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PRAGMATIC MARKERS IN THE SPOKEN DISCOURSE OF SELECTED UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATES IN KADUNA STATE UNIVERSITY

PAM, KEZIAH JONAH (PhD), OBINS, NUHU ISAAC & ONOJA ,ANDREW PhD)

Abstract

Pragmatic markers (PMs) contribute in conversations to a great extent even though they have no significant relevance to the meaning of the communication content itself. Pragmatic markers such as *you know* ,*um* ,*well* ,and *actually* play a vital role in structuring conversations ,managing turn -taking , and maintaining social relationships . This study examines the use of pragmatic markers PMs)in the spoken discourse of undergraduates at Kaduna State University (KASU) K,afanchan Campus .The study aims at exploring the complex roles that PMs play ,especially in specific contexts ,such as university settings ,where students engage in diverse forms of discourse ,ranging from casual peer interactions to formal academic discussions. The research adopts a mixed-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative analyses to investigate the frequency and functions of these markers in informal peer interactions and formal academic discussions. Data were collected through the recording of 20 hours of natural conversations across different contexts, followed by transcription and coding of the occurrences of specific PMs. The quantitative analysis reveals the predominant use of *you know* ,u*m* ,and *so* in informal settings ,while *actually* and *I mean* appear more frequently in formal academic contexts . The study observes gender -based differences with female students using hesitation markers more frequently than male students .The qualitative analysis highlights the social functions of PMs, including their role in signaling agreement, managing uncertainty, marking hesitation, and fostering social solidarity. The study contributes to the comprehension of PMs function in Nigerian university discourse ,offering insights into their role in both informal communication and academic settings . The findings suggest that PMs are essential tools for managing social dynamics , maintaining conversational flow , and constructing academic identities .The study recommends further research on PM use in other Nigerian and African universities and suggests integrating pragmatic competence into language education programmes to improve students ' communication skills in both formal and informal contexts .

Keywords: *Discourse Markers, Hesitation Markers, Pragmatic Markers, Social Interaction*

Introduction

In the study of language, communication extends beyond the structure and meanings of words and sentences to include small linguistic elements such as pragmatic markers (PMs). One of the key aspects of spoken language that facilitates effective interaction is the use of pragmatic markers. Pragmatic markers which are also referred to as discourse markers or fillers are small linguistic elements that, while not contributing to the core semantic content of a message, play crucial roles in organising discourse, managing conversational flow, and indicating the speaker ' s stance, attitude, or emotional state (Schiffrin 137 ; Holmes 67) Examples of such markers include expressions like *you know, like, um, well, as in* and *actually.* These markers are particularly common in informal speech, and they help speakers manage complex social dynamics, signal agreement or disagreement, mark hesitation, and structure conversation .

The study of PMs is situated within pragmatics, a subfield of linguistics that investigates how speakers use language in context to achieve their communicative goals (Yule 72). Pragmatic markers are thus seen as crucial tools for navigating both the structure of discourse and the social fabric of communication. In everyday conversation, speakers use PMs to manage turn-taking, convey uncertainty, facilitate understanding, and indicate shared knowledge (Aijmer 86). In addition to their structural and referential functions, PMs are also integral to the negotiation of social relationships, as they enable speakers to display solidarity, express politeness, and manage social distance (Holmes 69). Given the complex roles that PMs play, it is important to investigate their use in specific contexts, such as university settings, where students engage in diverse forms of discourse, ranging from casual peer interactions to formal academic discussions.

Department of English, University of Jos, Jos. keziahpam16@gmail.com, Department of General Studies, Nuhu Bamalli Polytechnic, Zaria, Samaru Kataf Campus, isaacobins@gmail.com, Department of English, University of Jos, Jos. onojaandrew@gmail.com

Corresponding Author
PAM, KEZIAH JONAH (PhD)
E-mail: keziahpam16@gmail.com

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the use of pragmatic markers in the spoken discourse of KASU undergraduates. The mixed-methods approach is particularly advantageous for exploring complex linguistic phenomena, as it allows for a more comprehensive understanding of both the frequency and contextual meaning of PMs in conversation. The quantitative aspect of the study focuses on the frequency and distribution of PMs across different conversational contexts, while the qualitative aspect examines the functions of these markers and their role in the social dynamics of the university. The combination of both methods offers a more nuanced understanding of the linguistic and social dimensions of pragmatic marker usage. The quantitative analysis provides the statistical data necessary to identify trends, while the qualitative analysis interprets these findings within the socio-cultural context of the university.

