Transitioning between Small Talk and Work Talk through Discourse Markers: Evidence from a Workplace Spoken Corpus

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Abstract

The focus of this article revolves around discourse markers (DMs) that are used when switching between work talk and small talk in workplace interactions. Research in this field has showed how discourse markers are used to manage several interpersonal dynamics in interaction. This study is aimed at identifying which DMs are used in the workplace to operate a shift of topic, how often DMs are used at the juncture of interaction, and what are their specific pragmatic and discursive function when they are used in these situations. This study is based on a workplace small-talk corpus of spoken American English. Results show that DMs are often used to mark the shift to a different topic or mode of discourse; in particular, shifts to work talk are marked more often than shifts to more small talk on different topics. Also, speakers may select different DMs based on the type of shift. The role and function of the highest-ranking discourse markers were observed, as well as pragmatic implications and impact in the daily interactions among co-workers.

Key words

Discourse markers; pragmatic markers; interaction boundaries; small talk; workplace discourse

1. Introduction

People typically spend a very large amount of their adult lives in workplaces and while every workplace is governed by specific rules and interpersonal dynamics, spoken interaction among coworkers is common and typical of most work environments. Many interactions among colleagues are work-related, but depending on factors like the workplace environment, the type of work, and the individual personalities of the workers, work talk intertwines with small talk. The worker who engages in small talk interactions pursues essential goals, such as building and keeping relationships with coworkers, taking a break from the work routine, contributing to a friendly work environment (see Di Ferrante 2013; Holmes, 1998, 2000; Koester 2006; Mullany 2006), and also "managing their human energy" (Fritz et al. 2011: 32–33; see also Fritz et al. 2013).

This paper concerns the pragmatic implications of the alternation between task-oriented and non-task oriented discourse among coworkers. Research has demonstrated how boundaries of spoken exchanges can reveal important information on the mechanics and power dynamics of interpersonal relationships (see for example, Angouri & Marra 2010, 2011; Bolden 2006; Laver 1975, 1981; Lee, Lee, and Narayanan 2008; Lindström 1994). Different strategies and linguistic markers are used to introduce a new topic, exhausting the topic at hand or enacting engagement on the ongoing discussion on a certain topic. Small talk and "instrumental discourse" (Schneider 1988: 1) – namely talk that is oriented to the task at hand – have been analyzed as two different types of discourse (Kuiper & Flindall 2000; Schneider 1988). These two types of discourse are both functional to the employees' well-being and to their job performance, but the passage from one to the other is a crucial moment where co-workers manage and negotiate their time at work, which is made of work, and non-work-related activities (for example relaxation, eating, social interaction – see Kim et al. 2017, 2018).

Although fundamental, the functions and pragmatic implications of specific discursive strategies for the workplace dynamics are little understood and taught. Moreover, such strategies and implications are highly difficult to grasp for learners of English as a second/foreign language who need to understand and interpret non-literal and intended meanings along with indirect language and usage in workplace communication in English. It turns out that both recognizing and marking change of topics or willingness to transition from small talk to work talk, for example, are very important pragmatic skills for anyone who wants to communicate effectively in the workplace context, let alone to keep smooth professional relations. The passage from chitchat to more serious matters is quite crucial as it can be problematic, embarrassing, or subject to criticism and speakers often use implicit verbal and non-verbal strategies not to make this transition abrupt or too obvious. Understanding and facilitating the passage by decoding discourse markers that accomplish such a function is an important interactional and pragmatic aspect of communicative competence. In order to contribute to the ways such competence can be acquired and developed, it is therefore necessary to analyze how speakers rely on specific discourse markers to convey the intention of shifting topic in spoken interaction.

To explore this gap in understanding, the goals of this paper are as follows: first, to show how speakers' awareness of interactional dynamics is reflected in the discursive strategies used at the junctures of interactions to switch from one to the next; second, to engage the reader in reflecting on how discourse markers are used as explicit cartilage for those junctures and help the speaker to regulate the shift of the interaction; third, to elicit the strategies used to manage interactions and the balance between small talk and task-oriented talk in workplace settings.

The research questions addressed here are, RQ1: How often and what discourse markers are used to switch topics in spontaneous interactions in the workplace? RQ2: What are the metadiscursive functions of discourse markers as they relate to the management of change of discourse topic?

This paper is based on data gathered from the Small Talk at Work corpus (STW, Di Ferrante, 2013), which is a 50,000-word sub-corpus culled from the AAC and Non AAC Workplace Corpus (ANAWC, Pickering & Bruce, 2009; Pickering et al., 2019). The corpus consists of spoken American English discourse, comprising only non task-oriented workplace interactions among over 200 coworkers. On the basis of the results obtained analyzing occurrence, frequency, and functions of discourse markers positioned at crucial points of transitions, implications are discussed that contribute to the understanding of workplace dynamics that might be relevant when switching from small talk to work talk.

