


A Pragmatic Study of Discourse Markers
In Death of A Salesman

《推销员之死》中 话语标记语之语用研究

高红云 著



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Preface

The flexible application and accurate comprehension of the prolific use of discourse markers in daily conversation and play can effectively promote language communication. Therefore, the research of discourse markers is assumed to have both theoretical and practical significance.

This research, based on the analytic framework of turn-taking proposed by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), does research in the functions of discourse markers in turn-taking in *Death of a Salesman* from a pragmatic perspective, then further analyzes the characters' utterances to reveal the characterization, conflict, development of the plot and the theme of the play and to appreciate the play from a new perspective.

This study proceeds from a relevant literature review of discourse markers as well as a few related notions and theories. It is followed by a brief retrospect of the origin of discourse markers and different definitions with the conclusion that the working definition of discourse markers in this study is as follows: they are grammatically optional or syntactically independent; they have little or no propositional meaning; and they have multifunctionality with high frequency in oral discourse. The major researches in this field are Schiffrin's (1987) coherence-based studies, Blakemore's (1987, 2002) relevance-based studies and Bruce Fraser's (1990, 1996) pragmatic approach, among which both Schiffrin and Fraser focus on local coherence of the utterances. The current study follows Schiffrin's (1987) framework of analysis of discourse markers especially in the exchange structure — sequences of

turn-taking in *Death of a Salesman* focusing on more global dimensions of coherence as well as local coherence and attempts to describe the strategies that discourse markers have in turn-initiating, turn-responding, turn-claiming, turn-holding, and turn-yielding, according to Sacks, *et al.*'s (1974) seminal framework for English conversation, and further analyzes their functions in revealing the characterization, characters' relationship, and the theme of the play.

The combination of the descriptive and explanatory methods is adopted to dynamically describe the positions of discourse markers in turn-taking in *Death of a Salesman*, and their functions in turn-initiating, turn-responding, turn-claiming, turn-holding and turn-yielding. Through observation, the reasons for the use of discourse markers in concrete contexts are expounded. In the meantime, the methods of qualitative and quantitative analysis are also combined to carry out the pragmatic illustration of discourse markers under discussion.

Discourse markers in *Death of a Salesman* have the functions of getting attention, shifting topics, continuing or delaying, providing information, repairing and showing attitude etc.; and they can initiate, respond, claim, hold and yield turns in turn-taking.

The tentative analysis of discourse markers in turn-taking in *Death of a Salesman* provides a new perspective to appreciate the play, which can offer diversified illustrations and initiative appreciation of the play. With the application of conversation analysis to the analysis of *Death of a Salesman*, the source of the complicated relationships among the characters and their conflicts can be found from their speech acts and turn-taking mechanism. The quantitative analysis of discourse markers in the play offers pragmatic illustration and relatively objective analysis of the characters in the play.

前 言

话语标记语在日常交际和戏剧文本中经常出现，而这一语言现象常被人们忽略，对它们的灵活运用和准确理解可以有效地提高言语交际的效率，因此，对话语标记语进行研究有着重要的理论意义和实践价值。

本书试图以 Sacks (1974) 等人提出的话轮转换模式为分析框架，对《推销员之死》中话语标记语在话轮转换过程中的作用进行语用研究，从而分析剧中人物的话语以揭示其在戏剧人物刻画、展示戏剧人物冲突、推动剧情发展和揭示戏剧主题方面的作用，为读者提供一种新的欣赏剧本的方法。

在对话语标记语的研究进行较为全面的梳理的基础上，本书分析了不同时期不同角度对话语标记语下的定义，认为话语标记语具有以下特征：原有语义虚化，程序意义占据核心地位；依赖于语境；位置的灵活性，句法的可分离性，多功能性等。对话语标记语研究有影响的流派主要有：连贯派，代表人物是 Schiffrin (1987)；关联派，代表人物是 Blakemore (1987, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2002)；还有语用学派，代表人物是 Bruce Fraser (1990, 1996)。Schiffrin 提出五种连贯模式，Schiffrin 与 Fraser 的理论均着眼于话语的局部连贯。本书将主要研究话语标记语在局部和整体语篇理解中的作用以及话语标记语在话轮获得、话轮保持、话轮放弃中的作用，进而分析话语标记语在戏剧人物刻画、展示人物冲突、推动剧情发展、揭示戏剧主题方面的作用。

