

A Corpus-Based Analysis on the Functions of Discourse Markers used in Malaysian Online Newspaper Articles

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ABSTRACT

This journal explores the functions of discourse markers used in Malaysian online newspaper articles by applying the rhetorical structure and genre theory. The corpus consisted of thirty articles published in The Star online newspaper known as Corpus of Online Newspaper articles (CorONAS). The roles of discourse markers were examined to see the relations between the sentences in the articles. The data indicated that different grammatical word classes of discourse markers exist in the articles. An analysis on the functions of discourse markers used by the authors of the newspaper articles was carried out based on the rhetorical structure theory. The data indicated that most of these discourse markers are found to serve a number of roles with the most occurrences of concession, evaluation, reason, and elaboration. The findings of this study can be useful for journalist, curriculum designers, book developers, language syllabus designers, learners and instructors of the English language.

Keywords: *Discourse markers, Corpus-based approach, Malaysian online newspaper articles, Genre theory, Rhetorical structure theory*

INTRODUCTION

Understanding various forms and functions of a new genre is crucial in order to comprehend the exact meaning embedded in the genre. Any form of misuse in the discourse marker may result in ambiguity of the texts. Misusing these items renders the texts unnatural, affects their acceptability, and increases the chances of communication breakdowns (Sun W., 2013). Given the shared purpose of language usage, writing texts in different genres may adopt general patterns of linguistic structure; at the same time, as argued by Shaw et al. (2014), language in writing discourse could be affected by disciplines or purposes and thus would show variations in actual application. Failing to acknowledge these purposes-specificities may prevent writers from achieving their desired target. In order to produce acceptable, natural, and communicatively effective texts, text-producers are required to use discourse markers in a certain way that is expected and accepted by their text-receivers. Therefore, studying the function of discourse markers as elements that ensure the texts' acceptability, naturalness, and effectiveness is indispensable for studying texts in any language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Louwerse and Mitchell (2003) considers connectives as cohesive devices that cue coherence relations, marking transition points within a sentence, between sentences, or between turns, both at the local and the global levels of conversation and discourse. Their consideration of discourse markers as cohesive devices is in line with Halliday and Hasan's (1976) account of cohesion, by which conjunctions signal cohesiveness by means of additive, adversative, causal and temporal relations. For the purpose of the present study, discourse markers are defined as expressions such as *now, well, so, however, and then*, which signal a link or a sequential relationship between the current basic message and the previous message.

Keeping in mind the end goal to depict the types of relations of DM the Rhetorical Structure Theory, which is utilized to portray types of relations amongst sentences is applied. In this study, the present study analyses discourse markers by looking at the sentence structure of text level and use the rhetorical structure theory to describe its functional relations. The functional classification that is suggested for

discourse markers at the sentence level are classified as follows: additive, contrastive, explanatory, inferential, sequential and background DMs. (Kohlani, 2010).

- Additive – “Usually correlates with the elaboration type of relation which indicates that one segment of text is adding new information to a preceding segment.” (Kohlani, 2010)
- Contrastive – “Usually correlates with concession, otherwise, affirmation, contrast and comparison which indicate that they establish some kind of denial or contrast between the two propositions that they connect.” (Kohlani, 2010)
- Explanatory - “Usually correlates with reasons, evidence, interpretation and result types of relations. The type of relation under explanatory DM shows that the prior segment provides an explanation for the preceding segment.” (Kohlani, 2010).
- Inferential - The type of relation under inferential DM shows results or conclusion. “It introduces propositions that come as

results or conclusions from previous propositions.” (Kholani, 2010)

- Sequential – Usually correlates with sequence (transitional, ordering, timing) types of relations. It “indicates that they are signaling the sequence of the main points that writer intend to make and indicate a sequence of steps in a process.” (Kalajahi et. al. 2012)
- Background – Usually correlates with the background type of relation which “introduces propositions that provide background information for preceding propositions.” (Kholani, 2010).

Kohlani (2010) has come up with an impressive framework on types of relations of DM using RST which was modified based on William C. Mann, Maite Taboada (2016) RST. Table 2.1 describes the definitions of types of relations that are introduced in the RST in order to show how they are identified whereby N stands for nucleus, S for satellite. N and S stand for the situations presented.

