

Discourse markers : a challenge for linguists and teachers

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Résumé

Les marqueurs discursifs soulèvent un défi pour les apprenants d'une langue seconde. Cet article explique que les marqueurs discursifs sont le résultat d'un changement linguistique historique, d'un processus dans lequel certaines expressions fréquentes perdent leur signification propositionnelle, vériconditionnelle et acquièrent une fonction organisatrice du discours ou une fonction interpersonnelle, à côté de leur signification littérale. Deux études de cas sont discutées : of course pour l'anglais et enfin pour le français, montrant comment leurs fonctions variées dans le discours d'aujourd'hui sont reflétées dans leurs différentes réalisations prosodiques. Cet article défend la thèse que pour comprendre et utiliser les marqueurs discursifs, les apprenants doivent en premier lieu comprendre que leurs significations incluent des significations discursives et interpersonnelles.

Mots clés : prosodie, marqueurs discursifs, sens pragmatique, apprentissage du langage, changement linguistique.

1. Introduction

The lexical items we are concerned with in this paper are referred to in different ways by different researchers in different languages. In English we find reference to *discourse markers*, *discourse particles* or *modal particles*. In German these are known as *Partikel* or *Modalpartikel*, and in French such items are described as *particules*, *marqueurs discursifs* and *connecteurs*. The varied terminology conceals differences in analysis and interpretation, but all three languages referred to here (French, German and English) have lexical items or expressions that are problematic in terms of their linguistic analysis. They are also problematic for foreign learners, for whom they frequently seem untranslatable, difficult to learn and yet are a crucial element of communicative competence.

In her extensive treatment of the subject, Karin Aijmer defines discourse markers as a « class of words with unique formal, functional and pragmatic properties. They are difficult to analyse grammatically and their literal meanings are 'overridden' by pragmatic functions involving the speaker's relationship to the hearer, to the utterance or to the whole text » (Aijmer 2002, 2). As examples of English discourse markers she cites expressions such as *actually, anyway, I mean, I think, sort of, you know*, but this list of course contains only a small subset of all those expressions that are said in English to have some discursal or pragmatic function.

The apparent loss of propositional meaning, in Aijmer's words 'overridden' by pragmatic meaning, is the result of a process known as grammaticalisation or pragmaticalisation (Traugott 1997[1995]). The distinction between the two terms is still a matter for debate: some include the development of discourse markers under the general heading of grammaticalisation (e.g. Wichmann et al. 2010), while others claim that the process of semantic change that leads to pragmatic status, as opposed to grammatical status, is a different one (Guenther & Mutz 2004). In both cases, however, there is a loss of propositional meaning, and we will use the term grammaticalisation here in its broader sense to include the development of discourse markers. The process of semantic change over time, whereby truth conditional meaning is gradually 'bleached', is thought to be the result of frequent use (Bybee 2001). Originally analysable as adverbs (e.g. *now*), phrases (e.g. *in deed*) or clauses (e.g. *you see*), some expressions have been reanalysed as having discourse or pragmatic functions and appear to be no longer grammatically integrated into the rest of the utterance. In a number of cases, the new meanings exist alongside the older meanings, as for example the English *now*, which, although it persists in use as an adverb of time ('now', as opposed to some other time), also has the function of indicating a topic shift – a transition to new material or a new topic or argument¹.

For learners it is not always easy to explain the 'meaning' of discourse markers. In our own experience it has been an area where teachers have resorted to the notion of 'filler', 'Füllwort', or (non)explanations such as 'it doesn't really mean anything', or 'you just have to learn it'. Looking in a dictionary is usually less than help-

¹ Admittedly, historical records do not give us access to earlier spoken forms and studies of historical change are skewed towards written evidence, but efforts have been made to use data as close as possible to spoken use, such as for example transcribed courtroom data, informal personal letters, and early dramatic texts.

ful. Searching in the dictionary for meanings of the German *ja*, we found the following :

- (1) Das ist ja richtig aber... (That's (certainly) right but...)
- (2) Ich kann es ja mal versuchen, aber... (I could always try, but...)
- (3) Das wissen wir ja alle. (We all know that)
- (4) Komm ja pünktlich. (Be punctual)

Only in one case was there any attempt to translate the particle at all ('certainly') and for this reason a student might be forgiven for thinking it means nothing.