The target population for this study comprises selected undergraduate students at Kaduna State University (KASU) Ķafanchan Campus .One hundred participants drawn from the Faculties of Agriculture and Environmental and Management Sciences were used as sample . The campus provides a rich context for examining language use ,as it is a campus that attracts students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As a result, the student body at KASU Kafanchan Campus presents a unique opportunity to explore how pragmatic markers are used in both formal and informal contexts, reflecting different social relationships, academic statuses, and personal identities.

Data were collected through the recording of natural conversations among undergraduates using a recording device. The spoken discourses of the participants were recorded during lectures, and at break periods at departmental and faculty offices while they interacted amongst themselves, with lecturers, as well as other departmental and faculty officers. These conversations were discreetly recorded using an audio device to ensure that all utterances are captured without distortion. The use of natural, unaltered conversations allows for the study of PMs in their natural context, providing insights into how these markers function in real-world interactions. Departmental participants were informed about the recording procedure to grant their consent to participate but student participants were not informed so that they would produce natural conversations. Ethical considerations, such as ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, were upheld throughout the study.

While there is an extensive body of research on pragmatic markers, much of the existing literature focuses on their role in Western or global English-speaking contexts (Schiffrin 110 ;Holmes 9 4)Other researches that explored the language practices of Nigerian university students have predominantly focused on issues such as code-switching (Omoniyi 53), language and power (Wodak 142), and language in academic writing (Adeniran 116). However, there remains a significant gap in research when it comes to the use of pragmatic markers in informal spoken discourse, particularly in Nigerian universities like KASU. Taking into account how these markers are employed by undergraduates in both casual and formal interactions offers important insights into the social functions of language within this context.

While it is widely acknowledged that pragmatic markers are essential in managing conversation and expressing social relationships (Schiffrin 102), the specific ways in which these markers function in the speech of Nigerian university students remain under explored hence this study sets out to investigate it.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a multidisciplinary theoretical framework drawing concepts and approaches from Discourse Analysis, Pragmatics and Sociolinguistics. It is anchored in key theories such as Discourse Theory, Politeness Theory, and Gender Performativity.

Discourse Theory: Deborah Schiffrin's theory of discourse markers provide insights into how speakers organise discourse, manage interaction, and signal relationships between ideas. Discourse markers function as cohesive devices, especially in conversational and institutional settings (Schiffrin 31). The relevance of discourse theory to pragmatic markers in spoken discourse lies in how discourse theory provides a framework for understanding the structure, coherence, and function of language in use— precisely what pragmatic markers help manage. Discourse theory helps explain how speakers use these markers to manage turn-taking, signal topic shifts, or maintain coherence in conversation. Pragmatic markers function as discourse cues that guide listeners through the structure of talk, helping to maintain cohesion across utterances.

Politeness Theory: Drawing from Brown and Levinson's framework, Holmes explores how politeness strategies reflect social hierarchies and gendered expectations. She shows that women tend to use more indirect and polite forms, aligning with relational rather than transactional goals in communication (Holmes 45). This theory is particularly relevant to this study as it

shows how PMs function as hedges, making discourse less direct and absolute to mitigate assertiveness and promote politeness as shown by the analyses in this study. Aijmer discusses how discourse particles like "well," "you know," and "I mean" manage interaction and encode speaker attitudes (Aijmer 27). Lennon similarly highlights the multifunctionality of pragmatic markers in academic contexts, noting their role in hedging, indicating emphasis, or managing speaker-listener relationships (Lennon 118). This theory serves as a significant framework in which the study is anchored.

Gender Performativity: Baxter, applying Butler's gender performativity theory, argues that individuals enact gender through language choices. Baxter shows how gender identity is fluid and socially constructed through discourse, especially in institutional power dynamics (Baxter 89). This study finds this theory very foundational to its findings as pragmatic markers previously seen as signs of female inferiority are reframed as resources for performing relational, empathetic, or inclusive stances, which are contextual and strategic, not biologically determined.

The relevance of these frameworks to this study cannot be undermined given its multidisciplinary approach. Pragmatic markers often function to signal or reinforce the illocutionary force of a speech act. Pragmatic markers often function to mitigate the force of a speech act, making it more polite, tentative, or indirect. Pragmatic markers help speakers navigate these contextual factors and help clarify intentions and guide listener interpretation.

The theoretical framework of this study integrates sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspectives, rooted in discourse theory and grounded in the sociocultural realities of Nigeria. These theories provide tools for analysing how language constructs gendered identities and power relations within Nigerian academic discourse.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis:

Using a coding scheme, each recorded conversation was transcribed, and the occurrence of specific PMs were counted and categorised based on their type (e.g., discourse markers, hesitation markers). The frequency of PMs was then analysed.

