

**Ethnic Background Differences in the use of English Discourse
Markers in the Dissertations of Students of Usmanu Danfodiyo
University, Sokoto**

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Abstract

This paper describes the writings of graduate students in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto. It investigates the use of discourse markers (henceforth, DM) in their dissertations to find whether there are ethnic background differences in the use of these markers. In addition, the study samples eight dissertations (two from each ethnic background i.e. Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and others) during the analysis while adopting Sperber and Wilson's (1995) Relevance theory. The data are analysed using mixed method approach of both qualitative and quantitative methods. One of the major findings reveals that there are no substantial qualitative ethnic background differences in the use of DMs in the dissertations. However, there exist some few traces of quantitative differences where the dissertations of students with Hausa ethnic background score "143" times occurrence, followed by Igbo with "120" times occurrence and Yoruba with "115" times occurrence and then Others (minority languages) with "86" times occurrence. The finding concludes that the students with Hausa ethnic background use more DMs in their writing than the other ethnic groups.

KEY

DM - Discourse Markers

UDUS - Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto

S/N - Serial number

DN - Dissertation Number

PG - Page number

AS - Area of Specialization

G - Gender

EB - Ethnic Background

Intr./Bckgrnd - Introduction/Background

CF - Communicative Functions

LC - Logical Consequence

1.0 Introduction

In Nigeria, English language occupies the place of second language where it is used in various aspects just as a lingua franca. The language is used in education sector (language of instruction in schools), language of the media, and language of deliberation in the national assembly etc. As such, the students in various institutions of learning use English language to express themselves in speech and in writing. In essence, the long essays written by students as pre-requisites for the award of higher degrees in various institutions of learning are documented in English language except for those specialising in language courses like Hausa, Arabic, French etc. Lowe and Zemliasky (2010) view academic writing as a form of evaluation that asks you to demonstrate knowledge and show proficiency with certain disciplinary skills of thinking, interpreting, and presenting. They further add that, academic writing, especially the writing of research articles,

dissertations and theses, is often viewed in literature as ‘writing up’, that it is as if first comes the research, an active creation of new knowledge, and then comes the writing; a relatively passive assembly of what has already been achieved.

Therefore, academic writing involves all the aspects of scholarship where in every writing, every word counts. Furthermore, in English language, there are numerous aspects of discourse such as discourse markers. Swan (2005) views a discourse marker as a “word or expression” which shows the connection between what is being said and the wider context. According to him, a discourse marker connects a sentence to what comes before or after; it indicates speaker’s attitude to what he is saying. He gives three examples which are “on the other hand”, “frankly” and “as a matter of fact”. In addition, Fraser (1999) offers a definition of DM as a class of lexical expressions drawn primarily from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases that signal a relationship between the interpretation of the segment they introduce, S2 and the prior segment, S1. Fraser further adds that DMs have a core meaning, which is procedural, not conceptual and their more specific interpretation is ‘negotiated’ by the context, both linguistic and conceptual. These and many other definitions can testify that there are elements of discourse units otherwise known as discourse markers that exist in our day-to-day conversations and written discourse.

In addition, there are several research conducted especially in academic writing concerning the roles of discourse markers. For example, Al-khazraji (2019) analyses the use of discourse markers in essays writing of ESL students at a school in Dubai. This qualitative study examines six randomly essays selected where only nine extracts were analysed. These extracts focus on how students use discourse markers with cohesion and coherence. The major finding indicates

that discourse markers improve the quality of writing and increase the comprehension of text. In their research, Alahmed and Kirmizi (2020) investigate the use of discourse markers in L2 English writing by Iraqi postgraduate students at Karabuk University. This study selects 15 M.A. students where 30 essays are written by the participants. The DMs found in the data are classified into four categories: contrastive with 10%, elaborative with 64%, implicative with 6%, and temporal with 20%. The study concludes that students overuse elaborative DMs such as “and”, ‘but’ etc.

