

An Evaluation of the Use of Discourse Markers In Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

This study investigated the use of discourse markers in Nigerian Newspapers. The research is a corpus based study that adopted a descriptive design. A purposive sampling technique was used in the collection of data. The analysis revealed that additive, adversative, causal and temporal discourse markers are used in Nigeria Newspapers by news writers to relay information to their readers and that they function to enhance the cohesive links between the units of talk in the text analyzed. It is therefore recommended that Nigerian newspapers writers should be schooled in the art of effective use of discourse markers in relaying information.

KEYWORDS: Discourse Markers, Nigerian Newspapers, Additive, Adversative and Temporal

INTRODUCTION

In linguistics, discourse markers are words or phrases that serve as fillers and are relatively syntactic-independent and do not change the meaning of the sentence and have empty meanings. In a practical English usage, Swan (2005) opines that discourse marker is a word or expression which shows the connection between what is being said and the wider context. He further claims that, it: (a) connects a sentence to what comes before or after (b) indicates a speaker's attitude to what he is saying.

Newspaper belongs to print media. It is unique in two ways: one, it requires a good knowledgeable and literate readers/audience to filter information out of it. Two, it is accessible in only cities and towns in the Nigerian community. It is important to note that newspapers have different types of readers for various pieces of information. Types of information are stored or compartmentalized in different columns, and this classification normally requires varying language use and styles. This assertion is in consonance with the sociolinguistic concept that "language varies according to region, sex, status, level of literacy, occupation, socio-cultural values and idiosyncrasies" (Adeyanju, 1998:71). These "constraints that societal phenomena place on language use" underplay the universally standardized language and style columns in a newspaper (Oloruntoba Oju 1999:139).

Language is a medium of communication. Both humans and animals communicate in order to decode and convey a meaning. In order to communicate properly, the syntactic and semantic structure of language should be used in order to enhance effective understanding. The manipulation of language is very important and that turns to be difficult especially in the print media. The stylistic manipulation of this language in most cases becomes ambiguous and leads to confusion as well as misrepresentation of information. The use of discourse markers helps greatly in the resolution of intended meaning in newspaper writing.

Furthermore, Nigerian newspapers have been criticized by linguists for the poor use of grammar. Therefore, the research seeks to evaluate the use of discourse markers in selected Nigerian Newspapers: first to determine the types of discourse markers used and, second their appropriate use and their function in relaying information.

It is quite clear that in communication, the use of discourse markers especially in writing has been hued in the print media. This research will therefore help linguists who would like to make a comparative study on the use of discourse markers in the print media especially those involved in the teaching of writing skills. It will also help them understand the appropriate use of discourse markers as well as their meanings.

The study is based on the evaluation of the use of discourse markers in Nigerian newspapers. The corpus for the study is selected from four Nigerian newspapers. They are: The Vanguard, Daily Trust, This Day and The Sun.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of discourse makers in Nigerian newspapers has been of great concern. It is important to note that the Nigerian newspaper covers the local issues, major events, politics and celebrations, the ways of life of people in Nigeria and the business news. The system of Nigerian media is pulsating. It has more than 100 local and national newspapers as well as publications. The government owns some of these publications and newspapers. The first Nigerian newspaper was “Iwe I rohi Ara Egba ati Yoruba” (meaning newspaper for Egba people and the Yorubas). It was established in Abeokuta by Rev. Father Henry Townsend. Its first edition hit the news stand on December 3, 1859.

The Concept of Discourse Marker

Discourse markers are commonly referred to as linking words and phrases or sentence connectors. They may be described as the fillers that bind together the piece of writing making the different parts of the text stick together. They are used less frequently in speech unless the speech is very formal (Blakemore, 2002). To Redeker (1990:1168) they are operators and define them as “a word or phrase, for instance a conjugation, adverbial, comment clause, interjection that is uttered with the primary function of bringing to listener’s attention a particular kind of upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context”. Fraser (1999: 950) looks at it as a programmatic class, lexical expression drawn from the systematic classes of conjunctions, adverbial and prepositional phrase. With certain exceptions, they signal a relationship between the segments they introduce. He goes on to say that discourse makers have a core meaning which is procedural not conventional and their more specific interpretation is ‘negotiated’ by the context, both linguistic and conceptual.

