

# THE USE OF DISCOURSE MARKERS BY FOREIGN STUDENTS LEARNING ROMANIAN<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The aim of this study is to investigate the use of discourse markers by students learning Romanian as a foreign language (L2), focusing mainly on the difficulties that occur in their acquisition, so one can provide better strategies to improve their teaching. Discourse markers are recognized as being essential for successful communication, which means that their acquisition should play an important role in the process of learning a language. The class of discourse markers covers a significant number of multifunctional elements, such as textual connectors, attitude markers, opinion markers, etc., that are mostly responsible for coherent and cohesive written texts, on the one hand, and for performing authentic and spontaneous speech, on the other. Our study has shown that foreign students use discourse markers differently from native speakers, in some cases because of the transfer from their mother tongue(s) or from other languages, such as English, and in other cases because of the lack of suitable input material.

**Keywords:** discourse markers, Romanian as a foreign language, non-native speakers, pragmatic competence, discourse coherence.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Discourse markers have been analysed from various perspectives (as part of argumentation and relevance theories, from a diachronic and synchronic perspective, as part of sociolinguistic and cognitive analyses, etc.) (Schiffrin 1987; Fraser 1999, 2009; Schourup 1999; Ghezzi and Molinelli (eds) 2014, among others). However, most studies in this field deal with the use of discourse markers in native languages, in certain contexts or in relation to specific communication strategies, while only a few of them focus on the use of discourse markers in non-native speech or in second and foreign language acquisition.

The present paper focuses on the acquisition of discourse markers in learning Romanian as a foreign language. In order to better understand the path of acquiring discourse markers in

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the process of learning Romanian as L2, we have analysed around 50 compositions produced by students in different stages of learning (from A1+ to B2+ in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*) and, consequently, showing different levels of pragmatic competence. The analysis targets the following aspects: the type of discourse markers used, their frequency, the type of speech acts in which they occur, the overall context, pragmatic errors in using discourse markers, as well as other issues regarding their contextualization.

As the corpus is based on written texts, the discourse markers analysed are mainly textual connectors, marking the relationship between units of texts: concession and contrast (*cu toate acestea/totuși* ‘however/nevertheless’, *chiar dacă* ‘even if/though’), cause (*pentru că/deoarece* ‘because (of)’), conclusion (*și așa/de aceea* ‘and so’/‘therefore’), etc. or establishing internal coherence and cohesion (*în primul rând* ‘firstly’, *pe de altă parte* ‘on the other hand’, *în plus* ‘in addition’, *de asemenea* ‘also’, etc.). Alongside textual markers, in our written corpus we have also recorded attitude markers (*probabil* ‘probably’, *din păcate* ‘unfortunately’, *din fericire* ‘luckily’), opinion markers (*cred că* ‘I think/I believe’, *în opinia mea* ‘in my opinion’), and interaction markers (*da!* ‘yes!’, *bineînțeles!* ‘of course!’, *desigur!/sigur că da!* ‘sure!’).

As often commented in the literature (Svartvik 1980; Jaworski 1998; Bardovi-Harling 2002; Müller 2005), there is a strong connection between the pragmatic competence of a non-native speaker and their ability to use discourse markers. According to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEF 2001: 28), the ability to produce clear, well-structured, detailed pieces of text on complex subjects by integrating discourse markers requires a C1+ level of proficiency. Most of the textbooks and teaching materials on Romanian as L2, especially those for beginner and intermediate level students, pay attention mostly to teaching vocabulary and grammatical forms, neglecting the use of discourse markers, as they are often related with native-like competence. Nevertheless, our data have shown that the necessity and the propension to use discourse markers appear much earlier. Apparently, there is no difficulty for a learner to identify and memorize discourse markers as words of a certain language, but it is rather difficult to contextualize them appropriately.

In the present study we will try to draw a clearer picture of the process of discourse marker acquisition in learning Romanian as L2. Identifying the errors students make on with certain regularity might prove useful for teachers to design effective strategies for accurate uptake and usage.

