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A CORPUS-BASED LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE MARKER USAGE IN ENGLISH GRADUATE STUDENTS' ACADEMIC PRESENTATIONS

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Abstract
This study investigated the use of discourse markers (DMs) in English graduate students' academic presentations to assess their academic tone. Using a mixed-method design and a corpus-based approach, the analysis was grounded in the three meta-functions of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978). Moreover, the Fung and Carter's (2007) four-category DM categorization framework was used. Additionally, AntConc software was used to analyze DMs frequencies, KWIC, and collocations, while Python was applied for data filtration and visualization. The data were collected from 60 MS English students at COMSATS University Islamabad (CUI) over two academic years (Spring 2023-Fall 2024) and were transcribed and compiled into a corpus of 67,166 tokens. However, after preprocessing with Python (spaCy), the final corpus was reduced to 37,554 tokens.
Results showed that cognitive markers category accounted for 39% of usage, followed by referential markers (36%), interpersonal (19%), and structural markers (6%). The most frequent individual DMs encompassed "like" (731), "you know" and "so" (341 each), "but" (330), and "also" (307). These frequencies indicated a strong reliance on non-academic markers. In contrast, academic DMs were used less frequently. For instance, "finally" appeared 55 times, "however" 13 times, and "therefore" nine times, while other formal markers such as "additionally" and "to sum up" appeared fewer than ten times. These results reflect a significant reliance on non-academic tone and conversational features in students' academic speech. The study highlights the need for targeted pedagogical interventions to enhance students' awareness and use of academic DMs in spoken academic settings.

Key Words: Corpus Linguistics, Spoken Academic Discourse, Academic Presentations, Discourse Markers, Fung and Carter's (2007) Framework, Cognitive DMs, Referential DMs, Interpersonal DMs, Structural DMs, Academic Language Use, Formal DMs, Informal DMs

Introduction

Discourse Markers (henceforth DMs) represent a complex and multifaceted linguistic phenomenon that has attracted considerable scholarly interest within the domain of pragmatics, discourse analysis, and cognitive linguistics. They play a vital role in organizing and structuring communication in both spoken and written discourse.

Discourse markers are linguistic elements that functions within and across sentences to manage the flow of the conversation; they act as cues that guide the listeners through the flow of conversation, which indicate shifts sin topics, speakers' attitudes, or the structure of the discourse (Fung & Carter, 2007). According to Degand et al. (2013), discourse markers are multifunctional linguistic elements that contribute to both interactional effectiveness and communicative coherence. Their classification often encompasses traditional, interactional, and textual functions; this underscores their role in extending meaning and reflecting the inherent complexity of their categorization within linguistic research. Moreover, Liu (2017) states that these markers can take the form of interjections, adverbs, conjunctions, phrases, or clauses. Furthermore, they help to express emotions, manage interactions (interpersonal), and aid interlocutors' understanding, without altering the core theme or message.

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Scholarly interest in discourse markers stems from their role in fostering coherence and relevance. Coherence theorists emphasizes the structural functions of DMs, while relevance theorists focus on their role in guiding interpretations; both of these functions are vital for clarity in academic communication (Chen, 2019). Povolná (2009) states that interactive discourse markers such as you know, you see, I mean, and I think play a crucial role in academic spoken discourse; they foster the fluency of interaction and enhances discourse coherence by aiding the negotiation of meaning among the interlocutors. However, according to Šimčikaitė (2012), the spoken discourse markers inappropriate use may lead to academic writing issues; this further highlights the need for investigating the use of discourse markers in academic spoken discourse. Moreover, the proper use of DMs is also crucial for computational models as these models are more sensitive to the use (and switching) of connectives. Cuenca and Degand (2022) in their influential book *Discourse Markers in Interaction* states that:

> Substituting a connective with another connective that establishes a different discourse relation harms model performance, especially when it involves adversative connectives. The WO-aware sentence embedding models are more sensitive to connective switches than WO-invariant models. Contrary to humans, richer knowledge of discourse connectives makes a computational language understanding system more susceptible to the negative effects of incorrect connectives. (p. 183)

In addition, they argue that to enhance the understanding of this complex linguistic category (discourse markers), further systematic research is required on the production and interpretation of discourse markers across various situational contexts, using diverse methodological approaches. Therefore, this study conducts a corpus-based analysis of MS English students' academic discourse, at COMSATS University Islamabad (Pakistan), to investigate the academic tone of commonly used DMs and to examine the overuse or underuse of various discourse markers categories, as classified by Fung and Carter's (2007) framework. This study is limited to the MS English students of COMSATS University Islamabad (CUI) and focuses exclusively on their first-semester academic presentations (Spring 2023 to Fall 2024). Moreover, it only analyzes selected DMs based on Fung and Carter's (2007) framework within a spoken academic context.

Significance of the Study

This study advances the understanding of spoken academic discourse among graduate students by systematically investigating the functional patterns of discourse markers usage. It offers empirical insights into the disproportionate reliance on informal markers; it uncovers gaps in students' pragmatic awareness and command of academic language conventions. Additionally, the results hold pedagogical value for the development of targeted instructional strategies aimed at fostering more formal and context-appropriate language use in academic speaking.