Table 2.1. *Nucleus-satellite Relations*

Relation Name	Definition
Elaboration	S presents additional detail about the situation or some element of subject matter which is presented in N.
Sequence	There is a succession relationship between the situations in the nuclei
Volitional Result	Another situation which is caused by that one, by someone’s deliberate action
Non-Volitional Result	Another situation which is caused by that one, but not by anyone’s deliberate action
Reason	Another situation which causes the first one, but not by anyone’s deliberate action
Conclusion	A judgment or decision reached by reasoning.
Contrast	Situation which is compared with another situation that is (a) identical with another situation in at least some respects, (b) similar to, or different from, another situation in a few respects

Adopted from Kohlani (2010)

Both Kohlani’s (2010) and Kalajahi’s et. at. (2012) definitions of types of relations were adapted to suit the purpose of the present research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, one of Malaysian online leading newspaper, the Star online Newspaper was used. The Star Online ranked seventh among the top 20 local web domains most visited on desktop computers in Malaysia, with 944,000 visitors. In the present study, the computer-assisted corpus analysis (CACA) approach (Manvender Kaur, 2014) was applied to the corpus compilation,

using the texts from online newspaper articles from the STAR Online newspaper. The purpose of this is to show how much the article is dependent upon the use of particular discourse markers and also how these discourse markers are used by the authors. The understanding of the quantitative analyses has hoped to shed some light on the use of discourse markers in the selected articles. Figure 3.1 shows the construct of the corpus to be used in the study.

The research instruments of the present study was corpus based. The researcher identified the discourse markers in the texts of the corpus, tagging it for frequency analysis and analyzing

A Corpus-Based Analysis on the Functions of Discourse Markers used in Malaysian Online Newspaper Articles

the occurrences of the discourse markers using the CACA approach. Once the frequency analysis is completed, the type of relations and functional categories of top 5 DMs are described to show the way they relate to each other. To answer the research questions, frameworks proposed by Fraser (2009) and Mann & Thompson (1988) was applied.

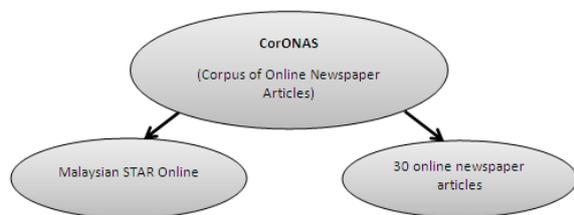


Figure 3.1. The construct of CorONAS corpus

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research Question

What are the roles of the discourse markers in

Example sentences ‘AND’

- (a)...The_AT way_NN1 the_AT state_NN1 is_VBZ run_VVN **and_CC** the_AT way_NN1 the_AT Johor_NN1 football_NN1 team_NN1 is_VBZ run_VVN is_VBZ the_AT same_DA
(4septtagged.txt)
- (b>Last_MD Saturday_NPD1 ,_, strong_JJ winds_NN2 **and_CC** thunderstorms_NN2 wreaked_VVD havoc_NN1 in_II parts_NN2 of_IO the_AT Klang_NN1 Valley_NN1 ,...
(11may tag.txt)

Analysis

In sentence (1a) and (1b), are called an additive marker. It signals that the segment preceding the DM ‘and’ constitutes additional information to the preceding discourse (Kohlani, 2010). Even though, these DM are called additive markers, they are actually different when it comes to type of relation.

In sentence (1a) and (1b), the ‘and’ shows the correlated relation of elaboration which is equative in nature. It indicates that the prior segment has got the similar force to the

Example sentence ‘THAT’

- (c) He_PPHS1 added_VVD **that_CST** the_AT man_NN1 has_VHZ a_AT1 round_JJ face_NN1 with_IW stubble_NN1 ._.
(3septtagged.txt)

Analysis

In (1c) ‘that’ is called an additive marker (Kholani, 2010). It signals that the segment preceding the DM ‘that’ shows the type of relation as elaboration that the writer intends to

the sentence structures in the online newspaper articles published in the STAR newspaper in Malaysia?

This section focuses only on functional relations of DM that are identified between sentences based on the type of relations derived from Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST), that they signal between sentences.

