

## The Use of Interpersonal Discourse Markers by Students of English at the University of Jordan

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### Abstract

This study adopts a functional approach to analyze the use of interpersonal discourse markers in interviews conducted with advanced EFL Jordanian learners. This group of subjects is represented by graduate students in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Jordan. The graduate students' data are compared to native interviews drawn from the Charlotte Narrative and Conversation Collection (CNCC). The native speakers' interviews are used as baseline data for evaluating the production of DMs by the advanced Jordanian EFL learners. Fung's (2003) taxonomy is employed for analyzing the use of interpersonal discourse markers in the native and non-native interviews. The analysis reveals that the advanced EFL Jordanian learners had a slightly higher percentage of interpersonal discourse markers than the native speakers of English. However, due to mother tongue influence, formal education and cultural preferences, the advanced EFL learners were found to employ a more restricted set of this category of DMs than their native counterparts.

**Keywords:** corpus linguistics, discourse markers, EFL learners, oral discourse

## Introduction

Discourse markers constitute a class of linguistic items that are drawn from various syntactic categories. These context-dependent items usually serve different functions in different contexts. Discourse markers are optional devices that do not contribute to the propositional meaning of their host discourse units. Despite their optionality, discourse markers are believed to serve varied functions on the textual, interpersonal and cognitive levels of discourse.

The textual functions of discourse markers involve signaling relationships between discourse units on the local and global levels of discourse. The textual discourse marker ‘*so*’, for example, signals a semantic relationship of consequence between its host discourse unit (*so* I will make you a sandwich) and the prior discourse unit (I know that you are still hungry). Discourse markers function interpersonally to enhance solidarity between interlocutors and to mark attitudes towards the propositional content of discourse units. For instance, the discourse marker ‘*just*’ functions on the interpersonal level of discourse to intensify the emotional content of the discourse unit (I was *just* proud of you). Discourse markers function on the cognitive level of discourse to signal buying time for solving cognitive problems and reformulating prior discourse units. The use of ‘*I mean*’ to mark the discourse unit it introduces (*I mean*, they were happy) as a reformulation of the prior discourse unit (she was happy) is a typical example of the cognitive functions of discourse markers. The following sub-sections provide background information on the terminology and characteristics of discourse markers.

## Terminology

Some of the most common terms found in the literature to refer to discourse markers are ‘discourse particles’ (Schourup, 1985), ‘discourse connectives’ (Blakemore, 1987) and ‘pragmatic markers’ (Brinton, 1996). The wide range of terms that are used to refer to the linguistic items that are identified by many researchers as discourse markers (DMs) is attributed to the different approaches that have been employed for the analysis of these items and the various functions that they serve. The term DMs is used by Schourup (1999, p. 228) because it is “merely the most popular of a host of competing terms used partially with overlapping reference.” The term ‘discourse’ suggests that these items function at the discourse level. The term ‘marker’ draws attention to the fact that the meaning of these items is analyzed in terms of what they signal rather than what they describe.

## Basic characteristics

Discourse markers are syntactically and semantically optional. They are syntactically optional in the sense that their deletion does not render the discourse segments that host them ungrammatical. The syntactic optionality of DMs can be exemplified by omitting the DM ‘*actually*’ from the discourse segment (she was tired *actually*). Omitting ‘*actually*’ does not render its host segment (she was tired) ungrammatical, rather, it affects signaling explicitly the attitude of the speaker towards the propositional content of the discourse.

The semantic optionality of DMs is ascribed to the fact that these devices ‘signal’ the relationship between the discourse units that they connect, but they do not ‘create’ these relations. Thus, if the DM ‘*but*’ is omitted from the sentence (Sami was late, *but* Sara was there on time), “the relationship it signals is still available to the hearer, though no longer explicitly cued” (Schourup, 1999, p. 231).

Moreover, DMs do not change the truth-conditions of their host sentences. Jucker (2002, p. 213) asserts that “a true sentence is true, and a false sentence is false, whether or not it contains a discourse maker.” Brinton (1996, p. 34) attributes the non-truth conditionality of DMs to their “semantic shallowness.”