## 2. ON DISCOURSE MARKERS

The interest on discourse markers has grown considerably since the second half of the last century, probably with Longacre’s study (1976) on “mystery particles”, a term he used to name “a number of apparently meaningless words and phrases, including adverbs, particles, and interjections whose word class, distribution and meaning are opaque” (*apud* Brinton 1996: 1). In their study on cohesion, Halliday and Hasan (1976) describe a list of cohesive devices such as adverbials, conjunctions and prepositions which are “cohesive not in themselves but indirectly, by virtue of their specific meanings; they are not primarily devices for reaching out

into the preceding (or following) text, but they express certain meanings which presuppose the presence of other components in the discourse” (Halliday & Hasan 1976: 226).

These functional units with pragmatic and discourse values, which are generally called *discourse markers* (Schiffrin 1987; Schourup 1999; Maschler 1994, 2000, 2009; Jucker & Ziv 1998), cf. Fr. “marqueurs discursifs”, Sp. “marcadores del discurso”, Germ. “Diskursmarker” (Rothe 2014)), are also known as *pragmatic markers* (Fraser 1996, 1999, 2006, 2009; Brinton 1996, 2008; Andersen 1998, 2001, 2014; Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg 2006, 2011; Aijmer 2013), *discourse particles* (Stede & Schimtz 2000, Aijmer 2002), *pragmatic particles* (Beeching 2002, Fischer *et al.* 2006), *pragmatic expressions* (Erman 1987, Erman & Kotsinass 1993), etc. By choosing the term *discourse markers* we follow Schiffrin’s model of discourse (1987), a model which focuses on constructing coherence through relations between units in discourse. It is commonly agreed that discourse markers represent a dynamic and heterogeneous class of lexical and grammatical items which are syntactically optional, semantically opaque, and pragmatically multifunctional, as they can establish relations between units of discourse, between the speaker and his own message, between the speaker and the addressee, etc.

Although discourse markers are most often associated with oral speech, given that their main role is to ensure the coherence and consistency of oral interaction, they also have a significant frequency in the written discourse, where they are isolated from the rest of the statement, being intonationally marked with punctuation marks (Fraser 1990: 338; Lutzky 2012: 13). According to some studies the label “discourse” might be misleading as it refers to a limited class of words, like turn-takers, confirmation seekers, hesitation markers, fillers, etc., that usually signal relations at interactional, conversational level (i.e. oral discourse) (Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg 2011: 226).

In the present study we follow a broader view on discourse markers, according to which the label “discourse” refers to spoken and interactive aspects of the language, as well as to written and non-interactive aspects (Schiffrin 1987; Ghezzi 2014). We believe that coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, prepositions, different types of adverbs, etc. (i.e. textual connectors), whose main function is marking the relationship between two units of texts, are part of this heterogeneous class as well. In fact, if we consider Schiffrin’s model of discourse and Ghezzi’s classification of discourse markers functions, we may classify discourse markers in three subgroups: *textual markers*, *illocutionary or attitude markers*, and *interactional or conversational markers*.

According to Schiffrin’s (1987) model of discourse, discourse markers act at three levels of discourse: the ideational or propositional level, indicating relationships between parts of the utterance or between larger speech sequences; the action or illocutionary level, marking relations between the speaker and their own message; the level of interaction or exchange of remarks, signalling relations between speaker and interlocutor (Schiffrin 1987: 24-29).

It is quite difficult to identify the primary functions of discourse markers, because they are multifunctional elements that encode procedures, through various linguistic strategies. For these reasons Ghezzi (2014) groups them around three macrofunctions: (1) **discourse and textual cohesion and coherence**, where markers index the relationship between the propositional content of utterances and texts; (2) **social cohesion**, where markers signal the

relationship between the interlocutors; (3) and **personal stance**, where markers indicate the speaker's stance toward the discourse, the interlocutor, the context of interaction (Ghezzi 2014: 13–14).

### 3. DISCOURSE MARKERS IN L2

#### 3.1. Pragmatic competence

Most discourse markers, especially those that occur in conversations (*păi* 'well', *mă rog* 'whatever', *sigur* 'sure', *poate* 'maybe', *bine* 'fine/ok') are perceptually the most salient features of the spoken discourse even to a foreigner. Foreign students can easily identify and memorize discourse markers as words of a certain language because of their distinct intonation and their frequency in speech. However, it might be quite problematic to use discourse markers in proper contexts, due to the difficulty of finding an equivalent item in their native language or in English. Another reason is that marking discourse in a particular way requires native-like competence, i.e. communicative and pragmatic competence.