Problem Statement

Discourse markers play a significant role in ensuring cohesion, coherence, and effective communication. However, MS English students often overuse certain types of discourse markers in their academic and formal settings, which may affect their adherence to academic tone and conventions. This area has not yet been explored in the context of Higher Education Institutions in Islamabad, Pakistan. Therefore, this study investigates the use of discourse markers in MS English students' academic presentations. Specifically, it focuses on identifying the recurring patterns and frequencies to assess the academic tone of English graduate students' spoken discourse. The findings aim to contribute to enhancing students' awareness of academic language use and to inform pedagogical practices in higher education.

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Research Objectives

1. To examine the categories of discourse markers used in the academic presentations of MS English students.
2. To determine the frequencies and percentages of discourse markers used in academic presentations.
3. To analyze how frequently used discourse markers reflect academic tone in academic presentations.

Research Questions

1. What categories of discourse markers are used in the academic presentations of MS English students?
2. What are the frequencies and percentages of the selected discourse markers used in academic presentations?
3. How do the frequently used discourse markers reflect the academic tone of students' academic presentations?

Literature Review

Discourse markers are brief linguistics elements that help structure communication by signaling relationship between ideas, guiding interpretation, and managing interaction. While they do not convey explicit propositional content, markers such as well, you know, and however function to indicate logical connections, organize discourse flow, and reflect the speaker's intent or attitude (Ismail, 2012; Liu, 2017). They can be categorized into categories such as additive, adversative, casual, and sequential. Their functions encompass enhancing coherence, guiding interpretation, and improving the flow of conversation in both spoken and written discourses (Diem, 2023). According to Bolly and Crible (2015), DMs are linguistic cues that anchor speech within the context of ongoing discourse; it indicates semantic relationships, organizes the structure of discourses, and manage interpersonal interactions. They are categorized based on syntactic and semantic features, while they encompass functions as indicating discourse relationships and managing interpersonal interactions.

The Use of Discourse Markers in Academic Settings

Discourse markers in academic settings often reflect the features of spoken language, which may result in stylistic inconsistencies. Therefore, to foster coherence and clarity, academic writing should emphasize the use of formal discourse markers (Šimčikaitė, 2012). Moreover, in academic writing and research projects, the appropriate use of discourse markers plays a significant role in structuring arguments and guiding readers through the text. Teaching the appropriate use of these markers is essential at higher education level, as their effective utilization can improve the clarity and professionalism of academic writing (Yakubu, 2013). Discourse markers such as you know play a significant role in academic discourse by organizing speech across grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, and interactional levels. Additionally, in contemporary academic spoken English, you know demonstrates flexibility; it functions as a hedging device and face-saving strategy that supports identity construction and fosters effective interaction between students and professors (Borba & Jaegar, 2011).

Recent Literature on Discourse Markers

Nonnative academic writing often faces challenges in using discourse markers (DMs) for coherence. Alenizy, Al-Thunayyan, and Alhuqbani (2024) examined the discourse markers in 14 dissertations from a Saudi university; they utilized Fraser (2006) framework to classify them into elaborative, temporal, contrastive, and inferential types. Their findings revealed that in nonnative academic writing elaborative markers to be the most common ones, with clustering patterns across abstracts, discussions, and conclusions. These markers were followed by temporal, contrastive, and inferential markers.

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The use of discourse markers (DMs) in academic writing is vital for a coherent and clear communication. A study by Syahdanis (2020) investigated the argumentative text written by the 78 of fifth semester students at Bengkulu University. Using Fraser's (1999) categorization and two additional groups from Martinez (2004), it identified four main categories of DMs. The most frequent category was the Elaborative Markers (33.91%) followed by "Also" being the second common marker (29.28%). The results reflected that the students generally used DMs correctly. However, 5.19% of the 345 DMs were being deemed unacceptable due to overuse, incorrect relations, and semantic incompletion.

Discourse markers also play a vital role in shaping communication in spoken discourse. While adopting a descriptive-qualitative approach, Ramah and Laili (2013) analyzed the DMs in Jay Shetty's *On Purpose* program. The analysis showed that the most common used marker in *On Purpose* programs is the clause "you know." The study identified the primary functions of these markers as reaction indicators or back-channel cues. These functions are vital for enabling speakers to express reactions to the audience, demonstrate comprehension, and sustain attention throughout the interactions. Moreover, Maqsood (2023) investigated the DMs in Pakistani political speeches at UN General Assembly; he categorized them by functions according to Fung and Carter's (2007) framework. His work highlighted the strategic role of DMs in projecting confidence, establishing authority, fostering rapport, and ensuring coherence in political discourse. The findings also reflected that both democratic and dictatorial leaders employ interpersonal markers to engage their audience and project their stance on political issues.