In addition to the previous reviews, Sumardiyani and Susanto (2020) scrutinize English discourse markers in EFL students’ writing production. The study adopts Fraser’s (1988; 1996; 1999) taxonomy where DMs are classified under contrastive, elaborative and inferential DMs. The study uses English discourse markers by University EFL students in writing production. This qualitative research approach employs documentation of students’ writing of 38 students of 3rd semester in the 2018/2019 academic year. The major finding reveals that contrastive, elaborative and inferential markers are used throughout the data. The study concludes that students need to understand how to employ DMs properly to be coherent in their writing. In a more recent study, Huneety, et al. (2023) contend that overuse of DMs by students may be attributed to L1 influence and the popularity of these DMs among students and teachers of English. This is contained in a research on the use of DMs in argumentative compositions by Jordanian EFL learners. This study presents DMs written by Jordanian EFL learners of English at Hashemite University in Jordan. It involves learners at two academic stages, that is, sophomores and seniors using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The results show that both groups of the participants use the same types of DMs with varying degrees of frequency which include elaborative, contrastive

markers being the most widely used, while inferential, conclusive, and exemplifier markers appear insignificant in both groups.

Lastly, Kurtianti et al. (2024) delve into a corpus-based study of discourse markers and modal auxiliary verbs in the written text produced by EFL students with the same level of proficiency. The study conducted on Indonesian EFL learners is meant to identify and analyse how discourse markers facilitate the organization of ideas and reveal the mindset of the text producers. The qualitative corpus-based study uses AntConc.3.2 4w in calculating the words and their frequencies to obtain the most frequent words in the corpus. The study's findings reveal that Indonesian EFL learners frequently use the discourse markers 'but', "even though", "beside", "so" and "because of". The small amount uses of DMs in their text indicates that students find difficulties in using them.

It is important to note that most of these studies have concentrated on the use of discourse markers in academic writing but using Fraser's taxonomy of classifications of DMs. However, this study investigates DM from a different perspective which is Relevance Theory (1995) by Sperber and Wilson. Additionally, this study concentrates in the Nigerian context. That is, it deals with dissertations of graduate students submitted at the Department of English and Literary Studies, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto. This clearly shows the gap that is left in this area of study.

2.0 Methodology

The research uses convenience sampling in selecting the Department of English and Literary Studies because it is assumed that the graduate students at that level have mastered the language

to some extent hence, DMs use can be found in their writing. Additionally, the eight dissertations are chosen from each ethnic group thus: Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and Others (minority languages) with two dissertations from each group of both language and literature. The method of analysis in this paper is mainly textual analysis where qualitative approach is used and a bit quantitative method. Additionally, the research uses Sperber and Wilson's (1995) relevance theory during the analysis to find whether the use of DMs differs between the ethnic groups. The theory has it that both verbal and non-verbal communication require the ability to attribute mental states to others. According to Sperber and Wilson, a communication code model is required and only accounts for the first phase of linguistic treatment of an utterance that provides the hearer with the linguistic input that is enriched through inferential process to obtain the speaker's meaning.

In order to make sense of the data and the analysis, the researcher uses Eko's (2007) codes and categorization to arrange the data under different headings for easy identification. This is presented in the table below:

Table 1: Presents the codes

S/N	DN	PG	AS	G	EB	DMs in Intr./bckgrnd	CF
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The above table describes the headings in the columns as S/N for serial number, DN for dissertation number, AS for area of specialization, G for gender, EB for educational background, and intr/bckrnd for introduction/background and lasty CF for communicative function.

3.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

This section entails the presentation and analysis of the DMs found in the dissertation of each student within the ethnic groups selected. However, it is not possible to present the whole data

from the introductory to the summary and conclusion sections. The researcher therefore presents the DMs and their analysis of the introductory sections of each ethnic group. They are presented in the tables below:

3.0.1. Dissertation One

Dissertation one contains different sections ranging from chapter one to chapter five. DMs are found in almost all the sections of the dissertation. The sections DM are realized include introduction/background, statement of the research problem, significance of the study, methodology, literature review including the theoretical framework, data presentation and analysis section, and then lastly, summary and conclusion section.