Discourse markers are also observed to be syntactically detached from their host discourse segments. These devices, hence, have ‘peripheral’ grammatical functions in the sense that they do not enter into construction syntactically with other clause elements. For example, the DM ‘*you know*’ in (Children are sometimes very annoying, *you know*) occurs outside the syntactic structure of the utterance that contains it and thus it serves a pragmatic rather than a syntactic function. That is, the DM ‘*you know*’ in the abovementioned example does not fulfill a syntactic role. Rather, it serves the pragmatic function of marking shared knowledge and experience between the interlocutors.

In accordance with the fact that DMs are context-dependent linguistic items, they usually serve different functions in different contexts. For example, depending on the context in which it is used, the DM ‘*so*’ can perform various pragmatic functions. For instance, ‘*so*’ is used for summarizing previous points in the discourse in (Mary is very bright and beautiful. She has a very loving and supporting family and she has many friends. *So*, she is a happy child). This DM can also mark a transition to another topic as in (Right. *So* let’s solve another aspect of this problem). Furthermore, ‘*so*’ can be used to connect utterances to the non-linguistic context, for instance, a mother who sees her daughter crying tells her (*So* you failed the exams).

### ***Interpersonal DMs***

The interpersonal category of DMs might be employed to involve the listeners in the communication processes for the purpose of signaling solidarity between the interlocutors (e.g. *you know*). Discourse markers with interpersonal functions might be used to express attitudes towards conveyed messages. The DMs ‘*I think*’ and ‘*sort of*’, for instance, function as hedges that express language users’ tentativeness towards the propositional content of discourse segments. The interpersonal DMs that indicate tentativeness seem to reduce social distance between interlocutors. In addition to hedging, interpersonal DMs can also contribute to establishing solidarity between interlocutors by functioning as backchannels. For instance, the DMs ‘*oh*’ and ‘*yeah*’ might be used to “show the hearer’s understanding of the social relationship between the partners and to keep the conversation going” (Aijmer, 2002, p. 51).

Language users often employ interpersonal DMs to provide guidance to intended interpretation of messages by indicating their attitudes towards propositions. Therefore, the omission of DMs might result in a greater possibility of misinterpreting communicated messages. Moreover, in accordance with the fact that interpersonal DMs contribute to the establishment of intimacy, failing to use this category of DMs might result in increasing social distance between interlocutors.

Non-native speakers show a tendency to use a limited and redundant set of the interpersonal DMs to serve restricted functions. The difficulty of mastering the use of the DMs that function on the interpersonal level of discourse is ascribed to the informality or even stigmatization of this category of DMs, first language interference, formal de-contextualized education and grammar-based curriculum.

***Aims of the study***

The present study is a comparative analysis of the use of interpersonal DMs in informal interviews with American native and Jordanian non-native speakers of English. This analysis is based on corpus-driven data. The native speakers' interviews are used as baseline data for evaluating the acquisition of DMs by Jordanian post-graduate students of English. This study will attempt to answer the following question:

How do post-graduate students of English differ from American native speakers in their use of interpersonal DMs?

***Significance of the study***

In accordance with the fact that interpersonal DMs are used frequently in oral discourse, it is reasonable to hypothesize that they play a crucial role in language. In spite of the crucial role that these devices play, there are few studies that investigate the acquisition of interpersonal DMs by foreign and second language learners. Most of the studies on English DMs focus on the acquisition of these devices by native speakers of English. Moreover, few studies have been conducted on the comparative usage of DMs between native and non-native speakers of English.

This study is based on the belief that comparing the use of interpersonal DMs by native and non-native speakers of English may lead to a better understanding of the appropriate use of this category of DMs and may help Jordanian learners to achieve a native-like competence of these devices.

***Limitations of the study***

The present study will have the following limitations:

- 1- Detailed information on prosodic features of the interview transcripts is beyond the scope of the study.
- 2- In accordance with the facts that there is no enough information about the interviewers of the native English corpus and that the researchers conducted the interviews with the non-native learners, this study only analyzes the interviewees' use of DMs.