Additive Markers

Table 4.3 shows the additive markers found in the data, the discourse markers, their frequency and the type of relation(s) they encode:

Table 4.3: Additive Discourse Markers

Discourse markers	Correlated relations
And	Elaboration – Equative
That	Elaboration – Emphasis
Also	Elaboration – Emphasis

preceding segment. However, in sentence (1a) DM ‘and’ even though it is elaborating the same issue, it does not relate immediately to its prior and preceding segment. It does not link the same word class whereby, the elaboration is lengthy. For example, ‘...." The_AT way_NN1 the_AT state_NN1 is_VBZ run_VVN **and_CC** the_AT way_NN1 the_AT Johor_NN1 football_NN1 team_NN1 is_VBZ run...’ on the other hand, sentence (1b) DM ‘and’ relates to the segment introduced immediately to the prior segment. It links the same word class. For example, ‘winds_NN2 **and_CC** thunderstorms_NN2’.

make and indicates the relation of emphasis. In this sentence the ‘that’ indicates the act of emphasizing whereby, the writer puts more emphasis on what is already mentioned in the prior segment of the sentence. (Kalajahi et al. 2012). This DM ‘that’ relates to the introduced

segment whereby, added_VVD showing the emphasis relation of man_NN1 linked by ‘that’.

Example sentence ‘ALSO’

(d)The_AT schools_NN2 have_VH0 **also_RR** been_VBN advised_VVN to_TO stop_VVI all_DB their_APPGE other_JJ outdoor_JJ activities_NN2...
(22march tag.txt)

Analysis

In (1d) ‘also’ is called an additive marker (Kholani,2010). It signals that the segment preceding the DM ‘also’ shows the type of relation as elaboration of emphasis. In this sentence the preceding segment elaborates the prior segment by adding the DM ‘also’ whereby, advised_VVN shows the elaboration of emphasis relation to schools_NN2 linked by ‘also’.

Example sentence ‘AND’

(a) He_PPHS1 said_VVD the_AT victim_NN1 later_RRR drove_VVD to_II her_APPGE house_NN1...
(b) **...and_CC** was_VBDZ sent_VVN to_II a_AT1 hospital_NN1 here_RL by_II her_APPGE housemate_NN1...
(2sept tagged.txt)

Analysis:

In this sentence ‘and’ is called a sequential marker (Kholani,2010). It signals that the segment preceding the DM ‘and’ constitutes sequence that the writer intends to make and indicate a sequence of steps in a process. Subsequently, it can also be replaced with DM ‘then’. In this sentence the sequential markers indicates the act of transitional which shows an

Example sentence ‘WHEN’

(c) Suzana_NP1 Ishak_NP1 was_VBDZ speaking_VVG at_II the_AT assembly_NN1 **when_CS** she_PPHS1 suddenly_RR complained_VVD of_IO dizziness_NN1...
(22march tag.txt)

Analysis

In this sentence ‘when’ is called a sequential marker(Kholani,2010). In this sentence the type of relation is a sequence that shows timing. It signals that the situation in the preceding segment indicates the timing that it took place at the same time as the situation in the prior segment (Kalajahi et al. 2012). The relation between was_VBDZ speaking_VVG in the prior segment is a sequence of timing to complained_VVD in the preceding segment

Example sentence ‘THAT’

(a) ...there_EX were_VBDR no_AT obvious_JJ signs_NN2 **that_CST** the_AT man_NN1 was_VBDZ murdered_VVN ...
(3septtagged.txt)

Sequential Marker

Table 4.4 shows the sequential markers found in the data, the discourse markers, their frequency and the type of relation(s) they encode:

Table 4.4. Sequential Discourse Markers

Discourse markers	Correlated relation
And	Sequence(Transitional)
When	Sequence(Timing)

abrupt move from one topic to another (topic shift) (Kalajahi et al. 2012). This DM ‘and’ relates to a separate message. The prior segment (2a) has got a separate message with the segment introduced (2b). Later_RRR drove_VVD in the prior segment indicates as sequence of transitional to was_VBDZ sent_VVN linked by ‘and’

linked by ‘when’, whereby one incident took place simultaneously during another action.

Explanatory Marker

Explanatory marker that is found in the data of this study is listed in table 4.6 below.

Table 4.6: Explanatory Discourse Marker

Discourse Markers	Correlated Relation
That	Reason

Analysis

In this sentence ‘that’ is called an explanatory marker (Kholani,2010). It signals that the segment preceding the DM ‘that’ indicates the reason, which shows the type of the relation of the DM ‘that’ is a reason. In this sentence the preceding segment to DM ‘that’ shows a sentence which provide explanation for prior segment taking up the explanatory role. Whereas, the prior segment to DM ‘that’ presents a reason in sentence. (Kholani,2010). The preceding segment relates to the prior segment of the DM ‘that’ whereby, the relation

Example sentence ‘THAT’