Schiffrin (1987: 41) in her own view posits discourse makers at a more theoretical level as members of functional class of verbal and non-verbal devices which provide contextual coordination to the on-going talk. Such talk must involve textual features that help in hanging text together appropriately. According to her, discourse makers are “sequentially dependent elements which bracket unit of talk”.

Litman(1996) defines discourse makers as the major linguistic device available for a writer to structure a discourse; texts are better understood when discourse markers are used in the negotiation of meaning in linguistic exercises. Bussman (1984) further opines that the use of discourse markers assist speakers develop language skills, feel more comfortable about their conversational skills and allow speakers to collect their thought before officially speaking. That is to say that discourse markers refine speakers’ pattern of illuminating ideas in discourse. Discourse marker can be defined as a lexical item that indicates the kind of semantic/rhetorical relationship holding between adjacent text spans on the linguistic surface (Knott, 1996). It functions as maker of relationship between units of language in use; it gives contextual meaning to discourse. They generally refer to as syntactically different class of expressions which are differentiated by their functions and the kind of meaning they encode (Knott, 1996). With their various classes of words, they tend to give proper variation to text when properly negotiated.

Grammatical Status and Functions of Discourse Markers in Text

Discourse markers are linguistic expressions gathered from different classes of words. They have the grammatical status of the main class they belong to. For instance, they can be conjunctions (and and but), adverbs (anyway and however) and prepositional phrase (after all and in spite of this). Such discourse markers differ in grammatical class, but have the same functions (Fraser, 1999). He further claims that discourse markers are syntactically subordinate conjunctions that cannot introduce separate sentences, but must be dependent on a canonical (independent) clause to make a sense in any text. Halliday and Hasan (1976)’s use of conjunctions are

indicative of discourse markers. These conjunctions are of four categories as adopted by them. They are: additive, adversative, causal and temporal; these are typified by the words: and, yet, so, and then respectively.

Different from his earlier view, Fraser (1990, 1993) argues that discourse markers are peculiar expressions that can introduce separate sentences such as since, because, and although. He further claims that discourse markers can include such as and but simply because such expressions can relate two separate messages no matter how they are separated.

Conclusively, discourse markers have a 'core' meaning which is procedural not conceptual. It is right that they decode meaning that defines the relationships between discourse segments, but they do not contribute to the truth-conditional context of these segments (Fraser, 1999). The markers are therefore very necessary in the contextualization of text.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is a corpus-based study because it attempts an evaluation of the use of discourse markers in Nigerian newspapers; the research design is descriptive since it is analyzing a naturally occurring language data.

A purposive sampling technique was used in the collection of data. The Nigerian Newspapers were selected for the study; they are: Vanguard, Daily Trust, This Day and The Sun. The data for the study were collected within the month of February, 2013.

The Discourse Markers were analyzed based on eclectic approach involving the adoption of Schiffrin's (1987) discourse markers of connectives such as conjuncts: and, but and or; temporal: while, etc., Fraser's (1990, 1993) words such as: since, because, and although and Halliday and Hassan's (1976) conjunction cohesive device such as: additive, adversative, causal and temporal, typified by the words: and, yet, so and then respectively.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data adequately, an eclectic approach based on Schiffrin's (1987), Fraser's (1990,1993) and Haliday and Hassan's (1976) connectives, words and conjunctions respectively were used.

Analysis of Discourse Markers

As earlier mentioned, discourse markers are sign post lexemes used in signally between relationship of ideas in discourse. They help in joining or linking structures as additive, temporal, adversative, cause and effect, etc.

