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- ABSTRACT -

ACQUISITION AND USE OF DISCOURSE MARKERS IN FRENCH Pathways and Testimonies of Romanian Students in Academic Mobility

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- RESUMÉ -

ACQUISITION ET PRATIQUE DES MARQUEURS DISCURSIFS EN FRANCAIS

**Parcours et témoignages d'étudiants
roumains en mobilité académique**

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ACQUISITION AND USE OF DISCOURSE MARKERS IN FRENCH Pathways and Testimonies of Romanian Students in Academic Mobility (Abstract)

Keywords : Discourse markers (DM), Social representations (SR), Learning environments and modes, Linguistic trajectory, Erasmus mobility.

I. Introduction

This research is rooted in several branches of language sciences — discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and language acquisition — to study discourse markers (DM) among Romanian students engaged in academic mobility. The author adopts an approach based on the notion of trajectory, encompassing linguistic, academic, and identity-related aspects. DM, often perceived as vague and under-taught elements, are central to this investigation: how are they acquired, used, and perceived by allophone learners, and what role does the learning environment play in their appropriation? The specific context of Transylvanian Francophonie enriches this reflection by revealing patterns of use distinct from those of native speakers and raising questions about the influence of the sociolinguistic context. Following a qualitative approach, the study draws on social representations as both a theoretical and methodological anchor, since they manifest through discourse — the very material of analysis. The project was gradually constructed through a back-and-forth between empirical observation and the structuring of the objects of study (DM, learning environments, representations). This chapter retraces that process, presents the theoretical foundations used, the research objectives, the guiding questions, and the methodological choices. It announces an analysis centered on learners' discourse, considered both in their individuality and in their integration into a social group, in order to understand the dynamics of DM acquisition and propose new perspectives for teaching French as a foreign language.

II. Conceptual and theoretical framework

The concept of discourse markers (DM) has been subject to many definitions and approaches that emphasize their essential role in discourse cohesion and organization. These units, present in all languages, primarily serve to structure speech, manage interactions between speakers, guide understanding, and indicate logical or pragmatic relationships between utterances. Despite this functional diversity, it remains difficult to define them with a single, encompassing definition due to their hybrid and multifunctional nature.

To clarify their status, several key characteristics are retained: DMs belong to various grammatical classes but are generally morphologically invariable, meaning they do not inflect, except in some deverbal cases where slight person variation is possible (e.g., *tu sais* / *vous savez*). Their removal does not cause ungrammaticality, and they do not alter the propositional content of the utterance. They are also syntactically optional, do not create microsyntactic links between non-autonomous parts, and may appear in various positions within the utterance without changing its meaning.

Empirical corpus analysis shows that DMs primarily appear in interlocutory contexts, where they fulfill interactional and pragmatic rather than strictly semantic functions. For instance, markers like *en fait* or *tu sais* do not provide new propositional content but serve to manage communication, express nuances in attitude, or ease dialogue. This dual nature — neither fully syntactic nor fully semantic — makes them difficult to categorize and requires case-by-case analysis.

The definition adopted in this study is thus a pragmatic compromise based on both theoretical insights and empirical data. It prioritizes key features to ensure methodological coherence. Its goal is not to resolve all definitional dilemmas but to offer a clear operational framework, recognizing that some units will be more "prototypical" than others and that compromises will sometimes be necessary. This pragmatic stance aims to maintain analytical rigor while staying true to the complexity of the discursive phenomenon.

The learning context is a key variable in second language acquisition, though its definition remains complex and polysemous. It associates a focal event (the language) with a specific terrain (the sociolinguistic setting). This notion is central, as language and context are inseparable, encompassing cultural, social, historical, and other factors. This work distinguishes two main types of learning contexts: *homoglossic* (the target language is present in the learner's environment, i.e., immersion) and *alloglossic* (the target language is present only in the classroom). This mirrors the distinction between acquisition (a

subconscious, natural process) and learning (a conscious, formal process), popularized by Krashen. However, this dichotomy is challenged by researchers who prefer to speak of a continuum where learning and acquisition are intertwined.

A third term, "appropriation," is proposed to describe a more dynamic and active process that encompasses both learning and acquisition. Appropriation highlights the learner's active engagement within a social context, beyond passive language reception. From a didactic perspective, appropriation and learning are also distinguished: learning is seen as a formal, planned objective, whereas appropriation reflects a broader dynamic, integrating both conscious and unconscious aspects of linguistic knowledge construction. In the humanities, this notion is pivotal, situated at the intersection of psychological and social dimensions, and is used in sociology, social psychology, linguistics, anthropology, etc. The concept of social representation (SR), as developed notably by Moscovici, refers to a form of socially constructed and shared knowledge that organizes reality for a group. It is not limited to scientific knowledge but plays a practical role in social life. An SR is composed of a stable central core, which organizes the fundamental elements, and a more flexible periphery, shaped by individual experiences. This core reflects the group's fundamental values and beliefs, ensuring group identity. SRs often emerge in encounters with new objects through social interactions. They evolve with experience and are expressed in discourse, acting as cognitive and social reference points. In a linguistic perspective, SRs also appear in stereotypes and expressions, contributing to the construction of social reality and collective imaginaries.

III. Research questions and objectives

Q1 : Do Erasmus students show a more significant evolution in the use of discourse markers (DM) between the start and end of the semester compared to the control group?

Q2 : Does the range and quantity of DM remain generally limited for all participants?