2. Literature Review

The variety of features and diversity of characteristics of discourse markers explain why some very frequently cited works on the topic state that (that of) discourse marker is "a fuzzy concept" (Jucker & Ziv 1998: 2), and "no taxonomy can do more than partially represent a fuzzy reality" (Hyland 1998: 444). In truth, *fuzzy* has often been used to refer to discourse markers for several reasons; firstly, the concept of discourse markers does not have one single definition which is widely accepted and relied on: "there has been considerable debate on what counts and does not count as a discourse marker" (Fraser 2015: 48; see also Bazzanella 2006; Fischer 2006; Jucker & Ziv 1998). Secondly, discourse markers do not belong to one grammatical category, and their belonging to one class or another is often established on the basis of the function of each discourse maker in the different contexts of use and on the basis of the linguistic co-text (see Bazzanella 1995), which clearly represents a difficulty for attempting categorization (see Bazzanella 2001); in this regard, Biber and colleagues notice that in some cases, particularly with "utterance launchers" (1999: 1078), only prosodic information, when available, allows to determine the grammatical status of discourse markers (see also Erman, 2001). Thirdly, a given discourse marker may have multiple pragmatic and discursive functions: several scholars have examined the polyfunctionality of discourse markers which refers to the both variability of functions in different contexts – and co-texts – and to the co-occurrence of multiple functions in the same context – and co-text – see *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic polyfunctionality* in Bazzanella 2006, 2010).

For example, in terms of polyfunctionality, Müller (2005) identifies nine different functions of the discourse marker *so*, five at the textual level and four at the interactional level, which – particularly interestingly for the purposes of the present study – include the function of *boundary marker* and that of *transition relevance place*. However, the nine functions of *so* do not represent an isolated case of a particularly versatile discourse marker when compared with the thirty different functions of *you know* that Müller (2005) was able to gather by reviewing the relevant literature (identifying 12 of these functions also in her own data).[1] Because of the multiplicity of functions that can be conveyed by the same discourse marker and of the discursive and pragmatic considerations involved in the process, many scholars underlined how identifying functions is not an easy task:

> The difficulties in identifying the different functions of certain markers are obvious, especially when the meaning of the marker must be defined in pragmatic terms. It is often hard to determine whether the meaning of a marker belongs to the marker itself or to the context. (Cuenca 2008: 1373)

A very good example is the discourse marker *well*. With the following example, Fuller (2003: 24) shows that the discourse marker *well* "signals that what follows is a reformulation of the previous utterance":

B: I never got to go to Rome or Greece or Italy...
A: **Well**, you never chose to go to Rome or Greece or Italy... you could've gone, you did not choose to do it. I mean I never had more money than you to do it, I just did it, anyway.

A learner of English, or anyone, who were to interpret this exchange and the role of *well* with the help of a dictionary might struggle notably. Even when a dictionary signals the role of a word as discourse marker, the meanings and the features are greatly assorted and sometimes vague. Assuming that this person is a diligent one and makes the time and effort to discriminate among the multiple meanings of *well* as a noun, an adverb, and adjective, and as a constituent of an idiom, s/he will find that it is also labeled as an interjection which is used to resume a line of discourse, to introduce a remark, or to express surprise and remonstration (Merriam Webster online; Dictionary.com; thefreedictionary.com). If s/he is fortunate enough, s/he will have looked it up in a dictionary that also indicates the function of *well* as a "sentence connector" and "an expression used to preface a remark, gain time, etc". However, none of the online dictionaries I examined mentions the reformulation function observed in Fuller (2003) and reported above. Interestingly though, that reformulation function is not infrequent[2] in spoken interaction and is reported in several studies (see for example Cuenca 2008; Müller 2005). In addition, the acquisition and use of discourse markers by language learners may not correspond to a full and accurate awareness of their functions (see Borreguero Zuloaga 2018 on the acquisition of discourse markers by learners of L2 Italian; see also *pragmatic fossilization of discourse markers,* "the phenomenon by which a non-native speaker systematically uses certain forms inappropriately at the pragmatic level of communication": Romero Trillo 2002: 70; Zhao 2013).

   In truth, not only have different labels been attributed to this object of study (Brinton 1998 identified over a dozen different labels) but also many classifications and taxonomies have been proposed – with different fortunes – over time and especially starting from the late 1980s and the early 1990s (see, for example, Fraser 1999 for an overview and Borreguero Zuloaga 2018 for a more recent proposal). Approaches have also been distinguished between broader and narrower conceptions on their metadiscursive function (for example, more focused on textual interaction or on reflexivity: Ädel & Mauranen 2010), interactional function (see also Romero Trillo 2002) and cognitive function (see Bazzanella, 2006 and

Fung & Carter, 2007 for a discussion on the three functions and their microfunctions). Regardless of the diversity of approaches to these devices, it is crucial to notice and analyze the uses, meanings, and functions of discourse markers to become aware of the possibility of using them strategically in discourse, for example as cues for the addressee to where the discourse is going or how it should be interpreted. Investigating discourse markers is also very important to the point that Jung (2006), for example, found that the absence of discourse markers impacted significantly the comprehension of spoken discourse by non-native listeners.

Although research has explored many aspects of DMs in written discourse, spoken discourse has been sidelined and the pedagogical implications much less investigated. Such a gap is being filled thanks to research based on spoken corpora (see, for example, Ajmer 2015; Borreguero Zuloaga 2018; Broggini & Murphy 2017; Erman 2001; Fung & Carter 2007; Lee & Subtirelu 2015; Müller 2005).

As noted above, the linguistic form of discourse markers tends to be disconnected from its original meaning and to assume additional linguistic and extralinguistic uses, which have multiple functions, including structuring the discourse, emphasizing the interactional configuration of the utterance, and "instruct[ing] the hearer to construct a mental representation of the discourse" (Fung & Carter 2007: 415). Discourse markers have been found to be particularly relevant when used at the boundaries of interactions as they are inherently suited to open an interaction, to close it, or to shift it to a different topic; in Fraser's terms, "they function like a two-place relation, one argument lying in the segment they introduce, the other lying in the prior discourse" (1999: 938).

