

A Critical Review of Two Prominent Approaches to Discourse Markers

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ABSTRACT:

Discourse markers have been investigated widely from various theoretical and practical perspectives. These markers were found playing essential roles in building up a coherent text and speech at the structural and functional levels. The proper use of these markers enables hearers or readers to comprehend information presented in the text or speech easily and effectively. Due to the importance of these markers in written and spoken discourse, various approaches have been proposed to examine their linguistic forms and functions. In this regard, two approaches, namely the coherence-based and relevance-based approaches were proposed. Although these two approaches are widely used to account for the various types of discourse markers and underpin the interpretation of their linguistic and pragmatic functions, they were not without theoretical and practical limitations. The aim of the present study is to provide a critical review of the two theories as used in various types of contexts. This investigation highlighted their strengths, weaknesses, applicability and suitability of analyzing various types of spoken and written discourses. In spite of the huge variance between the two approaches, the review showed that both are complementary to each other. While the discourse-coherence approach gives an answer to the role of these markers in creating discourse coherence, the relevance-based approach demonstrates with evidence that these markers are necessary tools in the hand of speakers to control the direction of their speech and how this speech can be interpreted whether semantically or pragmatically by hearers.

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1. Introduction:

Discourse markers (henceforth DMs) have been investigated widely in the recent years (Alkhawaja et al., 2022; Alkhawaja et al., 2023; Fraser, 1988, 1996, 1999, 2009; Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 2011). Research on these markers in spoken and written discourses focused on how the use of these markers in various communicative situations can help speakers-listeners or writers-readers construct meaningful interpretation and judge the discourse as textually and pragmatically coherent (Kapranov, 2020; Taheri Ghaleno & Dabirmoghaddam, 2021). Although there is an agreement that these lexical markers play necessary roles in relating the various segments of discourse, the investigation of DMs has witnessed a heated discussion and disagreement in terms of their operational definitions and classifications (Alkhawaja et al., 2022). Assigning their linguistic meaning and pragmatic functions was also difficult as the linguistic and pragmatic functions of these markers can vary based on contextual, social, and cultural considerations (Schleef, 2008).

DMs have been defined functionally from various perspectives. From a linguistic point of view, Schiffrin (1987) emphasized that DMs, which operate at the sentence and discourse level, are lexical expressions that are employed by speakers or writers to maintain textual or spoken coherence. From a pragmatic perspective, Fraser (1988) defined DMs as lexical expressions that have a primary meaning syntactically independent of the basic sentence structure. According to him, although the removal of the DMs from the utterances does not make the sentences ungrammatical but they remove a powerful clue about what the speakers intend to say. In this sense, DMs play necessary role in providing additional pragmatic interpretation of the utterance beyond its lexical meaning. From relational point of view, Fraser (2009) defined DMs as relational words that signal a relationship between two meaning in the utterance, the primary meaning of the marker and the overall meaning of the utterance. DMs in the sense help relate what is uttered in the sentence to the meaning of the marker used in that utterance.

In spite of handling the DMs from different perspectives, there is overall agreement that the use of these markers can help communicate meaning effectively and any improper use of these devices can lead to undesired consequences such as misunderstanding and confusion on the part of the hearer (Alkhawaja et al., 2023). The aim of the present paper is to review the approaches that have been proposed in the literature critically to provide theoretical and

practical basis of the definitions, classifications, and functions of DMs. In this regard, the review will handle two of the main approaches to DMs, namely the coherence-based and relevance-based theories. The review will explain the role of DMs from coherence perspectives as linguistic devices in interpreting a discourse as coherent and discuss the role of DMs from relevance perspectives as pragmatic devices that constrain the relevance of discourse units. This includes explaining the similarities and differences between the two approaches and clarify the sources of dispute. The review will also include a review of the past studies that adopted these approaches in their analysis in the following sections.