Discourse markers are essential for EFL listening comprehension, yet instructions on them are limited in various contexts. Utilizing corpus-based analysis method with AntConc software, Tai (2016) investigated DMs frequency and distribution in junior high English textbooks (in Taiwan), listening workbooks, and the CAP English test. The study found that DMs are frequently used in textbooks and tests than listening workbooks; DMs frequency was higher at the initial positions of the sentences. In addition, discourse markers such as "you know" and "I mean" play a significant role in political interviews. Adopting a corpus-based approach, Fu, Afzal, and El-Dakhs (2024) examined DMs frequency, function, co-occurrence, and placement in CGTN's *The Point with Liu Xin* and BBC's *HARDtalk.* The findings showed that "you know" was appeared more frequently in Chinese interviewer's speech, while "I mean" was common in British interviewer's speech. The study reflected that "you know" was used for a focus on high audience engagement; "I mean" simply added to the clarity within the speech. Moreover, Farhani and Ghane (2022) carried a corpus-based study to examine the functions of four DMs I mean, I think, you see, and you know in academic spoken English. Utilizing British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus, they adopted a mixed method research design. For DMs detection, the concordance lines of the corpus were analyzed. The quantitative analysis of the corpus demonstrated that among these four DMs "you know" was the most frequent marker while "you see" was the least common. The qualitative analysis, on the other hand, reflected that these DMs served various functions, including hedging, emphasizing, clarifying, and managing discourse. Furthermore, Kapranov (2016) conducted a corpus-assisted study to investigate the use of DMs in the climate change sections of annual reports by the British Petroleum and Royal Dutch Shells. WordSmith (2012) adopted a qualitative approach to analyze the DMs in these reports from 2010 to 2015; the analysis focused on the frequency and distribution of DMs in these reports. The results indicated that the British Petroleum climate change discourse commonly used "and" (M = 4.2%), "as" (M = 0.9%), "also" (M = 0.4%), "likely" (M = 0.3%), and "but" (M = 0.15%), while Royal Dutch Shell's featured "and" (M = 2%), "but" (M = 0.15%), "also" (M = 0.6%), "such" (M = 0.2%), "however" (M = 0.2%), and "accordingly" (M = o.1%). Ultimately, the results indicated that

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British Petroleum used more connecting DMs, while Royal Dutch Shell employed a broader range of markers to introduce contrast and explanation in their climate change discourse.

Theoretical Approaches to Discourse Markers Analysis

The study of DMs has evolved over time through multiple theoretical frameworks; each of these frameworks offer distant perspective on their functions and roles in language. According to Diem (2023), there are three main theoretical frameworks for analyzing discourse markers: coherence theory, relevance theory, and adaptation theory. However, Systematic Functional Linguistics views language as a tool for realizing ideational and interpersonal meanings; it makes SFL vital for analyzing how DMs contribute to coherence, cohesion, and rhetorical organization in academic writing. SFL, therefore, could be used as a theoretical framework in DMs analysis to understand the relationship between language use and its social context (Khasawneh & Khasawneh, 2023). Therefore, the current study employs SFL's metafictions as a theoretical framework to guide the entire research, specifically examining how the use of DMs contribute to meaning making.

Research Gap

Despite extensive research on discourse markers in written academic texts and political or media discourse, limited attention has been given to their use in spoken academic presentations by graduate students. The current study addresses this gap by examining how discourse markers function within the academic speech of non-native English-speaking graduate students.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is carried out under the Systematic Functional Linguistics' three meta-functions. The theoretical framework is discussed in the following section as:

Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a linguistic theory which is developed by M. A. K. Halliday in 1960s. This theory examines the function of language within a society; it highlights its structure and use in conveying meaning. Unlike other linguistic theories, it foregrounds the functional use of language, specifically how language is employed to express experience, negotiate interpersonal relationships, and structure coherent communication. In other words, SFL argues that the structure of language is shaped by its communicative functions, rather than being governed by its arbitrary set of rules (Martin, 2016). Furthermore, SFL has found a strong place in education, especially in teaching language and literacy. It helps educators concentrate on how language functions to construct meaning in a specific context; it also promotes critical literacy skills by moving beyond a focus on grammar alone (de Oliveria & Smith, 2019). According to Gebhard and Accurso (2020), the context of situation in SFL refers to the particular conditions under which communication occurs. It encompasses the field (the subject matter or activity), the tenor (the interpersonal relationships among the participants), and the mode (the form of communication, such as written or spoken language).

According to Webster (2015), this theory represents language as a resource for meaning-making in various communicative contexts. It also emphasizes the role of language in shaping experiences and enhancing social interactions. Moreover, this meaning-making potential is realized through three meta-functions; these meta-functions include the ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning (Adenan, 2011). These metafunctions are interrelated and operate simultaneously to construct meaning in any given context. The ideational meta-function refers to the representation of experiences and ideas; it explains how language is used to construct and communicate information about the world, including tangible objects, events, and abstract ideas (He & He, 2019; Webster, 2015). In addition, the interpersonal meta-function relates to the role of language in constructing and upholding social relationships. It examines how language reflects interpersonal dynamics, including aspects such as power, solidarity, and mood (Gebhard & Accurso, 2020). Furthermore, the textual meta-function is concerned with

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the organization of language to ensure coherence and meaning. It investigates how texts are structured to obtain specific communicative goals (He & He, 2019).

