Methodological Approaches to Studying Discourse Particles in L2

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Introduction

The importance of discourse particles as essential elements of communicative interactions has led to a considerable number of studies about these small words in the last years. The focus on oral skills in foreign language education, as well as the progress in the linguistic description and lexicographical compilation of discourse particles, confer them special importance in the field of second language acquisition and foreign language teaching and learning.

Discourse particles are considered an essential prerequisite for the acquisition of communicative competence (Wierzbicka 2003). They are challenging to forgo when starting, maintaining, and ending conversations in the foreign language; to take and transfer the turn or to introduce and conclude a topic or to ensure mutual understanding. Their appropriate use facilitates a higher level of speaking fluency (Hasselgren 2002), while their complete absence can cause confounding effects and the impression of “clumsy” and “unskillful” speech (Delahaie 2009:17). The fact that discourse particles are essential communicative components from the pragmatic point of view is contrasted by the complexity of their linguistic description and the difficulty of their learning and teaching in L2. Métrich (1988: 23) considers discourse particles some of the “trickiest elements of a foreign language” because students have to cope with their formal indeterminacy, their semantic reduction and their functional polyvalence.

Studies on the use of discourse particles in foreign languages cover a broad field of research topics such as the development of the repertoire of discourse particles across different levels of proficiency (Hancock 2000; Jafrancesco 2015; Borreguero 2017; Borreguero et al. 2017; Koch and Thörle 2019); the role discourse particles play in the performance of particular interactional tasks and the functional

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preferences of L2 usage (Guil et al. 2008; Pascual Escagedo 2015; Thörle 2016); the relation between the use of discourse particles and fluency (Götz 2013); the analysis of discourse particles in relation to non- and paraverbal means in communication (Iñigo Mora and Álvarez Benito 2006; De Marco 2016); comparative studies on the L2 usage of discourse particles and native language usage (Müller 2005); and, finally, the impact of L1 transfer and other interlanguage processes (Romero Trillo 2002; Diao-Klaeger and Thörle 2013; Andorno and Rosi 2016).

This wide range of research questions about the use of discourse particles in L2 generates a diverse spectrum of methodological approaches with different emphases according to current technical innovations as well as to the traditional anchoring of disciplines in qualitative and quantitative paradigms. As for data collection processes in discourse particle research, for instance, data survey methods cover the elicitation of discourse particles in rigorously controlled experimental settings (e.g. Bonvin and Dimroth 2016) just as well as in more or less free or simulated interactions between learners or learners and native speakers or in naturally occurring social interactions (Pekarek Doehler and Berger 2019). In the same line, the analysis of data ranges from the statistical quantification of discourse marker uses in corpus linguistic approaches (e.g. Gilquin 2016) to the contextual microanalytic methods of social interactions in conversational settings (e.g. Pauletto and Bardel 2016). They cover functional analysis in the onomasiological sense, i.e., which discourse particles fulfill a certain function, as well as semasiological investigations describing different functions of a particular form.

With the aim of discussing the potentialities and drawbacks of different research methods according to concrete subjects in question, and with the additional aim of merging and expanding perspectives and creating methodological synergies across different disciplines and languages within the investigation of discourse particles, the editors of this special issue on “Methodological approaches to studying discourse particles in L2” carried out a scientific conference on the same topic at the Department of Romance Studies at the University of Siegen in June 2018.

This special issue in *Corpus Pragmatics* comprises a selection of the findings presented at the conference as well as some additional contributions which discuss methodological challenges related to the conception and execution of discourse particle research, from the design of the study to the collection, processing and analysis of the data.

With their contribution **“Possibilities and Drawbacks of Using an Online Application for Semi-automatic Corpus Analysis to Investigate Discourse Markers and Alternative Fluency Variables”** Christoph Wolk, Sandra Götz and Katja Jäschke discuss the methodological potentiality offered by an online application with a multilevel-coding system for corpus-based investigations of fluency-enhancing strategies employed by advanced learners of English. The analysis shows similar distributional patterns of fluency strategies across groups of learners of different native languages, with a clear preference for filled and unfilled pauses and repetitions in early stages of acquisition before the display of a more appropriate use of discourse particles on higher levels of competence. As for the quantitative approach, the authors acknowledge the possibility of identifying special fluency-enhancing features with the automatic application in large amounts of data which

allows establishing measurable correlations between the use of discourse particles and particular L2 variables.