Studies in applied linguistics and language acquisition state that "it is thus not sufficient to learn just the grammatical forms of the language", knowledge in a foreign language should expand beyond grammar and vocabulary and deal with the relationship between the forms of language and how they are used to express meanings and intentions in appropriate ways (Bialystok and Hakuta 1994, *apud* Müller 2005: 18). Svartvik (1980: 171) highlights the importance of mastering discourse markers claiming thus:

if a foreign language learner says *five sheeps* or he *goed*, he can be corrected by practically every native speaker. If, on the other hand, he omits a *well*, the likely reaction will be that he is dogmatic, impolite, boring, awkward to talk to, etc., but a native speaker cannot pinpoint an 'error'.

Undoubtedly discourse markers play a significant role in the pragmatic competence of a speaker resulting in successful communication. In *Common European Framework* (CEF 2001: 13), 'pragmatic competence' is described as a component of **communicative language competence** alongside linguistic and sociolinguistic competences. Each component concerns certain skills: **linguistic competences** include lexical, phonological, syntactical knowledge; **sociolinguistic competences** refer to the sociocultural conditions of language use; and **pragmatic competences** deal with language functions, speech acts, interactional exchanges, mastery of discourse, cohesion and coherence, the identification of text types and forms, irony, and parody.

The process of teaching-learning a foreign language in a school environment mainly concerns the acquisition of linguistic skills (grammar and vocabulary), and pays attention to sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences only partially, due to the high degree of formality required in the educational environment. Discourse markers as pragmatic and sociolinguistic skills are mostly acquired outside the class, some of them being incorporated only by teaching materials designed for upper intermediate or advanced students.

### 3.2. The data

For the present study we have analysed written compositions produced during classwork by both male and female students, of various ages and language backgrounds and at different stages of learning. The examples listed below contain other types of errors as well, such as lexical or morphosyntactic errors, which we haven't mentioned here as they don't make the object of our research. Analysing data, we have noticed that the necessity of using discourse markers, especially those that function at propositional level bounding units of texts, appears since the beginning of the process of study. In examples (1) and (2) where students of elementary level (A1) are providing answers to the question *Ce vrei să faci anul viitor?* 'What do you want to do next year?', we can notice the lack of cohesive devices. To solve the task, students are required to name activities learned in class and to write them using present tense and the subjunctive mood. The focus here is on the grammatical and lexical forms, not on textual connectors.

- (1) **S1:** [Vreau] să mă distr[ez] cu prieteni[i] în fiecare week-end **și**<sub>1</sub> în septembrie [să] mă întorc în România **și**<sub>2</sub> [să] încep să studiez medicina..., **și**<sub>3</sub> vreau să fiu serios **și**<sub>4</sub> [să] studiez mai mult **și**<sub>5</sub> o să ne mutăm într-un apartament nou **și**<sub>6</sub> e probabil să cumpăr [un] apartament singur **și**<sub>7</sub> vrem să mergem împreună la toate orașele în România.  
'I want to have fun with my friends every weekend **and**<sub>1</sub> to come back to Romania in September **and**<sub>2</sub> to begin studying Medicine..., **and**<sub>3</sub> I want to be serious **and**<sub>4</sub> to work more **and**<sub>5</sub> to move into a new apartment **and**<sub>6</sub> probably buy an apartment to live by myself **and**<sub>7</sub> visit together all the Romanian cities.'
- (2) **S2:** Pentru anul viitor vreau să învăț limba română. Vreau să vorbesc foarte bine româna **și**<sub>8</sub> **după ce** vreau să merg la Universitate[a] de Gaze și Petrol **și**<sub>9</sub> vreau să merg la sala de fitness[s] **și**<sub>10</sub> vreau să merg cu prieteni[i] **și**<sub>11</sub> vreau să merg în Dubai cu frații mei **și**<sub>12</sub> vreau să merg la țara mea.  
'For the next year I want to study Romanian. I want to speak Romanian very well **and**<sub>8</sub> **after that** I want to study at Petroleum-Gas University [of Ploiești] **and**<sub>9</sub> I want to go to the gym **and**<sub>10</sub> I want to go out with friends **and**<sub>11</sub> I want to go to Dubai with my brothers **and**<sub>12</sub> I want to go to my country'