Similarly, a search for the translation of French *enfin* yielded the following :

- (5) Pas exactement, enfin, dans un sens, oui. (... **Well** in a way yes)
- (6) C'est un élève qui enfin n'est pas bête. (He's not stupid **after all**)
- (7) Enfin, tu aurais pu le faire. (**all the same** you could have done it)
- (8) Enfin, un grand garçon comme toi ! (**Oh come on** a big boy like you)

Again, it would be difficult for a learner to derive any general help in the interpretation of the word *enfin* that could be applied in other contexts. As long as learners rely on dictionaries, based on an assumption that there is a semantic equivalence for each item, it will not be possible to understand the meaning of discourse markers. As Aijmer points out,

« Discourse particles seem to be dispensable elements functioning as signposts in the communication facilitating the hearer's interpretation of the utterance on the basis of various contextual cues. This does not mean that discourse particles are meaningless decorations or a verbal 'crutch' in discourse indicating a lack of speaker proficiency, but they are better dealt with in pragmatics or in discourse analysis than in semantics. » (Aijmer 2002, 2)

In short, without an understanding of pragmatics (what *people* mean rather than what *words* mean), learners cannot begin to grasp what particles, markers etc. are actually 'doing' in spoken interaction. However much they may appear to be unnecessary or untranslatable lexical items, we know that this is not really the case. Learners must therefore be made aware that meaning is not just denotational but that meaning can be subjective, and express the speaker's relationship to the hearer, to the utterance or to the text. In practice, of course, these meanings frequently overlap, as we will illustrate in the next section.

2. Examples of pragmatic or discourse meaning: hearer-utterance-text

Spoken text can be seen as a coherent stretch of language, such as a monologue, consisting of more than one utterance (the term 'sentence'

is reserved for written language). It can also be seen as a stretch of ongoing interaction between speakers. In this context there are a number of expressions that derive their meaning from the existence of other components in the discourse. These were described by Halliday & Hasan (1967) as aspects of *cohesion*, i.e. they indicate how a larger stretch of discourse hangs together. Examples of this are:

- (9) by the way = beginning of a digression
- (10) to sum up = refers back to a series of propositions
- (11) anyway = end of a digression

Such cohesive markers, when used in conversational interaction, can also be exploited strategically to control talk. For example, a speaker who wishes to bring the conversation back to their own preferred topic may begin an utterance with *anyway*, even if they have not actually digressed. In effect, this treats the previous speaker's contribution as a digression and thus legitimates the change of topic. In this sense, the discourse (cohesive) function overlaps with an interactional function whereby the speaker implies a stance towards an utterance for strategic purposes.

Some markers are not cohesive in Halliday and Hasan's sense, but are features of spoken conversation, and can therefore only be interpreted in the context of speaker interaction. For example, the word *oh* in English can be an indication that some information has been received by the speaker (e.g. Aijmer 2002). Depending on how it is said, however (Local 1996), it can also indicate a range of attitudes to the received news, from uninterested to very surprised. Here we have an overlap between meaning in relation to the structure of the discourse ('I acknowledge receipt of the information') and the speaker's attitude to the utterance itself ('this is how I feel about the information').

We also find cases of overlap where markers that relate to a proposition also express an attitude towards the hearer. The following (invented) examples illustrate this.

- (12) *Please* can you shut the door

Here the word *please* indicates that the pragmatic force of the utterance is a request. However, it also has the interpersonal function of expressing politeness by indicating that the request is assumed to be a legitimate one.

- (13) I was feeling *sort of* strange

The expression *sort of* indicates fuzziness, imprecision and thus casts some doubt on the appropriateness of the word *strange*. However, expressions that suggest indeterminacy are often used to create a sense of closeness between speaker and hearer.

- (14) This is a bit too long, *I think*.

The epistemic comment clause *I think* displays an element of uncertainty toward the proposition. However, expressing an element of uncertainty, as with the expression of indeterminacy in the previous example, downplays possible face-threat and is therefore a potential contribution to politeness.

We see, therefore, that discourse markers have a range of functions which include providing cohesion by relating parts of a text to other parts, indicating the speaker's attitude to an utterance, and often thereby indicating the speaker's attitude to the hearer. Some expressions are used strategically to negotiate a relationship between Speaker and Hearer, for example by expressing solidarity, but also as a way of exerting power. We will see this strategic use of a discourse marker in the next section.

3. English of course

Discourse markers are thought to derive, as we have already mentioned, from a historical process of semantic change known as grammaticalisation. They begin as lexical items or phrases, but through frequent use the propositional meaning becomes lost or 'bleached'. The expressions are re-analysed as having discourse or pragmatic functions.

