The Discursive and Interactional Functions of Discourse Markers in Casual Conversations

Mădălina Georgiana Matei[*]

Resumé : *Les fonctions discursives et interactionnelles des connecteurs du discours démontrent la complexité des rapports fonctionnels et pragmatiques qu'ils peuvent développer pendant la conversation. Les fonctions discursives, que les connecteurs de discours peuvent avoir, sont principalement liées de la manière d'organisation technique du texte qui implique l'assurance de la cohérence et de la cohésion, la préparation des questions et des réponses possibles, la signalisation des difficultés de construction du discours. En ce qui concerne les fonctions interactionnelles, les connecteurs de discours sont utilisés pour montrer l'attention que les participants s'accordent réciproquement, la politesse et la protection de la « manière d'être » des interlocuteurs.*
L'ouvrage analyse la manière où des variables comme l'âge ou le genre peuvent engendrer des variantes individuelles d'employer les connecteurs du discours. Les perspectives de travail sont fonctionnalistes, pragmatiques et d'analyse du discours. Cette approche pluridisciplinaire a comme but de découvrir les dimensions discursives et interactionnelles de l'interaction verbale non-formelle, en général, et des connecteurs du discours en particulier.
Mots-clés : *connecteurs de discours, analyse du discours, interaction verbale non-formelle, variables*

Abstract: *The discursive and meta-discursive functions of discourse markers testify to the complexity of functional and pragmatic relationships that markers can trigger within a conversational exchange. Casual conversation is the instance in which both discursive and meta-discursive dimensions of discourse markers arise due to the dynamic, spontaneous and goal-oriented nature of talk-in-interaction. Among the elements that could contribute to the existence of the meta-discursive functions of discourse markers are speaker variables such as age, gender, education or geographical area. This paper analyzes the manner in which personal variables generate individualized variants of marker use focusing mainly on the variable of gender. Especially in mixed talk, the variable of gender could influence the choice of discourse markers in instances such as narratives, arguments or gossip. The only issue that is to be determined is the extent to which gender could exert such influence. The perspectives that this article adopts are functional, pragmatic and discourse analytical. This combined approach would hopefully manage to uncover the discursive and the meta-discursive dimensions of casual conversations in general and of discourse marker use in particular.*
Keywords: *discourse markers, casual conversation, conversational exchange, variable of gender*

1. Introduction

The functions of discourse markers could be situated either at the discursive level or at the interactional one. The discursive functions of markers are connected to the textual organisation of verbal exchanges to such phenomena as turn-taking mechanisms, repairs, prefacing of questions, turn-construction techniques, interactions and so forth. The interactional level is related to the attention that the participants in the conversation pay to each other. In the category of interactional functions we can include politeness strategies, expressing opinions and the provision of dispreferred or face-threatening responses. This paper discusses functions of discourse markers which are set against two of the most important speaker variables: gender and age.

2. Research Methodology

The conversations that are rendered and analyzed in this research are informal. In order to make the research activity more comfortable for the respondents, they have been given a voice recorder and asked to record conversations whenever and for whatever period of time they saw fit. The participants in the research are undergraduates, graduates, academics and people with an average level of instruction (high school graduates). Out of seven hours of conversation, the most relevant fragments have been extracted in order to demonstrate some definite theoretical and practical aspects.

All the verbal exchanges given as examples in this paper are rendered in the language in which they were uttered (English or Romanian) in order not to alter the semantic and pragmatic meaning of the markers in their original context but the analyzed items in Romanian are to be either translated into English (whenever possible) or their functional equivalent in English will be given.

---

[*] Assistant Lecturer, PhD, "Transilvania" University of Brasov

3. Age and Marker Preference

When listening to the conversations recorded for this research one could notice that the young participants in the speech event have a marked preference for markers such as *you know (ştii), and (şi), well (păi)* and *I mean*. Even in formal contexts young people recur to the above mentioned markers as a familiar refuge which could simplify their communication.

If these markers could also occur in institutional settings, in casual conversations they are extensively used especially to express *shared knowledge and common ground between speakers,* as *functional elements in discourse management,* with an *interactive or expressive function,* and to *highlight cohesion and coherence relationships in discourse.* (Schiffrin, 1987, 2006; Blakemore, 2006; Müller, 2005; Murar, 2008; Pons Borderia, 2006; Downing, 2006; Eggins, 2004; Cruse, 2006).