As we can see in the examples above, the conjunction *și* 'and' overtakes the function of marking a succession of events (*și*<sub>1</sub>, *și*<sub>5</sub>, *și*<sub>7-și</sub><sub>12</sub>), addition (*și*<sub>3</sub>), purpose (*și*<sub>2</sub>, *și*<sub>4</sub>), or extra details about something that has just been mentioned (*și*<sub>6</sub>).

In Romanian there are several items that are used to mark a succession of events: *după* 'after' followed by a noun, *după ce* 'after' followed by a verb, *după aceea* 'after that', *apoi* 'then' (see example (3)); addition *de asemenea* 'also/as well' (see example (5)), *în plus* 'furthermore'; purpose (*pentru ca* 'in order to', etc.

- (3) **S3: După** studiez, vreau s-o ajut la magazin pe mama o lună. **Apoi**, vreau să merg în China... **După aceea**, vin înapoi la București... Sper să fac tot [ce] vreau!

- ‘**After** studying, I want to help my mom one month. **Then** I want to go to China... **After that**, I come back to Bucharest... I hope I will do everything I want!’
- (4) **S4:** De obicei mă trezesc la ora 7 sau la ce ora pisica mea vrea să mănâncă. Măncăm împreună micul dejun **și după asta<sub>1</sub>** mă încerc să scriu pentru magazinul meu. **După asta și<sub>2</sub>** când este ora 12:00 încerc să mă îmbrac pentru că în fiecare zi la ora 14:00 trebuie să merg la școala mea.  
 ‘I usually wake up at 7 o’clock or exactly when my cat wants to eat. We are eating breakfast together **and after that** I try to write for my magazine. **After that**, (precisely) when it is 12:00 o’clock, I try to dress up because every day at 14:00 o’clock I have to go to my school’

In example (4), the student is presenting his daily routine. He is 4–5 weeks farther in learning Romanian compared to the students in examples (1) and (2). His vocabulary is more elaborate, grammatical structures are more accurate, and he uses succession markers properly. What is interesting here however is that student no. 4 is using the oral, colloquial form *după asta* instead of *după aceea* – the recommended counterpart in formal writings. It is possible that the marker was acquired outside his class. *Și* is also used to mark a succession of events preceding the adverb in (1) (*și după asta<sub>1</sub>*) and following it in (2) (*după asta și<sub>2</sub>*). If in (1) *și* is used correctly, in (2) it cannot appear in that position. The error occurred because the student did not know that there is a suitable connector to mark the addition of a detailed and exact information, i.e. *mai exact* ‘more precisely’.

In the next examples (5)–(8), students are presenting what they like and what they do not like about Bucharest being asked to motivate their answer. But before doing that, the teacher gives them indications on how to organize their ideas. They are told to use textual connectors, such as *în primul rând* ‘firstly’, *în al doilea rând* ‘secondly’, *în final* ‘finally’; addition markers: *de asemenea* ‘also/as well’, *în plus* ‘in addition’, *totodată* ‘also/as well’, parallel structures: *pe de o parte* ‘on the one hand’, *pe de altă parte* ‘on the other hand’, etc. The task was given in the middle of the second semester when they reached the intermediary level. As we can notice from the examples below, the pragmatic competence in the case of each student was not equally acquired. Student no. 5 uses only one additional connector, although they were recommended to use different structures to avoid repetition. Student no. 6 misspells *în primul rând* ‘firstly’ by replacing *în* with *la* maybe because a confusion was made between *în primul rând* ‘firstly’ and *la început* ‘at the beginning’.

