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A Pragmatic Analysis of Dagbani Discourse Markers

Mohammed Abubakari Rashid, Salifu Abdul-Bachi, Ibrahim Alhassan

E. P. College of Education, Bimbilla, Ghana
Email: rashid@epcoebimbilla.edu.gh

Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate discourse markers in Dagbani, a Mabia language spoken in the Northern Region of Ghana. The study aims at identifying the Dagbani discourse markers by drawing data from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was obtained from normal conversations among individuals at social gatherings and game playing joints where individuals gather and engage in conversations, while secondary data were gotten from some Dagbani novels. Data from both Nanuni (Southern Dialect) of Dagbani and standard dialect were sampled randomly and analyzed base on the social context and the pragmatics of the various markers employed in the discourse. The study also establishes the category of discourse markers displayed in the various conversations, guided by the Discourse Grammar Framework. The study found that, Dagbani discourse markers can be categorized into Thetical and Sentence Grammar with the Theticals dominating in many of the conversations such as *wɔyiyo* "sorry", *laabirata* "truly", *Oo*! "Oh!", *yɛimaŋli* "actually/truly", *lala* "really", leaving few under Sentence Grammar category such as *amaa* "but". However, Aa! "*Ah!*" is used as a discourse marker to disjoint information.

Keywords

Dagbani, Pragmatics, Grammar, Thetical and Discourse Markers

1. Introduction

Discourse markers are markers in a proposition, in most cases, serve as connectives in discourse. Blackmore (2006) cited in Matei (2010) postulates that discourse markers are defined in terms of their function in establishing connectivity in discourse. Connectivity could be understood either as coherence or cohesion which marks text or spoken connections at different levels. They have the linguistic potency of creating an organizational link between two or more prop-

ositions to the hearer. It is therefore a linguistic phenomenon that is pervasive cross-linguistically and permeates in both speech and textual units.

The current study presents a pragmatic analysis of discourse markers in Dagbani, a Mabia language spoken in the northern region of Ghana by the Dagbamba. The objective of this study is to further explore the category of discourse markers that operate in Dagbani discourse, by analyzing utterances on their social context and the pragmatics of individual discourse markers exhibited in typical Dagbani conversations. The rest of the study is organized under the following rubrics: section two gives a brief description of the language under study while section three presents some related discussions on discourse makers. Section four looks at the methodology adopted for the study and theoretical issues are presented under section five, while section six presents and analyzes the Dagbani data on discourse markers. Section seven recapitulates and concludes the study.

2. The Language under Study

Dagbani belongs to the Mabia-language of the Niger-Congo Basin language group spoken in the Northern Region of Ghana. According to Hudu (2010), national censuses in Ghana group together four related ethnic groups who speak Mabia (Gur) languages called Mole-Dagbani which are Dagomba, Nanumba, Mamprusi and Mossi (with the last one largely spoken mainly in Burkina Faso). The traditional state of the Dagbamba is Dagbɔŋ (the traditional seat of the Yaa Naa). Kwame (2018) approximates two million native speakers of Dagbani in Ghana. Dagbani has three major dialects which include Tomosili, (the Western dialect) spoken in Tamale and its surroundings, Nayahali (the Eastern dialect), spoken in and around Yendi, and Nanuni, which is also spoken around Bimbilla and its surroundings (Issah, 2015). However, there is total mutual intelligibility among the speakers of these three dialects.

3. Review of Related Literature

Many linguists have developed interest in the study of discourse markers across the globe, See (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1993; Hansen, 1998; Fraser, 1999; Heine, 2013; Tree, 2015). Fraser (1993: p. 3) observed that the first series of examining this area of linguistics was carried out by Schiffrin (1987), when she analyzed English discourse makers such as *and, because, but, I mean, now, oh, or, so, then, well,* and *y know* as they occurred in unstructured interview conversations. She opines that these markers typically serve three functions: 1) They work as contextual coordinates for utterances by locating them on one or more planes of discourse; 2) They index adjacent utterances to the speaker, the hearer, or both; 3) They index the utterance to prior and/or subsequent discourse. Schiffrin (1987: p. 31) observes that discourse markers are sequential dependent elements that bracket units of talk, i.e. non-obligatory utterance-initial function in relation to ongoing talk and text. This means that in isolation, discourse markers make no meaning, until they are used in a pragmatic context of discourse as

point of access to the construe of other units of discourse.