2. Coherence-Based approach to DMs:

Coherence-based approach to DMs, as pioneered by a number of researchers (Fraser, 1988, 1990; Giora, 1998; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Redeker, 1990, 2006; Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 1982), provides an understanding and interpretation of the text in terms of the coherence relations established between the various discourse units. In this sense, the presence of DMs in a given text plays major role in assigning coherence i.e., connectedness between a text and its constituent parts, so any interpretation of the meanings in the text depends on the meaning of the discourse marker employed in such a text. For space restrictions, two representative approaches of Coherence-Based approach will be reviewed, Halliday and Hasan (1976), and Fraser (2009). These models seem to have been most commonly adopted in literature on DMs.

A. *Halliday and Hasan's (1976) approach to Discourse Markers*

Halliday and Hasan (1976) made the initial attempts in studying textuality. The researchers provided an overview and analysis of two related textual qualities, coherence and cohesiveness considering coherence as an umbrella that covers cohesion. Halliday and Hasan (1976) defined cohesion as a “semantic relation between an element in the text [presupposing] and some other element [presupposed] that is crucial to the interpretation of it” p.8. Such cohesion can be structural, grammatical, or lexical that help link sentences and paragraphs in a text by forming relationships that hang the text together. These relationships can be semantic, partially via syntax and partially through vocabulary, which is essential to the text interpretation.

Halliday and Hassan (1976) noted that when the interpretation of one discourse element (presupposing) depends on another element (presupposed) in the same sentence or between sentences, a cohesion relationship is expressed. However, when the understanding of meaning goes beyond the elements in the sentence to involve the listener or reader in the understanding and interpretation of the relationship, a coherence relationship is expressed. In the sentence, ‘They think so’, for example, the individual elements of the sentence are not enough to understand its meaning. A listener or reader’s understanding of the context and situation in which the sentence is uttered must be present.

Halliday and Hassan (1976) focused in their analysis on cohesion with little effort exerted to analyze coherence. They focused on their interpretation of text meaning on the presupposing and presupposed elements that reside in the text itself. However, they noted the following:

The texture involves more than the presence of semantic relations of the kind we refer to as cohesive, ... [but it] involves also some degree of coherence in the actual meanings expressed: not only, or even mainly, in the CONTENT, but in the TOTAL selection from

the semantic resources of the language, including the various interpersonal (social-expressive-conative) components- the moods, modalities, intensities, and other forms of the speaker's intrusion into the speech situation (p. 23).

Establishing cohesion, according to Halliday and Hassan (1976), is through the use of markers, such as pronouns, determiners, conjunctions, conjuncts and adverbials that are used to achieve a number of cohesive relations, such as substitution, repetition, reference, or omission items across a text. In spite of the brief introduction to coherence, Halliday and Hassan (1976) attracted the attention to coherence as another important element of textuality. One of the researchers who developed the study of textuality and coherence was Schiffrin as explained in the following section.

B. Schiffrin's (1987) Approach to Discourse Markers:

Schiffrin (1987) used interviews to analyze the DMs used by common speakers. The researcher created a corpus that contained lengthy speech units extracted from the interviews. By viewing DMs as linguistic tools that join nearby speech units to create coherence of the entire discourse, Schiffrin put a discourse model of speech and coherence in the talk. Based on this model, linguistic and non-linguistic structures as produced by the speakers can form a participation framework that contribute to discourse coherence. Schiffrin (1987) provided the following explanation of her discourse model:

My discourse model has both non-linguistic structures (exchange and actions) and linguistic structures (ideational). Speaker and hearer are related to each other, and their utterances, in a participation framework. Their knowledge and meta-knowledge about ideas are organized and managed in an information state. Local coherence in discourse is thus defined as the outcome of joint efforts from interactants to integrate knowledge, meaning, saying, and doing (p. 29).