In 1998, Hyland discussed discourse markers at the boundaries of interactions as "frame markers" (442) and therefore with a relevant metadiscursive function and defined them as "explicit references to text boundaries or elements of schematic text structure, either introducing shifts in the discourse or preparing for the next step in the argument" (1998: 442–443). In other words, these frame markers are used to signal that a change is occurring and they denote discourse boundaries and/or topic shifts: "Items in this category therefore provide interpretive framing information about longer elements of the discourse." (Hyland 1998: 443). Drawing on Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen's (1993) taxonomy, he details this definition, specifying that these frame markers "includ[e] items used to sequence, to label text stages, to announce discourse goals, and to indicate topic shifts" (2004: 138); the following examples are presented as instances of frame markers: "Finally/to conclude/my purpose is to" (p. 139). From both the definition and these examples, it seems that Hyland tends to conceive of frame markers as explicit references to their position in the interaction (*finally*, for example, leads toward the end of a stretch of discourse). However, he lists *well* and *now* (Hyland 1998: 443) as examples of frame markers for topic shift, and these two DMs only implicitly signal the boundary of the interaction[3]. These latter examples of frame markers for topic shifts are not included in his later works (see for example, Hyland 2004, 2017), suggesting that explicit markers are perhaps more central to a focus on academic written texts. The connection between the explicit frame markers and the written texts might be reinforced by the fact that on the basis of Hyland's categorization, Broggini and Murphy

(2017) investigate the presence of frame markers (specifically sequencing and stage labels) in academic lectures in English as a lingua franca and they did not find many occurrences. Interestingly, studies that explored spoken interactions often identified instances where less explicit discourse markers were found at the beginning of an interaction or to switch topics. Müller (2005) worked with a corpus of spoken discourse and found that *so* was often used as a boundary marker. Bolden (2006) analyzes casual interactions among family members and finds that two discourse markers, *so* and *oh* are predominantly used to introduce a new "conversational matter" (663) and that the choice of one or the other is determined by the orientation of the utterance on the self or on the interlocutor. More specifically, Bolden refers to *so* as "sequence-initial" (663), meaning that what is introduced by it, had been planned to be said by the speaker, as opposed to *oh*, which introduces matters that just occurred to the speaker. Bolden (2008) suggests that "the basic interactional function of *so* as a marker of "emergence from incipiency" serves to characterize the upcoming action as introducing the conversation's first "intended" talkable – something that was projected by the very act of initiating the contact, what parties orient to as having been pending or incipient" (305).

Finally, it is relevant to notice here that discourse markers may be produced in combination (see Lohmann & Koops 2016 and Cuenca & Crible 2019 for an overview of the relevant literature) where two or more are used together in spontaneous interactions: "two non-identical elements form a DM sequence if each is used as a DM independently and a speaker produces them in a row" (Lohmann & Koops 2016: 423). Although instances of this phenomenon (*sequencing*: Fraser 2011; *clustering*: Maschler 1994)[4] have been analyzed in a number of studies, only very recently has research been exploring this aspect more systematically. For example, in their works, Lohmann and Koops (2016) and Cuenca and Crible (2019) identified both sequences that tend to occur more frequently, as well as discourse markers that tend to occupy predominantly a given position within sequencing. In this regard, some studies focused on these multipart sequences "at the beginning and the end of conversational turns" (Cuenca & Marin 2009; Haselow 2019: 2; Pons Borderìa 2018) finding regularities in the turn position where discourse markers tend to be used (turn beginning vs. turn end); also these discourse markers have been found to "serve specific communicative functions, especially at turn-beginnings and -endings where speakers need to deal with a large set of generic tasks" (Haselow 2019: 15).

Jones and Carter (2013) explore explicit methods to teach discourse markers and suggest that while a spoken corpus provides information on the frequency of use of different markers, "these may be linked directly to a particular cultural identity and therefore may not be the most useful items for learners." While this statement is debatable, it underlines how relevant it is to be able to effectively and appropriately handle discourse markers within particular cultural contexts and it seems that workplaces are particularly complex contexts in terms of representation of corporate and personal identity (see Angouri & Marra 2011; Di Ferrante 2016; Holmes & Marra 2002a; Mullany 2006).

3. Methodology

About thirty years ago, discourse markers were often considered "markers of unclear thinking" (Crystal 1988: 47); since then, by relying on corpora of spoken discourse, research has abundantly shown that on the contrary discourse markers are key to successful communication. Studies have demonstrated how their discursive and pragmatic functions vary on the basis of many variables including the context and the interlocutors. It turns out then, that spoken corpora are a valuable tool to identify discourse markers in conversation and to analyze their frequency and functions (Aijmer 2015; Müller 2005; Romero Trillo 2002). The goal of this research is to identify which discourse markers are used in the workplace to change topic, at what frequency this occurs, and what their specific function is when used for this purpose. In order to do this, the data analyzed here are based on a spoken corpus of American English, the Small Talk at Work sub-corpus (henceforth STW; Di Ferrante 2013), which is a collection of spontaneous, naturally-occurring small talk interactions in the workplace. The interactions in the corpus were isolated from a larger workplace corpus, the AAC and Non-AAC Workplace Corpus (ANAWC, Pickering & Bruce 2009; Pickering et al. 2019), which is a corpus of spoken workplace discourse. It was collected by transcribing the audio recordings of workplace talk recorded by eight workers of six different American workplaces, over five days. The STW sub-corpus consists of 423 small talk interactions and around 50,000 words; it comprises interactions between four focal participants recording the exchanges and over 200 coworkers with whom they interacted. Two of the four focal participants are Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) users: this term refers to people whose ability to speak is impaired due to communication disorders and who rely on AAC strategies and or technologies to talk. In the ANAWC corpus, these speakers rely on different types of AAC depending on several variables (see Bouchard et al. 2021; Di Ferrante & Bouchard 2020).[5]

The interactions are non-task oriented, and they only include face-to-face exchanges (phone calls were not included). In the present work, the sub-corpus was examined with a specific focus on the boundaries of these interactions where explicit discourse markers occur. In particular, the small talk interactions in the corpus alternate with transactional discourse or with more small talk but with a switch of topic.