An analysis of the historical development of *of course* shows that its meaning derives from the noun 'course' (French/Middle English *cours*) meaning 'the path taken e.g. by a river' (see Lewis 2003), and was used metaphorically to mean 'in the natural order of things', 'predictable' or 'to be expected' (OED). (For a fuller account of the development and uses of *of course* see Wichmann et al. 2010). If we say *of course he will come back* we mean that it is natural or predictable that he will come back, and early uses of *of course* all appear to convey some sense of naturalness or predictability. Early adjectival use, now obsolete, was predicative and postmodifying.

- (15) 1580 The friendship between man and man as it is common so it is of course. (OED)
- (16) 1813 You must give me leave to flatter myself, my dear cousin, that your refusal of my addresses is merely words of course. (Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*)

In Present Day English, this adjectival usage persists only in the fixed expression *a matter of course*. Until the 19th century, *of course* was also used as an adverb, also meaning naturally or predictably.

- (17) 1813 Mr Collins had only to change from Jane to Elizabeth – and it was soon done – done while Mrs Bennett was stirring the fire. Eliza-

beth, equally next to Jane in birth and beauty, succeeded her of course. (Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*)

During the 18th century, *of course* is to be found in sentence internal position and can be analysed first as adverb and then with broadened scope as sentence adverbial ('in accordance with the natural ways of the world') :

- (18) 1752 If a poor child is to be whipped equally for telling a lie, or for a snotty nose, he must of course think them equally criminal. (cited in Lewis 2003)

To sum up, the historical data show that the grammatical function of *of course* has changed over time, some usage now being obsolete, except in fixed expressions.

In Wichmann et al. (2010), this historical data was compared to usage in Present Day English (PDE). The study was based on naturally-occurring data taken from the International Corpus of English, British English (ICE GB) compiled at the Survey of English usage at University College London (Nelson, Wallis & Aarts 2002). It was based on 200 examples of *of course* taken from a total of 552 occurrences in the spoken section of the corpus, containing 600,000 words of speech. The analysis shows that *of course* is still used with evidential epistemic meaning (i.e. it is a natural consequence of something, it is predictable), for example in (19) :

- (19) Well I studied English all my life **so of course** <,> I love poetry [ICE-GB S1B-048]

However, there were also a number of examples indicating a loss of lexical strength where the meaning is discoursal rather than propositional, for example as a connective that introduces a shift in the discourse e.g. a new argument :

- (20) **but of course** <,> presumably (if she is saying) [ICE-GB S1A-054]

The most striking development in the usage of *of course* in PDE is as an interpersonal marker express shared knowledge ('we both know this'). We see this in the following examples, made more explicit in the first by the addition of 'as you know'.

- (21) Members of jury the first point is this <,> This **of course** as you know is a civil case it's not a criminal case [ICE-GB S2A-061]
 (22) Now in spite of this the British class system is regarded as peculiar And it certainly would be peculiar if all the myths about it were actually true **but of course** they're not [ICE-GB S2B-035]

Indicating that something is 'shared knowledge' can have a number of functions. In rehearsed broadcast interviews the interviewee tells the interviewer what he or she already knows for the benefit of the audience. In effect, this is a kind of prompted monologue, in

which the interviewer serves merely to prompt the speaker to give the audience certain information. The interviewee may acknowledge this difference between audience and interlocutor by the use of *of course*. In the following example, the late Archbishop of Canterbury relates that his mother was a hairdresser. There is clearly no sense in which it is natural or predictable that this might be the case, and the expression *of course* merely acknowledges that the information is not new to the interlocutor.

- (23) Uh but uh she had been **of course** uhm <,> a a hairdresser on an ocean liner [S1B-041]

This use of *of course* to mean 'we know this' does not only occur in situations where the speaker-hearer relationship is complex (such as in interviews). It also occurs in monologic situations (such as lectures, or broadcast reports) in which the speaker mitigates his or own potentially face-threatening position of authority in order to seek complicity of the audience – 'I am telling you this but you probably know it already'. The following is from a sports report :

- (24) United on a good run at the moment whereas Rangers **of course** have been struggling in the First Division [ICE-GB S2A-003]

This is an attempt to create a sense of solidarity and equality or intimacy between speaker and hearer(s), and is often to be found in casual conversation where the symmetry of the speaker-hearer relationship is to be nurtured. In other situations, however, such as in political debates, the speaker may be attempting to gain a superior position of power, and the expression of 'shared knowledge' tends to be used to project authority rather than to downplay it. Identifying something as common knowledge or as self evident allows the speaker to dismiss it in the service of his or her own argument. The following exemplifies this usage :

- (25) And again my honourable friend doesn't understand the meaning of morality Last week on a visit to Israel I found that the Israeli government was well aware of the dangers of her becoming militarily involved in the Gulf crisis Uh while she does **of course** have every right to defend herself will my honourable and learned friend urge the government of Israel to continue to show the considerable constraint which she has so far shown [ICE-GB S1B-060]

This dual function is pointed out by Holmes (1988), who notes that *of course* may signal both authority and solidarity.