As it is clearly stated in this extract, Schiffrin considered coherence a direct result of the interaction and cooperation between the speech interactants who exert efforts to interpret the intended speech produced by either of them. In this sense, discourse for Schiffrin (20050 is not only a “unit of language but also as a process of social interaction” (p. 190). This confirmed what Halliday and Hassan (1976) proposed as ‘speaker's intrusion into the speech situation’. However, Schiffrin (1976) focused on the concept of local coherence, which refers to the coherence created by relationships between adjacent discourse units. In this regard, DMs were considered essential to the expression of discourse coherence as they help connecting various talk components in a way that makes the interpretation of each component reliant on the interpretation of the others.

Schiffrin (1987) defined DMs as “sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk” (p. 31). Based on this definition, DMs were considered a group of linguistic expressions that consists of word classes such as conjunctions (and, but, or), interjections (oh), adverbs (now, then), and lexicalized phrases (y’know, I mean). These markers can operate at five planes of talk, *information state*, *participation framework*, *ideational structure*, *action structure*, and *exchange structure*. The action and exchange structures were considered by Schiffrin pragmatic as they operate at the speech act and turn-taking levels.

The exchange structure refers to the exchange system in which the consequence of participant alternations and their interactions with one another consist the units of conversation. In this system, DMs, such as 'well', 'and', 'but', 'or', 'so', 'y'know', among others can be employed to establish discourse coherence by reflecting the mechanics of the turn-taking and show how these turns are related to each other.

The action structure is much connected to the speech acts performed by the speaker and the sequence of these acts as occurring within the discourse. DMs operate at the action structure can include the use of 'Oh', 'well', 'and', 'but', 'so', 'because', and 'then'. The focus of the ideational structure is on the propositions that form the semantic units. DMs, such as 'because', 'now', 'then', 'I mean', or 'I know' in the ideational structure reflect cohesive, topic, and functional relations between the propositions found within the discourse. The participation framework, reflects the relationship between speakers and listeners and how they relate to each other and to the information they provide during their interaction. The DMs that can reflect such a participation include 'Oh', 'well', 'so', 'now', 'I mean', and 'I know'. The information state plane reflects the continuous organization and management of various types of knowledge as it develops over the course of interaction. DMs such as 'oh', 'well', 'so', 'because', 'then', 'I mean', and 'y'know' can help manage and organize the information and knowledge intended by the speaker to the hearer.

As it can be seen from the possible types of DMs used in each plane, these markers can operate at various levels of discourse simultaneously to connect utterances in one single plane to various planes. For example, the DM 'because' can reflect action, information, and ideational structures at the same time. Another important point about the use of DMs is related to the functions of these markers. Schiffrrin (1987) noted that DMs can reflect relationships that either local or global. Local functions are achieved when the relationship is achieved between neighboring utterances while global functions are achieved when the DMs are used to relate structures of discourse far from each other. Coherence for Schiffrrin (1987) occurs as a result of integration among different components of talk in which a discourse marker plays essential role in establishing an integrative speech either locally between neighboring sentences or globally at the whole discourse level.

In terms of the role of DMs in adding meaning to the discourse in which they exist, Schiffrrin (1987) noted that certain markers, such as 'oh' can add meaning to the discourse by displaying new and unexpected information. Other markers such as 'but' does not add new meaning other than its contrastive meaning. Some other markers, such as 'because' or 'so' keep their core meaning as cause/result conjunctions or can reflect new metaphorical relationships depending on the context of utterance or discourse (Schiffrrin, 2005). Realizing the importance of DMs in serving an integrative function in discourse and their role in maintaining discourse coherence, Schiffrrin (1987) in her model set a number of conditions to recognize a discourse marker from non-discourse marker. The word to be a discourse marker must be syntactically separable, located in initial position, operate at local and global levels, and function on different planes of discourse.