In the following conversation between and Alexandru and Roman, two teenagers from the Republic of Moldova, the use of discourse marking *you know (ştii)* is used in its interactional function of expressing *shared knowledge and common ground between speakers*.

1. Alexandru:**Da păi** eu am văzut că ăştia cu balul ăsta **ştii** (inaudible) (.) **asta** (.) **asta::**
2.   eu când – mie-mi spun băieţii chiar că acolo poţi să nici nu vii să nici nu
3.   faci. Poţi să te înţelegi **ştii**? Ca să vii şi să te-nţelegi cu oamenii **ştii** şi să
4.   să deie pă blatu
5. Roman: [locu]
6. Alexandru: [locu]–ntâi da.
7. Alexandru: **Şi** eu am zis că **băi** nu nu ce-i aşa ceva **ştii**?

In this conversation, Alexandru and Roman are talking about the first year students' ball where Alexandru takes part in a contest. His reaction to what he found out about some abnormal practices is very emotional and this is obvious especially from his first turn.

In line 1, the turn is begun by the discourse marker *da (yes)* which is used as a discourse management marker. *Da* marks Alexandru's claim for the floor as well as the abrupt start of a new topic of the first year students' ball which was in no way connected to the previous topic of amusing situations generated by the difference between name anniversaries in their Old Style Orthodox religion and the New Style Orthodox one which is practised in Romania. Then, in the same line, Alexandru hedges his topic introduction with the discourse marking *well (păi)* but, as it can be noticed, he experiences difficulties in constructing his turn.

Alexandru has two failed attempts to start his turn and achieve a coherent discourse unit and it is only the third attempt (*mie-mi spun …*) that proves to be successful. The struggle for a coherent discourse unit is marked by the discourse marking *asta (that is)* - uttered twice, preceded and followed by pauses and with a prolonged vowel at its second uttering - which signals the speaker's hunt for time to construct the turn and, at the same time, to build discursive coherence.

The discourse marker *you know (ştii)* is used in lines 1, 3 and 7 as an expression of common ground between speakers but also in its interactive or expressive function. The discourse markers fulfilling the latter function, signal the speaker's emotional involvement in the uttered discourse unit.

In line 7, in order to reclaim the floor after Roman's brief intervention, Alexandru starts his turn with the discourse marking *and (şi)*, a very popular turn-initiation marker among younger and older speakers alike.

A very interesting marker which is very popular especially among young people is *băi* (a functional equivalent of *look* as an attention marker). An instance of its use can be seen in line 7 where Alexandru renders a fragment of direct speech bracketed by *băi*. In the discursive context, this marker is used to express disagreement but also to draw the attention of the interlocutor on the ensuing justification of the disagreement.

The following discourse unit illustrates another very interesting use of *băi*:

1. Roman: eu n-am – n-am prins aşa ceva, nu. La noi – noi la Construcţii o fost, n-o fost
2.   chiar pă blatu. **Băi,** cine-o avut mai mulţi susţinători o – de exemplu băieţi de
3.   anu-ntâi care s-o îns – o venit şi cu băieţi mai mari s-o salutat, o băut o bere
4.   **una-alta**, s-o distrat, o mai spus o gluma **una-alta**.

In this turn, *băi* is used as an attention marker as it warns the listeners that something important in about to be said but it also functions as an elaboration marker. Roman expands on his statement that the contest held at his faculty's ball was not 'staged' and begins an explanatory narrative on the matter. It is obvious that, as any discourse marker, *băi* can fulfil various functions according to the discursive context in which it is used. It is very important, in such cases where there is almost no core pragmatic meaning of the marker, to look at the surrounding discourse to see what the respective marker signals.