***Literature review***

Al-Masri (1999) adopts a pragmatic approach to analyze 26 English DMs under the label gap-fillers. The study is based on a corpus of nine television interviews. The participants in these interviews are 66 native and non-native speakers of English. The non-native subjects are represented by highly educated Jordanian people, whereas the native subjects are American participants of varied ages and academic levels. The results of this analysis indicate that the non-native subjects use the targeted gap-fillers less frequently than their native counterparts. Al-Masri attributes the Jordanian subjects' relative underuse of gap-fillers to the difficulty of the acquisition of these devices by non-native speakers. The analysis also reveals that the most frequent gap-fillers in the Jordanian and American data are 'you know' and 'yeah'. The Jordanian subjects, nonetheless, are found to avoid using (*hey, wow and anyway*) and to show cultural and stylistic preferences for (*I think and actually*).

Romero Trillo (2002, p. 774) defines DMs as "elements that have undergone a process of discourse grammaticalization and have included in their semantic/grammatical meaning a pragmatic dimension that serves for interactive purposes." He investigates the use of (*look,*

*listen, you know, you see, I mean and well*) in native and non-native conversations. These interpersonal DMs are divided into involvement and attention getting markers. Romero Trillo's analysis is based on corpus-driven data. Data elicited from native speakers are used as "baseline data" for evaluating the production of DMs by Spanish speakers. The results of the study indicate that the Spanish speakers use the involvement markers less frequently than native adults. Moreover, the attention getting markers are "completely eliminated" from the non-native adult data. Romero Trillo concludes that the use of interpersonal DMs by non-native speakers is "fossilized both in quantity and diversity of elements used" (Romero Trillo, 2002, p. 783).

Fung (2003) adopts a functional-attitudinal approach to analyze discourse markers in pedagogical settings. Audio-recording and Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English (CANCODE) are the tools for data collection from non-native and native English speakers, respectively. The comparative analysis of the data reveals that 52.2% of the targeted DMs are underused by the non-native subjects. However, these subjects overuse the DMs (*I think, but, yes and because*). In comparison with their native counterparts, the non-native subjects use the targeted DMs to fulfill very restricted functions. The latter are also found to lack the skills in utilizing the interpersonal DMs "through which solidarity is shared" (Fung, 2003, p. 293).

Based on a corpus-driven analysis, Aijmer (2004) investigates how advanced Swedish learners of English use DMs. The researcher analyzes 50 interviews with undergraduate students of English. The students are interviewed by a native speaker "on a topic such as a recent trip or a movie they had seen" (Aijmer, 2004, p.175). The non-native data is "compared with a similar amount of conversational material from the London Lund Corpus of Spoken English" (Aijmer, 2004, p. 175).

The analysis indicates that some DMs are used frequently by the native and non-native subjects such as (*I think, you know, sort of and well*). The DM '*I don't know*' is only used by the non-native subjects. The frequent use of '*I don't know*' by the Swedish learners "makes them sound more uncertain than native speakers" (Aijmer, 2004, p.186). In accordance with the fact that the learners are interviewed by a native speaker of English, Aijmer emphasizes that overusing '*I don't know*' is an indication of the learners' high communicative stress.

Muller (2005) examines the acquisition of English DMs by non-native speakers. This study adopts a bottom-up approach in which "evidence from the data takes precedence over theoretical constructions" (Muller, 2005, p.26). Muller analyzes the use of (*well, you know, like and so*) by German University students. English native speakers' usage of the targeted DMs is set as the standard of this analysis. The study is based on 70 conversations of the Giessen-Long Beach Chaplin Corpus (GLBCC) in which the subjects are asked to watch a Chaplin movie and retell it then exchange their opinions about it in pairs.

The results indicate that the four DMs are employed by the German subjects with a frequency of occurrences and individual functions which are different from the native subjects. The latter uses "*so* almost twice as often as the Germans and both *you know* and *like* even more than five times as often" (Muller, 2005, p.244). The German subjects, on the other hand, employ '*well*' twice as often as the native speakers of English. Muller analyzes German EFL textbooks in an attempt to interpret the results. '*Well*' is found to be overrepresented in the textbooks, in contrast with, (*so, you know and like*). Moreover, in many cases '*so*' is substituted by '*well*' because the German speakers find the latter to be more English than the former.

