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CONTENTS

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CONJUNCTIONS BETWEEN ENGLISH AND ALBANIAN LANGUAGE 1667
Suzana Ejupi 1667
Hajrulla Hajrullai 1667
PRAGMATIC MARKERS IN THE SPOKEN INTERLANGUAGE OF MACEDONIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH 1671
Marija Kusevska 1671
AN OVERVIEW OF NEGATIVE MARKERS IN ENGLISH AND ALBANIAN 1677
Arta Bekteshi 1677
OBSERVATION ON A CERTAIN GRAMMATICAL HOMONYMY IN BULGARIAN AND EXERCISES TO OVERCOME THE MISTAKES IT CAUSES IN FOREIGN STUDENTS' SPEECH 1683
Mariya Genova 1683
Lidiya Kavrakova 1683
FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING/LEARNING IN THE DIGITAL ERA 1687
Kujtim Ramadani 1687
PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN EFL CLASSES: EXPERIENCES WITH SEE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS 1693
Rufat Osmani 1693
DISCOURSE AND LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RMA INTRODUCTION SECTIONS – A BULGARIAN-ENGLISH COMPARATIVE STUDY 1697
Ivaylo Dagnev 1697
Mariya Saykova 1697
Maya Yaneva 1697
THE NOUNS CREATED BY REDUCING IN THE DICTIONARY OF BULGARIAN LANGUAGE BY NAYDEN GEROV 1701
Albena Baeva 1701
EXISTENCE OF VARIANTS AND DIALECTS OF ENGLISH 1705
Vesna Milevska 1705
LANGUAGE CHALLENGES IN ASPECT-BASED SENTIMENT ANALYSIS: A REVIEW OF ALBANIAN LANGUAGE 1709
Majlinda Axhiu 1709
THE USE OF THE TEXT IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE DIDACTICS 1713
Aterda Lika 1713
Lindita Kazazi 1713
FATHER FIGURES IN SELECTED SHAKESPEARE'S WORKS 1717
Fatbardha Doko 1717
MORTALITY FEARS OF SOFRONIY VRACHANSKI 1723
Albena Baeva 1723
RESURRECTION, SACRIFICE AND INCEST IN THE ALBANIAN AND THE ENGLISH BALLADS: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH 1727
Fatmire Isaki 1727
THE MYSTICAL VIEWS OF MEVLANA XHELALADDIN RUMI 1733
Ivana Koteva 1733
Mahmut Celik 1733
COLONIAL DISCOURSE IN BURMESE DAYS BY GEORGE ORWELL 1737
Emine Shabani 1737
Flakron Shabani 1737

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PRAGMATIC MARKERS IN THE SPOKEN INTERLANGUAGE OF MACEDONIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

Marija Kusevska
Goce Delchev University-Shtip, Republic of N. Macedonia, marija.kusevska@ugd.edu.mk

Abstract: The study presented in this paper is a part of the research project "Developing cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research and its practical implications", which is currently being implemented at Goce Delchev University in Shtip, Republic of Macedonia. It investigates the use of pragmatic markers by Macedonian learners of English. Speakers use them to achieve smooth flow of speech and help their interlocutors decode the meaning of their utterances appropriately. We pose two research questions: 1. Do Macedonian learners of English use pragmatic markers in their speech? 2. Do they use the same pragmatic markers as native speakers and with the same frequency? The analysis was carried out on a research corpus compiled for this purpose. The participants were 72 students of English at the Department of English language and literature, Goce Delchev University, Shtip. All students sat the Quick Placement Test and their proficiency level in English was determined. Students with B2 level and above were chosen to participate in the project. Five topics were selected: problems with dogs in our cities, living and working abroad, tattoos and piercings, how much time to spend with a girlfriend/boyfriend, and talking on the phone while sharing time with friends. The preliminary selection of the pragmatic markers to be studied was made on the basis of previous studies of the use of pragmatic markers by native and non-native speakers of English. The following pragmatic markers were selected: *and, but, I think, like, yes, yeah, so, just, okay, well, kind of, sort of, actually, I mean, only, you know, anyway, you see, and listen*. The results showed that Macedonian learners of English use the same pragmatic markers as native speakers albeit some of them are used with different frequency. The benefits of this research are twofold. First, it gives evidence about how Macedonian student use English for their communicative purposes and how well they can manage conversation. Second, the data collected in this project will be used as a starting point for creating an electronic corpus of the English interlanguage of Macedonian learners.
Keywords: pragmatics, pragmatic markers, frequency, function, language corpus