Materials and Methods

While using a mixed-method research design, this study adopted a corpus-based approach to analyze the commonly used DMs in an academic setting. Moreover, the study utilized Fung and Carter's DMs categorization framework which is presented in their Applied Linguistics study titled as *Discourse Markers and Spoken English: Native and Learner Use in Pedagogic Settings* (2007). This framework classifies DMs into the following four functional categories:

i. **Interpersonal DMs;** express attitudes, engage with the listeners, or manage social relationships (e.g., you know, I see, okay, right)
ii. **Referential DMs;** connect ideas and indicate logical or cause-effect relationships (e.g., and, but, however, because, so, therefore, also, moreover, furthermore, additionally)
iii. **Structural DMs;** organize discourse, signal transitions, and structure speech or arguments (e.g., firstly, now, finally, to sum up)
iv. **Cognitive DMs;** reflect speaker's thinking, uncertainty, or need to correct or clarify speech (e.g., I think, I guess, I mean, like)

Data Collection

The data were collected from MS English students of COMSATS university Islamabad, Pakistan. The participants were selected through a convenience sampling technique. All participants provided informed consent, and their anonymity and confidentiality were ensured in accordance with established ethical guidelines. The sample comprised 60 students from the batches of Spring 2023, Fall 2023, Spring 2024, and Fall 2024 (two years). 15 students were selected from the first semester of each Batch. In each first semester, the presentations (02 per student) were recorded and transcribed by the researchers (throughout the timespan of two years). Ultimately, in order to generate the corpus, the data were compiled into a **txt** file manually. The corpus was consisted of **67166** tokens.

Corpus Preprocessing

The corpus was preprocessed in Python 3.12 (64-bit) using SpaCy tool. The data were tokenized and lemmatized, while the stopwords and punctuations were removed. However, specified discourse markers (DMs) were retained for their category, frequency, and academic tone identification and analysis. These markers included the following from each category:

- "You know," "I see," "okay," and "right" from the interpersonal category
- "But," "however," "so," "therefore," "also," "moreover," "furthermore," and "additionally" from the referential category
- "Firstly," "now," "finally," and "to sum up" from the structural category
- "I think," "I guess," "I mean," and "like" from the cognitive category

After the data preprocessing, the corpus was limited to **37554** tokens.

Data Analysis

The study employed AntConc (4.3.1) to examine the frequency and collocation of the selected discourse markers. The preprocessed corpus data were loaded into AntConc (4.3.1) for patterns and academic tone identification. Furthermore, the study also used Python 3.12 (64-bit) for data visualization and generating the word cloud for qualitative interpretation.

Results and Discussion

The frequencies of commonly used DMs, as identified by the AntConc software, are displayed in the following table. In addition, the table shows DMs category, percentage, and academic tone as well.

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Table 4.1 Discourse Markers Frequencies and Percentages

S. No	Discourse Marker	Frequency	Percentage	DM Category	Tone
1.	Like	731	1.95 %	Cognitive	Non-academic
2.	You know	341	0.91%	Interpersonal	Non-academic
3.	So	341	0.91%	Referential	Non-academic
4.	But	330	0.88%	Referential	Non-academic
5.	Also	307	0.82%	Referential	Non-academic
6.	I think	136	0.36%	Cognitive	Non-academic
7.	I guess	117	0.31%	Cognitive	Non-academic
8.	I mean	109	0.29%	Cognitive	Non-academic
9.	Now	106	0.28%	Structural	Non-academic
10.	Okay	105	0.28%	Interpersonal	Non-academic
11.	Right	81	0.22%	Interpersonal	Non-academic
12.	Finally	55	0.15%	Structural	Academic
13.	However	13	0.03%	Referential	Academic
14.	Therefore	09	0.02%	Referential	Academic
15.	Additionally	08	0.02%	Referential	Academic
16.	Furthermore	5	0.01%	Referential	Academic
17.	To sum up	02	0.005%	Structural	Academic

Table 4.1 reflect the frequency and percentage analysis of the 17 selected discourse markers; there is a notable preference for DMs associated with informal and conversational style. For instance, “like” was the most frequently used DM in the corpus which appeared 731 times and occupied 1.95% weight of the whole corpus (37554 tokens). This was followed by “you know” and “so” emerging 341 times (0.91% each). Other frequently occurred DMs contained “but” (330 frequencies, 0.88%), “also” (307 appearances, 0.82%), and “I think” (136 occurrences, 0.36%). Altogether, these numbers advanced the trend of DMs usage where cognitive and referential markers are frequently used by the MS English students in their academic presentations. DMs with lower frequencies, on the other hand, included “furthermore” (05 counts, 0.01%), “additionally” (08 occurrences, 0.02%), “therefore” (09 frequencies, 0.02%), and “to sum up” (02 occurrences, 0.005%). The low frequencies of such markers indicated that these students seldom use academic DMs in their academic presentations, while they rely heavily on cognitive and referential DM categories. Finally, this table results in a total of 1093 cognitive DMs, 1013 referential DMs, 527 interpersonal DMs, and 163 structural DMs.

