

Tag-markers in evaluative segments
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Abstract

Pragmatic markers (PMs) set up pragmatic coherence relations which are text genre and context specific. My main hypothesis is that PMs help in the organization of textual segments and that certain markers are bound to occur at particular segments. Similarly, because of their structural function, some markers will be systematically found at particular segment boundaries. The relationship between discourse structure and functions of markers has eventually allowed me to observe and classify a series of English and Catalan pragmatic markers according to their main role in a corpus of forty oral narratives (González 2004). I have described such role as *illocutionary* -if mainly operating in the rhetorical structure - *structural* -if mainly operating in the sequential structure - or that of *inference facilitator* -if its function is basically that of bridging text to cognitive context. Markers whose functions are tight to the *ideational* structure (English *then* and *so*; Catalan *llavors*, for instance) are units whose grammaticalization process has not been long enough for them to lose their descriptive or lexical value and, consequently, share traits from both ideational and pragmatic structures. In this paper I particularly concentrate on the role of two tag-markers that mostly appear in internal evaluation segments: Catalan *no* and *eh*. I will discuss their role in coherence relations terms (in the Ideational, Rhetorical, Sequential and Inferential components). The text within which these elements are framed -Labov's (1972) narrative- is a genre that shows structural regularities at both discourse and clause levels (*abstract, orientation, developing of action, evaluation -internal and external- result and coda*). This study follows the line of research on discourse structure developed mainly by Redeker (1990, 1991), Grosz and Sidner (1986, 1989), and Polanyi (1985). Sander's (1997) notion of *source of coherence* -semantic vs pragmatic- provides the ground for the description of the pragmatic functions attached to the markers.

1. Framework: Markers, Coherence Relations and Discourse Segments

Brinton (1996:33-35) provides an exhaustive list of basic features that, although not fully manifested in all units considered pragmatic markers, suggest a range of properties that most markers display¹. One of these features is that markers have little or no propositional meaning, which might take us to conclude that the presence of a device of such characteristics is totally unnecessary in the message we are trying to convey. This is basically true as far as informational value of the message, that is, a marker is not strictly obligatory for the full understanding of a sentence or segment, but, as Schiffrin suggests (1987:318) it is probably necessary to make the type of relationship between preceding and following propositions explicit and clear. On a similar line of argument Fraser (1999) claims: “a marker reinforces a relationship between the segments S1 and S2 by virtue of the DM meaning, while on the other hand, the context, both linguistic and non-linguistic, elaborates and enriches the relationship based on the details present” (p.946).

The role of pragmatic markers has been outlined by recent research undertaken by linguists working in the fields of artificial intelligence and natural language processing, both sharing a cognitive approach to linguistic phenomena. In the eighties and nineties, Grosz and Sidner (1986), Sanders et al (1993), Sanders (1997), Oversteegen (1997), or Mann et al. (1992) established the link between discourse segments and lexical units used in natural language that helped structure the ongoing flow of interaction and that signalled the structure and coherence of the discourse, in spoken communication mainly.

¹ I adopt Brinton's list of features as basis of what is considered a marker in this study. There is a summarized version of them in Jucker and Ziv (1998:3).

According to Grosz and Sidner (1989:439), depending on the inquiry interests, the kinds of relations that join discourse segments can be established differently. Theories whose main interests revolve around discourse meaning focus on the semantic or pragmatic relations (Schiffrin 1987, Mann and Thompson 1988, Sanders 1997, Redeker 1990), whereas natural language processing theories that aim at the formalization of language concentrate on how these meaning relations constrain and delimit units of discourse that are relevant to the interpretation of the message (Grosz and Sidner 1986, Grosz et al. 1989, Polanyi 1988). In both cases, *cue phrases*, as regularly named by most of the above linguists², play a key role in discourse because they are the mechanisms used by the speaker to set up semantic and pragmatic relations between utterances, and because they work as textual hinges that signal and delimit discourse units. See (1). It is an excerpt taken from the corpus of narratives. Note the overall distribution of markers.