(a)...they_PPHS2 were_VBDR shocked_VVN to_TO learn_VVI **that_CST** the_AT four_MC a_AT1 Spanish_JJ couple_NN1, ...had_VHD actually_RR been_VBN picked_VVN up_RP... (13may tag.txt)

Analysis

In this sentence ‘that’ is called an inferential marker (Kholani,2010). It signals that the segment preceding the DM ‘that’ shows the type of relation as a conclusion. In this sentence the additive markers indicates the act of concluding showing that the DM ‘that’ is intended to

Example sentence of ‘and’

She_PPHS1 had_VHD problems_NN2 with_IW her_APPGE husband_NN1 for_IF quite_RG some_DD time_NNT1 **and_CC** was_VBDZ planning_VVG to_TO go_VVI to_II Syria_NP1...

Analysis

‘And’ in this sentence indicates the result type of relation. It shows the cause and result of previous information (Kalajahi et al. 2012). The prior segment(S1) relates to the preceding segment(S2) of the DM ‘and’ whereby, the relation between problems_NN2 in the prior segment signals the result to go_VVI to_II

Example sentence ‘BUT’

(a)...men_NN2 in_II their_APPGE 40s_MC2 were_VBDR detained_VVN **but_CCB** the_AT passenger_NN1 in_II the_AT back_NN1 seat_NN1 managed_VVD to_TO flee_VVI..... (31august tag.txt)

Analysis

In this sentence ‘but’ is called a contrastive marker(Kholani,2010). In this sentence the type of relation is contrast. It shows the contrast between men_NN2 detained_VV1 in the prior segment with the preceding segment linked by ‘but’ passenger_NN1 flee_VV1. It signals that the situation in the preceding segment is in

between murdered_VVN in the preceding segment signals reason to no_AT obvious_JJ signs_NN2 in the prior segment linked by ‘that’.

Inferential Markers

Inferential markers that are found in the data of this study are listed in Table 4.7 below.

Table4.7. Inferential Markers

Discourse markers	Correlated relation
That	Conclusion
And	Result

conclude or sum up the information in the preceding sentence (Kalajahi et al. 2012). The relation between shocked_VVN in the prior segment is a conclusion to couple_NN1 picked_VVN up_RP in the preceding segment linked by ‘that’.

Syria_NP1 in the preceding segment linked by ‘and’.

Contrastive Markers

Contrastive markers that are found in the data of this study are listed in table 4.8 below.

Table4.8. Contrastive Marker

Discourse markers	Correlated relation
But	Contrast

contrast with the situation in the prior segment (Kholani. 2010).

DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the of the discourse markers, each discourse markers carries a variety of functional roles. The majority of studies on discourse markers implicitly assume that only one marker or discourse relation will

occur in a sentence (Oates , 2001) . However, this study shows that more than one relation may hold between text spans and each relation may be signalled by a discourse marker. Additionally, many discourse markers can be combined to cue a single discourse relation. Besides that, the role of DM in a sentence is influenced by the choice and placement of discourse markers, the style and the genre of the text.

CONTRIBUTION

Another important contribution of this study is describing the type of relation of discourse markers at the sentence level. In order to provide a coherent description of the functions served by these items, functional categories are suggested. Then, the discourse markers that are found to perform similar functions are grouped under one functional category indicating the types of relations that they relate to. In this study the discourse markers identified according to the type of relations that they signal are additive markers, contrastive markers, explanatory markers, inferential markers and sequential markers.

Most of these discourse markers are found to serve a number relational function in the CorONAS. For example, from this study, DM ‘and’ can be additive, sequential and inferential and referring to relation types elaboration-equative, reinforcing (additive), transition (sequential) and result. The analysis of the functional relations of the texts analyzed in this study shows the predominance of the following relations: concession, evaluation, reason, and elaboration. This is consistent with the findings of Kohlani (2012). As found by Kohlani (2012), the present study also shows the evidence of existence of types of relations such as result, sequence, elaboration, reason, conclusion and contrast. They signal how parts of a text are related—not just structurally, but in terms of underlying meanings and intentions. The extensive use of these ‘markers’ in newspaper articles is due to the fact that in this text type, it is of particular importance that the relation

between actions are unambiguously signaled, so that there is no space for mis-intrepretation.

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Citation: Hafizah Hajimia. " A Corpus-Based Analysis on the Functions of Discourse Markers used in Malaysian Online Newspaper Articles " *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies*, vol 5, no. 1, 2018, pp. 19-24.

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