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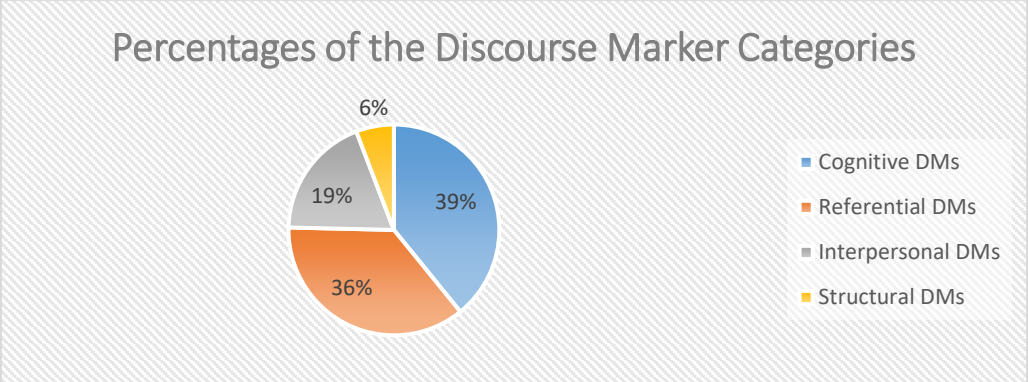
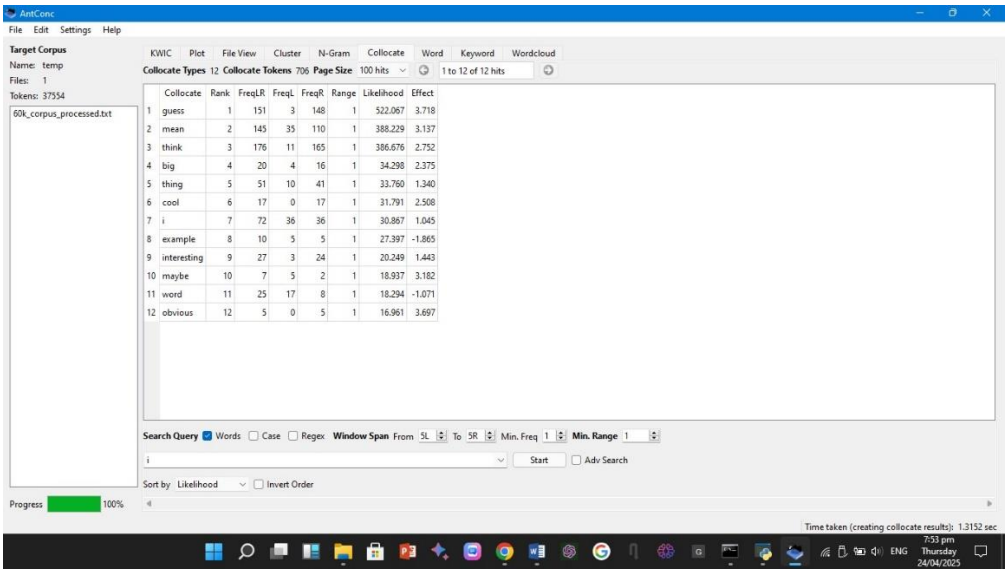


Figure 4.1 Percentages of Discourse Marker Categories Used in Academic Presentations

The Pie chart in Figure 4.1 illustrates the distribution of discourse markers across the four functional categories of the Fung and Carter (2007) framework: Cognitive (39%), Referential (36%), Interpersonal (19%), and Structural (6%). Cognitive DMs dominate the discourse, as reflected in Table 4.1, and it further exemplifies the sound presence of personal stance and thought process. Referential markers indicate a high frequency that contributes to the coherence in academic presentations. Moreover, there is a moderate use of Interpersonal markers, which aids in maintaining and managing interaction (with the audience). Furthermore, Structural markers are the least common DMs used in the corpus of academic presentations; they show a minimal use of organizational cues and academic markers. Finally, Table 4.1 and Figure 1 data show that the corpus has a predominantly informal and non-academic tone characterized by personal (cognitive and informal) conversational markers.

The following is a screenshot from AntConc analysis of the corpus that show the collocation of "I" and the N-gram frequencies of the cognitive DMs, such as I mean, I guess, and I think; this explicitly shows the overuse of cognitive and non-academic DMs used in the corpus.



The AntConc collocation analysis of "I" shows a strong frequency and dominance of the cognitive and personal DMs. For instance, I guess has 185 occurrences and 332.827 likelihood ratio, I mean has 161 frequencies and 382.407 likelihood ratio, and I think has 151 occurrences and 361.166 likelihood ratio. The high frequencies and likelihood ratios indicate a frequent use of personal stance in hedging in academic presentations; they reflect subjective and explanatory tendencies in the discourse. Moreover, the statistical analysis of these collocation is consistent