The excerpt above illustrates Labov's structural pattern of a narrative. This excerpt includes *orientation* (osc: space and characters), *developing action* (da: sequencing of the events, thoughts and actions), *evaluation* (ei: *internal*, to provide the point of view of the narrator; ee: *external*, to include an outside comment to clarify and facilitate the information provided to the hearer). Since the narrative is quite long, the *result* and the *coda* (closing up the story) have not been included in this case. A narrative of personal experience is formed by distinct segments that present a coherent overall framework. The working assumption is that markers indicate discourse segments boundaries and facilitate the *discourse segment purpose (DSP)*, following Grosz and Sidner (1986) proposal.

According to Grosz and Sidner (1986:176), discourse segment purposes are made recognizable by means of overt linguistic marking (use of aspect, mood, particular cue phrases, referring expressions) that make the intentions of the participants clear and that establish the discourse segment boundaries. The fact that a linguistic cue is at segment boundaries is not compulsory, since the intentions of the speaker can be inferred from previous utterances and from the overall intentional structure, but "cue phrases are the most distinguished linguistic means that speakers have for indicating discourse segment boundaries and conveying information about the DSP." (1986:188). Hockey (1988:1) also argues that, from a processing perspective, cue phrases help the hearer infer the structure of a discourse, which, according to her, is necessary for and prior to its interpretation. Finally, Grosz and Sidner argue that these linguistic signs are indirect means that alert the listener that a move or change is about to come. In their words, they may indicate all the following (1986:196):

1. that a change of attention is imminent;
2. whether the change returns to a previous focus space or creates a new one;
3. how the intention is related to other intentions;
4. what precedence relationships, if any, are relevant;

As previously mentioned, besides those scholars working on the relationship between markers and natural language processing, there is a line of research developed by scholars working on discourse meaning. These distinguish semantic from pragmatic segment relationships. Sanders (1997:122) establishes a theory of coherence relations that goes to the *source of coherence*, which can be semantic or pragmatic. The study that I present follows Sander's proposal and the pragmatic³ notion of *source of coherence* in particular.

² Grosz and Sidner borrow the term from Reichman (1981): "We will use the term *cue phrases* to generalize on her observation as well as many others because each one of these devices cues the hearer to some change in the discourse structure." (Grosz and Sidner 1986:178).

³ According to Sanders (1997:122): "A relation is semantic if the discourse segments are related because of their propositional content, i.e. the locutionary meaning of the segments." (...) "A relation is pragmatic

2. The Study: Corpus, Informants, and Instrument

The analysis of pragmatic markers undertaken in this study was carried out on an English and Catalan corpus of forty oral narratives, twenty in English and twenty in Catalan (González 2004)⁴. The informants from which the oral narratives were elicited are all native speakers of Catalan and English. The forty informants are adult men and women whose age ranges from twenty-five to thirty-five years old. Their educational level is university studies. The variables which have been controlled are, therefore, mother-tongue (English and Catalan), age, and educational level; sex was not taken into account, so both men and women were chosen at random. External variables were not taken into consideration.

The instrument used to elicit the forty oral narratives was one of the modules of the sociolinguistic interview (Labov 1972a), the *situation of danger*. It was the *vernacular principle* of the language sustained by Labov (1972b) that ruled the choice of the potential narrators, not the specificities of dialectological variables. The *vernacular principle* sustains “that the style which is most regular in its structure and in its relation to the evolution of the language is the vernacular, in which the minimum attention is paid to speech. (...) This most spontaneous, least studied style is the one that we as linguists will find the most useful as we place the speaker in the overall pattern of the speech community.” (1972b:112).

3. Narrative Evaluative Segments

When narrating a past personal experience, the speaker uses evaluation to signal to the listener that his story has a point, that it is tellable and that it is worth listening to. An account of a past personal experience that lacks evaluation will probably result in the listener coming up with: 'So what?'; the referential function of the story has been fulfilled but the audience finds it pointless and non-significant. Evaluative clauses can be found throughout the narrative, embedded either at the beginning, in-between the complicating action stages or at the end of it. The sort of evaluation found at the beginning of the narratives works as a sort of warming-up preface offered by the narrator to the listener, so as not to go so straightforward to the facts or objective events. See an internal evaluation segment exemplified in (2). It is found at the end of the story, following the result segment. Agatha has gone through a bad sailing experience and all through the account to the very end she strongly wishes that the listener copes with her anguish:

