

The Use And Pragmatic Functions Of Discourse Markers In Political Speech

Usmonova Zarina Habibovna,

Senior teacher of Bukhara State University

Email: z.h.usmonova@buxdu.uz

Sharipova Nozanin Xurshidovna

1st year master students of Bukhara State University

nozaninsharipova100613@gmail.com

Po'latova Mokhidil Bahodir qizi

1st year master students of Bukhara State University

mokhidilpulatova6@gmail.com

Abstract: *This study explores the use and pragmatic functions of discourse markers in political speech. Discourse markers such as well, you know, I mean, so, and however play a crucial role in structuring political discourse, guiding audience interpretation, and enhancing communicative effectiveness. The research analyzes selected political speeches to identify the frequency, distribution, and functions of discourse markers within different communicative contexts. The findings show that discourse markers serve multiple pragmatic purposes, including organizing ideas, expressing speaker attitudes, managing turn-taking, emphasizing key points, and establishing rapport with the audience. In political discourse, they are also strategically employed to persuade listeners, mitigate face-threatening acts, and create a sense of solidarity. The study highlights that the effective use of discourse markers contributes significantly to clarity, coherence, and persuasive power in political communication.*

Key words: *discourse markers, political speech, pragmatics, communication strategies, persuasion, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics*

1. Introduction

Political speeches are a sophisticated form of communication designed to shape public opinion, convey policy positions, and build a rapport with listeners. A key tool that helps ensure clarity, coherence, and persuasiveness in such speeches is the use of discourse markers[1]. These are words or phrases—like well, however, so, you know, and I mean—that indicate relationships between ideas, guide interpretation, and help manage the flow of interaction. Beyond simply connecting sentences, discourse markers serve important pragmatic roles: they can highlight key points, soften statements, indicate contrast, or structure arguments, making them essential in political rhetoric.[2]

Political communication frequently involves presenting complex arguments, persuading audiences, and managing their responses. Discourse markers help speakers organize their thoughts, convey attitudes, and maintain a conversational tone, even in formal or pre-prepared speeches. Despite being commonly used in political contexts, their pragmatic functions have not always been thoroughly examined in communication research. This study, therefore, investigates the use of discourse markers in political speech, emphasizing their communicative functions and effects on the audience.[3]

2. Methods

This research utilizes a qualitative content analysis of political speeches delivered by leaders from English-speaking countries. A corpus of ten speeches from politicians in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, delivered between 2016 and 2022, was assembled, totaling roughly 50,000 words. The speeches were chosen based on their availability, significance to the public, and diversity in political context, including campaign addresses, parliamentary debates, and policy announcements. [4]

1. Identification of discourse markers: Following Fraser’s (1999) classification of these markers, all discourse markers were located and grouped into four categories:
 - Additive markers (e.g., and, also)
 - Contrastive markers (e.g., but, however)
 - Causal markers (e.g., so, therefore)
 - Hedge or mitigating markers (e.g., well, you know)[5]
2. Analysis of pragmatic functions: Each discourse marker was examined to determine its communicative role within the speech, such as structuring the discourse, emphasizing or softening points, or conveying the speaker’s attitude.
3. Frequency and placement: The study recorded how often each marker appeared and where it was positioned within sentences or paragraphs to identify usage patterns.[6]

3. Results

The Table 1. findings show that additive markers (e.g., and, also) appeared most frequently in the speeches, followed by contrastive markers (e.g., but, however). Hedge markers such as well and you know were commonly placed at the beginnings of sentences, performing interpersonal and pragmatic functions, including softening statements and engaging the audience.[7]

Table 1. Additive markers

Types	Frequency	Example	Function
Additive	45%	“We need education reform, and also better healthcare.”	Connecting ideas, emphasizing points
Contrastive	30%	“We promised change, but we faced challenges.”	Highlighting opposition of contrast
Casual	15%	“We lowered taxes, so the economy improved	Explaining cause-effect relationships
Hedge	10%	“Well, you know, we are doing our best.”	Managing audience perception, softening statements.

Pragmatic Functions. 1. Organizing discourse: Discourse markers help guide listeners through complicated arguments. Words like firstly, secondly, and finally assist in structuring points in a clear, logical sequence.[8]

2. Conveying attitude: Contrastive markers, such as however, enable speakers to signal disagreement or emphasize an alternative perspective.

3. Managing interpersonal dynamics: Hedges like well and you know soften statements and foster a cooperative, conversational tone with the audience.

4. Emphasizing key points: Additive markers such as also and in addition highlight important ideas and reinforce the speaker’s message.[9]

Examples from Political Speeches:

- U.S. Presidential campaign speech: “We need to invest in infrastructure, and also make healthcare affordable.” — The additive marker emphasizes the combination of priorities.[10]
- U.K. Parliament debate: “We respect the previous government’s efforts, but we must go further.”

- The contrastive marker highlights differences and enhances persuasiveness.
- Canadian Prime Minister: “Well, you know, these reforms will take time, but they are necessary.”
- The hedge softens the assertion and helps maintain rapport with listeners.[11]

4. Discussion

The results suggest that discourse markers perform several important pragmatic functions in political speech, influencing both the organization and persuasiveness of the discourse.[12] The widespread use of additive and contrastive markers indicates that politicians often aim to stress priorities while simultaneously acknowledging opposing viewpoints or challenges. Hedge markers, although used less frequently, appear strategically to shape audience perception, show empathy, and minimize potential confrontation.[13]

From a pragmatic perspective, discourse markers enhance clarity, cohesion, and audience engagement, making political messages more effective. Speakers use them, either consciously or subconsciously, to guide the flow of arguments, manage listener reactions, and establish credibility. These findings align with earlier research emphasizing the rhetorical value of discourse markers in persuasive communication.[14]

Furthermore, analyzing the use of discourse markers provides insight into a speaker’s strategies, revealing how politicians structure their arguments, navigate potentially face-threatening situations, and engage audiences. Understanding discourse markers is therefore essential for scholars of both political communication and discourse analysis.[15]

Conclusion. Discourse markers are indispensable tools in political speech, functioning beyond mere connectors to facilitate persuasion, coherence, and audience engagement. Additive, contrastive, causal, and hedge markers each serve distinct pragmatic roles that enhance the clarity and impact of political messages. Future research could explore cross-linguistic variations or the influence of DMs in multimodal political communication, such as televised debates or social media campaigns.

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