C. Fraser's (1999) view of discourse markers:

Fraser (1999) attempted to describe DMs in light of their role in discourse coherence from a coherence-based perspective. Fraser (1999) defined DMs as "a class of lexical expressions drawn primarily from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases

with certain exceptions” (p. 831). From a relational point of view, Fraser emphasized that DMs link two segments, the present discourse and the prior discourse. A discourse segment for Fraser can be a sentence, an utterance, or a message. A discourse marker, such as ‘however’, for example, can relate two discourse segments (prior and coming discourse) in a contrastive relationship. In terms of the position of DMs, Fraser noted that DMs mainly occur at initial position to the segment with a few markers occur at the medial or final position.

For the grammatical forms of DMs, Fraser (1999) noted that DMs can be prepositional phrases, adverbs, and conjunctions. In terms of the functions of DMs, Fraser noted that although DMs do not add to the propositional meaning of either segment, they are important to provide lexical hint for the relationship between two segments. He added that the meaning of a DM is procedural that relies on the marker itself rather than conceptual which depends on the relationship between the speaker and the hearer. This implies that every DM has its unique and fundamental meaning. For instance, the marker ‘*in contrast*’ indicates a specific contrast with the preceding segment along two distinct contrast areas. However, DMs differ in meaning depending on the situation which justifies the preference of using ‘but’ than ‘nonetheless’ to denote precise contrast.

According to Fraser (1999), DMs should be regarded as a pragmatic class because they add to the interpretation of an utterance rather than its propositional content. Since they both studied DMs from a coherence-based perspective that emphasizes how DMs signal coherence between units of talk, Fraser (1999) and Schiffrin's (1987) points of view on DMs are largely comparable. They both assert that DMs are linguistic statements made up of many syntactic types. In spite of this similarity, both researchers approached DMs with some variations. The first difference lies in the type of coherence. Fraser (1999) contended that DMs contribute to ‘global coherence’ in which the DMs communicate the segment they introduce (S2) to any other prior segment in discourse. Schiffrin (1987), on the other hand focused on ‘local coherence’ in which the DMs help maintain coherence created by relationships between adjacent discourse units. Another variation between the two researchers is that Schiffrin studied DMs by concentrating on the structural and linguistic contributions that DMs make to coherence. In contrast, Fraser examined the cognitive function of DMs and contended that these markers have procedural significance constant with that proposed by Blakemore's (1987) relevance approach.

It can be inferred from the previous review of coherence-based approach to DMs that in spite of the debate among the scholars over the coherence theory of DMs, all agree on the necessary roles of these markers in various communicative situations can help speakers-listeners or writers-readers construct meaningful interpretation and judge the discourse as textually and pragmatically coherent.

3. Relevance-Based Approach to DMs:

The supporters of the coherence-based approach, as explained in previous section, think of DMs from semantic lenses as words and expressions that play roles in the interpretation of the truth-conditions in the utterance either in neighboring segments or at whole discourse level. The relevance-based approach to DMs, as pioneered by a number of researchers (Blakemore, 1992, 2002; Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Wilson, 2019), criticized the coherence-based approach of not considering the interpretation of non-truth conditions which needs to be approached from a pragmatic perspective which relies on the cognitive process of the speaker and hearer

(Blakemore, 2002). This group of researchers based their investigation of DMs following the Relevance Theory as proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986) who approached DMs from relevance and cognitive perspectives.

Based on Grice's (1975) implicatures and maxims, Sperber and Wilson (1986) have proposed the Relevance Theory. The main proposal in this theory is that when an utterance is made, there happen also expectations of relevance, and the relevance should be accurate and expected enough to guide the listener near the speaker's intended meaning. To put it in another way, an addressee invests effort in using contextual assumptions to derive inferences about what other people believe, desire or intend to say or behave in a given situation. This effort needs activating the cognitive system in order to reach maximum relevance and better interpretation.

According to Blakemore (2002), such cognitive effect can help better represent the world in three ways. First, it may (1) yield better contextual implications about the situation, (2) strengthen the assumption about that situation, or (3) eliminate such an assumption. The relevance of a situation is increased depending on the quantity of the cognitive effort exerted in understanding the communicative intention of the interactants.