本书的研究思路是从话轮获得、话轮保持、话轮放弃这种话轮转换角度系统地来研究话语标记语在《推销员之死》中的运用。首先在已有研究的基础上对话语标记语的界定提出自己的观点，接着

以话轮转换机制为分析框架，从话轮获得、话轮保持、话轮放弃这种动态的话轮转换角度对话语标记语在《推销员之死》中的运用进行研究。本书采用描写与解释相结合的研究方法对《推销员之死》中话语标记语在话轮转换中话轮的位置、话轮的获得以及保持与放弃中的功能等进行动态描写，对交际者在具体语境中使用话语标记的动因进行解释，同时采用定量与定性相结合的方法对话语标记语在话轮转换中的使用进行语用阐释。研究发现话语标记语在《推销员之死》中有引起注意、转换话题、语义暗示、思维缓冲、信息提供、给予反馈、语义修补以及表明态度等作用；在话轮转换中可以发起话轮、回应话轮、索取话轮、保持话轮和放弃话轮等作用。

本书尝试性地运用话轮转换模式对《推销员之死》中话语标记语进行语用研究，为戏剧赏析提供了一个新的角度，可以使戏剧文本的解读多样化，体现读者阅读的多元化和主动性。运用这种模式与会话分析原理对《推销员之死》进行研究，戏剧人物间错综复杂的关系以及矛盾冲突均可从其言语行为模式和话轮转换机制中找到根源。运用该理论对戏剧文本进行量化分析，从语言学角度对戏剧人物的表现作出阐释，使得对戏剧人物的分析建立在相对客观的基础上。

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

This study was motivated by noticing the wide use of the small words such as *well*, *oh*, and *y'know* etc. either in spoken language or in drama, in which dialogue is the main means of expression. These small words are termed discourse markers, which are related to stylistic variation and therefore may be used at varying rates in different types of interactions (Andersen, 1998; Jucker and Smith, 1998; Aijmer, 2002; Fuller, 2003). It is this interesting linguistic phenomenon that leads the author to do the present study.

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* released in 1949, which was put on stage for 745 performances, winning both the Tony Award and the Pulitzer Prize for drama in the same year. After its opening on Broadway in 1949, it achieved immediate success and has become the most performed and adapted play in American theatrical history and has remained a classic to this day. The fact that performances of *Death of a Salesman* have met with great public approval throughout the world attests its prevalence; the play's conflicts and themes appear to be universal both domestic and abroad. The Chinese audience really liked the play according to the reports at that time. And in 1983, Miller came to Beijing, directing artists of Beijing People's Art Theatre to stage *Death of a Salesman*. After the performances, heated debates have been aroused in the circle of criticism. From the survey of the

researches in this play, studies on the subject in China and abroad are mainly from literature circles, starting from Aristotle's classification of drama in his *Poetics* into six elements, namely, character, plot, diction, thought, music and spectacle, to critically assess the playwright, the play, and salient productions in an endeavor to understand more fully the manifold reasons why *Death of a Salesman* continues to have relevance with theatre audiences, both in the United States and the other countries at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with a compensational tool of the drama text analysis.

Then in the 20th century, Drama Critics, borrowing concepts from different schools of thoughts, make comments on drama from various theoretical perspectives. With pragmatics and discourse analysis combined to study the main means of the expressions in this literary dialogues, the development of stylistics of drama moved into a successful period. Some researches concern the linguistic structure of dramatic dialogue. (e. g. Burton, 1980; Herman, 1991) Some apply politeness theory to expound the social dynamics of character interaction. (e. g. Simpson, 1989; Leech, 1992) And others draw eclectically from pragmatics and discourse analysis so as to interpret such aspects as characterization and power relationship and conflict in the drama. (e. g. Short, 1989, 1996, 1998)

Though it may be difficult, more and more interdisciplinary techniques incorporating the separate areas for the critical textual examination have appeared and received attention and acknowledgement for their interpretative power. Various linguistic theories are applied to the dramatic texts in an attempt to appreciate the aesthetic value of the drama through the use of language. Among them, pragmatics and discourse analysis are the most broadly employed ones. With the application of pragmatics, and discourse analysis, particularly conversation analysis, scholars have successfully studied such aesthetic elements as characterization, plot development, power relationship and

theme construction etc. by means of the playwright's arrangement of the dialogue. However, Li (2010) suggests "a methodological inadequacy or problem exists with the existent theories of drama stylistics; because of the overlapping nature of pragmatics and other linguistic theories (such as discourse analysis), this viewpoint has made the analytical framework confusing and unsystematic" (p. 247). As Verschueren (1999) claims, pragmatic principles operate at different levels of language, such as the phonological level, morphological level, syntactical level, semantic level and discourse level.