1. INTRODUCTION

The study presented in this paper is a part of the research project "Developing cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research and its practical implications", which is currently being implemented at Goce Delcev University in Shtip, Republic of Macedonia. This project was partly motivated by the small number of studies of this type in Macedonia as well as by the growing need for development of new research methods. In compliance with the above, the objectives of the project are as follows: 1. increase of the pool of cross-cultural, intercultural, and interlanguage pragmatics studies; 2. development of modern methods for data collection and analysis; and 3. linking empirical research with educational and communication needs in the society.

This study focuses on pragmatic markers. Pragmatic markers (PM) are very common in spoken language. Conversations are full of words such as *yeah, right, well, I mean, like, you know* that speakers use to achieve a smooth flow of speech and help their interlocutors decode the meaning of their utterances appropriately. They are linguistically encoded clues which signal the speaker's potential communicative intention (Fraser, 1996: 168). Speakers also use them to modify the strength of their utterances or mitigate face-threatening acts. We pose two research questions here: 1. Do Macedonian learners of English (MLE) use pragmatic markers in their conversions? 2. Do they use the same pragmatic markers as native speakers and with the same frequency?

2. PRAGMATIC MARKERS

All researchers who have investigated pragmatic markers agree that these elements facilitate spontaneous speech production and interaction and prevent the speaker from being seen as impolite or awkward (Crystal, 1988, in Müller, 2005, p. 1). There is disagreement, however, on how to call them. Researchers who are more interested in the cognitive processes or discourse organization label them as discourse markers (Fraser, 1996; 1999; 2009; Schiffrin, 1987), while those who are more interested in their sociolinguistic, interactional quality, call them pragmatic markers. Other contesting terms for their role are discourse particles, pragmatic particles, pragmatic expressions, connectives. As our interest is focused on the sociolinguistic, interactional facet of these terms, we will use the term pragmatic markers, although other terms will be used when referring to certain authors.

Pragmatic markers do not make up a single, well-defined grammatical class, but come from different word classes. Fung and Carter (2007) list the following to indicate the range: coordinate conjunctions (*and, but, or*); subordinate conjunctions (*since, because, so*); prepositional phrases (*as a consequence, in particular, by the way, at the end of the day*); adverbs (*now, actually, anyway, obviously, really, certainly, absolutely*); minor clauses (*you see, I mean, you know*); response words (*yeah, yes, no*); interjections (*oh, ah, well*); metaexpressions (*this is the point, what I mean is, that is to say, in other words*). Other properties of the pragmatic markers are the following:

- they do not contribute to the propositional meaning of a sentence;
- they are short and very frequent in oral discourse;
- they tend to group in utterances as in *Well, anyway, I mean, what was the reason ... y'know, why did she do it, anyway*? (Brinton, 1996: 33);
- they support both positive and negative politeness. Speakers, however, often view PM negatively. They are socially stigmatized. They tend to expose a negative attitude towards a certain marker and claim that they never use it;
- they are often associated with informality and with women's speech;
- they are optional, loosely attached to the syntactic structure and an utterance is still grammatical if they are dropped. They do not enter into grammatical relations with other elements of the sentence (Andersen, 2001; Jucker and Ziv, 1998; Müller, 2005). They usually occur at the beginning of an utterance but they may be also found in other positions including sentence final position (Brinton, 1996; Fraser, 1999; Schiffrin, 1987);
- they are notoriously polysemous and multifunctional, which poses problems of interpretation. While pragmatic markers are semantically empty and can be dropped without affecting the meaning of a sentence, they serve a variety of functions.