In line 4 we encounter another expression having a discourse marking function in the context: *una-alta* (functional equivalent of *and so on* or *this and that*) displays the orientation of the speaker towards discursive relevance and that's the reason why the enumeration does not continue. This marker performs the above mentioned function of expressing *shared knowledge and common ground between speakers* and has a prominent *interactive or expressive function*. Apart from this marker, there several others that can be used by young people to display group membership by giving the impression that commonly shared ideas and practices are being discussed (e.g. *like, y'know, cos'*, etc)

4. Bracketing in Mixed Talk

It has been argued that women's speech style is facilitative, cooperative, egalitarian and personal while men's discourse is assertive and authoritative, men's conversation style being a form of display, of competition and hierarchy, of getting control of the interaction (Wodak, 1997: 84, Carson, 1997: 147, Sheldon, 1997:227).

In point of discourse markers, the differences between female and male speech are triggered only by the discursive outcome that they pursue in conversation. Otherwise, we cannot safely claim that there are female-specific or male-specific discourse markers but only, perhaps, a different manner of using them in conversation, according to their personal discursive agenda.

The conversations in this chapter are informal ones and the participants in the conversational events are George and Cristina, a married couple in their mid-thirties, both having a high level of academic instruction; in their conversations, a great number of discourse marking words and expressions can be encountered.

4.1. Narratives

The following fragment illustrates Cristina's repeated attempts to narrate an event in spite of several interruptions:

1. Cristina: povestea astăzi Mădă de Laura
2. George : mhm
3. Cristina : că: ea are şi activitatea de traducător
4. George: (talking to their son Ştefan) Gata? Bine.
5. Cristina: **ştii şi:**
6. Ştefan: (talking to his baby brother) Unde te uiţi, Petru?
7. George: la sticla de ceai a lu' mama.
(several turns in which both parents tend to their children)
8. Cristina : **aşa şi ziceam de** Laura că ea are şi activităţi independente de traducător.

The struggle to complete a narrative is always bracketed by discourse markers and, if in the first two lines the narrative is even supported by backchanneling, in line 4 George's attention is distracted and Cristina makes other attempts to both claim and hold the floor and to get her husband's attention. For instance, in line 5 she uses the discourse marking *ştii* (*you know*) in order to get George's attention by establishing common ground and adds the discourse marker *şi* (*and*) to signal her intention to continue the narrative. Her attempt fails again, this time because of her son's interruption and the ensuing events and turns that develop from this interruption (tending to their youngest son, Petru, talking to Ştefan, etc.).

Finally, Cristina resumes her narrative and makes another, this time successful, attempt to continue. In line 8, the summarizing marker *aşa* (*so*) starts the turn, the discourse continuation marker *şi* (*and*) and another summarizing unit of meta-talk *ziceam că* (*I was saying that*) hedge the re-starting of the narrative. In this verbal exchange we could say that the non-facilitative nature of male talk is perfectly illustrated. But Cristina's conversational goal was that of completing her

narrative and, using a highly mitigated discourse, she eventually managed to achieve her conversational goal.

Women's conversational style is described as cooperative, facilitative and personal. The following conversation illustrates the fact that Cristina verbally supports her husband's narrative and shows emotional involvement in the story. George is narrating the fact that a repaired mechanical part was delivered to a customer who refused to pay when the courier delivered the package but, somehow, the customer managed to take the repaired part out of the package and replace it with a broken one:

1. George: **Deci** eu când am vazut asta a fost interesant (.) că eu am crezut că este altă
2.   piesă pe care va trebui să o reparăm şi să continuăm colaborarea, **ştii**?
3. Cristina: **Băi** ce mârlani!
4. George: Am văzut-o, era diferită clar de la cer la pământ **ştii**?
5. Cristina: **Păi şi** ce puteţi face acuma?
6. George: Am refuzat pachetul.
7. Cristina: **Băi** da' şi clientul ce măgar de client!

This fragment illustrates the fact that almost no mitigation for the claim of turns is necessary as the husband is allowed and even supported to complete his narrative. The discourse marker *deci* (*so*) signals the beginning of another discursive stage in which George describes his own reaction to the events that he had mentioned. George's turns in lines 2 and 4 are ended with the listener-oriented *ştii* (*you know*) which immediately triggers supportive and emotional comments (lines 3 and 7) from his wife. Both comments are prefaced by the discourse marking *băi* which signals the listener's indignation at the narrated events.

The marker *ştii* (*you know*) in line 4 succeeds in its function of establishing common ground between speakers. In line 5, Cristina shows her concern but also her suspicion that nothing can be done by means of the discourse markers *păi* (*well*) and *şi* (*and*).