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) statistical tool was used to analyse the frequency data, allowing for comparisons across various factors such as year group, gender, and the formality of the interaction. This helped to determine whether certain markers are associated with specific social contexts or groups of students.

Qualitative Analysis:

The qualitative component involved a thematic analysis of the functions and roles of pragmatic markers in discourse. This was done by examining the context in which each marker is used and interpreting its social function within the conversation. Key themes that emerged include:

- Signaling agreement or disagreement (e.g., use of *yeah, right*).
- Managing hesitation or uncertainty (e.g., use of *um, uh*).
- Facilitating topic transitions (e.g., use of *so, well*).
- Creating solidarity or expressing politeness (e.g., use of *you know, I mean*).

This helped to identify how students use PMs not only to structure their speech but also to manage their relationships with others, signal their attitudes, and navigate the social hierarchies within the university.

Results and Discussion of Findings

Quantitative Analysis of Pragmatic Markers

The quantitative analysis of the data was conducted by transcribing and coding a total of 20 hours of recorded conversations (in three days). The conversations were analysed for the frequency of specific pragmatic markers, including discourse markers (e.g., *you know, well*), hesitation markers (e.g., *um, uh*), and markers of emphasis or clarification (e.g., *actually, I mean*) The frequency of each marker was calculated and categorised based on context (informal vs formal) and demographic factors (year of study, gender).

Table 1: Frequency of Pragmatic Markers in Informal vs. Formal Contexts

Pragmatic Marker	Informal Contexts	Formal Contexts	Total Frequency	Percentage of Total
You know	62	20	82	21%
Um	45	8	53	13%
Well	30	16	46	11%
Actually	15	25	40	10%
I mean	27	12	39	9.5%
So	40	10	50	12%
Uh	35	6	41	10%
Right	10	5	15	3.5%
Like	20	3	23	5.5%

Prevalence of *You Know* and ***Um*** in Informal Contexts **:** The most frequent pragmatic marker across both informal and formal contexts is *you know* **,** which appeared significantly more in informal contexts (62 occurrences) than formal settings (20 occurrences). This is consistent with Schiffrin ' s finding that *you know* is used to establish shared understanding and rapport, particularly in more casual and familiar interactions. Similarly, hesitation markers like *um* and *uh* were more frequent in informal conversations (45 occurrences for *um,* 35 for *uh*) indicating that students tend to hesitate or take pauses more frequently in unstructured ,less formal settings.

Use of *Actually* and ***I Mean*** in Formal Settings **:** In contrast ,markers such as *actually* and *I mean* were used more frequently in formal contexts (25 occurrences of actually and 1 2of I mean) These markers often function to emphasise points ,clarify misunderstandings, or make corrections in academic or more structured conversations, which is consistent with their role in managing discourse in formal settings (Aijmer 22). The frequency of these markers suggests that students are more likely to use them when navigating academic discussions or clarifying their arguments.

Variations across Demographics: In terms of demographic factors, year of study and gender were found to influence the frequency and use of specific pragmatic markers. First-year students, for instance, showed a higher frequency of hesitation markers such as *um* and *uh* , reflecting their relative inexperience in university discourse and a tendency to pause while formulating thoughts .Senior students (third and fourth years)used markers like *so* ,actually ,and *you know* more frequently ,likely reflecting their greater confidence in engaging in academic discussions and interactions with faculty .

Qualitative Analysis of Pragmatic Markers

This analysis involved categorising the markers based on their conversational functions, including their role in managing turn-taking, signaling agreement or disagreement, expressing emotions, and marking hesitation. The following themes emerged:

Theme 1: Managing Turn-Taking and Topic Shifts

Many pragmatic markers were used to manage turn-taking and signal the introduction of new topics. For instance, the marker *well* was often used at the beginning of a sentence to signal a shift in the direction of the conversation .This marker helped speakers gain time to formulate their thoughts while maintaining control of the conversational floor . Similarly , *so* was frequently used to introduce new topics or conclude a discussion.

Example:

- Student 1: " I think we should focus on the group assignment next week. "
- Student 2: " Well, that ' s a good idea, but we should also prepare for the presentation tomorrow. "

Well signals a shift in the direction of the conversation and sets the stage for the introduction of a new topic. It ensures smooth transition from the initial suggestion to a related but distinct concern thus maintaining coherence

and politeness in the dialogue.