Table 2: Presents DMs in Introduction/background Section

S/N	DN	PG	AS	G	EB	DMs Intr./bckgrnd	in	CF
1.	No.1	1-5	LIT.	F	Hausa	But		Counter argument
2.						But		Discourse initiator/counter argument
3.						Although		Contrast
4.						Thus		LC
5.						Therefore		LC
6.						Therefore		LC
7.						For example		Exemplification
S/N	DN	PG	AS	G	EB	DMs Intr./bckgrnd	in	CF

8.						Additionally	Additional info.
9.						On the other hand	Balancing contrasting points
10.						And	Holding the floor..
11.						Moreover	Additional info.
12.						In fact	Clarity
13.						Therefore	LC

Analysis

In the introductory section of this dissertation, thirteen (13) DMs are found serving different cognitive, communicative, and contextual functions. The first DM used in the text is ‘but’ which functions as a “counter argument” marker in that context. It implies in the context that, “...African writers are identified as not only chronicles of contemporary political writing *but* also advocates of radical social change”. These two segments of the discourse are connected by the counter argument marker ‘*but*’ which contrasts the two segments to be processed differently.

Moreover, another DM ‘but’ is used again to “initiate a discourse” at the beginning of a discourse as seen in the text. “*But* an African writer who chooses.....” The DM also serves as a “counter argument” marker looking at the previous discourse on “African writer who writes in African language rather than the one who writes in a colonial language”. The writer further exploits the DM ‘although’ at the beginning of a sentence where if the background information is considered, it functions as a “contrastive marker”. The DM ‘*thus*’ is used to show “logical consequence” on Africans. Furthermore, the DM ‘therefore’ is used twice and very closely to indicate yet another “logical consequence” of “Africans being exposed by oral literature to a wide range of artistic practices such as customs”. The DM “for example” is further used to serve the function of

'exemplification'. The writer continues using the DM 'additionally' to symbolize "additional information" on the novel being analysed. Interestingly, the DM "in fact" is also used to show "clarity of expression". It signals that the preceding information is another explanation to the prior one as indicated in this text on the "impact of orality in one novel". The last DM employed in this section is "on the other hand" where two sides of a discourse are "balanced".

3.0.2 Dissertation two:

In dissertation two, DMs are found in five sections. These sections include introduction/background section, methodology, literature review, data presentation and analysis section, and the summary and conclusion section. Some of them are presented in the table below:

Table 3: Presents DMs in Introduction/background Section

S/N	DN	PG	AS	G	EB	DMs in	CF
						Intr/bckgrnd	
1.	No.2	1-6	LIT.	F	Igbo	But	Counter argument
2.						Similarly	Additional info.
3.						Similarly	Additional info.
4.						In fact	Clarity
5.						But	Discourse initiator
6.						For instance	Exemplification
7.						Similarly	Additional info.
8.						On the other hand	Balancing contrasting points

9.						For example	Exemplification
10.						Firstly	Chronology
11.						Secondly	Chronology
12.						Thirdly	Chronology
13.						So	Discourse initiator/ LC
14.						Perhaps	Uncertainty
15.						However	Contrast
16.						On the other hand	Balancing contrasting points
17.						On the other hand	Same as above
18.						Besides	Additional info.
19.						But	Counter argument
20.						On the other hand	Balancing contrasting points
21.						To conclude	Summing up

Analysis

The DM identified in the introduction/background to the study is twenty-two (22). The first DM identified in this text is ‘but’ which functions as “counter argument” marker. The use of this DM signals that the two segments of the sentence are in conflict where one is disjointed from the other. Apart from maximizing relevance by this DM, it also constrains the reader’s search for relevance in this context. The next DMs used very closely are ‘similarly’ and another ‘similarly’ both functioning as “additional information” markers. The first one introduces a citation from a scholar which tells the reader that the previous sentence contains the background information. The use of this DM ‘similarly’ only adds information to the prior sentence which intuitively eases the processing effort of this particular discourse. The second DM ‘similarly’ also performs

the same function with the above one. It also introduces another citation from a scholar which also stimulates the maximization of the relevance.

