Discourse Markers in Italian as L2 in Face to Face vs. Computer Mediated Settings

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Abstract. This pilot study aims to highlight a) differences in pragmatic function and distribution of discourse markers (DMs) in computer mediated and face to face (FtF) settings and b) any correlation of DM uses and language competence. The data have been collected by video-recording and analysing three speakers of Italian L2 (language level competence: A2, B2) talking with an Italian native speaker face to face and through computer mediated video calls. A pragmatic functional approach has been applied for analysing data. Our investigation shows that the difference between face to face and computer mediated environments is worth noting only in less expert L2 speakers' discourse (i.e. A2 level). In fact, less advanced learners show a tendency to use more discourse markers with an interactional function (specifically addressee oriented) in face to face than in virtual environments. Conversely, there is no remarkable difference in the use of discourse markers by the two more expert speakers.

Keywords: discourse markers, computer mediated communication, face to face communication, Italian, second language.

1.   Introduction

The focus of the current study is justified by discourse markers' relevance as cohesion and interactional devices. Until now, different DMs in Italian L1 have been investigated (e.g. *ma*, *diciamo*, *bene*), but in Italian L2 the body of research is more reduced. As far as we know, little attention has been devoted to the use

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of DMs during multimodal communication mediated by Voice Internet Protocol software, apart from De Marco and Leone (2012).

Most studies on computer mediated oral discourse aims to understand whether when we practice computer mediated communication (CMC) we are practicing aspects of face to face communication. Differently, our perspective has overcome the position for which we need to justify the use of CMC for developing face to face interaction abilities. Our aim is to see if there are any differences between the two communication modalities that describe CMC, a widespread communication practice.

2. Method

2.1. Theoretical framework

The growing body of research on the use of DMs in L1 and L2 speakers' discourse of the last three decades reflect different theoretical perspectives discussed in Fischer (2000). For the purposes of the current research, the theoretical approach claimed by Bazzanella (2006), Moseegaard Hansen (2006) and Pons Bordería (2006) will be followed.

DMs are characterised by syntactic independence, i.e. if they are erased the sentence structure does not change. They constitute a functional class (Bazzanella, 2006) meaning that they are not identifiable either on their formal properties or on their grammatical class they belong to but on their property of establishing a "relationship between two units" (Pons Bordería, 2006, p. 82). As Moseegaard Hansen (2006) points out the two units that DMs link are not necessarily linguistic but they can be situational and cognitive, thus pertaining "to relations between the host utterance and its context in this wide non linguistic sense" (p. 25).

DMs are polyfunctional both at a paradigmatic and a syntagmatic level. At a paradigmatic level, the same form of DM can have different functions in relation to the distribution, the intonation and the voice volume and other elements of the cotext (Bazzanella, 1995; e.g. *diciamo*). At a syntagmatic level, the same DM can have different functions in the same utterance (Bazzanella, 1995).

The following parameters contribute to identify the DM function:

- at the cotext level: textual, paralinguistic components and gestures;

- at the contextual level: space, time, social roles and identity, age, textual genre, goal of interaction, ethnicity and also the channel such as oral, written or mediated by computer.

As Bazzanella (2006) points out DMs can have three macrofunctions, each of which include different microfunctions:

- cognitive which include procedural, epistemic markers and modulation devices;

- interactional which are distinguished on the speaker's and on the addressee's side. On the speaker's side, for instance, DMs can be used as turn-taking, phatic devices or for checking comprehension. On the addressee's side they also comprehend the so called listener perception (e.g. Eng.: *hm*, *huh*; in Italian (It.): *sì*, *mhm*; Yngve, 1970) and reactive expressions (Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki, & Tao, 1996), also named agreement/assessment signals (e.g. Eng.: *oh really/really*, It.: *bene*, *ok*) by which the listener wants to align to what has been previously said, also showing surprise (e.g. Eng.: *yeah*, *wow*, *gosh*);

- metatextual function used as textual markers (e.g. to signal transition and digression), focusing device and reformulation markers.

Concerning the use of DMs by L2 speakers, studies show that:

- even low proficient L2 learners use DMs, mostly non-lexical units;

- upper-intermediate Italian L2 speakers use a large variety of lexical and non-lexical DMs, in particular assessment and acknowledgement signals which are DMs with an interactional function (see above; Hellermann & Vergun, 2007; Lee, 1999; Pellet, 2005);

- advanced learners of Italian as L2 use different DMs such as fillers, and turn taking signals;

- most frequent non-lexical DMs (e.g. *eh*, *hm*, *mhm*) are produced either in turn-initial positions or for keeping the turn, thus showing difficulties in discourse planning. Furthermore, they are used for request clarification and to show attention (Bardel, 2004) and agreement/assessment and as mitigating devices in more advanced learners (Nigoević & Sučić, 2011).