Communicators can reach the maximal relevance if they are able to produce friendly communicative behavior. However, if only they were interested in capturing their addressees' attention and used more relevant utterances within their abilities and interests, optimal relevance is achieved. Such relevance must be (1) worth the address's effort to process it as it can yield adequate cognitive effects and (2) within the communicator's abilities and preferences (Blakemore, 2002). In this sense, the meaningful connections between utterances are required to be addressed withing DMs. The following section addresses a famous relevance-based approach on DMs, Blake's (1987/2002) approach.

Blakemore's (1987/2002) approach to DMs:

Based on the Relevance Theory, Blakemore (1987) stressed the importance of meaningful connections between statements. Based on her, the interpretation of an utterance goes beyond simply the recognition of the expressed proposition (semantic meaning) to include uncovering the intended contextual meaning of the utterance (pragmatic meaning) and that the coherence resides in how the relevance of one segment depends on the interpretation of the other. For Blakemore, semantic meaning is an outcome of linguistic decoding processes. This outcome can provide an input to inferential processes constrained. In other words, the linguistic encoding which is procedural can lead to another encoding of pragmatic inferencing which is conceptual.

Blakemore (2002) is one of those researchers who criticized the coherence-based approach to DMs. According to Blakemore (2002), approaching DMs, such as 'so', 'however' and 'well' semantically through the grammar of these markers would not help encode the truth conditions indicated in the utterances. Blakemore (2002) looked at examined DMs as linguistic expressions [that] assist in the inferential processes involved in speech comprehension. Following Grice (1989), who proposed the notion of conventional implicature, Blakemore made a distinction between the role of DMs in describing and their roles in indicating information rather than describing it. Blakemore found DMs serving two purposes in the process of utterance interpretation. First, they serve as indicators that limit the inferential phase

of utterance interpretation by guiding the process of utterance interpretation and offering clues that enable the hearer/reader to recognize the intended cognitive effect with the least processing effort (Blakemore, 2000:464).

Based on the relevance Theory, a DM can be considered essential for the speaker as well as the listener in three different ways. First, it can help derive a contextual implication. Second, it can add a piece of evidence that supports and strengthens the assumptions. Third, it might make an existing assumption invalid and force its elimination (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Wilson et al., 2004). Blakemore (1990) added that these contextual assumptions can determine the relevance of each situation to the addressee. Blakemore (1990, p. 135) uses the following instances to illustrate these presumptions:

- (1) If David isn't here, then Barbara is in town.
- (2) David isn't here.
- (3) Barbara is in town.

The sentences in the above examples can be interpreted in the way that the contextual assumption in (1), and the information in (2) will be relevant in virtue of yielding the contextual implication in (3). In fact, every discourse marker can modify how utterances are understood. The following examples are given by Blakemore (1990, p. 136) to illustrate this point:

1. Barbara isn't in town. **So**, David isn't here.
2. Barbara isn't in town. **However**, David isn't here.

In his study about the use of 'well' as a discourse marker, Jucker (1993, p. 438) believed that relevance theory is "the only theory that can account for all the uses of 'well'..... based on cognitive principles". Jucker (1993, p. 440) added that the "relevance theory can form a base to explain varied occurrences of DMs especially when the context of utterances are considered. Taking context into account can help better interpret the function of the DMs as discourse coherence created by relevance assumptions.

4. Re-assessment of the two theories:

As explained in the above review of the two approaches and their relevant theories, the two approaches have their own basis, features, theoretical assumptions, supporters, and, of course, their strengths and weaknesses. The supporters of the coherence-based approach emphasized that the analysis of discourse must consider the sequentially-dependent units of discourse (Redeker, 2006; Schiffrin, 2005). Although she built her approach only on 11 DMs, Schiffrin (1987, p. 314) generalized the idea that "except for *oh* and *well* ... all the markers I have described have [core]meaning".