From the examples above it should be clear that the expression *of course* in British English has undergone a semantic change whereby its original meaning of 'naturally', 'predictably', has become 'self evident' and from there to 'we all know this'. Its meaning in the latter cases is no longer epistemic ; in other words, it no longer relates sim-

ply to the proposition, but is the expression of subjective, interpersonal meaning. It is this increased subjectivisation that is thought to underlie the process of grammaticalisation.

There is some evidence in the corpus data that there is a further development towards what Aijmer refers to as ‘interpersonal particles for planning purposes’ (2002, 51). Expressions such as *I mean, you know* often occur in phases of disfluency – points in the discourse where the current speaker is holding the floor but seems to be planning how to formulate the next utterance. Such expressions often co-occur, as in the following example, where *of course* occurs together with the discourse markers *you see, I mean*.

- (26) But **of course** you see I mean if you say classical feature theory handles it then [ICE-GB S1A-054]

As we hope to have made clear above, any explanation of the meaning of *of course* in British English must go beyond propositional, semantic meaning and involve an awareness of other kinds of meaning. Discourse particles, including *of course*, have a variety of functions including the expression of relationships within a text, a subjective attitude to the proposition or an attitude towards the interlocutor (interpersonal meaning). Learners who are not aware of such dimensions of meaning will be unable to grasp what discourse markers are doing, and will be understandably tempted to conclude that they are indeed, in Aijmer’s terms, only ‘meaningless decorations’.

4. Discourse particles and prosody

As is the case with *of course*, some discourse expressions continue to exist with their earlier, more propositional meaning. Participants can generally judge from context whether, for example, *now* means ‘at this time’ or ‘let’s change topic’. Disambiguation is not so simple, however, for automatic systems such as speech recognition software, and the field of speech technology has shown some interest in finding ways of doing this without contextual knowledge. One way of disambiguating is to pay attention to how the expressions are uttered, i.e. their prosodic realisation. Hirschberg & Litman (1993), in a study of the prosody of ‘cue phrases’, found that the main difference between *now* as an adverb of time and *now* as a discourse marker was its prosodic prominence. The time adverb is generally stressed and the discourse marker is not. Why should this be? According to a theory of intonational meaning (Pierrehumbert & Hirschberg 1990), prosodic salience (stress) is related to semantic weight. This is consistent with what we already know of English, namely that grammatical words (prepositions, pronouns, etc.) are more likely to be unstressed, while lexical words, e.g. verbs, adjectives and nouns, have a greater poten-

tial for stress. Discourse markers are said to be the product of grammaticalisation – a frequency-induced process which involves a loss of semantic weight over time. If this is the case, we can predict that for those items that maintain both a more propositional meaning and a discourse meaning concurrently, the difference may be reflected in the degree of prosodic prominence given to the item in speech. This would explain the tendency for *now* as an expression of time to be stressed and *now* as a discourse marker to be unstressed. If we apply this principle to cases such as *of course*, we would predict that those tokens that retain some propositional meaning ('it is natural, it is predictable') are more likely to be stressed, i.e. prosodically prominent, than those that have acquired a subjective interpersonal meaning ('we know this').

4.1. Evidence from a spoken corpus

The corpus-based study of *of course* (Wichmann et al. 2010) described above, subjected the 200 tokens of *of course*, out of the 552 found in ICEGB, to auditory analysis. For each token the accentual status was identified (i.e. whether stressed or unstressed), and this was related to the propositional or pragmatic/interpersonal meanings inferred independently from the context. The assumption was that those items that are less propositional are more likely to be unstressed and those that retain a propositional element are more likely to be stressed. A Chi-squared test showed a strong association between prominence and meaning ($p > 0.001$), confirming that propositional meaning is strongly associated with prominence, and interpersonal meaning is associated with loss of prominence. Prosodically we therefore have what we predicted – that as the semantic weight is lost and the meaning becomes more opaque, so prosodic prominence is lost.