The two conversations rendered above illustrate two different conversational styles which, coincidentally or not, belong to people of different genders. This fact might confirm the above quoted theories on gender differences in speech. But in order to have more comparison data on the matter, the next section deals with more tense verbal interactions in which the two protagonists are involved.

4.2. Arguments

In arguments the importance of discourse markers increases because, on the one hand, there is constant competition for the floor among the participants in the speech event as every one of them wants to have the chance to expose their ideas in the most convincing manner in such a way as to 'outsmart' the other participants. On the other hand, given the fact that we are dealing with a conflicting type of exchange, the presence of discourse markers is necessary for hedging and mitigation.

The following conversation between Cristina and her husband, George can serve as an example. In this fragment they are discussing the solutions they have given the fact that no television or internet provider covers their neighbourhood. George suggests that they improvise an antenna:

1. Cristina: Ei pe naiba, nu prinzi orice, [vezi-ţi de treaba]
2. George: [exagerez]
3. Cristina: **Păi** exagerezi, **tocmai**, **că uite** tu ai –
4. George: - **dar** las' că nu televizorul este –
5. Cristina: **Ba** eu cred că este, **tocmai**, **că** la ţară oamenii nu:: ştiu cât stau
6.   ăştia care sunt şi la şefi, **ce ştiu eu**, şi au la serviciu RDS **şi-aşa**,
7.   nu ştiu dacă neapărat acasă folosesc internetul.

This conversation shows that there is an open competition both for the floor and for the defense of expressed ideas. However, the avoidance of face-threatening acts is obvious especially in line 3 when Cristina confirms George's appreciation of his previous statements as an exaggeration by using *păi* (*well*) as a hedging device for the same appreciation which, coming from her and so becoming an other-appreciation, could have been face-threatening.

In order to mark the opposition between George's statements which she considers to be false and her own appreciation of the matter, Cristina uses the discourse marking *tocmai* (*that's the*

idea), to introduce, with the help of *că* (*cos*) used in its discourse marking function of presenting an idea which is 'disguised' in the causal continuation of previous discourse, an exemplifying situation or an argument in favour of her discursive goal.

Although she also hedges her argument with the listener-oriented *uite* (*look*), the listener does not agree to allow her to finish the turn. On the contrary, when he discovers a false *transition-relevance* place between two words, he interrupts by marking his opposing stance with the discourse marking *dar* (*but*).

Cristina uses the same method of the false *transition relevance place* to interrupt George's statement. She start her own turn with the discourse marker *ba* (a functional equivalent of *on the contrary*) signalling the fact that her ensuing discourse will be in disagreement with George's. She again makes use of the same combination of discourse marking *tocmai* (*that's the idea*) and *că* (*cos*) used as *cause* that embeds reasons (Schiffrin, 1987:193), signalling the fact that her future argument is the correct one.

The two discourse markers that Cristina uses in line 6 have an interesting function in the context. *Ce ştiu eu* (*what do I know*) and *şi-aşa* (*and so forth*) are discourse management markers that help the speaker construct her turn by gaining more time for the construction of ensuing discourse.

The use of discourse markers to gain more time is illustrated by another fragment of conversation between the same protagonists, on the same subject of cable providers:

1. George: **Deci** televizorul a fost [tot timpul da]r nu o să stea pe internet sau să =
2. Cristina: [din moment]
3. George: = vorbească la telefon. Deci nu telefonia va fi cea care va aduce greul.
4. Cristina: **da'** din moment ce trag un cablu mai contează ce tragi pe el?
5. George: **păi deci încă o dată zic**, cel care vrea un astfel de serviciu nu-l vrea pentru
6.   televizor **asta încerc să-ţi spun**, îl vrea pentru telefon.

The hunt for time is marked in line 1 and 5 by several discourse management markers. In line 1, for instance, *deci* (*so*) is both an attention marker signalling the fact that the ensuing discourse is an important clarification that the listener has to pay attention to and, at the same time, it has a discourse organization function. *Da'* (*but*) in line 4 signals the fact that Cristina is about to contradict the previous statement and she does that by formulating a rhetoric question which catches George off-guard. In line 5, George uses discourse markers *păi* (*well*), *deci* (*so*) and the meta-talk expression *încă o dată zic* (*I repeat*) to gain time to construct his response.