Buysse (2011) analyzes the use of the operative DMs ‘*so*’ and ‘*well*’ and the involvement markers (*you know, kind of, sort of, like* and *I mean*) in informal interviews with native and non-native speakers of English. The non-native subjects are divided into two separate groups based on their exposure to the target language and their motivation for learning that language. They are forty native speakers of Dutch, half of whom are students of English Linguistics and the other half is represented by students of Commercial Sciences. The non-native corpus is compared to a corpus of twenty interviews with native speakers of English.

The analysis indicates that the students of Commercial Sciences use all the DMs under study less frequently than the students of English Linguistics. Both non-native groups use the operative DMs more frequently than native speakers. Nevertheless, the involvement markers are avoided or neglected by the non-native subjects. Buysse contributes the ignorance of the involvement markers to the unnatural foreign language context that “rarely contains an abundance of pragmatic items in spoken language” (Buysse, 2011, p. 15). The informality or even stigmatization of involvement markers is another factor that could lead to their significant underuse by the non-native subjects.

## **Methods and procedures**

### ***Subjects***

The subjects of the study are American native speakers of English and advanced Jordanian EFL learners. The latter group of subjects is represented by thirty-three advanced Jordanian EFL learners who are between the ages of 23 and 37. These learners are graduate students in the Master’s programs of the University of Jordan’s Department of English Language and Literature. English graduate students have to score high in the graduate entrance exams that assess their English language proficiency level. Scoring high in one of these exams might qualify the graduate students to be considered as advanced EFL learners.

The native speakers’ interviews are drawn from the Charlotte Narrative and Conversation Collection (CNCC Corpus). Thirty-three interviews are selected randomly from the interviews that are conducted with native speakers of English who are between the ages of 18 and 38. These subjects are mainly university students or graduates who occupy a different range of professions. The native interviewees reside in and around Mecklenburg County, which is located in the state of North Carolina (USA), and they come from a range of different ethnicities and social backgrounds.

### ***Data collection***

The non-native corpus is compiled along the lines of the CNCC Corpus. The non-native subjects are interviewed by the researcher who is a non-native speaker of English. To conceal the identity of the subjects, initials are used instead of full names. Furthermore, each interview begins typically by asking the subjects to introduce themselves by stating their names, ages, native tongues and the language they use as their major means of communication. The subjects are then asked about their childhood stories and adventures, favorite books, childhood memories, experience as EFL learners and about the difficulties they face as graduate students.

**Transcription**

Symbols that indicate brief unfilled pauses (-), unit unfilled pauses (pause), beginning of overlapping utterances ([ ), unfinished words (=), unintelligible speech ( ) and prolonged syllables (::) are added to the transcripts of the native and non-native interviews.

**Model of analysis**

The present study employs Fung's (2003) taxonomy in analyzing the interviews with the native and non-native speakers of English. Fung's taxonomy of DMs is elicited from authentic recordings from the pedagogical sub-corpus in CANCODE and from group discussions of 49 intermediate-advanced learners of English in a secondary school in Hong Kong (Fung, 2003, p. 68). Common DMs identified in the native and non-native corpora are grouped under four functional categories, namely, the interpersonal, referential, structural and cognitive categories of DMs.

The interpersonal category includes DMs that "perform a phatic function in the discourse to facilitate closeness between participants for the purpose of establishing roles and relationships between the interlocutors" (Fung, 2003, p. 77). According to Fung (2003), this category of DMs serves three interpersonal functions:

A- Marking shared knowledge (involvement markers): *See, you see, you know, Listen.*

B- Indicating attitude: *well, really, I think, obviously, absolutely, basically, actually, exactly, sort of, kind of, like, to be frank, to be honest, oh.*

C- Showing new responses: *OK, okay, right, alright, yeah, yes, I see, great, oh great, sure.*

**Data analysis**

Two criteria are employed in evaluating the native and non-native subjects' use of DMs. The first criterion is the frequency of the use of the interpersonal class of DMs. To indicate the frequency of the interpersonal functions of DMs, the total number of interpersonal DMs is to be compared to the total number of the entire set of DMs that are used by the participants. The frequency rates of interpersonal DMs used by the non-native subjects are to be compared to their native counterparts to detect whether they convey underuse, overuse or appropriate use of the targeted DMs.