The functions of PM fall into two categories described by Halliday (1976, p. 29) as 'textual' and 'interpersonal'. Halliday's third mode is the ideational mode which is the content. Although Halliday is sometimes criticized for integrating all three modes within the grammar of language (Leech, 1983, in Brinton, 1996), most of the taxonomies are based on them (Redeker, 1990; Fraser, 1996; Andersen, 2001; Beeching, 2016; Crible, 2018). Many authors strongly relate pragmatic markers to politeness. They can modify an utterance or express solidarity because "they hint at uncertainty or approximativeness, and because they are often associated with naturalness, friendliness and warmth" and when it comes to politeness, ambiguity can be very useful. This makes pragmatic markers very important for interactional sociolinguistics. In addition to the previously described functions of pragmatic markers, Crible (2018, p. 9) views them in relation to fluency and disfluency. Fluency is described as "unmarked talk, which can be plain, eloquent or creative, albeit not necessarily flawless" and disfluency as talk with breaks in the speech flow or in the syntax, leading to some sort of disruption such as pauses, repetitions or shortenings.

As far as English is concerned, the number of studies on pragmatic markers is impressive. The frameworks of research for pragmatic or discourse markers are primarily motivated by linguists' interest in discourse coherence (Schiffrin, 1987), their pragmatic role (Fraser, 1999; 2009) and theory of relevance (Blakemore, 2002). Research of pragmatic markers has been enabled by compilation of language corpora that provide researchers with a wide scope of data and technical possibilities for searching through them. Corpora make it possible to investigate the distribution of pragmatic markers in speech and writing and in different registers (Aijmer, 2013; Beeching, 2016; Fischer, 2006). Most of these studies are concerned with the use of pragmatic markers in modern English. Intra-linguistic studies often focus on one marker such as *well* (Aijmer, 2013; Beeching, 2016; Jucker, 1993; Schiffrin, 1987), *but* (Blakemore, 2002; Holtgraves, 1997), *actually* (Aijmer, 2013), *like* (Andersen, 2001; Beeching, 2016), *anyway* (Park, 2010), or compare several markers on the basis of their similarity or differences (Blakemore, 2002; Simon-Vandenbergen, 2008). Parallel and other comparable corpora create opportunities for studying pragmatic markers cross-linguistically (Crible, 2018; Cuenca, 2008; Gonzales, 2005; Jucker and Ziv, 1998), while learner corpora throw light on how language learners use pragmatic markers (Aijmer, 2011; Aijmer, 2004; Fung and Carter, 2007; Hellermann and Vergun, 2007; House, 2013; Müller, 2005).

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

The participants in this study were 72 students of English enrolled at the Department of English language and literature, Goce Delchev University-Shtip. They all learned English for eight or nine years which means they had English as a subject up to their graduation from school. Some had additional instruction in English at a language school. Very few of them had been to an English speaking country. All students sat the Quick Placement Test

designed by Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate and their proficiency level in English was determined. Students with B2 level and above were chosen to participate in the study. They make a cohesive group of students who have good knowledge of the grammatical structures and enough vocabulary to express their views, mood and emotions.

For the purpose of this research, we collected a small corpus of conversations produced by the participants. We refer to it as Macedonian Learner Corpus (MLC). All of the students participated with a colleague whom they also considered a friend. We consider the conversations semi-spontaneous because they were collected in an experimental environment, but the respondents were not aware of what was being observed in their speech. They were asked to freely participate in the conversation (as if they were out for coffee with a friend) and share their views and ideas. Usually there was some hesitation at the beginning, but students soon became involved in the conversation and became very spontaneous. Five topics were selected: problems with street dogs in our cities, living and working abroad, body piercing and tattoos, the healthy amount of time to spend with the person you're dating, and talking on the phone while sharing time with friends. Students chose three of them to discuss during their session. The conversations were then transcribed and analyzed.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The preliminary selection of the pragmatic markers to be studied was made on the basis of previous studies of the use of pragmatic markers by native and non-native speakers of English (Aijmer, 2004; Crible, 2018; Müller, 2005; Schiffrin, 1987). The following pragmatic markers were selected: *and, but, I think, like, yes, yeah, so, just, okay, well, say, kind of, sort of, actually, I mean, only, you know, anyway, you see,* and *listen*. The list of the 20 pragmatic markers and the number of their occurrences in the MLC are presented in Table 1. The results indicate that pragmatic markers serve as useful tools for learners to structure and organize their speech. We may divide them in four groups on the basis of their frequency: 1. PM with high frequency (*and, but, I think, like, yes, yeah*); 2. PM with medium frequency (*so, just, okay, well*); 3. PM with low frequency (*say, kind of, actually, sort of, I mean, only, you know*); and 4. PM with very low frequency (*anyway, you see, listen*).