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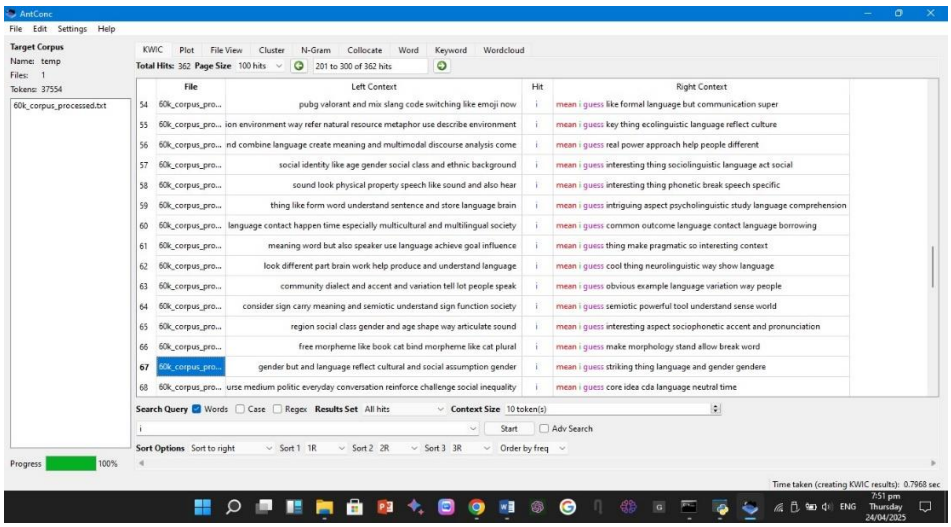
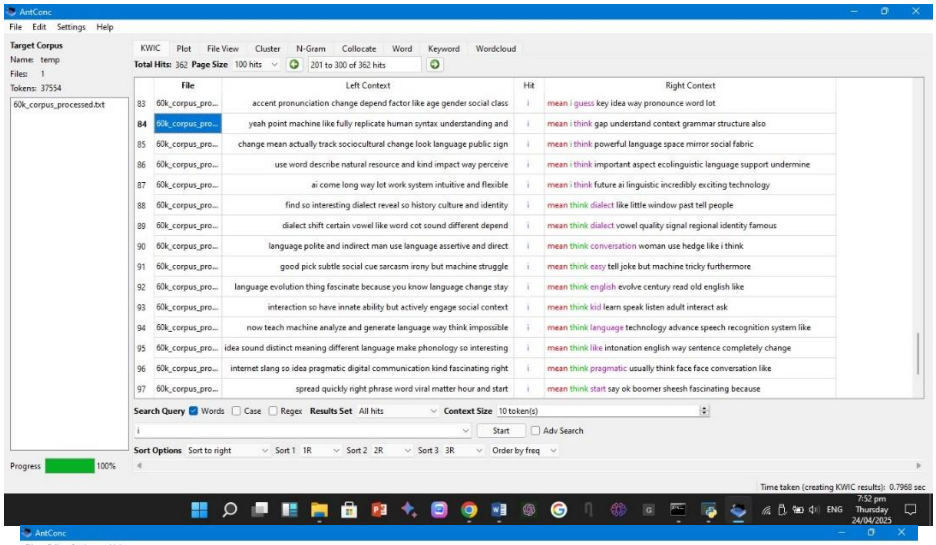
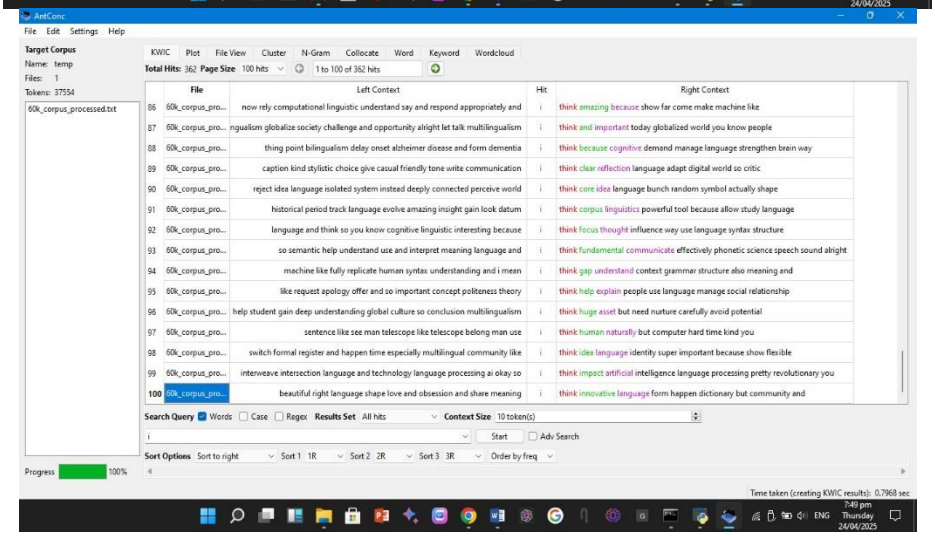
with pie chart and earlier analyzed DMs frequencies and percentages. This further reinforce a concluding thought of the overuse of the cognitive, non-academic, and informal markers in the corpus (of academic presentations). The following are some screenshots from AntConc analysis of the corpus that reflect the KWIC of "I."