4.2.1 Textual Analysis of Discourse Markers

TEXT I

The researcher made the discovery after testing compound on mice and inducing intestinal Ischema. Olive oil Healing properties have been known for millennia, said John Wherry, Deputy Editor of the journal of Leukocyte biology, which published the findings. But we have had until relatively recently; we have had few direct scientific insights into exactly how it works in the body (Daily Trust Newspaper page 11, February, 2013)

In text I above, the discourse marker additive "and" is used to add extra information to the preceding sentence. It functions as cohesive device to link the previous sentence to the preceding phrase. The marker "and" reveals the -- discoveries made. It points at a continuation of talk in the written discourse of the newspaper. It consolidates the clarity of the message in that particular text. The marker "but", has a preceding information that few direct scientific insights were given which contrasts the earlier report or discoveries made by the research on mice that shows olive oil healing properties known for millennia.

Text II

While appealing to the government to come to their aid, the chairman said the ring leader of the hoodlums, Toriola Had been barred from parading himself as either a member or chairman of the union. (Vanguard, page 7, February, 2013)

In text II above, the writer made use of discourse marker of temporal "while" to point information to the readers. It can be deduced that the marker "while" functions as cohesion to link the sentence with the previous one. This is used to establish a simultaneous idea between the phrases in the text. However, further analysis revealed that it was not used differently from what exists in the text examined above. The temporal marker does not only function as cohesion but also serves as conjunction which provides clear understanding of separate ideas to the readers. This means that the marker performs more than one function to enable the reader has inferred meaning from the information relayed in the text.

TEXT III

SUSWAM, who gave the warning yesterday while presenting 46 official cars to the 23 deputy chairman of the Local Government council and leaders of the Legislative Councils in the state said “Please, I want to concentrate on the governance of the state and would not want to be distracted by such campaigns. Those who want me to become president of the country or whatever, the time is not ripe, they should wait till next year. Do not distract me because of 2015”. (This Day Newspaper, page 51, February, 2013).

From text III above, the following types of discourse markers were identified: Temporal and Causal. Temporal “while” is used to establish a simultaneous link between a sentence and a phrase. This marker “while” does not only function as a conjunction but also serves to create cohesion. The news writer made use of this marker to enable the reader understands the link between the information provided between the two structures. It points out why the speaker was presenting the gift and at the same time warning his supporters who want him to contest for a higher elective position. This shows a simultaneous link and cohesion between the sentences.

TEXT IV

The news was also on Linda Ikegi’s blog and all over the social media unconfirmed report said, she died at Reddington Hospital. However, late report last night said she might not be dead but in a coma. (The Sun Newspaper, page 1, February, 2013).

In text IV above, two types of discourse markers were used: Additive and adversative. Additive “and” was used in the text to add additional information to the proceeding sentence. It also functions as link and cohesion. The writer made use of additive marker to enable his readers get to know the news of the popular musician all over the social media. Further analysis reveals that adversative was also used in the text provided above. This marker “but” was used in the text as a contrast marker which suggests that the musician was not death, but in a state of coma. The adversative marker was used to contrast two ideas in the text but it gives insight on the state of the musician which suggests that she is still alive.

CONCLUSION

The study on discourse markers in Nigerian newspaper reports was based on textual analysis. Thus one aspect of the components of discourse markers was analyzed. The analysis of the discourse markers revealed that, additive, adversative, causal and temporal discourse markers were used in the text investigated. The study therefore revealed that the functional analysis of discourse markers that formed the corpus enhanced the cohesive links between the units of talk in the text analyzed. The use of discourse markers in the text eased or helped in the understanding of information relayed in the newspaper reports. Additive, adversative, causal and temporal are used in the newspaper reports. Therefore, it can be concluded that, Daily Trust, Vanguard, This Day and The Sun news reportage use additive, adversative, casual and temporal to communicate to the audience. Based on the research findings, it is recommended that the media practitioners should learn the appropriate use of discourse markers in order to communicate effectively to their target audience/readers.

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