Table 1 Frequency of the top 20 PM in the MLC

PM	Number of occurrences	PM	Number of occurrences	PM	Number of occurrences
and	832	just	160	I mean	42
but	540	okay	117	only	42
I think	357	well	115	you know	34
like	294	say	58	anyway	2
yes	286	kind of	48	you see	2
yeah	216	actually	46	listen	1
so	170	sort of	42		

The use of pragmatic markers by MLE was compared with the results of two studies that show the use of pragmatic markers by native speakers: Crible (2018) and Fung and Carter (2007). Crible (2018) studies the use of pragmatic markers by native speakers of English and native speakers of French. For English, she uses the British component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-GB, Nelson et. Al, 2002) and Backbone project (Kohn, 2012). Fung and Carter (2007) examine and compare the production of pragmatic markers by native speakers and learners of English in Hong Kong. For English, they use the pedagogic sub-corpus from CANCODE, a corpus of spoken British English. Table 2 shows the contrastive frequency of the target markers in MLC, ICE-GB and CANCODE and demonstrates the extent to which they differ in use. Crible (2018) does not give information on *I think* and *just* while Fung and Carter (2007) do not give information on *kind of, only, anyway* and *listen.*

Table 2 Comparison of the frequency of the studied PM in the three corpora

Pragmatic marker	MLC	ICE-GB	CANCODE	Pragmatic marker	MLC	ICE-GB	CANCODE
and	832	1,140	11,736	say	58	8	920

but	540	477	3,152	kind of	48	31	/
I think	357	/	1,060	actually	46	97	867
like	294	16	1,822	sort of	42	60	1,172
yes	286	13	1,172	I mean	42	174	922
yeah	216	27	4,118	only	42	1	/
so	170	429	4,424	you know	34	196	1,659
just	160	/	1,988	anyway	2	15	/
okay	117	34	1,865	(you) see	2	8	1,141
well	115	304	1,637	listen	1	2	/

Table 2 shows the contrastive frequency of the observed PM in the three corpora and demonstrates the extent to which they differ in use. According to the information in Table 2, *and* and *but* are the two most frequent markers in the three corpora. The rest of the markers show certain discrepancy in their frequency. Table 3 shows the ten most frequent markers in each corpus.

Table 3 the ten most frequently used pragmatic markers in MLC, ICE-GB and CANCODE.

MLC	and	but	think*	like	yes	yeah	so	just	okay	well
ICE-GB	and	but	so	well	you know	I mean**	actually**	then**	or	sort of**
CANCODE	and	no	yeah	right***	but	or	just	okay	like	you know

*present in MLC but not in the native corpora **present in ICE-GB but not in MLC ***present in CANCODE but not in MLC

Comparison of MLC with ICE-GB and CANCODE

The results in Table 3 reveal that the top ten markers in the three corpora are similar. However, we have also noticed some differences:

- Two markers that are not present among the top ten in MLC, but are present in CANCODE, are *right, or* and *you know*. In our study, we do not focus on *or* and we do not have information about it. *You know* is at the bottom of the low frequency group with 34 occurrences. As for *right*, there were 20 occurrences. However, most of them were adjectives (*the right one; feel right; is right; in his right mind, right time*) and a few appeared as intensifiers in *right now, right here* and *right away*. None of them was used as a pragmatic marker. *Right* is not among the first ten in the ICLE-GB either. With its 31 occurrences, it is a low frequency marker.
- *like* is among top ten markers in both MLC and CANCODE. However, it is higher on the list in the MLC and has a position in the top five markers. *Like* is not in the top ten markers in ICLE-GB. In this corpus, it is in the low frequency group with 16 occurrences only.
- *I think* is the only marker in the MLC which is not present among the top ten in the other two corpora. *I think* is on the 17th position on Fung and Carter's list for CANCODE and is closely followed by *I mean* on the 18th position. Crible (2018) lists *I mean* with frequency of 174 occurrences in ICLE-GB. In MLC, *I mean* is in the group of low frequency markers with frequency of 42 occurrences.