In addition, another set of DMs are exploited in the dissertation. They include: “in fact” which functions as ‘clarity’ marker, and the DM ‘but’ which functions as a “discourse initiator” marker. The DM “in fact” in this context intuitively adds ‘clarity’ to the discourse because it connects to the background information. The DM ‘but’ on the other functions as “discourse initiator” marker which initiates a discourse implying that new discourse is underway. Moreover, the DM “for instance” is used as an ‘exemplification’ marker giving examples of “African novelists in the text, such as Soyinka, Sembene, etc.” This is according to RT, a communication code model which infers to the reader in order to obtain the writer’s meaning. The DM ‘similarly’ is used again to “add information” to the prior one, introducing another citation as it functions above. Also, the DM “on the other hand” where it “balances two contrasting sides of the discourse” clearly infers to the previous discourse to stimulate the cognitive process. Additionally, the DM “for example” is further used to show ‘exemplification’. This intuitively allows the reader to infer what the writer intends to explain in the given example.

Furthermore, two (2) DMs are used to show chronology in the discourse. These include ‘firstly’, ‘secondly’ and ‘thirdly’. The DMs signal that the points are in chronological order where one point follows the other. This shows that the points are independent, each standing on its own. The DM ‘firstly’ intuitively implies that the point to be mentioned is number one and it should be contrasted with ‘secondly’ and ‘thirdly’ This gives access to the points being made in the discourse. The next DM is ‘so’ which initiates a discourse and serves as a “logical consequence” marker. Thus, it implies that the background information of “English language to suit African

context” connects with the readership of African novels”. The DM ‘so’ therefore performs this function which also intuitively constrains the processing efforts needed in interpretation. The DM ‘perhaps’ further shows ‘uncertainty’ of the previous information. It makes the reader infer that the preceding information does not guarantee the certainty of the prior one.

Another DM utilized in this text is ‘however’. This DM signals direct ‘contrast’ between the writer’s perspective and the previous ones. This DM ‘however’ contributes in this context to the reader to use his thoughts, memories and conclusion of inferences to get to the meaning. The writer further uses two same DMs “on the other hand” to “balance two contrasting sides of discourse”. In relevance theoretical terms, “other things being equal”, the higher the processing effort needed in interpretation, the lower the relevance, and the lower the processing effort needed in interpretation. So, these DMs raise higher expectations of relevance by connecting with the background information to ease comprehension of the two sides of the discourse. The DM ‘besides’ “adds to the prior information” in this particular context. It signals that the two sides of the discourse are connected or even one segment is a continuation or elaboration to the other.

In addition, the DM ‘but’ as used in the text is serving the function of “counter argument” marker indicating that one side of the argument is a continuation to the other. The background information connects the two segments together which intuitively allows maximization of relevance hence, faster processing of meaning is achieved. The DM “on the other hand” is used again to “balance two contrasting sides” on the importance of female writing and the focus of their writings. In concluding the section, the DM “to conclude” is used which signals that the writer “*sums up*” the section. It literarily infers to the reader to stop processing of meaning.

3.0.3 Dissertation five (3)

Dissertation three is language based by a Yoruba male candidate which contains five chapters. In these chapters, DMs are found only in the introductory/background section, literature review section, methodology, data presentation and analysis section, and then the last part which is the summary and conclusion section. The table below shows the DMs found in some sections of the dissertation.

Table 4: Presents DMs in Introduction/background Section

S/N	DN	PG	AS	G	EB	DMs Intr./bckgrnd	in	CF
1.	No.3	1-6	LANG	M	Yoruba	Therefore		LC
2.						For instance		Exemplification
3.						As a result		LC
4.						But		Contrast
5.						Therefore		LC

Analysis

The table above identifies the DMs that appear in the introductory part of this dissertation. The first DM realized is ‘therefore’ serving the function of “logical consequence”. The DM here indicates that the previous discourse on “language donor and receptous” and the preceding one on “the task ahead of translator in creating new words”, are connected whereby one segment serves as a conclusion to the other. The second DM identified is “for instance” as usual serving the function of ‘exemplification’. The DMs “as a result” and ‘therefore’ show “logical consequence” in their respective contexts. The last DM in the section is ‘but’ serving its major function of “contrast”.