According Hansen (1998: 236), discourse markers are linguistic items which fulfill a non-propositional, metadiscursive (primarily connective) function, and whose scope is inherently variable, such that it may comprise both sub-sentential and supra-sentential units. He argues that semantically, discourse markers process instructions which are intended to aid the hearer to integrate the unit with the maker to understand the unfolding discourse. For Tree (2015), the functions of discourse markers in spontaneous writing are similar to their functions in spontaneous speaking. Moving forward, the frequency with which discourse makers occur in spoken versus written formats is motivated by four dimensions as, attitudinal markers, tailored markers, cohesive makers and temporal markers.

Schiffrin (2006) defines discourse markers as the recurrent use of a certain marker to convey communicative meaning. The latter, Schiffrin adds, is dependent upon the relational functions that markers develop in the respective text or context of use. Matei (2010) opines that discourse markers can be understood in relation to their function in discourse. They function as connecting discourse, guiding the interpretation processes of the hearer, they are interactive and give expressions such as face-saving or face-threatening, politeness, etc. they also express shared knowledge or common ground between speakers, termed as "grounding".

However, Hansen (1998: p. 358) argues that discourse markers "function as instructions from speaker to hearer on how to integrate their host unit into a coherent mental representation of the discourse". This means that they situate their host unit according to the surrounding discourse and with respect to the speaker-hearer relationship. In the affirmative, Waltereit (2002) mention that discourse markers can position the state of affairs of their host unit temporal or causal consequence of the preceding state of affairs, they may highlight their host unit in various ways, they may present the host unit as closing the current discourse topic.

4. Methodology

This study employed qualitative research with ethnographic design by drawing data from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were drawn from Nanuni (the southern dialect) of Dagbani and standard Dagbani out of the three dialects. The researchers elicited data from conversations during regular social gatherings such as wedding grounds, naming ceremonies, funeral grounds and owari game playing joints, where people meet and interact in discourse. For the purpose of proximity of this dialect and research sites, these social gatherings were selected by the researchers. Rapid anonymous survey was used for data collection from the participants of these discourses, and this made it possible to obtain natural data and also avoid observer paradox. Data were recorded and transcribed onto a field jotter and purposively sampled portions that contain the display of discourse markers by interlocutors, and analyzed in relation to the

pragmatic context of a particular discourse marker in use. As native speakers of Dagbani, the researchers produced some of the primary data introspection. The secondary data were, however, elicited from *Duligu mini Nɔŋa*, "The hornbill and the scorpion", a drama by Abu-bakari (2017) and *Wuni Bimbirili*, "God's seed", a prose, by Pazack (2016).

5. Theoretical Issues

This study is guided by the framework of Discourse Grammar Theory. According to Heine (2013), Discourse Grammar, as proposed in Kaltenböck et al. (2011) and Heine et al. (2012), is based on the assumption that, there are two domains of discourse organization. Speakers are constantly faced with a general problem in communication; that is, handling the contrast between the linear flow of verbal communication and the immediate communicative and cognitive needs arising from the discourse situation. To deal with this problem, they dispose of two contrasting domains for organizing their linguistic discourse: Sentence Grammar (SG) and Thetical Grammar (TG). Each operates on its own principles for organizing discourse. She opines that Discourse Grammar comprises all the linguistic resources that are available for constructing spoken or written (or signed) texts. Thetical Grammar for their appropriate interpretation, should be associated with a specific situation of discourse. As argued by Haegeman in 1991 in what she calls the radical orphanage approach, a speaker has to establish the relevance of a thetical by an inferential process (as outlined e.g. by Relevance Theory) which takes into account the immediate context of the utterance. In addition, Sentence Grammar (SG) under Discourse Grammar has been the main subject of theories of mainstream linguistics. It is based on word class, constituent types such as sentences, clauses, phrases, words, and morphemes, including the syntactic and morphological machinery to relate constituents to one another. The main categories of theticals distinguished so far are: conceptual thetical, formula of social change, vocatives, imperatives and interjection (Kaltenböck et al., 2011), Heine and Kaltenböck cited in (Heine, 2013).

Theticals have their properties that differentiate them from Sentence Grammar. Kaltenböck et al. (2011) cited in Heine (2013: p. 1215) outlined the following properties of theticals:

1) They are syntactically independent.
2) They tend to be set off prosodically from the rest of an utterance.
3) Their meaning is non-restrictive.
4) Their internal structure is built on principles of SG but can be elliptic.