In addition to the frequency of occurrence, another criterion employed for assessing the interviewees' use of DMs is the variety of the use of interpersonal DMs. Accordingly, the percentage of the occurrence for each marker within the interpersonal class of DMs is to be calculated to find out if the non-native subjects, in comparison with their native counterparts, use a restricted or varied set of interpersonal DMs.

**Results and discussion****Frequency of occurrence**

Following Fung (2003), the identified instances of DMs are categorized under four functional classes, namely, interpersonal, referential, structural and cognitive. Table 1 presents the frequencies of the functional classes of DMs that are employed by the native and non-native subjects.

Table 1. *The frequency of the functional classes of DMs in interviews*

	Native speakers	Non-native speakers	Total
	Percent	Percent	Percent

Referential	58.5	53.1	57.0
Interpersonal	21.2	26.2	22.5
Structural	14.6	14.2	14.5
Cognitive	5.7	6.6	5.9

As shown in Table 1, the non-native speakers (26.2) had a slightly higher percentage of interpersonal DMs than their native counterparts (21.2). This result contradicts the researchers' hypothesis that EFL Jordanian learners tend to avoid using DMs that operate on the interpersonal mode of language. The avoidance of interpersonal DMs in oral discourse is attributed to foreign language learners' exposure to unnatural linguistic input that prepares learners "to speak like a textbook rather than speaking naturally" (Fung, 2003, p. 177). Buysee (2011, p. 15) subscribes to the view that learning a language through formal instruction "restricts the opportunities for foreign language learners to familiarize themselves with pragmatic devices such as involvement discourse markers." Moreover, non-native speakers are encouraged to "steer clear of informal elements in an effort to keep their language as "neutral" and inoffensive as possible" (Buysse, 2010, p. 479). The ignorance of interpersonal DMs is, therefore, associated with the informality, "even up to the point of downright stigmatization", of this group of pragmatic devices (Buysse, 2011, p. 16).

### *Variety of interpersonal markers*

This section presents a detailed analysis of the varied functions that DMs were found to serve under the interpersonal category. This analysis aims at finding out whether the non-native subjects used a varied or restricted set of interpersonal DMs in comparison with their native counterparts. Table 2 presents the frequency of the functions that were served by the interpersonal class of DMs.

Table 2. *The frequency of the functions served by interpersonal DMs*

Functions of interpersonal DMs	Native Speakers	Non-native speakers	Total
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Involvement markers	2.7	1.0	2.2
indicating attitude	17.5	22.6	18.9
showing responses	1.0	2.5	1.4

The most frequently served function by interpersonal markers was indicating the attitudes of the speakers towards the propositional content of the utterances. In addition to indicating attitudes, the interpersonal markers were also used as involvement markers by the speakers to involve the listeners in the conversational action and by the listeners themselves to signal active listenership. The function of involving the listeners in the communication process was slightly more frequent in the native interviews, whereas employing interpersonal markers for showing responses and signaling attitudes had slightly higher percentages of use in the non-native data.

Table 3 below presents the frequency of the interpersonal markers in the native and non-native data.