4.0 Discussion of major findings

This section describes the major findings of the research. In the eight dissertations selected between the academic sessions 2010 to 2023, a total number of four hundred and sixty-four (464 DMs) are found. The Hausa ethnic group has 143 DMs, the Igbo DMs score 120 DMs, the Yoruba with 115 DMs and lastly, the group tagged as others has only 86 times occurrence of DMs. The result therefore shows that there are no qualitative differences in the selection and use of DMs by all the ethnic groups because the DMs are used relatively the same with same meaning in the various contexts of communication. The DMs ‘however’, ‘therefore’, ‘thus’ and many others are used in their writings without any difference in their respective meanings. However, the above finding shows that there are little quantitative differences in the use of DMs where the Hausa ethnic group has the highest use of number of DMs’ use which is 143 and the least being other minority ethnic groups with 86 times. This is presented in the table below:

Table 5: Presents the categories of the ethnic groups and percentages of DMs’ occurrences

S/N	Ethnic background	Gender	Times of occurrence	Total	Percentage
1.	Hausa	M	81		
		F	62	143 times	31%
2.	Igbo	M	48		
		F	72	120 times	26%
3.	Yoruba	M	42		
		F	73	115 times	25%
4.	Others	M	53		
		F	33	86 times	18%
				Grand total=	100%

				464	
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The table above clearly shows the categories or the ethnic groups where each group has a male and a female dissertation with the number of occurrence and their percentages respectively. The highest percentage as shown above is 31% which goes to the Hausa ethnic group, this is followed by the Igbo with 26%, the Yoruba ethnic group also goes with 25% and the least goes to the other ethnic groups tagged as others with 18% only. The Hausa ethnic group being the highest in the use of DMs in the students' dissertations could be attributed to maybe their first language influence. It could mean that the language uses so many DMs hence, the students in most cases transfer them to their long essay writings and perhaps in their spoken language too. This finding is similar to that of Fagge and Tukur (2021) who also found that Hausa speakers of English tend to use more DMs in writing than in spoken language. This perhaps can be attributed to the Hausas being more expressive in their writing than in speaking which of course is a commonly known fact that most of the Hausa people are influenced by their cultural background thus, they tend to be less expressive in speaking the target language.

However, it is worthy of note to clearly understand that the frequent use of DMs in writing does not guarantee English language competence. It could be possible that some of the DMs are misused, overused, or advanced used depending on the level of proficiency of the writers. So, Hausa ethnic group being the highest does not indicate that they are more competent than others and other ethnic groups being second, third and the last does not mean that they are not competent in their English language usages. It could be that the Hausas use more DMs due to L1 influence and other ethnic groups use less DMs due to L1 influence too, and it is directly

transferred in the use of the target language as Taweel (2020) shows that Arab learners of English use more DMs than native speakers which could be attributed to the L1 influence and so learners transfer their functions directly in the target language. Whatever the case may be, more researches need to be conducted in this regard to ascertain the reason for the use of more DMs by the Hausas than the other ethnic groups in the Nigerian academic contexts.

5.0 Conclusion

This paper has discussed the use of DMs in graduate dissertations among UDUS students. The researcher has selected eight dissertations two from each ethnic group to ascertain whether there are ethnic background traces or differences in the use and selection of DMs in their long essays. Finally, the findings have come to conclusion that there are no substantial qualitative ethnic background differences, but the quantitative ones do exist with Hausa being the highest with 31% and the least being Others (other minority languages) with 18%. The researcher concludes that there is the need for further researches in the field of DMs especially in the Nigerian academic contexts.

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