The boundaries between small talk interactions and between these and task-oriented talk have been examined to determine the frequency of discourse markers; then the distribution of discourse markers was analyzed based on their function in terms of structuring the discourse and marking the shift toward a different small talk topic or a work-talk interaction. Finally, a qualitative analysis on the functions of discourse markers has been carried out on the basis of the evidence provided by the frequency analysis. Specifically, the pragmalinguistic use of highest ranking discourse markers was interpreted in the discursive context as determined by the sequences of events in the general script (Schank & Abelson 1977) of talk in the workplace; the sequences refer to the moves from small talk to work talk and vice versa.

4. Analysis

The main focus here is how coworkers use discourse markers to switch to a new topic. In particular, the analysis is aimed at identifying whether any relation exists between the use of specific discourse markers and the type of shift, and what pragmatic considerations can be made when participating in workplace exchanges.

In order to address the first research question (RQ1) on the identification and frequency of discourse markers used to switch topics in spontaneous interactions in the workplace, discourse markers are investigated that govern the boundaries of interaction in the alternation between small talk and work talk. Specifically, the absolute distribution of discourse markers at the boundaries of the interactions was considered in the STW corpus along with their distribution relative to the type of boundary. The interactions where these DMs are used, were also analyzed in a discourse analysis perspective in order to identify their functions not just in terms of text structure, but also in the context of workplace dynamics and social relationships among coworkers (RQ2). As a matter of fact, following Fraser (1999), discourse markers "impose a relationship between some aspects of the discourse segment they are a part of, call it S2, and some aspect of a prior discourse segment, call it S1" (938). Hence, in order to examine this relationship and for the purposes of this study, it is important to explore the metadiscursive functions of DMs as they relate to the management of change of discourse topic. The research questions are addressed in parallel in the following analysis as the quantitative results shed light on the discourse analysis of the interactions, hence while the two research questions complement each other, in the following sections I will focus first on forms and frequencies of discourse markers and then on their distribution and functions.

4.1 DMs as transition facilitators: forms and frequencies

Since this paper is concerned with those markers that determine the passage from one topic to the next, the starting point of the analysis consisted of classifying all the interactions in the corpus on the basis of the type of boundary that characterizes them.

Table 1. Boundaries of small talk interactions

Boundaries	F	P
Shift to work talk	190	45%
Transition to more small talk	123	29%
Separation	89	21%
Interruption	17	4%
End of the recording	4	1%
Total	423	100%

As shown in Table 1, the endings of the small talk interactions have been coded on the basis of what they led to: 45% of the small talk exchanges ended to switch to work talk; 29% is constituted by transitions, a shift from a small talk interaction to another small talk interaction (the transition is ambivalently the end of a small talk exchange and the beginning of another small talk exchange); 21% of the talks end instead with the physical separation of the participants. Finally, 4% of the small talk interactions end because the participants are interrupted by someone who was not participating in the communicative event or by something that happens (a phone call, an alarm ringing, etc.); only 1% of the interactions ends either because the participants turn the recorders off or the battery of the recorder runs out of power.

For the purposes of this paper, the interactions ending with separation, interruption, or the end of the recording were not part of the analysis. The boundaries characterized by shifts to work talk and transitions to more small talk were then looked at and the presence of DMs was assessed on the basis of a) their position at the juncture between the two interactions b) previous literature on discourse markers and their functions, c) their being "independent of sentential structure [in that] removal of a marker from its sentence initial position, in other words, leaves the sentence structure intact" (Schiffrin 1987: 31). Moreover, for DMs that have a SUBJ-V structure (*parentheticals*: Dehé 2014; Kozubíková Šandová 2015), such as *I mean, I think, I guess, you know*, Pizziconi (in preparation) suggests that switching the tense, usually from present to past, should not affect the analyzed phrase when it works as a discourse marker.

Both those intersections that lead to work talk or to more small talk show particularly interesting results as far as the use of discourse markers is concerned. In Table 2, the boundaries between two interactions are organized based on whether the discourse marker is present or not.

Table 2. Distribution of DMs on the boundaries of interaction

Boundaries		F	P
Shift to work talk		**190**	100%
	with DM	84	44%
	without DM	106	56%
Transition to more small talk		**123**	100%
	with DM	38	31%
	without DM	85	69%

First, it is interesting to notice that workers use discourse markers when switching to work talk more often than when shifting to small talk: discourse markers are used in 44% of the total shifts to work talk and in 31% of the transitions to small talk. This can probably be related to the passage to work talk representing a sharper change of discourse mode compared to the transition to more small talk. Additionally, the different quantity of discourse markers might also be a signal of pragmatic implications. In other words, the more frequent use of discourse markers when switching to work talk compared to small talk may indicate that

the former is more problematic, or pragmatically complex; for this reason, it may need specific linguistic strategies to be handled. It should also be taken into account that the shift to work talk may also involve a change in the frame of mind as it often implies also a passage from a lighter, sometimes cheerful mood to a more focused one, hence it is possible that the speaker signals the switch not just to their interlocutors, but also as a way for themselves to focus on a task that requires to concentrate. It is therefore important to notice that the shift to work talk might prove to be a challenging move as the person who decides to put the small talk to an end is also going to cease a moment of break from work tasks, which is often cheerful and enjoyable. Thus, the passage needs to be handled by taking into account this type of considerations and often discourse markers are to be employed along with other carriers of epistemic modality to smooth the transitions.