For better understanding of DMs, Schiffrin suggested investigating other cases, such as the perception verbs (see, look, and listen), deictics (here and there), interjections (gosh and boy), meta-talk (this is the point and what I mean is), and quantifier phrases (anyway, anyhow, and whatever). Although the primary interest of Schiffrin (1987) and Redeker (1991) were in adopting the coherence-based approach to DMs which focuses on the semantics relations, the latter criticized Schiffrin (1987) and proposed several significant modifications to her planes.

The coherence-based approach was also criticized by Fraser (1987). Although both agree on the general concept of discourse coherence, Fraser looked at a DM as a linguistic expression that has a core meaning that can be enhanced by the context. He also found the function of DMs is to signal the relationship that the speaker intends to convey between the utterance the DM introduces and the prior utterance rather than just revealing the relationship as suggested by Schiffrin. Fraser (1999) and Schiffrin (1987) analyzed DMs in accordance with the coherence-based theory that emphasizes that DMs convey coherence links between units of conversation. They both agree that DMs are linguistic statements made up of many syntactic types.

In spite of these similarities, Schiffrin and Fraser have some variation in accounting for the DMs. First, Fraser (1999) noted that DMs should be regarded as a pragmatic class because they add to the interpretation of an utterance rather than its propositional content which is different from Schiffrin (1987) who relied only on the semantic components of the discourse marker. Second, Fraser emphasized that DMs can signal the segments they introduce (S2) to any other prior segment in the utterance and whole discourse. This, based on Fraser, can create both local and global coherence. Schiffrin, on the other hand focused in her analysis on the local coherence and the immediate effect of the DMs on their prior segment in the same unit of talk or text.

In her study of DMs, Blakemore (1987, 1992) adopted the theoretical framework of Relevance Theory as proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986). She offered the third theoretical viewpoint in which she viewed DMs, which she called 'discourse connectives, as a specific kind of Grice's conventional implicature. According to her, DMs only have a procedural meaning that comprises instructions on how to change the conceptual representation of the utterance rather than a representational meaning. In this sense, the procedural meaning can lead to another encoding of pragmatic inferencing which is conceptual. According to Blakemore (1992, pp. 138-141), there are at least four different ways that information provided by an utterance [discourse marker] can be relevant, namely a contextual implication (e.g., *so, therefore, too, also*); it may strengthen an existing assumption by providing better evidence for it (e.g., *after all, moreover, furthermore*), it may contradict an existing assumption (e.g., *however, still nevertheless, but*), and it may specify the role of the utterance in the discourse (e.g., *anyway, incidentally, by the way, finally*)".

5. Conclusion:

The main purpose of this study was to review the basic assumptions underlying two considerable approaches to DMs. It was concluded that DMs from the coherence-based approach contribute to linguistic coherence. This approach was established by Schiffrin's (1987) who provided the most significant in-depth analyses of these DMs. Her analysis focuses on eleven English DMs that are included in a corpus of sociolinguistic interviews. These markers include particles (*oh, well*), conjunctions (*and, because, but, or, so*), temporal deictics (*now, then*), and lexicalized sentences (*I mean, y'know*).

Furthermore, DMs according to Schiffrin, serve a variety of purposes. DMs exhibit a relationship in meaning between two discourse units. Besides, DMs they serve as contextual coordinates in communication through indexing the position of an utterance to the participation or textual settings. However, achieving coherence in discourse is always the most important goal when utilizing these markers whether through functioning as contextual coordinates or

connecting two segments together with a meaning relation, or any other method. Such integrative function of DMs allow them to operate at more planes of coherence. Schiffrin (1987) concluded that DMs allow speakers to construct multiple dimensions or realities.