On the other hand, SG allows the speaker to encode virtually any conceptual information in a coherent and a consistent way. In doing so it has the potential to create its own textual world, one which can be fairly independent from the immediate situational context. Sentence Grammar (SG) differs from theticals in their semantic-pragmatic potential. This means that under Sentence Grammar (SG), discourse makers remain mostly in their traditional word classes as either
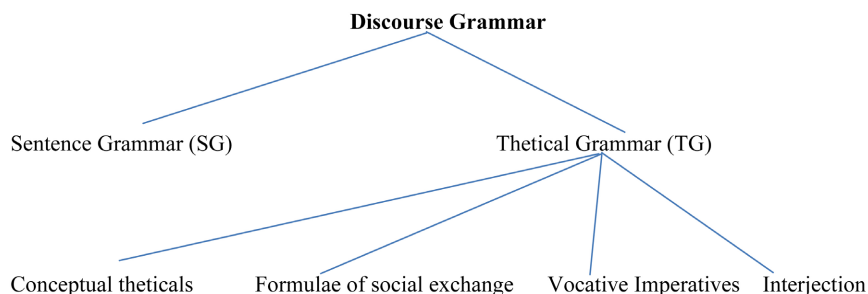
adverbs or real connectives as conjunctions. Therefore it is not surprising that the meaning of theticals has been described with reference to notions such as what Heine (2013) calls subjectification (the component attitude of the speaker) and intersubjectification (speaker-hearer interaction). Biber et al. (1999: p. 133) cited in Heine (2013) illustrates this with the item *frankly* under the following constructions:

1a) *She spoke frankly about herself now and then.*

1b) *Frankly*, *Kris didn't want to know.*

(Biber et al. 1999: p. 132).

According to Biber et al. (1999) cited in Heine (2013) in (1a), *frankly* is an adverb of Sentence Grammar, determining the meaning of the predicate. In (1b) by contrast, it is called a sentence adverbial, a sentence adverb (Brinton & Traugott, 2005: p. 139), a disjunct (Quirk et al., 1985: p. 648, p. 613), or a commentary pragmatic marker (Fraser, 1996). The relationship between the two domains of Discourse Grammar is complex; it is shaped most of all by a mechanism called cooptation (Heine, 2013). The theoretical architecture of domains of Discourse Grammar is illustrated below:

Discourse Grammar

Sentence Grammar (SG)   Thetical Grammar (TG)

Conceptual theticals   Formulae of social exchange   Vocative Imperatives   Interjection

6. Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and analyzes the data on Dagbani discourse makers. As noted in the early pages of this paper, data is analyzed, taking into concern the pragmatic sense of a particular proposition in the context under the orientation of Discourse Grammar framework as a guiding module. Let us observe the Dagbani discourse maker *wɔyiyo* "sorry" as it occurs in the following context of discourse:

2a) Speaker A: …*O bi duŋⁿ o shiŋkaafa maa?*

"He did not collet his rice?"

2b) Speaker B: *Wɔyiyɔ*, *o tamla di yɛla maa.*

"Sorry, he has forgotten of it."

In the (2a) and (2b), the context was in the grounds of naming ceremony where well-wishers come and present their support (usually in cash) to the owner of the occasion and sit for a while and take a take-away pack of food (locally called take-away) and drinks before living. However, this person left without collecting his package. The discourse marker *wɔyiyɔ* "oh! sorry" in (2b) is used by the interlocutor in (2b) as a thetical to express worry over what happened. Under

Discourse Grammar, theticals have their properties that differentiate them from Sentence Grammar (SG). Even though their internal structure is built on principles of SG but can be elliptic and syntactically independent. Obviously, Speaker B could have used only *wɔyiyɔ* "oh! sorry" to express the same worry in the same context, without uttering the rest of the proposition. In addition, it is used as a formula of social exchange to the Speaker in (2a).

(3a-c) below is a pragmatic context of the use of the discourse maker *laabirata* "truly" in a discourse of use between two narrators.

3a) Speaker A: *Dawuda nima ban yirila Ashaman n-chani Aŋkara bɛ naba juɣu[n].*

"Dawuda and his friends usually leave Ashaiman[1] to Accra[2] on foot."

3b) Speaker B: *Aŋkara ni Ashiama waɣa fa!*

"From Accra to Ashaman is very far!"

3c) Speaker A: *Laabirata, di shiri waɣa.*

Truly, it is far.