5. French *enfin*

After discussion of an English discourse particle we will now turn to an example from French: *enfin*, an expression that is similarly the result of historical semantic change. Both its historical development and its prosodic realisation(s) have been studied in depth, the historical aspect by Mosegaard Hansen (2005), and its prosody by Bertrand & Chanet (2005).

Enfin derives etymologically from the Latin *in fine* (*en (la) fin*) and is found in historical texts in a variety of spelling forms, including *enfin/en fin (an fin)/en la fin*. Mosegaard Hansen assumes that the earliest use was as a prepositional phrase, usually written as two (or three) words, and that it was reanalysed as an adverbial from the 12th Century. Its propositional meaning is related to time, referring to the end of a temporal sequence of real-world events, and Mosegaard Hansen

claims that this is the only truth-conditional use (2005, 46). From the mid 16th century, she observes the development of two new uses : the first, a listing function and the second which she describes as a ‘synthesising’ use. In its listing function, its temporal meaning has been extended to indicate not the end of a series of events but a series of propositions in a text. In the following example, *enfin* marks the end of a sequence of rhetorical questions, the order of which is determined by the text and not related to any inherent chronological order of real-world events :

- (27) Commandoit elle pas à ses gardes ? Pouvoit elle pas les punir de ce que trop librement ils la laissoient conférer avec ceux dont elle se servoit pour instrument de ses desseins ? Et enfin n’estoit il pas en elle de les resserrer tellement et si estroictement qu’elle ne peust venir à bout de ce qu’elle pretendoit? (Pierre de L’Estoile, Registre-journal du règne de Henri III, vol 5, 1587, from FranText) (Cited by Mosegaard Hansen 2005, 47)

This metadiscursive usage occurs in modern French as in

- (28) Je n’irai pas voir X-men avec toi : tout d’abord, je n’aime pas la science fiction ; ensuite, je n’ai pas d’argent ; et enfin, j’ai autre chose de prévu. (Cited by Mosegaard Hansen 2005 : 38)

In the second strand to this stage of development, *enfin* ‘marks a (part) of an utterance which sums up the previous discourse’ (Mosegaard Hansen 2005, 47), as in the following example from modern French :

- (29) Cédric et grand, beau, intelligent, spirituel, enfin parfait quoi ! (Cited by Mosegaard Hansen 2005, 38)

These parallel developments, clearly derived from the temporal sense, indicate a shift from truth-conditional meaning to what Blake-more (1992) calls ‘procedural’ meaning; in other words *enfin* now tells the hearer how to process the text, but does not refer to the truth value of the propositions in that it no longer refers to chronological sequence of real-world events.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the ‘synthesising’ meaning, according to Hansen, becomes entrenched, and can be found in initial position, where it implies the synthesis of previous, unspoken propositions :

- (30) Reine : Enfin, jusques à quand mon ame desolée D’effroyables sursauts doit-elle estre esbranlée ? (Antoine de Montchrestien Tragedie de la reine d’Escosse 1604) (Cited by Mosegaard Hansen 2005, 53)

In the same period we find evidence of increased subjectivity or attitude, so that the word *enfin* denotes not only an event or final state-of-affairs, but that the state-of-affairs was to be desired. In other words there is an introduction here of an attitudinal meaning, often a sense of relief.

(31) Tirinte : Que les Dieux soient louez ! Enfin elle s'en va. (1627)

By the end of the 17th century, *enfin* occurs in a self-repair function, to correct previous statements.

(32) Tout le monde est venu à la soirée. Enfin tous ceux qui n'étaient pas partis en vacances.

Mosegaard-Hansen argues that this is derived from its synthesising use. It hides inaccuracy by pretending to be a final synthesis rather than a correction. It is also used to interrupt one's own speech to indicate that the speaker will not pursue the line of argument, or as an interjection to interrupt others :

(33) Enfin ! Ça va pas, ça !

There are differing views on how to categorise the various types of usage in modern French. Mosegaard Hansen suggests three main uses of *enfin* – in its temporal or listing function, in its synthesizing function and as a repair particle or interjection, possibly conveying a sense of irritation or impatience. From a grammaticalisation perspective, however, it seems most useful to describe the uses in relation to the degree of subjectivisation that is implied, from truth conditional at the more transparent end of the spectrum to attitudinal at the subjective, interpersonal end. On this basis we can posit three phases. Firstly, *enfin* is still used in its truth-conditional sense of referring to the temporal order of events in the real world. Secondly, in its extended, text-structuring role, it is used for listing or synthesising a series of propositions, and its attitudinal derivatives. Finally, it is used as a repair or interruption particle.