In her article **"Turn-Initial Discourse Markers in L2 Spanish Conversations: Insights from Conversation Analysis"** Marta García García deals with particles used in turn initial position by adult learners of Spanish to display inter-turn relationships. She investigates *y-* and *sí-*prefaced turns and reveals different discourse functions like topic initiations, shifts and continuations. Drawing on a qualitative approach, García García makes a case for the use of conversation analysis as a research methodology, which allows for a meticulous description of how learners use discourse particles in a particular context to establish coherence with previous turns and thus, contributes to identifying concrete dimensions of interactional competence.

In their contribution about **"Model and Discourse Marking in L1 & L2 Spanish: A Comparative Analysis of Oral Narratives"** Pedro Gras, Patricia Galiana and Elisa Rosado focus on the role of discourse particles in a particular text type – oral narratives – produced by Dutch learners of Spanish in a classroom task in comparison with Spanish native speakers' performance in a previously existing corpus. Following a functional approach, the authors state certain similarities in native and non-native use regarding propositional values, while observing a more extensive repertoire of forms and functions in structural and modal discourse marking in native narratives. The comparability of the data elicited in different settings and for different corpora could be accomplished by repeating just the same elicitation task with the second group of informants.

The paper **"The Acquisition of Italian Discourse Markers as a Function of Studying Abroad"** by Elisa De Cristofaro and Linda Badan examines how the particular acquisitional context of linguistic immersion during a study period in Italy influences the use of discourse markers by learners of L2 Italian with L1 Belgian Dutch. In terms of discourse marking in L2, the main effect of the stay in the Italian target culture and language is the increased variation in the pragmatic functions of discourse particles employed by the learners. This differentiated functional use was elicited using a Map Task, which proved to be a valid method for collecting comparable data in this specific longitudinal setting before and after the stay in Italy.

Margarita Borreguero Zuloaga and Anna De Marco also discuss the effects of immersion on discourse marking by Spanish learners of L2 Italian in their article **"The Role of Immersion and Non-Immersion Contexts in L2 Acquisition: A Study Based on the Analysis of Interactional Discourse Markers"**. The contrastive analysis was carried out with two different groups of learners, one in immersion and one in non-immersion context and different conversational settings, one between peers (symmetric) and one between teachers and students (asymmetric). The data indicate a higher interactional involvement and thus a higher number of types and tokens of discourse markers employed in symmetric settings in both contexts. In contrast, the interactions in the immersion context show a greater variety of discourse markers accomplishing functions such as agreement and acknowledgement. On the contrary, the frequency of discourse markers and the types of interactional functions do not seem to be affected by the type of context. The study also discusses methodological challenges related to the complexity of uncontrollable factors influencing acquisitional processes – besides the

(non)-immersion context to be studied – just as well as the type of interaction task in which learners were involved, which gave rise to different types of speech production.

In their paper on **“Metadiscursive Activities in Oral Discourse Production in L2 French: A Study on Learner Profiles”**, Christian Koch and Britta Thörle focus on the use of discourse markers within metadiscursive activities such as word searches, repairs and metalinguistic evaluations. The focus on individual learner profiles enables them to identify the relation between individual conduct and cross-individual strategies and to compare the latter to native speakers’ usage. Although the individually preferred discourse markers differ from one learner to another, the learner profiles match insofar as they all make use of so-called “lexical teddy bears” that share formal and functional properties. The authors show that the discourse markers used with a metadiscursive function in the learner corpus coincide mainly with those used in other contexts, thus making them polyfunctional, e.g. *oui, alors, voilà*, while native speakers make use of functionally more specialized items. Other expressions, such as *comment on dit, je voulais dire*, and *pardon*, share formal features of discourse markers when they are used in the learner corpus, but their use is still close to the literal propositional meaning and does not reach the same degree of grammaticalization as the discourse markers used by native speakers.

The studies gathered in this volume show the close relationship between the acquisition of discourse particles and the development of pragmatic competence in a foreign language, i.e. the ability to successfully participate in the organization of dialogic interaction, to produce coherent, recipient designed speech, to deal with disfluencies and to express the modal marking of utterances. This close relationship makes discourse particles a relevant research topic in second language acquisition, which is discussed here from a methodological point of view. As discourse particles are primarily a phenomenon of oral interaction, their study in L2 requires an analysis based on oral learner corpora, including dialogic interaction. Starting from their specific research questions, the authors discuss a range of problems related to this kind of corpora, focusing on the identification and coding of fluency-enhancing features in L2 speech, the impact of the elicited text types and tasks, of formal and informal settings, and the selected learner group, or the comparability of native speaker and non-native speaker corpora, among other issues. The editors hope that the methodological proposals and solutions presented in this volume contribute to a better understanding of the acquisition of pragmatic competence in L2 as well as to the further development of corpus related research in L2 pragmatics.

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