Table 3. *The frequency of interpersonal markers in the native and non-native interviews*

	Native speakers	Non-native speakers
	Percent	Percent
Just	27.2	1.8
Actually	12.0	30.1
You know	11.2	2.5
Kind of	8.9	1.8
Like	8.7	10.3
Really	8.1	2.1
I think	7.1	17.7
Well	3.4	8.2
Yeah	2.4	12.1
Basically	2.1	2.5
Oh	1.8	1.1
Right	1.6	0.0
Sort of	1.5	0.0
Ok	1.3	1.8
See	0.6	0.0
Obviously	0.5	0.0
Absolutely	0.3	0.0
To be honest	0.3	0.0
Yes	0.3	6.7
Alright	0.2	0.0
Exactly	0.2	0.4
Okay	0.2	0.0
Sure	0.2	0.4
I mean	0.0	0.7

### ***Involving listeners in communication processes***

In the interpersonal category, the DMs (*you know*, *OK*, *right* and *see*) were used by the speakers to involve the listeners in the communication processes for the purpose of signaling solidarity between the interlocutors. In contrast to the non-native learners (2.5), the native interviewees (11.2) used the involvement DM ‘*you know*’ frequently as a marker of the interviewers’ assumed shared knowledge. Similarly, Fung (2003, p. 96) compared the use of ‘*you know*’ between native and non-native speakers of English. She came to the conclusion that the native speakers of English employed this marker more frequently than their non-native counterparts “to appeal to the assumed shared knowledge” of the hearers for the acceptance of information. A similar result is reported by Romero Trillo (2002, p. 777) who argues that the DM ‘*you know*’ serves the function of involving the listener in “the thinking process of the speech.” The following two examples selected from the native and non-native interviews, respectively, illustrate employing ‘*you know*’ for the purpose of marking shared knowledge.

(1) AM: ...*and* they were *just* pretty exciting stories especially when you are a kid *you know*... (Native)

(2) AM: ...*you know*-parents sometimes tell some stories to frighten their children- (Non-native)

In addition to ‘*you know*’, another involvement maker that appeared in the native and non-native data is ‘*OK*’. It should be pointed out that this marker only performs the interpersonal function of showing responses to the speakers’ contributions in Fung’s functional categorization of DMs. However, there were instances where speakers employed this marker “to ensure that they have been understood correctly” (Lam, 2007, p. 35). Example (3) below illustrates the use of ‘*OK*’ as an involvement marker.

(3) AK: ...she was left alone- her husband was killed- by the white people- *and* also her other sons- were killed- *OK*-beloved- uh- when her- when her mother become old- beloved came to her as a soul-*OK*- ... (Non-native)

The involvement markers ‘*see*’ and ‘*right*’ were only employed by the native speakers. The former was involved in requesting the attention of the listeners and the latter served the function of seeking confirmation of the listeners’ comprehension (Aijmer, 2002, p. 52). The use of ‘*see*’ and ‘*right*’ in the native interviews is demonstrated in the following examples.

(4) TS: How does Rob talk away this fire?

JR: He- he does some- I don’t know- *see*- he can’t tell you (laughter) - ... (Native)

(5) QT: ...-*well*- I used to hit my sister- *right*- *and* run to my mama before my sister would hit me-... (Native)

### ***Indicating attitudes***

In addition to functioning as involvement markers, interpersonal DMs were also used to signal the attitudes of the speakers towards the propositional content of utterances. The most frequently used attitude marker by the non-native subjects was ‘*actually*’ (30.1), whereas ‘*just*’ had the highest percentage of use in the native data (27.2). The use of these interpersonal markers is shown in the following examples.

(6) EA: Now- let’s say as a child – did you do something funny- were you a trouble maker?-

AA: No- *actually*- I was a quite girl *and*-uh-(laughter) - *actually*- I don’t uh- recall problems- (Non-native)

(7) SS: ...*I think* it’s *just* human nature to get jealous *and*- to *kind of* put up a- *you know*- an offensive front to whoever the invader or the intruder is... (Native)

As illustrated in example (6), the DM ‘*actually*’ enables speakers to express “certainty about propositional meanings” (Fung, 2003, p.77). Al-Masri (1999, p. 64) relates overusing this marker by native speakers of Jordanian Spoken Arabic to “first language interference.” She additionally admits that Jordanian EFL learners “have a tendency to use an Arabic equivalent” to this marker (Al-Masri, 1999, p. 64). Other DMs that served the function of indicating certainty about the propositional content of utterances include (*obviously*, *absolutely*, *basically*, *exactly* and *really*). In line with Al-Masri (1999) and Aijmer (2004), the DM ‘*really*’ was more frequent in the native interviews. Moreover, there were no instances of the DMs ‘*absolutely*’ and ‘*obviously*’ in the non-native data. The DMs ‘*exactly*’ and ‘*basically*’ had comparable percentages of use in the native and non-native interviews.