5.1. Use of *enfin* according to genre

In a study by Bertrand & Chanet (2005), the use of *enfin* as a 'particle', i.e. for repair/interruption, accounts for 98% of usage in spoken French – especially conversation. Their study was based on the Corpus de Référence du Français Parlé (CRFP) (32 hours of different genres of speech including specialist talks, conversations and broadcast speech), and on a written newspaper corpus (Le Monde Diplomatique). In speech, *enfin* is nearly always used as a particle, while in written French, particle usage (repair, interruption) does not occur ; usage here is restricted mainly to the aspectual adverb (expressing relief) (50%) and text organisers (40%).

A further analysis of different spoken genres used three corpora : firstly the CRFP, secondly the Ester-Avignon corpus (courtesy of the Laboratoire d'Informatique d'Avignon) consisting of 40 hours of radio broadcasts from France Inter and Radio France International, and finally, the Corpus of Interactional Data (CID) collected at LPL, Aix. This consisted of 8 hours of spontaneous conversations recorded in a

soundproof room, of which four hours were used for the study of *enfin*.

Results show (Table 1) that the particle usage of *enfin* is most frequent in casual conversation (440 occurrences in 4 hours) compared with the radio corpus (250 occurrences in 40 hours). Secondly we see that spontaneous conversation contains *only* particles. Finally the radio corpus shows an intermediate position between spontaneous speech and writing – we find many particles (41%) but also text organisers (34%) and aspectual adverbs (15%). It is hardly surprising that there should be some features of written language, given the different types of broadcast, which include scripted speech, unscripted but highly prepared speech and spontaneous speech, both dialogue and monologue.

	particle	aspectual adverb	temporal connective	textual organizer	ambiguous	totals
CRFP	98,07%	0,17%	0,17%	0,26%	1,5%	100%
	(1109)	(2)	(2)	(3)	(17)	(1131)
radio news conversation	41,2%	14,8%	0,8%	33,6%	9,6%	100%
	(103)	(37)	(2)	(84)	(24)	(250)
conversation	100%	0	0	0	0	100%
	(440)					(440)

Table 1

Bertrand and Chanet observe that *enfin* as a temporal adverb, in its most transparent meaning from which others are said to derive, is very rare in modern French (see Table 2).

	particle	aspectual adverb	temporal connective	textual organizer	ambiguous	totals
CRFP	98,07%	0,17%	0,17%	0,26%	1,5%	100%
	(1109)	(2)	(2)	(3)	(17)	(1131)
written press	0	50%	4%	40%	6%	100%
		(75)	(6)	(60)	(9)	(150)

Table 2

These various uses show clearly the typical characteristics of grammaticalisation. We have a continuum from transparent meaning (referring to time), through closely related but non-truth-conditional discourse meaning, to a subjective meaning that expresses an attitude to the proposition or to the hearer. The findings have implications for pedagogy : the emphasis given to the different meanings of *enfin* will depend on whether the aim is to teach competence in written French or in daily conversation.

5.2. *Prosody and enfin*

Let us now return to prosodic realisation, which in both French and English appears to relate strongly to meaning.

Bertrand & Chanut's (2005) study included an extensive study of the meaning, distribution and prosody of *enfin*. Their data is taken from the Corpus of Interactional Data (CID). For the prosodic analysis they selected the last 20 minutes of each conversation, yielding 136 occurrences of *enfin*. As all these tokens were of particle usage, the prosodic realisation was compared with 5 tokens from the CRFP, three of which were text organizers and two aspectual adverbs.

For practical purposes, Bertrand and Chanut make a simple binary distinction between *enfin* as a particle (as repair or interruption marker) and *enfin* as a temporal adverb, text connective or aspectual (attitudinal) adverb. These two categories distinguish broadly between tokens with largely pragmatic, subjective meaning and those that are propositional in meaning or closely related.

They analysed a range of prosodic features including the following :

- Pitch contours
- Pause (separation vs. integration)
- Duration
- Phonetic realisation

The prosodic characteristics found were then related to the two categories of meaning identified. In their data they found a clear difference between the realisation of particle and non-particle usage of *enfin*. Non-particle uses of *enfin* were all realised as two syllables [ãfɛ̃] in contrast to the particle uses which could be phonetically reduced and were frequently realised as only one syllable [fɛ̃]. In addition, the average duration of non-particle uses was longer than for particles (527 vs. 300ms). All the cases of non-particle uses were accented, which was not the case for particles. Non-particles were produced in a higher register than particles and they were realised with an abruptly rising pitch contour, while the particles displayed a level or falling contour.