In the following interaction (Example 1), some coworkers are entering a room to start a meeting. One of their colleagues has not arrived yet and Sarah[6] is joking about it and suggests that it would have taken their colleague some time before arriving at the office. At that point, Rachel utters the move to shift to work talk.

Example 1

1 Rachel: or it might be just me and you [+] cuz nobody's here at the office either
2 [laughter] oh here's Michelle [+] and and uh uh Sharon's on her way
3 Sarah-AAC: alright it'll be a while before I can
4 Rachel: huh?
5 Sarah-AAC: it will be a while
6 Rachel: [+] it'll be a while?
7 Sarah-AAC: yeah
8 Rachel: yes [laughter] well she did say she was on her she she was stopping to get
9 breakfast and then [+] she was gonna be here
10 Sarah-AAC: yeah it'll be a while [laughter]
11 Rachel: **well** [+] **so anyway I guess** we should go on and [+]

Note: The grey-highlighted portion of text is the one including the work talk.

As we can see, Rachel uses a combination of four different DMs, *well*, *so, anyway,* and *I guess* to signal her move to shift discourse from small talk to work talk. This sequence of discourse markers is unusual because of its length and there is a paucity[7] of such instances recoded in the literature. However, previous studies have found that, just like in Example 1 here, *well* is typically used as the first item in discourse marker sequences (see Cuenca & Crible 2019; Lohmann & Koops 2016). The use of *well* by Rachel seems to have the function of acknowledging the fact that Sharon is not going to be at the office for a while, which entails there is no point in waiting; in other words, *well* displays the orientation of Rachel toward Sara's last utterance and at the same time a move to reorient the talk forward. The reorientation toward what follows, work talk, is further stressed by *so anyway* which, according to Cuenca & Crible (2019) "incorporates the structural meanings of continuity and change of topic, but it can also be seen as a compound

marker of (sub)topic change." Rachel is clearly shifting away from small talk toward a new focus on work talk, but does it very cautiously, to the point she also chooses to use an epistemic stance of doubt, *I guess* (Biber et al. 1999; Kärkkäinen 2007), which is then followed by the modal verb *should*, also expressing epistemic modality and hence the intention of the speaker to convey tentativeness (Coates 1987; see also Holmes 1990) rather than assertiveness. The abundance of hedges used by Rachel to make the passage to the work talk as smooth as possible and to clearly mark the tentative nature of her move is evidence of the extent to which the shift from small talk to work talk can be perceived as a transition that needs to be handled with a certain degree of cautiousness. The interactional troublesomeness of transitions is well described in a study by Deppermann, Schmitt, and Mondada (2010), who focus on "transitions between bounded activities […] such activities are, for instance, openings and closings of a conversation, the subsequent management of various topics of the agenda or the beginning of a presentation" (1700) in meetings. Through videorecordings they carry out a multimodal analysis showing that transitions are perceived by the participants as crucial interactional points.

Furthermore, as shown in Example 2, managing small talk in a work environment can also be a rather sensitive matter: doing small talk might be perceived as subtracting time from work and at the same time, trying to move the interaction from a humorous or relaxed, nonwork-related break among coworkers to work issues is a pragmatically-charged move that needs to be carefully handled and this is reflected in the discursive strategies selected by the speakers when operating the transitions between small talk and work talk.

In the passage in Example 2, it can be observed how Meryl makes use of a discourse marker along with other linguistic material to activate the switch to work discourse. Coworkers are doing small talk about graduate programs in social work and speech-language pathology in a specific U.S. State. They are sharing information about some graduate programs being cancelled. In order to criticize the Montrose school for not having graduate programs, Alice states that social workers are not needed in Montrose. Gary does not get the sarcasm and explains how someone wanted to enroll in a graduate program in Montrose, but was not able to do so because the programs had been cancelled. When Alice tries to explain that she meant the opposite of what she had actually said, Meryl jumps in, making clear that Alice's statement was actually sarcastic. At that point, it is Meryl who tries to move the conversation from small talk to work talk:

Example 2

1   Gary: right so what I'm saying is they're not having graduate programs
2   in Montrose anymore
3   Alice: right because only Ashville needs it really [+] come on Ashville and
4   Rockville. Montrose doesn't need social workers everybody is so
5   [overlap][inaudible]

6 Gary: [overlap] well it's just it's this person stayed I mean he's a young kid who
7 just graduated college a year or two ago he said Montrose probably has the
8 biggest need for it
9 Alice: yeah no kidding
10 Gary: than any other areas
11 Alice: yeah I mean that was
12 Meryl: yeah it was sarcasm
13 Alice: it was sarcasm [overlap] yeah
14 Gary: yeah
15 Alice: pretty much [overlap] everything [overlap]
16 Meryl: [overlap] I wanted to recognize
17 Alice: yeah pretty much everything I say is sarcasm
18 Meryl: **so** do we need to cuz we have uhm [overlap] 3 minutes or something
19 Alice: we have 3 minutes left [overlap] so we should probably
20 Meryl: [overlap] is there anything else we need to decide on I'll get some notes
21 out these are [overlap] really not notes but I'll get the notes out till you're ready