The DM ‘*just*’ is associated with “affective intensity” (Aijmer, 2002, p. 49). In example (7), ‘*just*’ intensifies the emotional content of the proposition (*it’s human nature to get jealous*).

Example (7) illustrates as well the use of the DM ‘*I think*’ to signal the speaker’s “level of commitment on the propositional content” of the abovementioned utterance (Lam, 2007, p.35). This marker appeared more frequently in interviews conducted with Jordanian EFL learners. Likewise, Al-Masri (1999) came to the conclusion that Jordanian EFL learners tend to overuse ‘*I think*’ in comparison with native speakers of English.

The DMs ‘*sort of*’ and ‘*kind of*’ were underrepresented in the non-native data. Fung (2003, p. 97) who came to the same conclusion argues that these markers carry “evidential meaning like imprecision or approximation” and have “the interactive effect of softening the tone and building up interpersonal closeness with the interlocutor.” The following are representative examples.

(8) AM: ...I *sort of* remember the words *but*- she told me them when I was very little *like*- I don't know *like* four or five maybe even younger... (Native)

(9) BD: ...I *think* they had a mixture *because I think*- um- it's *kind of like* two different- *you know* things that they would tell me as far as stories -... (Native)

The attitude marker ‘*well*’ was used as a “responsive signal” which served the function of indicating the speaker’s reaction to the prior utterance (Lam, 2007, p.114). This marker had a higher percentage of use in the non-native interviews. EFL learners’ overuse of ‘*well*’ is reported by Al-Masri (1999) and Muller (2005). As shown in example (10), the DM ‘*well*’ can preface responses that diverge from the prior questions. The use of this marker to signal responses where no dispreferences are detected is illustrated in example (11).

(10) EA: OK- what about books you read as a grown-up?

HA: What- you mean novels?

EA: Yeah- maybe like novels- yeah

HA: *Well*- u::h- I read many- (Non-native)

(11) EA: Can you tell us a bit about Tarzan? What do you remember about it? –

LA: *Well* – he lives alone- as a person- a human being- among only animals that was special- considering- ... (Non-native)

Likewise, the DMs ‘*yeah*’ and ‘*yes*’ served a similar purpose as ‘*well*’ to signal “direct answers which do not convey any dispreferred sense” (Lam 2007, p. 117). Some of the examples that illustrate using ‘*yeah*’ and ‘*yes*’ to introduce direct responses to questions are listed below.

(12) EA: Ok – now back to stories- who was the most talented story teller in your family? –

LA: *Yeah*- u::m- *I think* I’m no different in term of this question- I would say my grandmother- usually grandmothers are good story tellers...(Non-native)

(13) EA: Did you learn English from school- university- TV? –

AM: *Yes*- I started English when I was sixth grade- *and*- um- *I think*- I got better when I was going into the high school level... (Non-native)

Moreover, there are two tokens of the DM ‘*I mean*’ that served the function of prefacing responses that conveyed dispreferences. One of these instances is presented in example (14).

(14) EA: Ok- so what kind of books and stories do you read now?-

RK: *I mean actually*- we have many things to do (laughter)... (Non-native)

The attitude marker ‘*like*’ had comparable percentages of use in the native (8.7) and non-native data (10.3). Two functions were performed by ‘*like*’ in the interpersonal category of DMs. The first function of this DM was marking approximate number or quantity. Example (15) below presents the use of ‘*like*’ to indicate approximation.