Another contribution to discourse-coherence approach came from Fraser (1999) who attempted to categorize the general properties of DMs, show how they constitute an entire class in the linguistic system, and signal the communicative intention of the speaker. This in contrast to Schiffrin who is primarily interested in how markers contribute to discourse coherence and Blakemore who focused on the role that DMs in the development of discourse.

The relevance-based approach is another major method used to investigate DMs. This approach was based on the Relevance theory as proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986). This theory emphasizes the cognitive processes involved in utterance interpretations in which DMs play necessary roles in constraining these interpretations. This is contrast to the coherence-based approach which pays great emphasis on the textual functions of DMs in constructing a coherent discourse.

One of the first scholars to examine DMs within the Relevance Theory framework was Blakemore (1987). Blakemore examines DMs within the Relevance Theory framework maintaining that these markers give the hearer guidance on how to understand a speech. Blakemore (1987, 1992, 1998, 2002, 2004) stressed that DMs, which she refers to as 'discourse connectives' or 'discourse connectives', play an important role in the development of discourse and help "interpret the utterances containing them through the process of inferring the connections they express. In this sense, Blakemore noted that when speakers make an utterance, listeners try to understand it as being relevant in some manner to the situation in which it is uttered. The hearer's responsibility in this process is to select the interpretation that makes the most sense to them in the given context. In this regard, the speaker utilizes the DMs to limit the hearer's choice of interpretation especially when the speaker does not want the hearer to recover the unintended interpretation.

The present review provided a critical analysis of the most well-known DMs approaches. The review explained the various work conducted in this area and how DMs were approached by various scholars. To conclude, the two approaches are necessary for the interpretation of the DMs' behavior in speaking or writing. In spite of the huge variance between the two approaches, the review showed that both are complementary to each other. While the discourse-coherence approach gives an answer to the role of these markers in creating discourse coherence, the relevance-based approach demonstrates with evidence that these markers are necessary tools in the hand of speakers to control the direction of their speech and how this speech can be interpreted whether semantically or pragmatically by hearers.

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مراجعة نقدية لنهجين بارزين لعلامات الخطاب

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ملخص البحث:

تدرس علامات الخطاب على نطاق واسع من وجهات نظر نظرية وعملية مختلفة. وتلعب هذه العلامات أدواراً أساسية في بناء نص وخطاب متماسكين على المستويين الهيكلي والوظيفي. ويمكن استخدام الصحيح لهذه العلامات المستمعين أو القراء من فهم المعلومات المقدمة في النص أو الكلام بسهولة وفعالية. ونظراً لأهمية هذه العلامات في الخطاب المكتوب والمنطوق، تم اقتراح مداخل مختلفة لدراسة أشكالها ووظائفها اللغوية. ففي هذا الصدد، تم اقتراح نهجين، وهما النهج القائم على التماسك والنهج القائم على الصلة. وعلى الرغم من استخدام هاذين النهجين على نطاق واسع لحساب الأنواع المختلفة من علامات الخطاب ودعم تفسير وظائفها اللغوية والبراغماتية، إلا أنها لم تكن خالية من القيود النظرية والعملية، فكان الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو تقديم مراجعة نقدية للنهجين على النحو المستخدم في أنواع مختلفة من السياقات. وسلطت هذه الدراسة الضوء على مكان القوة والضعف لهاذين النهجين وإمكانية تطبيقهما وملائمتهما في تحليل أنواع مختلفة من الخطابات المنطوقة والمكتوبة. وعلى الرغم من التباين الهائل بين النهجين، أظهرت المراجعة أن كلاهما مكمل لبعضهما البعض، فبينما يعطي نهج اتساق الخطاب إجابة لدور هذه العلامات في خلق تماسك الخطاب، فإن النهج القائم على الصلة يوضح مع الدليل أن هذه العلامات هي أدوات ضرورية لدى المتحدثين للتحكم في اتجاه خطابهم وكيف يمكن أن يفسرها الخطاب دلالياً أو تداولياً.