Whenever evaluation is introduced, action is suspended. However, this does not always happen and it becomes really hard to separate it from the narrative clauses, so deeply embedded is it in the narrative framework and sequence of events; more often, though, it can be found in separate clauses, providing a more or less close or distant comment and, therefore, getting the narrator personally involved to a stronger or weaker degree. It is on this basis that evaluation can be classified as external or internal. *Internal evaluation* implies, always, an effort to drag the listener into the narrative's world and to make, by all means, the story credible. In this respect, the sort of personal experience with which the narrative deals -situation of danger- involves a special effort on the narrator's part since, from the very beginning, s/he has to demonstrate that s/he *really* was in danger. Labov (1982:230) differentiates objective from subjective events. The former are just reportable physical events that can be contradicted, at any time, by a witness present at the time; they are told in *external evaluation* segments and simply add information that the speaker considers is relevant for the full understanding of the story. At this point, the flow of the story is broken and a comment or remark is made. See a segment above (ee), in narrative (1).

if the discourse segments are related because of the illocutionary meaning of one or both of the segments. In pragmatic relations the coherence relation concerns the speech act status of the segments."

⁴ See the results of the study in González 2004 (Chapter 5: Tables 3 and 19; Chapter 6, Tables 22 and 45).

4. Two Catalan Tag-Markers in Evaluative Segments: *no?* and *eh?*

The role that markers play in evaluative segments is outstanding. In this paper, I will particularly concentrate on the two Catalan tag-markers *no* and *eh*, both mostly found in internal evaluation. Results have shown that these markers are systematically used in evaluation to call the hearer's attention and to establish a personal link with the interlocutor. If we take into account that markers predicate changes in the speaker's cognition and attitudes, the use of these units in evaluative parts of the narrative has a strong cooperative effect, in *Gricean* terms. They facilitate complicity and intimacy between speaker and hearer and confirm shared assumptions. It is on this argumentative line that Norrick (1993) points out the presuppositional nature of tag-questions:

"... invariant tags typically signal a perception of concurrence or difference in knowledge or attitude between the speaker and another participant in the conversation. In particular, tags tend to mark an assumption: (1) that the speaker and hearer share a belief or attitude, (2) that the hearer knows better than the speaker does, or (3) that the speaker knows better than the hearer, and hence challenges the hearer's incorrect belief. " (Norrick 1993:1)

The pragmatic value of tag-questions can be linked to the modality of the two different parts that form it: one assertive and the other (the tag) interrogative. Thus by means of *no* and *eh* the narrator "modalizes the utterance by introducing implicit information denoting her or his attitude about the communicative exchange" (Cuenca 1997:10). Between assertion and interrogation, the marker is then used as a discourse strategy to share with the listener a world of beliefs, what would be Norrick's first assumption above.⁵

Catalan pragmatic markers *no* and *eh* exhibit the intonational, pragmatic and syntactic properties of tag questions. Due to their interrogative character, they are always uttered with a fall-rise nuclear tone. In the *rhetorical structure*, they both function as elements that modalise the utterance manifesting the speaker's attitude and intentions; in this sense, they have a communicative truth-value since they are used by the speaker to overtly show a personal belief, opinion or thought, all of it with a sense of closeness. As far as syntactic distribution is concerned, they are always found in clause-final position, thus behaving as righthand discourse brackets (when the majority of markers are lefthand brackets). Due to their clause-final position, *no* and *eh* work as focal elements that call the listener for special attention. By means of these two markers, but in frequency terms specially by *no*, the narrator alerts the listener of a piece of information that is worth paying special attention to. This intrinsic property is specially significant in the case of monologued discourse such as narrative, since the use of it involves an overt willingness to share a common ground with the passive interlocutor and a desire of acceptance of what is being told. In this respect, contrary to what has been often suggested by some authors, its role goes far beyond that of a 'back-channeling' device that is used to maintain the communicative line open. It can therefore be asserted that the most outstanding property of tag-question markers such as *no* and *eh* is their inferential and presuppositional value since the speaker assumes and presupposes a shared knowledge with the listener of the story. See (3), an internal evaluation segment from a narrative. Elisabet is talking about a birthday party she went to. She was wearing a long scarf around her neck that caught fire when she got close to a candle.