Figures 1-3 exemplify these findings. Figures 1 and 2 show non-particle usage. The high register is visible in the pitch trace as is the sharply rising contour on *enfin*. The word is fully articulated in each case. Example 3, on the other hand, shows a contour typical of particle usage : the word is low in the speaker's range, it is reduced to a single syllable [fɛ̃] and is realized with a falling contour.

- (34) *enfin* aspectuels
que nous a- nous arrivons **enfin** dans /des, les/ sociétés modernes -
meilleures (CRFP, 727-PNE-PRO1, §2)
- (35) *enfin* organisateurs textuels
dans la maîtrise de nos dépenses enfin # l'importante réduction des
participations communales pour les zones d'aménagement confiées à
notre SEM (CRFP, 815-PNO-PUB1, §2)
- (36) *enfin* particules
oui parce que globalement sur cette semaine là # il a pas du tout eu
de temps
pour moi # (**en**)fin pour moi c'est très égoïste # pour nous quoi #
voilà
(14, N-Lé 11)

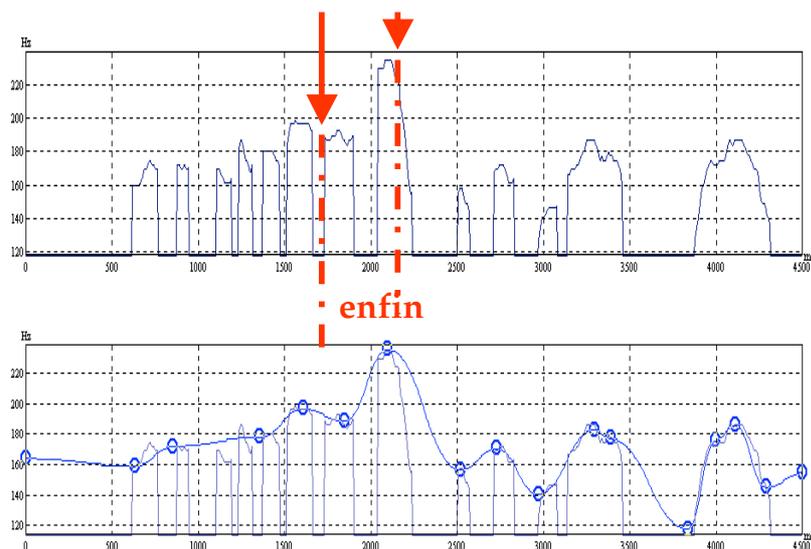


Figure 1

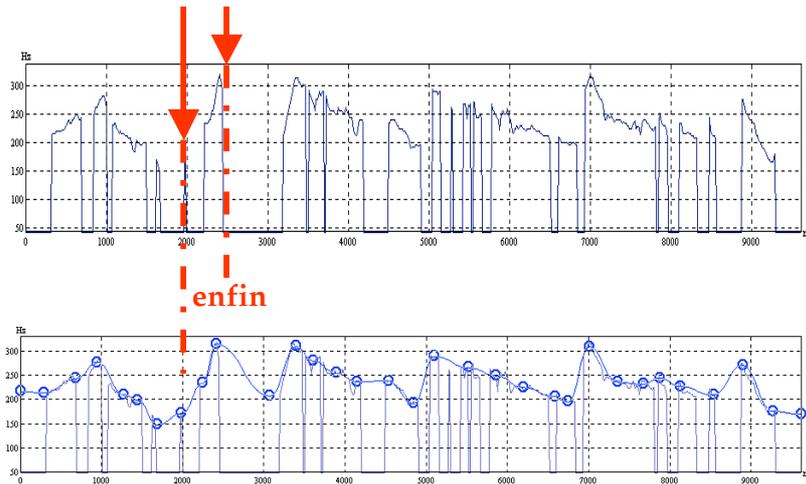


Figure 2

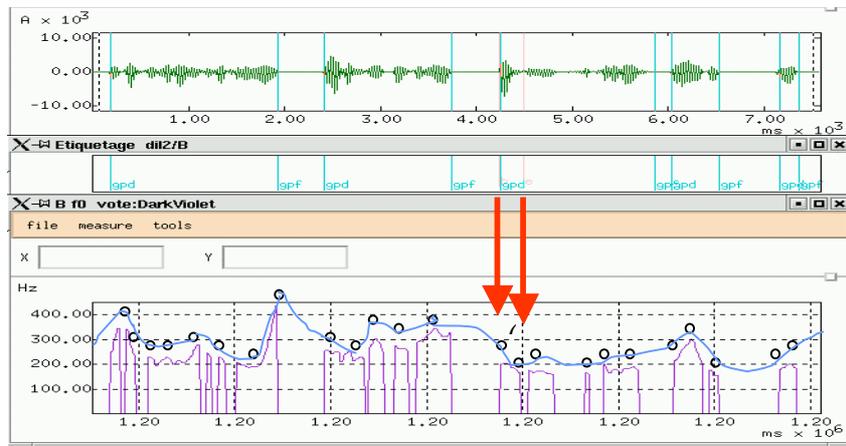


Figure 3

To summarise, there is evidence to suggest that particle and non-particle uses of the word *enfin* are distinguished by their prosodic realisation. In their article, Bertrand and Chanet reject the notion that the prosodic differences relate to the distinction between 'denotative' and 'non-denotative' meanings since they consider meta-textual, procedural meaning as non-denotative. If, on the other hand, we consider the meta-textual meaning as being at least *closer* to the propositional meaning, in that it refers to a sequence, albeit of discourse items rather than real-world events, then we can at least relate prosodic differences to positions on a gradient of more to less 'denotative'. Most importantly, they claim a distinction between marked and unmarked prosody :

« il semble que la différence principale réside dans une prosodie « non marquée » pour les particules et une prosodie « marquée » pour les non-particules. Les particules ne sont en effet jamais emphatisés, ni produites dans un contour montant aussi abrupt que celui des non particules, et elles sont par ailleurs beaucoup plus brèves que les non particules ». (Bertrand & Chanet 2005, 125)

6. Prosody and the theory of intonational meaning

Pierrehumbert and Hirschberg's theory of intonational meaning, as already explained above, suggests that semantic weight is reflected in degree of prominence. Their notion of prominence is based, of course, on English, which is rhythmically and intonationally different from French. It is therefore not straightforward to relate prosodic observations between the two languages. However, we can observe some similarities in our findings, if we take a broad view of 'prominence'. In the English study, we categorised