The narration above is a social context of the use of the discourse maker *Laabirata* "truly". It is a context of conversation between a man who narrates the routines of his son and friends in Ashiaman[1]. The second speaker challenges him by saying that "Ashiama to Accra[2] is very far" which speaker A eventually employ the discourse maker *laabirata* "truly" in (3c) to agree with the Speaker B. Pragmatically, speaker A uses the *laabirata* "truly" in agreement with the second narrator and not to expose himself as a liar. Under the theory of Discourse Grammar, the proposition in (3c) by the first narrator represents the Thetical Grammar which can be set off from the rest of the utterance and still make communicative meaning. Unlike under Sentence Grammar, we cannot give a specific word class of *laabirata* "truly" in its context of use. This is more like the English adverb/maker *frankly* as established by Biber et al. (1999: p. 132). However, *laabirata* "truly" can be referred to as sentence adverbial (Biber et al., 1999: p. 133), a sentence adverb (Brinton & Traugott, 2005: p. 139), a disjunct (Quirk et al., 1985) or a complementary pragmatic maker (Fraser, 1996). Meanwhile Heine (2013: p. 1217) opines that under the framework of Discourse Grammar it is classified as a conceptual thetical.

Observe the contextual occurrence of *amaa* "but" in the following discourse between a young lady and her older mother:

4a) Mother: *A bia maa na ku taa[n] di saɣim…*

"You child cannot eat food now…"

4b) *Amaa ɛmi o ka ti nye[n].*

"But feed him/her and let's see."

This was a conversation between a young lady and her mother over a child's feeding. In (4a), the grandmother was alarmed that the baby cannot eat food at its stage. The use of *amaa* "but" in (4b) by the mother is based on the discussion in (4a), therefore serving as a connective particle to the host utterance in (4a).

[1]A suburb of Accra.
[2]The capital city of Ghana. [n]Nanuni word.

The removal of the discourse marker *amaa* "but" does not affect the truth condition of the utterance.

Observe the use of the particle *Oo*! "Oh!" in a discussion between a young woman and her mother as follows:

5a) Mother: *Juŋɔ^n bia ŋɔ niiŋ^n bi nyaɣisa.*

"Today this child is not feeling well."

5b) *Nyuhimi o tiiŋ^n ka ti nye^n.*

"Administer medicine to her and let us observe."

5c) *Oo! O ti tiiŋ^n maa jaa^n bihina^n.*

"Oh! She has vomited all the medicine out."

The mother of the young woman complained about the health condition of the grandchild in (5a) and instructed the mother to administer medicine onto her in (5b). The child then vomited out all the medicine after taking it, which the grandmother expresses her surprise and worry on that in (5c). According to Heritage (1984) cited in Tree (2014), in spoken dialogue, the basic meaning of *oh* is to mark a speaker's change of state. The change of state indicated by *oh* can lead to positive and negative emotional inferences. Here, the grandmother of the child expresses a change in state of mind upon realizing that the child has vomited the entire medicine administered onto her. Observe the discourse involving the occurrence of the marker *yɛlimaŋli* "actually" in a discourse between a young man and the uncle below:

6a) Uncle: *Juŋɔ^n wula, yi bi chaŋ puuni?*

"Why, today you people did not go to farm?"

6b) Young man: *Yɛlimaŋli dinana^n bɛ chaŋya, mani m-bi chaŋ, suuna ŋɔ maa juɣu^n.*

"Actually, they have gone, I have not gone because of this ceremony."

Tree (2015) describes the use of *actually* as is a contrastive marker, a mitigating marker, a marker of surprising information, and a marker of a speaker's emotional attitude to the information. According to Oh (2000) cited in Tree (2015), an important distinction for *actually* is whether communication is spontaneous or prepared. In prepared written prose, *actually* at the beginning of a turn is found to serve a contrastive function. But *actually* at the beginning of spontaneous spoken utterances is found to mitigate face-threatening acts. Under the framework of Discourse Grammar, *Yɛlimaŋli* "actually" in the current pragmatic context is a purely conceptual thetical whose utterance could have been avoided by the young man in (6b). The avoidance could not have affected the truth condition of the utterance. This framework makes it easier to determine whether a particle in a written or spoken text is a discourse maker or can be treated in its natural word class.

Observe the Dagbani marker *lala* "really" in the following discourse between someone who is searching for yam to buy with another interlocutor.

Speaker A: 7a) *Juŋɔ^n m-bɔrila nyuya ni n da ka di daa maa yaɣi.*

"Today I am looking for yam to buy, but the price is so high."

Speaker B: 7b) *Lala, amaa sɔhila bɛ so kuli jirɪ^n li mi n-ginda.*

"Really, but yesterday they were just carrying it around."