Note: The grey-highlighted portion of text is the one including the work talk

In Example 2, Meryl starts the transition from small talk to work talk, which makes her move particularly complex in terms of pragmatics and very interesting: she marks the switch of topic with the discourse marker *so* and her invitation to go back to talk about work is formulated in the form of a question, "do we need to..." which is certainly more polite and less direct than a statement. This observation matches the finding of the challenging nature of the move from small talk to work talk mentioned above. Moreover, she leaves her question unfinished and she does not explicitly say that there's a need to work or talk about work. Her syntactically incomplete question appears to be as a sort of fill in the blanks whose meaning is perfectly understood by Alice – "we should probably". Meryl even justifies her (unspoken) proposition by saying that there are only three minutes left.

In sum, Meryl uses three pragmatically-charged strategies to go back to work talk: 1) a discourse marker (*so*), 2) an unfinished question (*do we need to* []), 3) a justification for her topic-shift move (*cuz we have uhm 3 minutes or something*). From a communicative perspective, Meryl shows awareness of the potential relational risk connected to the invitation to stop the small talk and to deal with more relevant tasks. In the end, it seems that she succeeds in getting everybody back to the task without sounding judgmental or imperious. This result is also consistent with Bolden (2008). The DM *so* is shown to be used to launch a business-related interaction; the author also maintains that it signals the passage to a move (talking about business) which had already been planned. In Example 2 above, this is also possible: Meryl had not participated in the small talk exchange, except at the end, when she facilitated the closure as Alice, in line 11, was trying to explain that she meant the opposite of what she had said and Meryl helps her by completing Alice's sentence: "yeah it was sarcasm". It turns out that it is possible that Meryl was helping to conclude the small talk exchange because she had planned to start a business one.

4.2 Selecting discourse markers for specific purposes: distribution and functions

This section is concerned with the distribution of discourse markers in the corpus and their functions within specific interactions. Table 3 shows how frequently discourse markers are used to switch to work talk and to transition to small talk. The percentages were calculated on the total of DMs per each type of shift, respectively n = 190 e n = 123 (see Table 2).

Table 3. Discourse Markers for shifting to work and for transitioning to more small talk

	Shift to work talk	F	P	Transition to more small talk	F	P
1	so	20	22.62%	so	6	15.79%
2	okay	10	11.90%	oh	4	10.53%
3	well	10	11.90%	well	3	7.89%
4	uh/uhm	9	10.71%	now	2	5.26%
5	alright	5	5.95%	but	2	5.26%
6	hey	5	5.95%	hey	2	5.26%
7	yeah	5	5.95%	and then	2	5.26%
8	okay so	3	3.57%	yeah	2	5.26%
9	but	2	1.19%	you know	2	5.26%
10	alright now	1	1.19%	ah	1	2.63%
11	alright so	1	1.19%	alright	1	2.63%
12	and	1	1.19%	aw	1	2.63%
13	and but	1	1.19%	course	1	2.63%
14	and then uhm	1	1.19%	okay	1	2.63%
15	but back to	1	1.19%	okay alright	1	2.63%
16	but so	1	1.19%	so but	1	2.63%
17	but uhm	1	1.19%	that's like	1	2.63%
18	now	1	1.19%	uh but	1	2.63%
19	now anyways	1	1.19%	uh/uhm	1	2.63%
20	so okay let's see	1	1.19%	well now	1	2.63%
21	so okay well	1	1.19%	well you know	1	2.63%
22	uhm well	1	1.19%	you see	1	2.63%
23	uhm yeah	1	1.19%	–	–	–
24	well so anyway I guess	1	1.19%	–	–	–

Data from Table 3 show that speakers use a variety of discourse markers to shift topic or mode. Interestingly, almost half of the employed discourse markers are sequences. Some of the highest-ranking discourse markers are analyzed here. Even with different percentages, *so* is the most used discourse marker in both cases, which is not surprising as several studies (see, for example, Bolden 2008, 2009; Byron & Heeman 1996; Müller 2005; Rendle-Short 2005; Schiffrin 1987;

see also Buysse 2012 and Schourup 1999 for overviews on the functions of *so*) have underscored the functions of *so* in initiating a new topic: "[a]t the beginning of a section, 'so' orients the audience as to the next point" (Rendle-Short 2003: 50) and some have found that it has specific functions when used to preface utterances. In particular, Bolden (2006) found that this particular DM is used to start talking about matters that have an "other-attentive action trajectory" (Bolden 2006: 662) meaning that *so* is used by speakers who do not intend to talk about themselves, but are instead oriented toward the addressee. In the back-to-work interactions, *so* serves to redirect the discourse toward work-related matters. In other words, it is not oriented to the addressee, but at the same time, consistent with Bolden's findings, it is not used by the speakers to talk about themselves. In this respect, it is particularly interesting to notice that *so* is also the most used DM to start the small talk interactions, however it is used less frequently compared to the back to work cases. In the following interaction from the STW corpus, a group of co-workers is pleasantly chit-chatting when Charlie, who was also involved in the small talk, makes a move to switch the interaction to work talk and retrieves the work task they had been talking about before the small talk started. In order to do it, in Example 3, Charlie uses the DM *so*, which typically connects a previous stretch of discourse with the chunk it introduces. In this case the DM has a twofold function: on the one hand, it serves as a signal to the participants that the digression on small talk is leaving the floor to work talk, but it also functions as an "inferential" or "resultive" DM to recapitulate and conclude (Fraser 1996: 188; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik 1985: 638).