In order to get the listener's attention to the key argument that he makes towards the end, George uses the attention-getting and, at the same time, reformulation marker *asta încerc să-ţi spun* (*that's what I'm trying to tell you*). What this meta-talk unit also manages to do is to direct attention towards the speaker and towards what is about to be said which represents a conclusion of his prior statements.

As we have seen from the discussion of arguments, the variable of gender does not contribute in a significant way to the manner in which discourse markers are used. All hedging devices, fillers, mitigating devices and meta-talk that we analyzed in this section cannot be said to be gender-specific in any way. Consequently, we could say that in this case, it is not gender that decides the choice of discourse markers but the conversational goal that speakers have.

4.3. Gossip

It has been argued by Coates (1998:130) that there is an important difference between the functional goals of male and female conversation: the goal of all-woman conversations is that of maintaining good social relationships, the reaffirming and strengthening of friendship (i.e. a private discourse), whereas the goal male speakers use speech with the primary purpose of exchanging information (i.e. a public discourse). In other words, women are more prone to gossip than men.

These considerations are somehow confirmed by the following conversations between George and Cristina in which they talk about their next-door neighbours:

1. Cristina: **Auzi,** în seara asta au venit ăştia foarte mândri de ei **dragă**.
2. George: Ce-au mai făcut?
3. Cristina : Nu ştiu ce-au făcut, cred că au semnat actele sau le-o fi dat ăla banii
4.   n-am idee

5. George: Aşa

In all the hours of conversation between the two protagonists, it is always Cristina who suggests subjects of gossip. In line 1, she starts the turn with the attention-getting marker auzi (listen) and then goes right into the topic. The provision of information is ended by another very interesting discourse marker. Dragă (dear) is always used in gossip, in Romanian, especially by women, to display a sort of complicity with the listener and, at the same time, disdain for the people or for the actions of the people who are the subject of the respective gossip. Very rarely does George participate in gossip and, as it is can be noticed in the conversation above, he only supports his wife's discourse by displaying an active 'listenership'.

The fact that George intervenes in gossip only to show attention towards the speaker's turn, resides from the following conversation as well. Here, the same subject of gossip is continued by Cristina after several interruptions from their children:

1. Cristina: Foarte mândră doamna. Când a coborât din maşină cât pe ce să să să
2. George: Să nu găsească pământul, **a**?
3. Cristina: Da:: îi stătea nasul numai pe sus
4. Cristina: **Băi**, mult ai, nimic nu faci.

George intervenes only in line 2 when he sees that Cristina cannot find her words at the end of line 1. Consequently, in line 2 he offers a possible turn continuation bracketed by a? (a functional equivalent of right?), that Cristina immediately accepts in line 3. Cristina brackets the conclusion that she draws in line 4 with the attention seeking marker băi that we encountered in several other contexts so far. Throughout Cristina's narration of the events, George does provide a few details and back-channelling response (mhm) from time to time.

The conversations analyzed in this section have shown that gossip topics are generally introduced by women who receive a minimum listener support from men. Jennifer Coates (1998) analyzed gossip in all-female groups and her conclusion was that women actively participate in gossip that they see as an opportunity for bonding and mutual support. Discursively, gossiping means backchannelling, active listenership, provision of support in conversation and complicity.

In mixed talk, gossip does not have the same characteristics. Women introduce a gossip topic but they do not get the desired response from male listeners. In the case of our participants in the conversational event, George and Cristina, this aspect is very obvious: there are times when George stops paying attention to the topic and seems willing to drop it. But it is always Cristina who reintroduces the topic. For example, in the following conversation, after several interruptions and activities around the house, Cristina reopens the topic:

1. Cristina: **Da. În fine, şi-aşa, ţi-am zis**, au intrat in curte, nu ştiu ce-au mai făcut că
2.   doar nu:: Dar i-am văzut.

In order to be able to reintroduce the topic, Cristina uses an impressive set of discourse markers: the first one is meant to signal the up-take of the conversational floor (da- yes), the second marks the fact that the former discussion was dropped (în fine – never mind), the third one marks the comeback to a previous topic (şi-aşa – so) and the fourth reminds the listener about the topic that the speaker wants to continue (ţi-am zis – I told you). George doesn't make any further comments and the topic is closed.