⁵ Most languages have invariant tags but certain languages such as English, Danish and Finnish use inflected tags as in: But your mom doesn't even limp, *does she?* Although tags are commonly used to mark uncertainty, Norrick (1995:688) claims that "more importantly they also imply that the hearer has more immediate or surer access to the knowledge in question, and hence they appeal to the hearer for confirmation."

The fact that Elisabet uses *no* so often in a part of the narrative that is especially subjective, i.e. internal evaluation,⁶ supports the aforementioned contextual effect role of this pragmatic marker. Notice that there is an increasing wonder and looking for an explanation about her reaction had she had long hair. By means of the marker, there is a sort of pragmatic crescendo at the intentional state caused by the same speaker, probably with an unconscious aim to transmit the anxiety of the moment to the listener. This links with the above discussion on the different role that tag-questions have, as pragmatic markers, in dialogued and in monologued discourse. I suggest that the use of tag-questions in monologues cannot be restricted to a pure communicative truth-value request (i.e. asking for confirmation), as may occur in conversation, but goes a step further onto a wider search for contextual effects that the speaker supplies in an attempt to facilitate the sharing of common ground and presuppositions. Note that the utterances modalised by *no* in (3) present different grammatical patterns: one conditional, two negatives, and one declarative.

According to Cuenca and Castellà (1995:70), the use of *no* in negative sentences is not grammatical⁷ but this restriction does not seem to work in a corpus of naturally occurring data, where the discursive attitude and intentional state of the speaker have a ruling function. In this sense, Cuenca seems to be right in hypothesizing that pragmatic functions are more important than formal syntactic aspects when it comes down to defining and characterizing tag-question markers (Cuenca 1996:401).

If compared with *no*, the tag-marker *eh* presents certain particularities. In the corpus analyzed there is a preponderant use of *no* (91.4% vs 8.6%) but distributional data also show that whenever the narrator uses the two forms, *eh* undertakes a higher attentional meaning than *no*. Let us see it in (4), the result segment of Elisabet's narrative above.

If we try to switch the two forms in (4), note that the pragmatic meaning does not radically change but loses its purpose and force. In addition, there is a polyphonic distinctive trait worth taking into consideration.

- *NAR: i m'ho van treure tot pel cap.
and they took it off over my head
- *NAR: ?? bonament com van poguer <eh/>.
?? as gently as they could <eh/>.
- *NAR: ?? però # no em vaig fer res <no/>.
?? but # I didn't hurt myself <no/>.

Notice also how the telling of the two facts, that of taking off the scarf and sweater that caught fire, and that of not being damaged, are not really addressed to the same enunciative interlocutor. There is a polyphonic use of the two markers: whereas the first performative action is part of the development of the action, that is, of the events being told, the result of not being damaged is an information that the narrator shares directly with the person that is listening to the story. Consequently, I would conclude that *no* and *eh* are two pragmatic markers with a core attentional and presuppositional meaning but which do not exactly share the same enunciative properties and illocutionary force: besides working at the attentional state, *no* facilitates the contextual effects that are necessary to fully understand the message but the use of *eh* carries along a stronger emphatic (deictic and illocutionary) purpose that translates into an overt willingness to address, sometimes even challenge, the interlocutor.⁸

⁶ Throughout her account, Elisabet uses *no*? fourteen times; eight of these belong to internal evaluative segments.

⁷ They exemplify it in: "??No acabaràs la feina, no?" (??You won't finish work, no?), although they bring in Hualde's (1992:5) opposite view on the matter by supplying his example: "No et vols menjar les patates, no?" ("You don't want to eat the potatoes, no?"). (Cuenca and Castellà 1995:70)

⁸ In fact, Cuenca and Castellà (1995:82) also hint at a distinctive trait between the two markers when they claim that *eh*? is used by the speaker with a subjective aim.