Example 3

1 Russel: thank God we don't live in East Montrose
2 Lori: [overlap] [laughter] really
3 Sarah-AAC: [overlap] [laughter]
4 Charlie: East Montrose
5 Russel: it's getting dangerous [overlap] out there
6 Lori: it is?
7 Abbie: mmm
8 Charlie: **so** it might be [overlap] so to check with insurance guy or liability insurance
9 Russel: [cough] [+] okay

Note: The grey-highlighted portion of text is the one including the work talk

As shown in Table 3, *oh* is the second most used discourse marker to transition to small talk. Consistently with Bolden (2006), who identified the discourse marker *oh* as used to initiate interactions that are self-oriented, in our corpus, it is never used to switch to work talk. Putting it differently, the opposition identified by Bolden between DM *so* as "other-attentive" and *oh* as "self-attentive" (664) is somehow reflected in the opposition, in the STW corpus, between work talk and small talk. Looking closely at the small talk interactions initiated by *oh,* some of them are self-oriented, but not all of them; however they all initiate utterances

that are personal to the speakers. Bolden's labels, "other attentive" and "self at-
tentive" seem to be able to be paralleled, in our corpus, with "work-oriented" and
"interactant-oriented". Examples 4 and 5 below show the DM *oh* chosen to start
small talk interactions. While in Boulden's terms, the first would be *self-attentive*
and the second *other-attentive,* they both are interactant-oriented as they are both
concerned with the personal lives of the speakers.

Example 4

1　Jen: are you are you done with me yet?
2　Sarah-AAC: yeah
3　Jen: okay [unclear] [0:20] [people speaking in the background]
4　Jen: **oh** you wanna see my my sweet son? I g- the one I never get pictures of
　　[laughter]
5　Sarah: [voc]
6　Jen: he's the one I never get any pictures of
7　Sarah: [voc]

Note: Four of the focal participants of the ANAWC corpus are Augmentative and Alternative
Communication Speakers. Sarah, in this interaction, is one of them and sometimes
she chooses not to use her speech generation device and to rely on vocalizations (Di
Ferrante & Bouchard 2020), especially when her interlocutor is familiar with her way of
communicating. The grey-highlighted portion of text is the one including the work talk.

Example 5

1　Jim: **oh** how was Aron was he like a super Valentine?
2　Paige: no [overlap] we don't [+] we don't do a whole lot [overlap] [laughter] he
3　did
4　Jim: [laughter] we don't normally either
5　Paige: he did a little you know as usual [+] which was fine but see his mother's
6　birthday is Valentine's day and their anniversary [overlap] so we always
7　Jim: so it's shadowed by [overlap] all these other events
8　Paige: yes it is but I mean it was fine [+] it was fine
　　Jim: cool cool cool

Small talk can be about anything, from politics to science, however, in this cor-
pus, the exchanges initiated by *oh* are specifically related to topics that concern
the speakers themselves. Aijmer (1986) notices that some of the main uses of *oh* is
the case where the "speaker suddenly has a certain insight but also if he guesses
or infers something, remembers or recognizes something, notices or observes
something, or successfully solves a problem" (p. 63) In Example 4, Jen uses *oh* to
start a small talk interaction whose topic is a personal one, namely her own fami-
ly. She has just ended a work-related exchange where Sarah confirms that they are
done with the task at hand. At that point, Jen seems to suddenly remember that
she has a picture of her son to show to Sarah. Example 5 is also concerned with
a topic that relates to the personal lives of the coworkers: Jim starts her small talk
interaction with *oh* to ask Paige about her Valentine Day with her husband. As
previously reported, small talk is demonstrated to be an important instrument of

relationship-building in the workplace, and in the meantime it allows to manage the timing of workplace tasks: Holmes (2000) sees it as a transitional device as it often marks the boundaries of discourse, for example when co-workers engage in chit-chat before or after meetings "small talk provides a transition assisting people 'to come back to earth' . . . after a session of hard work" (Holmes 2000: 43). In many workplaces, small talk- and work talk-allotted time are not rigidly regulated and it is up to the workers – and to the shared social norms of each workplace community – to manage the amount of talking time dedicated to non-task related discourse.[8] As a matter of fact, this type of discourse/topic management, namely the alternation between small talk and work talk involves important considerations that may include a wide range of issues spanning from work ethics to mental health: "From a manager's perspective, while these breaks [microbreaks] may be important for maintaining employee well-being throughout the workday, the time spent away from work due to breaks may be seen as detrimental to employee performance" (Fritz et al. 2013: 277). Although research demonstrates that microbreaks at work, including social interactions, are positively linked to job performance (Kim et al. 2018), employees (and their leadership) might not be aware of this and feel guilty about engaging in nonwork-related social interactions. Incidentally, Kim and colleagues (2018) suggest that "organizations should educate their employees and managers in the values of microbreaks between task episodes for enhancing job performance, *so that self-initiated microbreaks are not frowned upon* [emphasis added]" (783).

Workers often need to make more or less conscious decisions about the right time to start small talk, to become involved in it, and to go back to work. In the following interaction, two coworkers, Addy and Tess, are at their desks enjoying some leftover cupcakes from a little workplace party that had taken place in their office the night before. After a brief exchange, Tess decides to go back into work.