Certainly, the variable of gender does influence the unfolding of a conversation on a subject of gossip. If in other instances such as arguments, narratives, talk in institutional settings, the variable of gender is believed to have little or no influence of the speech event in general and on discourse markers in particular, in gossip, the same variable has a tremendous influence.

These conversations analzyed above and the conversations that Coates (1998) gives as examples, testify to the fact that, in gossip topics, women reccur to discourse markers to a greater extent than men. The role of markers could be that of introducing a topic, claiming the floor, interruptions, back-channelling, repairs as well as hedges for sensitive remarks. Other variables

such as age, education or geographical area do not seem to have an influence on either discoursive strategies or on the discourse markers that speakers select.

In the following chapter we are going to see the manner in which variables confirm of contradict the coordinates of male and female conversational styles put forth at the beginning of this chapter.

5. Bracketing in Same-Sex Talk

The coordinates of women and men talk enounced in the previous chapter, state that there are significant differences between the two conversational styles. In broad lines, women are characterized as having a more collaborative and supportive conversational style whereas men theoretically have a competitive and dominance-oriented conversational style.

5.1. Male Talk

In all the conversations that I recorded, I noticed that male talk is dominated by interruptions. If a narrative is begun by a speaker, it is very difficult for him to actually finish it without numerous interruptions which are not aimed at clarifying something of vital importance for ensuing discourse. The following conversation illustrates the fact that interruptions are more of a practice that necessity. The dialogue is between the two young students Alexandru and Roman:

1. Alexandru: **Da. d-apăi** dimineață -
2. Roman: - am fost la::
3. Alexandru: dimineață mă trezesc şi mă uit (.) la noi este una, o fată care doarme şi-o
4.   cheamă Gabi. Şi mă [uit
5. Roman: [la voi în cameră?
6. Alexandru: da
7. Roman: cu prietenu
8. Alexandru: da da. Da n-are . N-are prieten da' doarme la noi.
9. Roman: (laughing) Normal.
10. Alexandru: **şi:**:
11. Roman: n-are pat da?

Alexandru is trying to narrate an event but is constantly interrupted by Roman who is interested in getting control of the interaction. It is worth mentioning that only Alexandru's turns are bracketed by discourse markers. Roman's interruptions, although discursively aggressive, are not mitigated by such markers as *but, and* or *well* which normally indicate that another speaker wants to uptake. The interruptions are abrupt and irrelevant indicating the existence of a competition for the floor. In other words, Alexandru's mitigated and politely introduced turns in lines 1 and 9, for instance, stand no chance when confronted with Roman's aggressive discourse style.

Generally, the existence of discourse markers used by all participants in a conversation event, indicate the fact that both speakers and listeners pay attention to the conversational needs of the others and, mostly, they constantly try to preserve the interlocutor's 'face'. In this fragment of conversation, Roman shows no such orientation especially because, after his turn in line 11, he begins a conversation with a girl who is also present but who, up to that point, had been listening to Alexandru's narrative.

Apart from gender, age and in-group status are other categories that influence the two men's conversational styles. Alexandru is a freshman and Roman is an MA student whom Alexandru, as well as everyone else in the group, respects and looks up to. Roman is aware of his 'senior' status in the group and acts accordingly both discursively and otherwise. If this section has demonstrated that male talk is competitive and aggressive, in the following section we will look at the manner in which women react in casual conversation.

5.2. Women Talk

Deborah Tannen (1990:42) states that feminine language is oriented towards connection and intimacy whereas masculine speech style is mainly focused of status and independence. We might add that, especially in casual conversations, women are interested in sharing personal experience or bonding and this might be the reason why their conversational style is very supportive and collaborative. In other words, since they orient discourse towards personal, intimate subjects, their discursive style couldn't be competitive or aggressive in normal situations.

Female speakers involved in conversational events treat their interlocutors with the same attention and consideration so as to be granted the same discursive privileges when they come to share their ideas. Female speakers encourage their conversational partners to continue their turns and provide active listenership when they do not hold the floor. Back-channelling is, thus, very frequently encountered in all-women conversations.