See the two markers segment distribution in Table (1)

NO?									
<i>coherence relations</i>	<i>functio</i>	abstr.	orient.	action	i.eval.	e.eval.	result	coda	total
Rhetorical and Inferential	EVI CTX PRO	-	45 10.0%	150 33.9%	129 28.9% 17.8%	78 46.7%	42 9.4%	-	444
EH?									
<i>coherence relations</i>	<i>functio</i>	abstr.	orient.	action	i.eval.	e.eval.	result	coda	total
Rhetorical and Inferential	EVI CTX PRO	-	6 14.3%	12 28.6%	9 21.4%	6 14.3% 35.7%	9 21.4%	-	42

Table 1. Distribution of pragmatic functions of *no?* and *eh?* in Catalan narrative (N and %).

The three core pragmatic functions of these two tag-markers are attached to the Rhetorical and Inferential discourse components. In the first case (EVI), the markers are used by the speaker to emphasize and highlight a specific piece of information that is considered relevant in the story; by means of them the speaker tries to catch the hearer's attention to concrete utterances (found in specific segments). Attached to the Inferential role, there are two functions carried out by these two markers: constrain the contextual effects that the utterance may have on the listener (CTX), and share mutual background knowledge or ground (PRO). In addition, there are two data worth mentioning from the above table. First, the predominant role of *no* and, to a lesser extent, *eh* in evaluative segments (46.7% and 35.7%, respectively); second, the high presence of *eh* in the result (21.4%). The first finding supports the argument that these two tag-markers are used by the speaker with the purpose of sharing a common ground, facilitating the explanation of intentions, thoughts and attitudes. Moreover, as attentional elements they are found in the segment that offers more proximity and complicity with the listener, i.e. internal evaluation, where the narrator introduces subjective comments on a particular fact or event. The second finding links with the aforementioned characteristic of *eh* as marker that is mostly found at the end of the narrative to convey a particular emphatic illocutionary force that is sometimes translated into a challenging attitude. The straightforward address to the listener takes place at the end of the story, when the telling of events is over and the narrator rounds it off.

5. Conclusion

A story of a past personal experience that lacks evaluation has 'no point'. Evaluation can be internal -when the narrator conveys a subjective view on the events taking place- or external - when he brings in data that he considers are relevant for the full understanding and grasping of the point of the story. It is precisely in internal evaluation that the narrator makes use of very specific markers that help him establish the attentional state required. *No* and *eh* are two pragmatic markers that exhibit the properties of tag-questions. The narrator makes use of them to alert the listener to a piece of information that is specially relevant for him, creating a bridge between text and cognitive context. In this respect, they have a core inferential and presuppositional value that makes them highly useful elements to make the story progress since, when used, there is a significant amount of information that is implicit or understood. In the case of *eh*, there is a straightforward address to the listener that translates into an implicit desire to be believed and understood. When used together with *no*, there is a polyphonic use of *eh* that results into a change of enunciative interlocutor.

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Appendix. Examples of narratives.

(1) (NAR17 Bazil Narrator)
@Participants: NAR17 Bazil Narrator
@Age of NAR: 30;
@Sex of NAR: male
@Bg: osc
*NAR: <okay> # I'll tell you about_
*NAR: when I was in Africa\
*NAR: this is what happened\
*NAR: <okay> # I was living on the
outskirts of the city\
*NAR: and about five miles away a very
good friend of mine lived.
*NAR: they'd started building the
motor.
*NAR: they'd cleared.
*NAR: they'd cleared the grass and
rocks away.
*NAR: and they left a sand track of
about three kilometres.
*NAR: this was a short cut <you see/>
a short cut from my place to my
friend's\ through the country on this
sand road\
*NAR: that was going to be a highway
in the future\
*NAR: what I used to do was.
*NAR: I used to drive along there on
my motorbike.
@Eg: osc
.....
*(he once lifted the front wheel and
drove up; the motorbike turned over on
top of him)*
@Bg: ei
*NAR: I was lying there not not in
agony.
*NAR: but it was pretty sore.
@Eg: ei
@Bg: da
*NAR: because my leg was twisted over
to one side.
*NAR: I was lying there thinking.
*NAR: &<well/> # it's going to be
dark soon\
*NAR: and er # I might have to spend
the night in this position/&.
@Eg: da
@Bg: ee
*NAR: <well> # you must remember_
*NAR: that I was in Africa.
@Eg: ee
@Bg: da/otc
*NAR: <okay> # anyhow> # maybe ten
or something minutes later I saw down
the # down the sand road # an
approaching figure.
*NAR: sure enough it was this black
man.
*NAR: that was approaching.
@Eg: da/otc
@Bg: ei
*NAR: I suppose going home to his
shack somewhere.
@Eg: ei
@Bg: da
*NAR: <well> # he saw me from quite
a distance\
*NAR: and he was to the left of the
path or to the left of the road.
*NAR: and I was to the right.
*NAR: and he didn't move over.
*NAR: he carried on.
*NAR: he he kept coming towards me.
*NAR: but he didn't move over towards
me.