As a response to this current trend in drama stylistics, and to the burgeoning of pragmalinguistics as well, the present study seeks to analyze the characterization, the conflict between characters, plot development and theme construction in *Death of a Salesman* from a pragmatic perspective. To this end, this study places its analytic focus on a specific linguistic feature, namely, discourse markers. I think that the appropriate use of discourse markers in drama, which the main means of expression in this literary genre is face-to-face, spoken interaction, can achieve efficient and effective results. Brinton (1996) notes that, "while grammatically optional and semantically empty", discourse markers are "not pragmatically optional or superfluous" (p. 35). According to her, this is because they serve a variety of "interpersonal functions" (p. 64), which is essential for engaging in verbal interaction in a socially meaningful and acceptable way. In Brinton's (1996) words, "if such markers are omitted, the discourse is grammatically acceptable, but would be judged 'unnatural,' 'awkward,' 'disjointed,' 'impolite,' 'unfriendly,' or 'dogmatic' within the communicative context" (pp. 35-36). In this light, a pragmatic study of discourse markers and their functions in the process of turn-taking in *Death of a Salesman* will provide some useful insights into the appreciation of the drama and attempt to contribute to yet

another reassessment of Miller and his work.

Discourse markers in spoken and written discourses have been extensively explored in the English language (e. g. , Aijmer, 2002; Blakemore, 2002; Fraser, 1990, 1996, 1999; Lenk, 1998; Müller, 2005; Norrick, 2001; Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 1985, 1999, 2001) and in other languages (e. g. , Abraham, 1991; Onodera, 2004; Park, 1998). The rapid proliferation of studies on discourse markers attempt to label the function of discourse markers in a given context, but none attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the many possible comprehensions and functions of them in the appreciation of *Death of a Salesman*. Also, none of the previous works entail a comprehensive exploration of relationship among characters and the characterization through discourse markers' intended meanings and functions. There has also been no attempt to note how the functions and meanings of discourse markers shift according to their positions relative to conversational turns. To be frank, many studies of discourse markers paid attention to are studies focused on other topics, there has been no effort made to broaden the observable functions and meanings of discourse markers and make them applicable to many different types of contexts, especially to drama.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

Discourse markers are “tiny words” like *oh*, *well*, *but*, and *like*, etc. , which may often go unnoticed, but according to Short (1996), “in well-constructed dramatic dialogue everything is meant by the playwright, even when it is apparently unintended by the character” (p. 178). This study examines the use of discourse markers in *Death of a Salesman* and intends to achieve the following goals:

First, based on the pragmatic notions and principles of discourse markers, this study is to examine the discourse preceding and following

the use of discourse markers so as to describe a wide variety of uses of them, their roles in accomplishing the integration needed for discourse coherence, and their functions that discourse markers have served in particular contexts.

Second, the position of discourse markers relative to a conversational turn is explored in an attempt to describe the strategies that discourse markers have in turn-initiating, turn-responding, turn-claiming, turn-holding, and turn-yielding, according to Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) seminal framework for English conversation, the turn-taking system for conversation can be described in terms of a set of rules, namely, turn-constructual component, turn-allocation component and turn-taking rules.

The third purpose of this study is to add to the appreciation of the drama of *Death of a Salesman* from the pragmatic perspective of discourse markers, to reveal the characterization, characters' relationship and conflict, the regularity of the play's development and theme of the play.

Lastly, this study is to discuss the potential applications of the study, especially to the realm of stylistics of drama. The source for this study is the drama text, which is in need of critique and a study of the functions of discourse markers in turn-taking strategies, interestingly enough, is helpful in understanding and shedding light on literary criticism, that otherwise would go unnoticed.

1.3 Questions for the Study

The following questions are supposed to guide the whole study:

- (1) What functions do discourse markers have in drama text?
- (2) What rules do discourse markers follow in discourse structures — their position and function in turns?
- (3) What functions do discourse markers have in turn-taking

strategies?

(4) What are the features and pragmatic functions of turn-taking markers used in drama?