The protagonists of the following dialogue are two female students, Mădălina (23 years old) and Anda (21). The two young women are room-mates in a students' hostel and, in order to improve their spoken English, they allocate a few minutes a day to practise conversations in this language. The topics are not decided beforehand and, that is why their conversations in English resemble interviews in which they try to find out more about each other.

1. Anda: **So**, your last Christmas.
2. Mădă: My last Christmas was a lonely Christmas. I was at home with nobody around.
3. Anda: **[I can't believe it]**
4. Mădă: [My mother is is] gone far away in Spain.
5. Anda: **OK**.
6. Mădă: She couldn't come home, my brother was with his friends out in town and I was all alone crying.

The discourse marker *so* in line 1 is a topic insertion marker which is used to show that the discussion of the previous topic had ended. What is interesting is that Anda introduces the topic of 'the last Christmas' in a very animated tone. But when Mădă starts talking about a sad personal experience connected to this event, the discursive support that she receives from Anda is substantial and the tone of the conversation is immediately adapted to the new mode. The discursive support that Anda offers is in the form of back-channelling in line 3 and the discourse marking *OK* in line 5. The back-channelling sentence in line 3 (*I can't believe it*) displays empathy with the speaker in relation to the narrated event and the discourse marker *OK* signals both the reception of previous information as well as an invitation for Mădă to continue her turn which she does in line 6.

Apart from back-channelling, another type of discursive support provided in all-women talk is in the form of questions and comments formulated by listeners that require the speaker's answers and clarifications. It is a form of 'offering' the floor to the interlocutor as in the following example:

1. Mădă: What about the guy who entered your room yesterday. Was he a colleague of
2.   yours?
3. Anda: Ye:s he: is my my my buddy, **I can say that** he's my buddy and I hired him
4.   there.
5. Mădă: U::: **so** you're a very important person there.
6. Anda: **Yeah Yeah**. My boss is my boyfriend now (laughing)
7. Mădă: **OH!**
8. Anda: [**Ye:a:h**]
9. Mădă: [I didn't] know that.
10. Anda: **Yeah**. **Well** he's not quite a boss but he's a very important person there.
11. Mădă: **So** you work in teams there you have -
12. Anda: Yes, of course we are all young and it's it's very nice
13. Mădă: Interesting.
14. Anda: **Yeah.**

The idea that women use a great number of discourse markers in conversation is also illustrated by this dialogue. The attention paid to correct wording is marked in line 3 by the meta-talk sentence *I can say that* which shows the fact that Anda has eliminated all the doubts concerning the accuracy of the description of her friend as '*my buddy*' and, with this expression she confirms her previous characterization.

The concluding marker *so* in line 5 is Mădă's way of showing that she has taken the right inferential path and understood the implications of Anda's remark '*I hired him there*' as an indication of the fact that she has the power not to actually hire but to have someone hired in that

firm. But Anda cannot respond with a face-threatening act directed towards herself by giving a negative response to this comment. Instead, she uses the false confirmation marker *yeah yeah* (line 6) and continues with the real reason of her influence.

The discourse marking *Oh*, uttered by Mădă in line 7 not only shows her surprise at this new information but also invites Anda to continue her turn and to offer further details. Anda doesn't make the correct inference and uses another marker *yeah* as a confirmation of her previous statement.

But when Mădă realizes that the correct inferential path has not been taken she insists by making another observation in which her lack of information on the subject is emphasized. This time Anda provides some clarifications about the status of her partner in the firm but her reluctance to do so is signalled by two discourse markers *yeah* and *well* which indicate the fact that she found it awkward to specify that she had provided an exaggerated description of her partner.

But the attention that women pay to her conversation partners is noticeable in line 11: Mădă perceives the fact that Anda is uncomfortable with the subject and makes a topic shift bracketed by the discourse marker *so*. Mădă gives her friend the chance to make some positive remarks about herself. Anda's face-saving comments in line 12 immediately receive a positive feedback from Mădă, a feedback which is acknowledged by the discourse marker *yeah* (line 14).

The two verbal exchanges that have been given as examples for women talk have confirmed the coordinates that the literature has established for this type of talk. Therefore, the variable of gender does influence the manner in which discourse is managed.