Theme 2: Signaling Agreement or Disagreement

Pragmatic markers such as *yeah, right,* and *you know* were commonly used to signal agreement or disagreement. *Yeah* was frequently employed to express affirmation or to show that the listener is actively engaged in the conversation. *Right* was used to signal understanding or agreement, while *you know* helped create a sense of shared knowledge, particularly in informal conversations between peers.

Example:

- Student 1: "I'm really struggling with this assignment."
- Student 2: "Yeah, I know. It's tough for everyone."

Yeah signals agreement and empathy in the conversation. In some instances, however, these markers were used to introduce disagreement or challenge a point, as seen with the use of *actually* and *I mean* in formal discussions. The use of "Yeah, I know" shows absolute agreement.

Example:

- Student 1: "I think the research paper is due next week."
- Student 2: "Actually, it's due in two days."

Actually serves as a correction, indicating disagreement with the previous statement.

Theme 3: Marking Hesitation and Uncertainty

Hesitation markers such as *um* and *uh* were used frequently to indicate that the speaker was unsure or needed more time to think. These markers were most common in informal peer-to-peer interactions, where students felt comfortable expressing hesitation without interrupting the flow of conversation. This finding aligns with previous research that suggests hesitation markers are often used in less formal settings where speakers are not under the same pressure to present polished or well-thought-out responses (Aijmer 110).

Example:

- Student 1: "Um, I'm not really sure what the lecturer said about the assignment."

Um marks a moment of hesitation as the student tries to recall information. The student uses "um" as some kind of break to think and process information. "Um" also signals hesitation showing power relations among peers as used here.

Theme 4: Social Bonding and Identity Construction

Pragmatic markers also played an important role in social bonding and the construction of group identity. Markers like you know were used to establish solidarity between speakers, particularly in peer conversations. The use of such markers created a sense of mutual understanding and rapport, reinforcing the social relationships between the students.

Example:

- Student 1: "You know, we really need to work together on this assignment."
- Student 2: "Yeah, I agree. We can do it if we all pull together."

You know is used to indicate shared understanding and reinforce group cohesion. In more formal settings, however, markers like *I mean* and *actually* helped to assert authority or clarify points, reflecting the different ways students construct their identities in academic versus informal contexts.

Findings and Contribution to Knowledge

The analysis also reveals the following:

Pragmatic Markers in Informal vs. Formal Contexts

One of the most significant findings of this study is the clear distinction in the frequency of PMs between informal and formal contexts. In informal peer interactions, markers such as *you know, um,* and *so* were used far more frequently than in formal academic settings. This pattern is consistent with previous studies that have shown that informal speech tends to rely heavily on discourse markers (Schiffrin 116; Holmes 96). These markers help maintain conversational flow, engage the listener, and signal shared knowledge in a relaxed, unstructured environment (Stenström et al. 174).

In contrast, formal academic discussions, such as those in classrooms or during group projects, saw an increased frequency of markers like actually, I mean, and well. These markers are typically used to clarify, emphasize, or reframe statements (Aijmer 84; Holmes 104). Their higher usage in formal contexts suggests that students employ these markers to manage discourse structure, assert authority in academic conversations, and clarify or elaborate on complex ideas. This finding supports the view that discourse markers like *actually* and I mean play critical roles in managing academic discourse, helping speakers correct, elaborate, or shifts

the direction of their statements (Lennon 137).

Hesitation Markers and Their Role in Managing Uncertainty

The use of hesitation markers, such as *um* and *uh,* was particularly prevalent in informal settings. These markers serve an important function in signaling pauses, uncertainty, or the need for time to think (Fillmore 41). The results of this study align with previous research suggesting that hesitation markers are more commonly used in less structured conversations, where speakers feel less pressure to present polished or final answers (Aijmer 75). Interestingly, while hesitation markers were used more frequently by female students in this study, this mirrors findings from Holmes and other recent studies (Gale and Smith 69) where women were found to use hesitation markers as a strategy for maintaining politeness and avoiding interruption. Female students may thus be more inclined to use these markers to manage their social positioning in conversations, signaling caution or deferring their turn when speaking.

Gender Differences in the Use of Pragmatic Markers

The gender-based differences in the use of PMs observed in this study provide further insights into how PMs function in managing social relationships and conversational power dynamics. Female students were found to use hesitation markers such as *um* and *uh* more frequently than their male counterparts .This finding is consistent with Holmes argument that women use more politeness markers in conversation, which helps maintain smooth communication and avoid conflict in interactions. In addition, the use of discourse markers such as *you know* was also higher among female students . Recent studies (Gale and Smith 73; Coates 92) have noted that women's use of PMs such as *you know* often aims to create a sense of shared understanding and solidarity, especially in social contexts where relational dynamics are more fluid.