Q3 : Do some Erasmus students develop a conscious reflection on DMs, observable in their social representations of the language?

Q4 : Is there evidence of a process of *pragmaticalization* of certain DMs among these students over time?

Underlying these questions, the study also explores the evolution of social representations, which may be more fluid among students in mobility than among those who remain in their home country.

IV. Methodology

This study focuses on the acquisition of discourse markers (DM) through oral corpus analysis, with particular attention to the learners' social representations (SR) of the French language. The methodology involves several important theoretical and practical choices:

- Importance of the corpus:

The literature offers a wide range of oral corpora but none are specifically designed to study DMs. These corpora contain spoken, often spontaneous French, which is essential since DMs occur more frequently in spontaneous dialogic interactions.

- Original data collection:

To ensure appropriate material, the research involves the creation of an original corpus based on semi-structured interviews with a specific participant group. The goal is to obtain free, spontaneous oral discourse, without informing participants that the study focuses on DMs, in order to avoid attention bias.

- Compelling theme: social representations

The theme of SR plays a dual role:

1. It naturally encourages free speech around a relevant topic.
2. It also serves as a complementary object of analysis, allowing the study of discourse complexity.

- Choice of interview method

Semi-structured interviews are favored, with a comprehensive, empathetic posture where the interviewer facilitates rather than directs, allowing the participant to be the main agent of discourse. This method ensures the validity of the discourse data for analyzing SRs and DMs.

- Longitudinal approach:

The study adopts a longitudinal perspective (observing participants over time), deemed relevant for evaluating the impact of studying abroad and individual differences in DM acquisition.

- Acknowledged limitations:

Using semi-structured interviews slightly reduces spontaneity, and corpus comparability remains a challenge — a well-known issue in linguistic research.

V. Summary of Key Findings

1. Participants' Language Proficiency

Most participants had not reached a sufficiently advanced language level to use discourse markers (DMs) naturally and in an integrated way. While some progress is observed, DMs are more often understood than actively used.

2. Importance of Authentic and Regular Practice

Frequent and varied use of French, beyond the simple native/non-native divide, is essential for progress. Students who use French regularly in various contexts show better results.

3. Study Abroad: One Factor Among Others

The Erasmus experience generally supports better acquisition of DMs, but it is neither a unique nor decisive factor. Other elements, such as the initial language level, also play a significant role.

4. Evolution of DM Usage

On average, students who studied abroad show a more noticeable increase in the use and variety of DMs compared to the control group, but this evolution is neither linear nor uniform.

Development sometimes involves the replacement or abandonment of certain units, revealing a complex adjustment process rather than simple accumulation.

Specific examples (such as the transformation of *je ne sais pas* into *je sais pas*, or the shift from *ou ça* to *(et) tout ça*) illustrate a gradual adaptation to native-like French, especially among immersed students.

5. Role of Initial Level

The most significant progress is seen in participants who already had an advanced level (C1), suggesting that a study abroad experience is more beneficial when the starting level is high.

6. Quantity and Variety of DMs Used

The list of DMs used by participants remains limited, and their frequency of use is far lower than among native speakers (cf. comparison with Chanet corpus).

Some very common native expressions (such as *bon, bien, là, quoi*) are almost absent or rare among participants, despite having equivalents in Romanian.

This may be due to perceived register (some DMs are informal and considered unsuitable for interview contexts) and to the limited teaching of such units in FLE (French as a foreign language) textbooks.

7. Methodological Limitations

The analysis focuses on a specific selection of DMs, not the full range of possible discourse markers, which limits the scope of quantitative conclusions.

Other individual variables (housing, motivation, initial level, financial means, academic field, courses taken, social circle, travel, etc.) strongly influence the experience, making each journey unique. The modest sample size calls for broader research to identify common trends.

As for discourse markers (DMs), their acquisition appears uneven and at times puzzling, with progress often limited and use highly variable. The gap between theoretical knowledge and actual usage highlights the complexity of their appropriation. Progress is subtle and individualized, with some participants even showing unexpected results. The key role of the initial language level is clear: learners with an advanced B2 level and regular practice of the language—especially those enrolled in French-language programs—tend to progress further. Certification alone is not enough without daily linguistic immersion.

Finally, this work highlights the need to consider the multiple factors influencing linguistic experience and progress in the use of DMs, emphasizing the social and individual dimensions of learning during study abroad.

VI. Conclusions

The linguistic journey, though linked to a mobility experience that may come to an end, is an ongoing, evolving, and unique path. This study focused on that evolution, particularly through the analysis of discourse markers (DMs) and social representations (SRs) related to language. Contrary to a negative perception, DMs are not language flaws but rather dynamic elements reflecting authenticity, social interaction, and real-life usage. Social representations, for their part, should not be judged as true or false but understood in terms of how they are formed and spread.

The study, centered on Erasmus students, shows that their experience is not one of full immersion: actual contact with the language and native speakers remains limited, which affects progress. The dichotomy between “studying abroad” and “studying at home” (SA/AH) is overly simplistic in light of the diversity of individual paths.

Beyond linguistic competence, intercultural communicative competence is key for real integration. Though distinct, DMs and SRs evolve together under the influence of lived cultural and social experience. These developments reflect individual trajectories and show that language acquisition depends on the diversity of experiences.

Lastly, the research highlights the complexity and uniqueness of language learning, which cannot be confined to rigid categories. Discourse markers reflect the influences and identities of speakers, illustrating the paradox of a language that is both shared and deeply individualized.