Consequently, women's conversational style can be described as facilitative, collaborative, personal, considerate, supportive as well as oriented towards face-saving acts and bonding. Women use a considerably greater number of discourse markers than men but they also have a preference for indirectness, inferences and implicatures.

6. Conclusion

The assumption from which this paper departed was that variables such as gender or age influence the main pragmatic functions that the literature has ascribed to markers. This paper has shown that, at least in the conversational contexts that have been analyzed so far, the above mentioned variables could in actual fact influence the use of discourse markers.

The decision to translate the Romanian discourse markers into English was, at first, determined by the fact that the scope of this paper would be broadened so that the analysis could be accessible to both Romanians and English speaking readers. But my translation of the Romanian discourse markers (especially those which have not been 'translated' by the provision of a functional equivalent) has led to a very interesting discovery: the functions of the Romanian discourse markers are in most cases identical to those of their English equivalents.

The variable of gender was proven to have the greatest influence of the use of discourse markers. This is why two chapters have been devoted to this aspect. First, mixed-talk was tackled from the perspective of discursive practices and innovations in discourse marker use in narratives, arguments and gossip.

Then, male talk was discussed and set against some coordinates given for this type of speech in the literature. As in the case of 'women talk', the subject of the final chapter, the coordinates that referential authors found for these two types of discourse were fully confirmed by the conversations analyzed in both chapters. Among the most important findings of the two chapters we can mention the fact that women use far more discourse markers than men and they offer more discursive support in conversation. As listeners, women encourage their conversational partners to continue their turns and do not recur to abrupt interruptions as male speakers tend to do.

In conclusion, it is the coordinates of discourse marker use that establish 'the rule' or a general pattern of use but it is the variables that display the individuality of the speakers.

References:
Coates, Jennifer, *Gossip Revisited: Language in All-female Groups*.In Jenny Cheshire & Trudgill, Peter (eds.). *The Sociolinguitics Reader. Volume 2*.Arnold, London, 1998.
Corson, David, *Gender Discourse and Senior Education: Ligatures for Girls, Options for Boys?* in Ruth Wodak (ed.), *Gender and Discourse*, SAGE Publications, London, 1997.
Cruse, Alan, *A Glossary of Semantics and Pragmatics*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2006.

Downing, Angela, *The English Pragmatic Marker **surely** and its Functional Counterparts in Spanish,* in Karin Aijmer, Simon-Vandenbergen, A.M (eds.), *Pragmatic Markers in Contrast,* Oxford, Elsevier, Oxford, 2006, pp.39-58.

Eggins, Suzanne, *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics*, Second Edition, Continuum, New York and London, 2004.

Leech, Geoffrey, *Principles of Pragmatics*, Longman, London, 1983.

Müller, Simone, *Discourse Markers in Native and Non-native English Discourse*, John Benjamins B.V., Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2005.

Murar, Ioana, *The Functionality of Discourse Markers in Conversational Text.* Annals of the University of Craiova, Series Philology, English, Year IX, NO.1, 2008, Editura Universitaria Craiova, Craiova, 2008, pp. 125-139

Pons Borderia, Salvador, *A functional approach to the study of discourse markers* in Kerstin Fischer (ed.), *Approaches to discourse particles*, Elsevier, Oxford, 2006.

Schiffrin, Deborah, *Discourse marker research and theory: revisiting **and*** in Kerstin Fischer (ed.) *Approaches to discourse particles*, Elsevier, Oxford, 2006.

Schiffrin, Deborah., *Discourse markers*, CUP, Cambridge, 1987.

Sheldon, Amy, Johnson, D, (*Preschool Negotiators: Linguistic Differences in How Girls and Boys Regulate the Expression of Dissent in Same-Sex Groups* in Jenny Cheshire and Peter Trudgill (eds.), *The Sociolinguistics Reader, vol.2: Gender and Discourse*, Arnold, London, 1998.

Tannen, Deborah, *You Just Don't Understand. Women and Men in Conversation*, Virago Press, London, 1990.

Wodak, Ruth, *Introduction: Some Important Issues in the Research of Gender and Discourse.* in Ruth Wodak (ed.), *Gender and Discourse*, SAGE Publications, London, 1997.