Speaker A: 7c) *Ah! Ka wula ka a so bi yɛli ma*?

"**Ah**! But why didn't you inform me?"

Speaker B: 7d) *A gba yaa, m mi ni a bɔrila nyuya ni a da*?

"You too, am I aware that you are looking for yam to buy?"

Speaker A is looking for some yam to buy, but the price is so high that he could not buy some. Then speaker B came in and said *lala* "really" but yesterday they were just carrying the yams around. Diani (2010) cited in Tree (2015) opines that in spoken and written academic communication, the basic meaning of *really* is to comment on the propositional truth of the upcoming information, which can be seen as orthogonal to attitudes toward the information. Diani (210) refers to this as veracity confirmer. Speaker B is using *lala* "really" to confirm the truth condition of the foregoing utterance by speaker A. However thetically, *lala* "really" could have been avoided by speaker B which will still to confirm the truth condition of the foregoing utterance of speaker A. Under the framework of Discourse Grammar, Fraser (1996) puts *lala* "really" to remain a thetical complementary pragmatic marker.

It is also common in the Dagbani data to see reflection of cohesive markers in the conversations gathered. Observe the following discourse between speaker A and B at "owari" playing joint:

Speaker A: 8a) …*ma Afa Adam n-ŋme Hashim*.

"It is Afa Adam who wins against Hashim in the game."

Speaker B: 8b) *Aayi, Hashim n-ŋme Afa Adam*.

"…no, it is Hashim who wins against Afa Adam."

Speaker A: 8c) *Ah! Ah! Hashim n-ŋme Afa Adam*?

"Ah! Ah! is it Hashim who wins against Afa Adam?"

Speaker B: 8d) *Iin*.

"Yes."

Cohesive markers provide information about how to relate information before and after markers. In the case of discourse above, ah! ah! is used by speaker A in (8c) to create an environment of repairs to indicate that the foregoing information in (8a) is disjointed. Listeners would have to process a different set of opinion and understanding to accommodate and understand the discourse for the presence of ah! ah! in speaker A's utterance. This definitely affects listeners' interpretation of the discourse. However, under Discourse Grammar framework, *ah! Ah!* used by speaker A in (8c) remains a thetical. The discourse below also contains a cohesive marker:

Speaker A: 9a) *Ka ya ka yi yina lala*?

"where are you people from?

Speaker B: 9b) *Ti chaŋmi nti puhi Aduna*

"We went to greet Haruna."

Speaker A: 9c) *Bɔ n-niŋ*?

"What happened?

Speaker B: 9d) *O pɔɣa^n n-so dɔɣi sɔhila*, **amaa** *bia maa so labiya.*

"His wife gave birth yesterday, but the child died."

The above discourse is a conversation between brothers who were coming from another friend's house to sympathize with him over the loss of his child. Speaker A wanted to enquire about their whereabouts in (9a) which speaker B replied in (9b). Eventually in (9d) speaker B tells what happen to Haruna which contain a discourse marker *amaa* "but". *Amaa* "but" used by speaker B disjoints the earlier utterance within the same proposition. Under the framework of Discourse Grammar *amaa* "but" used can be classified under both Sentence Grammar (SG) and Thetical Grammar (TG). It can remain in its natural word class as a conjunction, linking two different ideas, while remaining a thetical that cannot change the truth condition of the proposition if avoided by speaker B in (9d).

7. Summary, Findings and Conclusion

This study was set out to explore the pragmatic analysis of Dagbani discourse markers, a Mabia language is spoken in the northern region of Ghana by the Dagbamba. The paper comprises seven sections, with section one being the introduction of the study. Section two described the language under study while a review of related literature came under section three. The methodology employed in the study was discussed in section four while theoretical issues were presented under section five. The study presents and analyses data under section six and concludes in section seven.

Findings from the study revealed that discourse markers are heavily in display among interlocutors in Dagbamba discourse. Many of the Dagbani discourse makers fall under the Thetical Grammar of Discourse Grammar Framework, where their avoidance by interlocutors will not change the truth condition of the utterances. Few of the markers fall under the Sentence Grammar category, where they can be regarded as their natural word classes as either conjunctions or adverbs. An example is the marker *amaa* "but" used by speaker B in (9d) above.

This study helps to bring to light the display of discourse markers in Dagbamba discourse. The study helps to explore more perspectives on the study of discourse markers cross-linguistically, by adding to the existing literature on discourse markers.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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