role. Some of the most common types include:

1. Markers of Addition

These are used to add extra information to the conversation.

Examples: 'Moreover,' 'Besides,' 'Additionally.'

2. Markers of Contrast

These are used to show a contrast or opposition between two ideas.

Examples: 'However,' 'On the other hand,' 'But.'

3. Markers of Cause and Effect

These show a cause-effect relationship between two ideas.

Examples: 'Therefore,' 'Thus,' 'As a result.'

4. Markers of Sequencing

These help to order events or ideas.

Examples: 'Firstly,' 'Next,' 'Finally.'

5. Markers of Clarification

These are used to explain or elaborate on a point.

Examples: 'In other words,' 'That is to say.'

6. Markers of Transition

These signal a shift in topic or direction of the conversation.

Examples: 'By the way,' 'Incidentally,' 'Speaking of.'

Common Mistakes Learners Make

Although discourse markers are essential in spoken language, learners often struggle to use them effectively. Common mistakes include:

- Overusing discourse markers can clutter speech.
- Using them randomly without understanding their function.
- Misplacing them can disrupt clarity.
- Using inappropriate discourse markers for the context.

How to Use Discourse Markers Effectively

Mastering discourse markers is a key aspect of becoming fluent in spoken language. Here are some tips on how to use them effectively:

1. Learn discourse markers in context.
2. Listen actively to native speakers.
3. Practice speaking naturally.
4. Record yourself and review.
5. Use sparingly for clarity.

Examples of Natural Use in Conversations

Formal Example:

Firstly, I would like to thank everyone for coming. Moreover, our project results show promising outcomes. However, there are still challenges we must address. In conclusion, I believe we are moving in the right direction.

Informal Example:

Well, you know, I wasn't really planning to go out tonight. But then again, it's been a long week, so maybe I should relax a little.

Conclusion

Discourse markers may seem small, but they are crucial for making spoken language more coherent, engaging, and natural. By structuring speech, linking ideas, expressing emotions, and facilitating interaction, discourse markers help create smooth and dynamic conversations. Understanding how and when to use them is a key skill for anyone looking to improve their spoken language proficiency. Effective use of discourse markers is a clear sign of fluency, and mastering them is essential for becoming an effective communicator in any language

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