(5) How does discourse marker as one of the effective turn-control strategies work in turn-taking in *Death of a Salesman*?

(6) What functions do discourse markers have in characterization, forming the conflict and contributing to the theme of drama?

1. 4 Significance of the Study

This study is supposed to having both theoretical and practical applications.

(1) During the last two decades, discourse markers have been investigated from a variety of perspectives and approaches, most of which focuses on the literature on pragmatics, e. g. as signaling “a sequential relationship” between utterances (Fraser 1990, 1999), as marking discourse coherence (Schiffrin 1987; Lenk 1998), and from a relevance-theoretic point of view (Blakemore 2002; Blass 1990; Jucker 1993), to name just a few. However, this research attempts to take Sacks *et al.*’s basic mechanism as its analytical framework, to interpret the application of discourse markers to the process of turn-taking in *Death of a Salesman*, which is a new endeavor and challenging in carrying out the study. And this is also one of the innovations of the current study.

(2) Generally, *Death of a Salesman* is usually appreciated by means of the traditional literary critical approach. Then with the development of stylistics of drama, scholars both at home and abroad, focus their studies on this field. Culpeper, Short & Verdonk’s (1998) book entitled *Exploring the language of drama: from text to context* is the first one wholly devoted to stylistics of drama. In China, Yang

(1989), Yu (1999) and Wang (2000) helped in the development of the study of stylistics of drama. Yu (1999) set up analytical framework for analyzing the dialogue of drama, and with the application of cooperative principle, politeness principle, speech act theory, discourse roles and their switching, register analysis, pragmatic ambivalence and conversational strategies, and turn-taking analysis, etc., he applied his framework to traditional dramas, achieving detailed, systematic and convincing results. It is noteworthy and remains a pity that discourse markers in the character utterances in *Death of a Salesman* have not yet comprehensively approached. The result of the current study from the pragmatic perspective may complement the unremitting world-wide research of the drama, which has been dominantly literary criticism-oriented and rhetoric-oriented.

(3) There is a need for an interdisciplinary theory which accounts for the communicative functions of discourse markers, intending to achieve the inference by means of the use of them, especially, how to appreciate the leading aesthetic characteristics of drama, namely, the characteristics of characterization, the conflict between characters, plot development and theme contribution gained through the dialogues and other ingredients of drama texts. Empirical methods should be found to determine the extent to which underlying knowledge is shared. However, sometimes scholars disagree on some problems existing in the theories and practice of drama stylistics (Hu, 2000), and the methods have not systematically been employed to more specific materials of drama corpus full of culture. With the interpretability of a literary stylistic study explaining the verified situations of communication by dramatic texts, it is necessary that we should give greater impetus to the newly-reborn discipline.

(4) The current study takes *Death of a Salesman* as its subject, and tentatively discusses discourse markers in the character utterances in the drama in an attempt to discover the functions of discourse markers

in turn-taking strategies, and their functions in characterization, plot development, and theme construction, etc. If it works, this analytical method can also be applied to the appreciation of other drama texts.

1.5 Methodology of the Study

This study explores the use of discourse markers in turn-taking process in drama text, among which the leading characteristics of the data under analysis are informality and “interactivity” (Cameron, 2001, p. 9). As the main task of this study is to describe the linguistic behavior occurring with a social goal on a turn-by-turn basis, theoretically speaking, it is appropriate to follow the methods of Conversation Analysis (CA). CA can provide “a wide range of discourse features, including the overall structuring of talk exchanges, the distribution of turns at talk, sequencing of conversational contributions, speaker-listener coordination, and participants’ joint achievement of transactional and interpersonal goals”. (Kasper, 2000, p. 317)

Empirically, the descriptive and explanatory methods will be combined in writing the research. Through observation, the position, function and frequency of discourse markers in turn-initiating, turn-responding, turn-claiming, turn-holding and turn-yielding are described and the reasons for the use of discourse markers in concrete contexts are expounded. In the meantime, the methods of illustration, categorization, comparison, contrast, and discussion are also combined to carry out the study. The method of illustration is proved to be extremely useful in explaining and understanding the linguistic phenomena. The methods of qualitative and quantitative analysis are also combined to carry out the pragmatic illustration of discourse markers. The method of comparison and contrast is adopted particularly when various approaches to discourse markers are discussed. All this offers a sound analytic ground