2.2.   Research questions and design

Research questions are:

- Which function and distribution do most frequent DMs have in CMC and FtF settings? Is there any difference?

- Is there any significant relationship between L2 proficiency and the use of DMs in FtF and in CMC?

Three pairs (PAIR1, PAIR2, PAIR3) have been recorded. All L2 speakers were university students (age 20-27). Different native and non-native speakers joined each pair. PAIR 1 was composed by two female participants. The L2 speaker, Mary, showed to be a A2-B1. PAIR2 was composed by two male participants. Tom, the L2 speaker was a B2 in Italian. Mary and Tom were both English native speakers. PAIR 3 was composed by a female Italian native speaker and by a male Russian native speaker, whose name was Andrej. This latter informant's L2 competence was B2 although during conversation he showed to be more fluent than Tom. To guarantee anonymity, participants' names have been replaced.

For the current research, the independent variable was channel setting, i.e. face to face and computer mediated communication. Dependent variables were distribution and function of DMs. Since the use of DMs is individual (Bazzanella, 1995), the data were analysed by comparing the use of DMs of the same pair in the two settings (control variable: individual differences).

All L2 participants talked for 10 minutes FtF and 10 minutes via Voice Over Internet Protocol with a native speaker. The topic choice for conversations was agreed with each L2 speaker and it was different for each task. The discourse type was either an interview or a discussion.

PAIR 1 and PAIR 3 were first recorded during FtF then during CMC conversation. To avoid practice effect on each task, the order of communication practice was reversed for one of participants' pair (i.e. PAIR2).

3.   Discussion

In L2 speakers' discourse data, DMs entail various functions and occupy different positions. Mary, the less proficient L2 speaker, mostly uses non lexical DMs (e.g. *uhm*) as a turn taking device in initial positions and as a procedural device

in middle turns. For the lexical unit, *sì* and *sì sì* are used, overlapping previous speaker's discourse to indicate reception and comprehension as well as for, in some cases, showing agreement. As regards FtF communication, *sì* is also used in final positions performing a metatestual function of focusing device (e.g. *e abita con i suoi genitori sì*, Eng.: and lives with his parents yes). In this latter setting *sì* as a DM is more frequent.

In FtF, Tom uses lexical DMs in the initial position as a turn-taking device (e.g. *sì sì sì, no però, però*) and to show agreement and "partial agreement". In middle turn positions there are DMs with a function of reception/agreement signals (i.e. *sì, sì sì sì, ah ok, uhm sì*). The lexical DM *sì* is also used in a final position, as a focusing and turn transition device (e.g. *qualcosa di molto diverso sì*, Eng.: something very different yes).

Andrej produces a consistent number of lexical DMs in FtF communication. The function of agreement is realised by the DM *sì* which is used in initial position to agree or to answer to a question stated by the listener.

Penso (Eng.: I think) is another DM the learner uses in the medial position with a cognitive function expressing a general modulating device or in the final position as a turn closing device. In Andrej's production, DMs are also used to confirm one's own beliefs (e.g. *certo, certamente*, Eng.: sure, certainly; *innanzitutto mi piace che l'Italia è il paese con la storia, certo capisco che Italia…* Eng[3].: First of all I like Italy is the country with the history, sure I understand that Italy), as prosecutor of the topic or topic shift (e.g. *quindi*, Eng.: then) as well as a memory support or a modulating device function (e.g. *ma, perché*, Eng.: but, why). For the two most competent L2 speakers, FtF and CMC interaction do not show differences in the use of DMs.

4.   Conclusions

The study highlights differences in pragmatic function and distribution of DMs in CMC and FtF settings as well as correlation of DM uses and language competence.

The investigation reveals that the difference between the two interaction environments (i.e. FtF, CMC) is worth noting only in the less expert L2 speaker's discourse (i.e. Mary). In fact, the data show a tendency in less advanced learners

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3. The word by word translation here is to give the general level of interlanguage as well as a sense of what is said in Italian.

to use more DMs with an interactional function in contact situations than in virtual environments. Specifically for what concerns Mary's production, it seems that she more frequently uses addressee oriented DMs (i.e. agreement signals) during FtF interaction. Conversely, there is no remarkable difference in the use of DMs by the two expert speakers (i.e. Tom and Andrej).

Concerning the relationship between L2 proficiency level and the use of DMs, the data confirm that:

- *sì* emerges in L2 less expert speakers, also showing the function of focusing device in final position;

- more advanced learners frequently use a variety of lexical DMs some of which entail metatestual functions.

- For the future, for better investigating different DMs distribution as well as function, a frequency count will be carried out. For better analysing structural properties, DMs' prosody will also be considered.

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