- The top ten list of pragmatic markers for ICE-GB includes *I mean, actually, then,* and *sort of*. None of them is on the other two lists. The occurrences of *I mean, actually,* and *sort of* are shown in Table 2. In MLC they belong to the low frequency group. As for *then*, there were 84 occurrences, but they were all adverbs of time.

Several comments are worth making with respect to the above results. Previous research also reveals high frequency of *I think* in the interlanguage of MLE (Kusevska, 2019). *I think* can be both a mitigating and intensifying device and sometimes it is difficult to determine its function. Its use in spoken language suggests that its role is to mark linguistic politeness, the degree of certainty of the propositions involved, and the epistemic stance of the discourse participants. In addition to these, Fung and Carter (2007, p. 431) suggest that "its high frequency in the student data indicates that *I think* is used very heavily to mark both speaker's thoughts and to express attitude, a process which has become automatic and highly routinized to the extent that pragmatic fossilization is evidenced".

(1) Speaker2: Yes, but *I think* she ... Well … I think that is normal.
Speaker1: *I think* we have... connection, different kind of connection between ourselves and we have a conversation that we are engaged in. I don't think she will have good time with us and I kind of really need time when I can spend time with my friends and not with her.

While the occurrence of *I think* in the interlanguage of MLE was expected, the occurrence of the marker *say* was surprising. The total number of occurrences with *say* was 100, 42 of which were a regular verb. 29 of the remaining 58 were in the phrase *let's say*. The rest were used in different types of structures: *I say, I want to say, I just want to say, I wanted to say, I wanna say, I would like to say, I would say, I'd say, I got to say, I must say, I have to say, I can say, I could say, I might say*. They all have counterparts in Macedonian and their use in MLC may be considered a case of language transfer.

Another marker that has higher frequency in the MLC than in the native corpora is *like*. It has much higher frequency in MLC than in ICE-GB. The pragmatic marker *like* has been studied in considerable detail by many authors (Andersen, 1997; 1998; Müller, 2005; Hellerman & Vergun, 2007; Beeching, 2016). They found that *like* was significantly more frequent between friends than between strangers. Its frequency is the highest among teenagers and it decreases with age. This could be one of the reasons why it is more frequent in our corpus. All participants in our project were young people who in their speech would tend to identify with young native speakers. Several pragmatic functions have been identified for *like*: a focus marker, indicating a search for an appropriate expression, marking an approximate number or quantity, introducing an example or an explanation, and a quotative. The examples below illustrate these functions.

(2) Okay, but they are dangerous, they attack *like* people, they attack children
(3) B: Err…err… Let's say, *like* …err… It would be… a modest shelter…err… small building.
(4) they have situation actually, they have ahm *like* ahm one month time to get out of there.
(5) couldn't she *like* go into some ahm backyards or a house or scream for help. No I think it's staged.
(6) he would not take care of him if the vaccines were mandatory because he didn't have that much money to pay, *like* why would you even get a dog if you wouldn't take care of? I think [exactly] it's total nonsense.

5. CONCLUSION

Pragmatic markers are useful contextual coordinates for both native speakers and learners to structure and organize speech in interpersonal, referential, structural, and cognitive categories. This study showed that learners use them more frequently than it was expected. It became obvious that some have similar frequency as in native corpora: *and, but*; some are less frequent: *I mean, actually, sort of, you know, anyway, so and well*; while some are more frequent in the learner corpora: *I think* and *like*. Another obvious result is that pragmatic markers are worth studying. It is not only the frequency that is important. What is also important is to find out how they are used by learners and what causes the discrepancies in their use between native speakers and learners. It is our firm believe that by studying pragmatic markers, we may learn more about how learners use the foreign language for communicative purposes and what problems they face in structuring and managing conversation. Thus, studying pragmatic markers has implications for teaching and learning, since their inappropriate use can lead to misunderstandings, difficulties in coherent interpretation, and impediments to interpersonal relations.

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