- (5) **S5:** **De asemenea** îmi plac toate drumuri[le] că se curățe și **de asemenea** șoferul aici în București respectă toate lumea, când lumea traversează drumul oprește șoferul... Nu-mi place aglomerat în drumuri ... mai ales în vacanțe ... **de asemenea** nu-mi place servicii medicală.  
 ‘I also like that all the roads are cleaned and **also** the driver here in Bucharest respects everybody, when people cross [the street] the driver stops ... I don’t like when it is traffic especially in vacations. I don’t like medical services either.’

- (6) **S6: La primul rând** îmi place aici pentru că țara e foarte bine, toate oamenii liniștiți și există multe lucruri aici, cafenele, restaurante, parcuri.  
‘Firstly, I like (living) here because the country is very good, everybody is calm and there are many things here, coffee shops, restaurants, parks.’
- (7) **S7: Pe de o altă parte**, nu-mi place faptul că Bucureștiul este un oraș foarte aglomerat cu mult trafic, oriunde și oricând. **Hai să nu uităm** că vremea în București este foarte urâtă, **mai ales** iarna când e foarte frig.  
‘**On the other hand**, I do not like that Bucharest is a crowded city with a lot of traffic, anywhere, anytime. **Let us not forget** that the weather in Bucharest is very ugly, **especially** in winter when it is very cold.’

In (7) there is a contamination between *pe de o parte* ‘on the one hand’ and *pe de altă parte* ‘on the other hand’: \**pe de o altă parte*. In the next sentence, the student introduces an argument that would support his opinion: *nu-mi place Bucureștiul* ‘I do not like Bucharest’, through *hai să nu uităm* which we believe is a loan translation possibly from ‘let us not forget’ in English. The other discourse marker, *mai ales* ‘especially’, that relates the message to a particular situation, is properly used.

- (8) **S8:** Bucureștiul este un oraș foarte liniștit și **de aceea** îmi place Bucureștiul. **În plus**, în București o să studiez medicina anul viitor. **De asemenea**, Bucureștiul ... are multe locuri și parcuri care sunt foarte frumoase vara. **Dar, pe de altă parte**, există câteva lucruri care nu-mi plac, **de exemplu**, străzile lui nu sunt prea curate și mai multe de blocurile sunt vechi. **În plus**, Mita e foarte răspândită... **La sfârșitul**, îi iubesc pe oameni din București dar mi-e dor să pleacă în țara mea și să vad casa mea din nou.  
‘Bucharest is a quiet city, **that is why** I like Bucharest. **In addition**, I will study medicine next year in Bucharest. **Also**, Bucharest has many places and parks which are beautiful in the summer. **But, on the other hand**, there are things I do not like, **for example**, the streets are not clean, and many buildings are old. **In addition**, bribery is widespread. **Finally**, I love people from Bucharest, but I miss going to my country and seeing my home again.’

In the last example, all markers are used correctly, except *la sfârșitul* which is not a discourse marker, but a prepositional phrase that requires a noun in genitive case after it. The correct form is *în final* or *în sfârșit* ‘in the end/finally’. We have decided to present here both correct and incorrect examples of discourse markers used in students’ compositions to highlight the importance of introducing them in teachers’ lesson plans.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, discourse markers are the key to successful communication, as they contribute to the pragmatic meaning of utterances and thus play an important role in the pragmatic competence of the speaker. Although the teaching process performed in the classroom is not a perfect environment for acquiring oral discourse markers, teachers may focus

their attention on practicing the use of textual connectors with students. In the present paper we have highlighted the most common difficulties regarding discourse markers acquisition: the lack of cohesive devices in the case of beginner and elementary students, the amalgamation in the same context of colloquial and formal discourse markers and using hybrid or contaminated structures by students who reached the intermediate level in their learning process.

To better understand how discourse markers are assimilated and how they are used in speech or writing by foreign students, an extended analysis on a larger corpus is required. Also, we believe that is highly important for teachers to focus on guiding students in using discourse markers not only when they reach the advanced level, but also since the beginning of their learning process. Teaching discourse markers should be done gradually, first, by introducing cohesive markers at A1 and A2 levels, then by presenting the class of organizing and argumentative markers at B1 and B2 levels, and, in the end, to introduce the interactional markers, a target for which a more advanced level is required.

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