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The KWIC analysis of "I" show that the context where the pronoun "I" is used is frequently followed by a word that make it a cognitive DM (guess, mean, and think). Through the KWIC analysis, these cognitive DMs are frequently come together. For instance, "I mean" is often followed by "I guess" and "I think"; they are all are cognitive DMs. The KWIC analysis therefore indicates that the context where "I" is used is often followed by a cognitive DM, and sometimes two cognitive DMs come together in the same context. In other words, the KWIC analysis reveals that the pronoun "I" frequently precedes the second part of the cognitive discourse markers such as think, mean, and guess; they often co-occur in the same context. This pattern suggests a strong association between "I" and cognitive DMs, indicating their clustered usage in the discourse. These co-occurrences and likelihood ratios reflects speakers' overuse and reliance on cognitive and non-academic markers.

The following figure represents academic and non-academic markers use in the academic presentations.

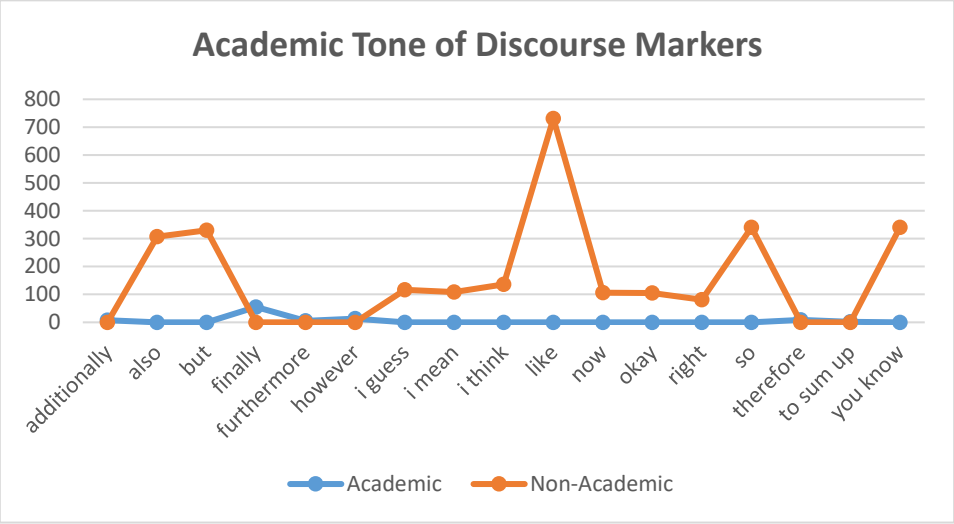

Figure 4.2: Academic Tone of Discourse Markers

Figure 4.2 illustrates the frequencies of commonly used academic and non-academic discourse markers. Moreover, it also reflects the academic tone of the DMs used by students in their academic presentations. The orange bar represents the non-academic discourse markers, while the blue bar reflects the academic discourse markers. The frequency of "like," a non-academic discourse marker, is over 700. Other nan-academic discourse markers such as you know, so, also, and but are followed next. In other words, these are the non-academic discourse markers widely used in these presentations. Cognitive discourse markers (e.g., I guess, I mean, I think) follows next. The academic discourse markers, however, are less evident in these presentations. These markers include however, additionally, finally, to sum up, and furthermore.

In terms of frequencies, the most frequently used DM is "like" with a frequency of 731. Other frequently occurring non-academic markers include "you know" and "so" (341 each), "but" (330) and "also" (307). The high frequencies show a strong preference for non-academic markers in the students' speeches.

In contrast, academic discourse markers are used far less frequently. For instance, "finally" appears only 55 times, while "however" and "therefore" occur 13 and 09 times, respectively. Other markers such as "additionally," "therefore," and "to sum up" show minimal presence, with fewer than 10 instances each. This disparity in usage reflects that students predominantly rely on non-academic DMs; this further contributes to a less formal and less academic tone in their presentations.

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These results underscore the significance of fostering greater awareness of academic language usage among the students. By encouraging the interaction of formal and context-appropriate discourse markers, the educators may support students in developing a more academic tone and improving the overall effectiveness of their presentations.

Discussion

The Use of Discourse Markers in English Graduate Students' Academic Presentations

Figure 4.3: Word-cloud of the Frequently Used Discourse Markers

The word-cloud summarizes the whole research; it reflects the usage of the most commonly used DMs in the academic presentations of the students. The word cloud, generated while using Python, illustrates that the cognitive DMs are most frequently used markers; they are followed by referential, interpersonal, and structural markers respectively. The structural DMs, which are mostly academic in nature, are least commonly utilized DMs in the presentations of the students. These results reveal that the cognitive discourse markers are the most dominant in students' presentations. The students give a strong emphasis on personal stance and thought processes. Discourse markers such as "I mean" and "I think" indicate personal involvement and express the speaker's stance or opinion (Farahani & Ghane, 2022).

In addition, the high frequency of referential markers underscores students' efforts to maintain coherence, while the moderate use of interpersonal markers indicates some awareness of audience engagement. Discourse markers such as "you know," "like," and "I mean" are frequently used in informal contexts; they contribute to a conversational tone that foster greater audience engagement (Pugh, 2014).

