

Pragmatic Markers as Signals of Discourse Expectations: A Corpus-Based Study of Political and Human–AI Interaction

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Building on expectation-based accounts of discourse processing and coherence-relation inference (e.g., Kehler et al., 2008; Rohde et al., 2011), as well as functional-pragmatic approaches to discourse and pragmatic markers (Aijmer, 2013; Furkó, 2020), this study examines whether and how pragmatic-marker uses cue anticipated discourse relations. Rather than claiming direct evidence about comprehenders' online processing, we analyse production-side signals that make particular continuations or reinterpretations more expectable.

The study addresses three questions: (1) How do the discourse-pragmatic uses of *of course*, *actually*, *well*, and *right* prospectively constrain or retrospectively revise discourse expectations? (2) How do their functions differ between adversarial, spoken political interviews and typed human–AI dialogue? (3) To what extent does AI-generated marker use reproduce surface distributional patterns found in human interaction while differing in sequential and interactional deployment? The corpora were selected to contrast a high-stakes setting characterised by contestation and epistemic positioning with a lower-stakes, technologically mediated setting in which an AI system responds to user prompts. The political-interview corpus contains 100,542 words/52 interviews, and the human–AI corpus contains 99,458 words/12 conversations generated with CharGPT 5.5.

All occurrences of the four target forms were retrieved and manually disambiguated. Only discourse-pragmatic uses were retained; compositional, propositional, or otherwise non-marker uses were excluded. Token-level annotation recorded speaker/source, turn position, local sequential environment, and the discourse relation cued by the marker. Discourse-functional classification distinguished, among other functions, common-ground or inferential-licensing uses, correction/contrast, response-prefacing, and alignment or confirmation. Sequential analysis then examined how these annotated uses co-occurred with interactional phenomena such as hesitation, self-repair, challenge, uptake, and stance negotiation. Around 20% of the data was independently double-coded.

Preliminary results indicate setting-sensitive tendencies rather than categorical differences. In political interviews, *of course* frequently presents a following proposition as inferentially licensed or already shared, often in environments of challenge or ideological positioning; *actually* more often introduces correction or contrast and thereby revises an expectation established by the preceding turn. In the human–AI data, *well*, *actually*, and *right* also occur turn-initially and may mirror user wording, but they are less often embedded in extended sequences of hesitation, repair, challenge, or negotiated stance. These findings suggest that AI-generated markers can reproduce familiar positional and functional patterns without consistently displaying the same degree of locally strategic interactional adaptation. Statistical reproduction and strategic deployment are therefore treated as gradient, potentially overlapping properties rather than mutually exclusive categories.

The study contributes a theoretically explicit and methodologically transparent account of pragmatic markers as cues to discourse expectations across contrasting modes and settings. Its conclusions remain provisional: the analysis identifies corpus-based signalling patterns, not direct comprehension effects, and claims about human–AI differences are limited to the annotated datasets and systems examined.

References

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