(15) AM: ...I *sort of* remember the words *but*- she told me them when I was very little *like*- I don't know *like* four or five maybe even younger... (Native)

When '*like*' is used with a numeral expression, it indicates it is not an exact one. Therefore, it "reduces the speaker's commitment to the literal truth of his/her utterance" (Muller, 2005, p. 210). In addition to marking approximation, '*like*' served the function of marking lexical focus. The DM '*like*' in example (16) is used to mark lexical focus on the new information "glow of light all around me"

(16) EA: ...she saw *like* this glow of light all around me as if the Lord had definitely cured me of leukemia- no more treatments- no more... (Native)

In addition to prefacing direct answers, the DM '*yeah*' and '*yes*' also served the function of emphasizing the propositional content of utterances. Finally, the attitude marker '*to be honest*' appeared in the native subjects' interviews only, whereas '*oh*' was used by the native and non-native interviewees.

### Showing responses

This category of interpersonal markers serves the function of providing responses to listeners and indicating "active participation and listenership" (Fung, 2003, p.98). Based on the optionality criterion, instances of '*yeah*' and '*yes*' that function as responses to polar questions are not treated as DMs. The DMs '*yeah*' and '*yes*' are employed to indicate acknowledgment, affirmation or agreement with the prior utterance. These DMs had higher percentages of use in the non-native data. Fung (2003), in contrast, found that '*yeah*' was underrepresented in the non-native conversations that she analyzed. She indicated that '*yeah*' was frequently substituted by '*yes*' in the non-native data. The use of '*yeah*' as a response to a polar question is represented in example (17). Example (18) illustrates the use of '*yeah*' as a DM that signals agreement with the other interlocutor.

(17) EA: Yeah- right- do you remember some of your childhood adventures?-

AA: Yeah- of course- (Non-native)

(18) JJ: That's who did my um- (pause) wisdom teeth-

KG: Yeah-

JJ: I liked him-

KG: Yeah I did too- *actually*- *Well* Doctor Trevez was like - ... (Native)

The DMs (*Okay*, *alright* and *right*) were only used by the native subjects. The interpersonal markers (*oh*, *ok* and *sure*) had comparable percentages of use in the native and non-native interviews. Using comparable percentages of the interpersonal marker '*oh*' by the native and non-native speakers of English contradicts Fuller (2003). Fuller (2003) identifies '*oh*' as a reception marker used to signal responses to speakers' contributions. This marker was found to have a higher rate in the interviews that she conducted with native speakers of English. The higher percentage of '*right*' in native interaction was observed by Al-Masri (1999) and Fung (2003). Contrary to Al-Masri (1999) who found that '*ok*' was more frequently employed in native conversations, the native and non-native subjects were found to be using a comparable percentage of this marker in the present study.

### Summing up

The DMs that are categorized under the interpersonal category served the functions of involving listeners in the communication process, indicating the attitudes of speakers towards the communicated messages and signaling active listenership by showing responses to speakers'

contributions. The interpersonal markers (*really, kind of, just and you know*) were used more frequently by the native subjects. The non-native subjects employed the interpersonal markers (*well, I think, yeah, yes and actually*) more frequently than their native counterparts. The native and non-native subjects had comparable percentages of the interpersonal markers (*exactly, basically, oh, sure, like and ok*). The interpersonal marker (*I mean*) only appeared in the non-native interviews. As for the non-native subjects, they avoided using the interpersonal markers (*absolutely, obviously, to be honest, sort of, okay, alright, right and see*). As can be noticed, the non-native subjects avoided using a larger set of interpersonal markers. This might indicate that despite the fact that interpersonal markers appeared more frequently in the non-native data, a more varied set of interpersonal markers was used by the native subjects.

### Conclusion

One of the conclusions that can be deduced from analyzing DMs in interviews conducted with native and non-native speakers of English is that advanced EFL learners can attain a near-native like competence in using these devices. Accordingly, the advanced EFL learners in this study were observed to use an appropriate frequency rate of interpersonal DMs. As for the variety of DM use, the advanced EFL learners employed relatively a varied set of interpersonal DMs. However, due to mother tongue influence, formal education and cultural preferences, the set of interpersonal DMs that appeared in the EFL learners' interviews differed from the one that was used by their native counterparts.

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