*NAR: <so> I shouted help/.
@Eg: da
@Bg: ei
*NAR: <I mean> # it was it was
pretty obvious_
*NAR: that I was in a a bit of a
situation there\
@Eg: ei
.....

(2) (NAR12 Agatha)
.....
@Bg: r
*NAR: and then this uh # speedboat
passed with some Arabs.
*NAR: and and they stopped.
*NAR: and being hospitable.
*NAR: the way they are.
*NAR: and they threw a rope.
*NAR: and they towed us back to the #
to the the sailing #.
*NAR: but # what # what it's not it's
not a jetty # whatever # the base.
@Eg: r
@Bg: ei
*NAR: and uh # well # until now it was
the most horrendous.
*NAR: well # close to death I would
say.
*NAR: I thought.
*NAR: I was going to die.
*NAR: I thought.
*NAR: I was starting to say my
prayers.
*NAR: I thought.
*NAR: it was the the um # the last
moments.
@Eg: ei
@Bg: c
*NAR: so # that's it.
@Eg: c
@End

(3) (NAR15 Elisabet)
Bg: ei
*NAR: i la sensació aquesta de # de #
<o sigui_res> # l'espant\ de # del
moment # però la sensació aquesta de
pensar_
*and the feeling of # of # <o sigui_res>
the scare of # of the moment #
but the feeling when you think*
*NAR: si hagués dut el cabell llarg_
if I had had long hair_
*NAR: que que potser m'hauria pogut
encendre tota jo <no/>.
*I could have probably caught on fire
<no/>.*
*NAR: no sé.
I don't know
*NAR: no m'havia passat mai.
it had never occurred to me before
*NAR: i la veritat és que em vaig
espantar.
*and the truth is that I was
frightened*
*NAR: em vaig espantar una mica <no/>.
I was a bit frightened <no/>.
*NAR: i que no saps.
and you don't know
*NAR: com # com reaccionar <no/>.
how # how to react <no/>.

*NAR: d'alguna manera saps.
in a way you know
*NAR: que et vols treure allò.
that you want to take that out
*NAR: però que no # que no t'ho pots
treure.
but that you can't # you cannot take
it out
*NAR: o no saps.
or you don't know how
*NAR: com treure't-ho <no/>.
to take it out <no/>.
*NAR: perquè # <clar/> # si # penses #
si t'ho tires ah #.
because # <clar/> # if # you think #
if you pull it ah #
*NAR: t'ho passes pel cap/.
you take it over your head/
*NAR: et pots fer mal a la cara/.
you can damage your face/
*NAR: o # no sé # una situació com una
mica # així estranya <no/>.
or # I don't know # a situation a bit
like strange <no/>.
@Eg: ei
.....

(4) (NAR15 Elisabet)
.....
@Bg: r
*NAR: se'n van adonar de seguida.
they realized it right away
*NAR: i me'l # me'l van apagar.
and they # they extinguished it
*NAR: i m'ho van treure tot pel cap.
and they took it off over my head
*NAR: bonament com van pòguer <no/>.
as gently as they could <no/>.
*NAR: però # no em vaig fer res <eh/>.
but # I didn't hurt myself <eh/>.
*NAR: no em vaig cremar gens.
I didn't burn myself at all
*NAR: tot i que em va quedar tot el
jersei foradat i fet malbé # i el
mocador també
<clar\>.
although the pullover ended up full
of holes and totally ruined # and the
scarf too <clar\>.
@Eg: r
.....