Moreover, the minimal presence of structural markers points to a lack of formal academic organization; it reinforces the overall informal tone of the presentations. Collectively, these results indicate a conversational style that leans more toward personal expression than academic convention.

The Appropriate and Inappropriate Use of Discourse Markers in Academic Presentations

The selection of formal or informal discourse markers is often influenced by the context, audience, and communicative purpose of the presentation. In formal settings, presenters are generally expected to use more structured and conventional language to align with academic of professional norms (Muslimawati, 2022). The analysis of discourse markers in students' academic presentations highlight both effective and inappropriate usage patterns that influence the overall clarity and academic tone of the discourse. Discourse markers are vital in oral presentations for fostering the logical progression of ideas and ensuring textual coherence. However, absence or inappropriate use can hinder the structured delivery of information and potentially compromise the clarity of the intended message (Alkawaja et al., 2023). Cognitive and referential markers such as "I think," "also," "but" are generally used appropriately to convey personal stance; it indicated addition or contrast and contributed to the coherence of

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the presentation. However, there is a noticeable overuse of informal (conversational) DMs such as "like," "you know," and "I mean," which, while aiding fluency, undermines the formality required in academic contexts.

In contrast, academically appropriate markers such as "therefore," furthermore," "additionally," and "to sum up" appear infrequently; it indicates a limited familiarity with or confidence in formal academic conventions. According to Alenizy et al. (2024), markers such as "therefore." "however," and "furthermore" are used to present logical connections and transitions in a structured manner. The underuse of these markers results in a lack of logical progression and weak structural cohesion in students' presentations.

The first research question explored the categories of discourse markers employed in the academic presentations of MS English students. Using the Fung and Carter (2007) framework, the study identified four functional categories: Cognitive, Referential, Interpersonal, and Structural. Cognitive markers, such as "I think" and "like," were used to express personal stance and thought processes. Referential markers (e.g., "so" and "also") served to maintain logical flow and coherence. Interpersonal markers, including "you know" and "okay," facilitated interaction and audience engagement. Structural markers such as "finally" and "to sum up" contributed to the organization of discourse.

The second research question examined the frequencies and percentages of the selected DMs. The data revealed that Cognitive DMs appeared most frequently (1093 instances; 39%), followed by Referential (1013; 36%), interpersonal (527; 19%), and Structural DMs (163; 6%). Among individual markers, "like" was the most common (731; 1.95% of the corpus), followed by "you know" and "so" (341each; 0.91% of the corpus). Markers such as "furthermore," "therefore," and "to sum up" appeared far less frequently; it indicated a limited use of academically appropriate expressions.

The third research question addressed the overall academic tone reflected in the use of DMs used by the MS English students in their academic presentations. The results revealed a dominant reliance on informal and conversational markers; it indicated that students' presentation styles leaned heavily toward spoken, non-academic discourse. The minimal presence of formal DMs underscored the need for a greater emphasis on academic language in oral presentations.

Conclusion

This study examined the use of DMs in academic presentations of the MS English students at COMSATS University Islamabad. Drawing upon Fung and Carter's (2007) DMs framework, a corpus-based and mixed-method approach was adopted where Antonc and Python were used to identify the recurring DMs patterns. The results revealed a marked preference for informal and conversational discourse markers across students' presentations; this indicated a significant divergence from conventional academic speech norms. The results showed that cognitive markers such as "like," "I think," and "I mean" were most frequently used, collectively accounting for 39% of the total DMs usage. Structural markers, typically associated with academic organization and clarity (e.g., "finally" and "to sum up") constituted only 6% of the total DMs usage. The predominance of the personal, hedging, and stance-indicating markers pointed to a strong informal tone in students' presentations. Moreover, academic DMs such as "therefore," "furthermore," "however," and "additionally" appeared very infrequently; this indicated students' limited familiarity with formal academic conventions in spoken discourse.

Furthermore, the collocation and KWIC analyses revealed a frequent clustering of informal discourse markers around personal pronouns such as "I," confirming a dominant and subjective reliance on cognitive and subjective expressions. Visual representations, including word cloud and bar graphs, showed the overwhelming use of nan-academic markers and the

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minimal presence of structurally and academically appropriate ones. Additionally, although students demonstrated some coherence through referential markers, the high frequency of casual markers such as "you know" and "like" indicated a strong conversational tone which is misaligned with academic norms.

These results emphasize the need for pedagogical interventions within the presentation skills to promote register-appropriate discourse markers use. Enriching students' awareness of formal discourse conventions is essential for improving spoken academic proficiency. This study contributes to the understanding of spoken academic discourse in non-native English contexts and highlights the significance of explicit instructions in academic language use.

Future Research Directions

A longitudinal approach involving students from different semesters would be valuable in tracking the evolution of discourse markers usage over time. Additionally, employing an alternative analytical framework or tools may offer deeper insights into the functional and pragmatic roles of DMs in academic speech. Moreover, replicating this study with the same methodology in the future could help assess consistency or change in discourse patterns. Furthermore, future research may explore the use of DMs among students from different disciplines and institutions to identify cross-disciplinary variations or examine institutional or regional differences in the use of DMs.

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