Conversely, male students in this study appeared to use *actually* and *I mean* more frequently than their female counterparts in formal academic settings. These markers allow speakers to assert their opinions more forcefully, often introducing clarification or a shift in stance, which may reflect gendered differences in how authority and expertise are communicated (Coates 124). This usage of assertive markers by male students aligns with research that suggests men are more likely to engage in dominance-based discourse strategies, particularly in academic or hierarchical settings (Baxter 152).

Pragmatic Markers and Social Bonding

A notable social function of PMs is their role in social bonding and identity construction. Markers like *you know* and I mean were frequently used to create a sense of shared understanding ,especially in informal peer -to -peer interactions . This finding is consistent with Stenström et al.'s observation that PMs such as *you know* are often used to signal familiarity and engagement , strengthening the social bond between speakers .In the context of KASU, where students come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds , these markers facilitate group membership and help students navigate the complexities of social and academic life. They act as "social lubricants," fostering rapport and signaling solidarity (Lennon 162).

However, in formal academic discussions, students were more likely to use PMs that allowed for clarification, emphasis, and correction, such as *actually* and I mean .These markers play a key role in managing academic identity ,helping students present themselves as informed and confident speakers. The use of PMs like *actually* to correct a point or offer a counter -argument also reflects the competitive nature of academic discourse ,where speakers may use these markers to assert control over the direction of the conversation (Aijmer 127).

Pragmatic Markers and Discourse Management

The findings of this study also highlight the important role that PMs play in managing the structure of conversations. In both informal and formal contexts, students used markers like *well, so,* and right to introduce new topics ,continue discussions ,or signal changes in direction. These markers help organise speech and make interactions more coherent, allowing speakers to manage the flow of discourse. Schiffrin's framework of discourse markers as "sequentially dependent elements" is reflected here ,as PMs enable speakers to create smoother transitions, move the conversation forward, and keep it on track (Schiffrin 162).

In informal contexts, PMs were often used in a more spontaneous, relaxed way to keep the conversation fluid and prevent awkward silences. In contrast, in formal academic discussions, PMs such as actually were used more strategically to manage interruptions and reframe arguments. This underscores the role of PMs in balancing conversational spontaneity and structured academic discourse.

Cultural Context and Use of PMs in Nigerian Universities

This study also contributes to the growing body of research on African Englishes and how cultural and social context influences language use. Recent studies on Nigerian English have shown that PMs serve not only functional purposes but also social ones, reflecting power, politeness, and group affiliation (Omoniyi 103). In Nigerian universities, where diverse linguistic backgrounds come into play, the strategic use of PMs allows students to navigate both local and global linguistic norms. The way that students at KASU use PMs— whether to signal hesitation, agreement, or clarification—also reflects broader social dynamics such as age, academic status, and peer relationships. These markers, therefore, play a crucial role in managing the social fabric of university life.

Conclusion

This study explored the use of pragmatic markers (PMs) in the spoken discourse of undergraduates at Kaduna State University (KASU). The findings reveal significant differences in the frequency and functions of PMs across informal and formal contexts. PMs such as *you know, um,* and so were more prevalent in informal settings, facilitating conversation flow and establishing rapport, while markers like *actually* and I mean were more common in formal academic contexts, serving to clarify or emphasise points. Gender differences were also observed, with female students using hesitation markers (*um*, uh) more frequently than males, indicating a pattern of politeness and deferment in their speech. Overall, the study highlights the crucial role of PMs in managing discourse, constructing social relationships, and navigating the academic environment.

Departmental participants were informed about the recording procedure to grant their consent to participate. This constituted a limitation to the study because they will naturally not produce natural conversations. However, this did not impede the outcome of the entire study since more of the participants were not informed. In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into the linguistic practices of KASU students, showing how pragmatic markers shape conversations, contribute to social bonding, and manage academic discourse in higher education.

Recommendations

i. Further Research: Future studies should expand this research to other Nigerian and African universities to examine the use of PMs across diverse contexts and cultural backgrounds, providing a broader understanding of their role in university discourse.

ii. Incorporating Pragmatic Competence: Language programmes should integrate pragmatic competence into curricula, teaching students the social functions of PMs to enhance both informal communication and academic discourse.

iii. Cross-Cultural Communication: Given the multicultural nature of Nigerian universities, further exploration is needed into how PMs function in cross-cultural interactions, improving intercultural communication and student engagement.

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