tokens of *of course* as accented or unaccented, a description that cannot directly be applied to French. But the prosodic components of what we perceive to be accented or 'emphatisé' are similar : in each case, for example, we expect greater duration of perceptually prominent syllables and shortening of non-prominent syllables. Grammaticalisation is said to involve a process of attenuation – shortening (e.g. *going to* > *gonna*). But this is the natural consequence of loss of prominence. We know that, in English, a syllable that is stressed is longer than the same syllable in unstressed position (relative to speech rate, etc.). The less time there is available, the less time there is for articulation. Unstressed syllables inevitably lose some segmental clarity. For this reason we should not be surprised to find reduced forms of *enfin* ('*fin*') and *of course* ('*course*') when they are not prosodically prominent or « marquée ». Even if we cannot apply the terminology of a stress-timed language to French, a universal principle of effort may still apply – those words that carry the most propositional weight are given the most attention, while

those with a grammatical or pragmatic function may be treated with less care².

This would suggest that the underlying principle is the principle of effort – speakers invest more in articulating the words that carry the most weight and less in more routinised, pragmatic items.

7. Teaching about discourse markers

Teaching the meaning of discourse markers is not easy, whether to native speakers or foreign language learners. Attempts to do so have been the inspiration for many studies, and in recent years the use of corpus data has afforded rich insights into this complexity (e.g. Aijmer 2002). Nonetheless, they remain to some extent ‘untranslatable’ while being crucial to spoken interaction. The frequency with which they occur makes it necessary, however difficult, to provide some kind of explanation to learners that goes beyond the apparently ad hoc renderings to be found in dictionaries. To do this, we have argued, it is essential for learners to understand the notion of pragmatic meaning – what people mean rather than what words mean. We may now tentatively add that meanings may be related to prosodic and phonetic realisation – a feature of speech that may raise learners’ awareness of differences that otherwise go unnoticed.

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² We wish to point out that the tendency to loss of prominence does not necessarily imply that discourse markers cannot be used emphatically. There are numerous prosodic and discourse constraints that influence the ultimate realisation of such items, but the complexity of these constraints goes beyond the scope of this paper.

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