Example 6*

1   Addy: [+] those are very pretty cupcakes aren't they sweet
2   Tess: we had those last night for our little [+] party
3   Addy: oh that's very nice
4   Tess: **alright** we have file folders somewhere we need to go ahead and [+] make
5   copies of the contract and get it in there and get that labeled and [+] just
6   go through our list here [overlap] [+] some of it is files and some of it is binders
7   [people laughing in background]

Note: The grey-highlighted portion of text is the one including the work talk

This type of shift of topics is very typical of workplace discourse and this is an example of a brief digression, a brief stretch of small talk immediately followed by work talk. *Alright* is the discourse marker chosen by Tess to signal that she's interrupting the small talk exchange to deal with work issues. By looking again at Table 3, it is possible to see that most of those discourse markers indirectly and implicitly frame transitions between interactions and this is due to at least two reasons. First, alternating small talk and work talk is typical of most workplaces

and it is a shared social norm among workers that a portion of the time they spend at work will consist of microbreaks (Fritz et al. 2011, 2013; Kim et al. 2017, 2018) that include non-transactional talk with co-workers. When Tess, in Example 6, decides to switch to work talk, she does not need to explicitly and directly say so because both her co-worker and she share the same workplace culture and norms. Second, those social and workplace norms are far from being official, rather they are progressively and silently negotiated in everyday exchanges on the basis of a more or less vague perception of the right amount of time and energy to be spent on non task-related talk. These decisions and negotiations are expressed through indirectness and implicitness, just like Tess does with *alright.*

Overall, data show a difference in discourse markers selection on the basis of their role and function as actual boundaries between small talk exchanges and what comes after. In particular, specific discourse markers are preferred for certain interaction boundaries, which is partly consistent with similar research on these aspects (Bolden 2006, 2008, 2009); for example there are five discourse markers that, with slightly different distributions (see Table 3), are present in both the types of transitions: they are: *so, yeah, okay, well*, and *hey*. Whereas, as it was reported, some are specific to a type of transitions.

Both the quantitative distribution of discourse markers based on their position in interaction and the closer analysis of specific interactions revealed that discourse markers serve multiple discursive and pragmatic functions (interactional, metatextual, cognitive, and their sub-categories: Bazzanella 2006). On the one hand, these contribute to regulating the alternation between small talk and work talk exchanges; on the other hand, they are important linguistic tools for the speakers to show awareness of the workplace dynamics, not to impose on co-workers, and to enact positive politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987).

5. Conclusions

The focus of this paper has been on discourse markers positioned at the intersection between workplace interactions; it was found that their position also informs their macro-function as a watershed when the interactions shift to a new type of discourse or to a new topic. Data showed that speakers of English in the STW corpus perceive the passages from an interaction to another to be relevant enough to often mark them with a variety of discourse markers. Some discourse markers like *so* and *well* are used both to switch to work talk and to keep doing small talk – but on a different level, some others, like *oh,* are only found when shifting to more small talk and *oh,* in particular, is correlated to introducing personal topics.

In quantitative terms, results indicate that the shift to work talk is more often marked by a DM than the transition to more small talk. This might be an indication that when the topic shift is pragmatically complex, speakers tend to rely more heavily on discourse markers. At these interaction junctures, discourse markers all seem to be fulfilling the general function of making the shift smoother, or at least not too abrupt, and most of the times discourse markers are used as

a linguistic strategy to signal the shift, implicitly. Particularly among same-status co-workers, if the speaker were more direct in signalling the switch, s/he might be perceived as arrogant or judgmental and may generate conflict. This whole issue is probably based on an ambiguity of some societies, where on the one hand, workplace culture, social norms, and scientific studies share the evidence for interpersonal relationship as essential to healthy workplace environments (Brunetto, Xerri, Farr-Wharton, and Nelson 2018; Xerri, Nelson and Brunetto 2015) but on the other hand, social conditioning and workplace culture itself nurture negative attitudes toward those who spend their time at work performing non task-related activities. The worker is then in the position of knowing that, within limits, small talk is workplace-appropriate, but it is not related to a work task, so the time and energy dedicated to small talk need to be decided each time and negotiated with the other interactants.

As syntactically-optional linguistic items, DMs seem to carry a heavy load in terms of discursive and pragmatic implications: speakers use them abundantly to convey a variety of interactional and social meanings. This is particularly relevant in the workplace where interaction spontaneity is constrained within a large amount of spoken and unspoken norms, power and politeness concerns, hierarchies, and work ethics. It turns out that spoken workplace exchanges offer a privileged perspective on discursive and pragmatic functions of discourse markers. In turn, discourse markers in workplace interactions help uncover interpersonal dynamics among co-workers.

Acknowledgments

Notes

[1]   Some scholars maintain that, given a discourse marker with multiple functions, it is usually possible to identify one function which is prevalent compared to the others (Müller 2005).

[2]   Müller (2005) reports that on average, native speakers of American English use *well* to reformulate and correct phrases 0,013 times per 100 words.

[3]   Less explicitly referred to their position in the text, appear to be those devices that Hyland calls *transitions* "[which] comprise . . . mainly conjunctions, used to mark additive, contrastive, and consequential steps in the discourse, as opposed to the external world" (138). While the examples for transitions are "In addition/but/thus/and" (Hyland 2004: 139), transitions are not defined as being related to text boundaries.

4 See Cuenca and Crible (2019) for a classification of co-occurring discourse markers.
5 In this paper, the distinction between interactions including AAC and non-AAC speakers are made only when relevant for the analysis of a particular data extract.
6 All names and places in the interactions were changed for anonymity purposes.
7 Cuenca and Crible (2019) record the sequence "*well I mean you know so*" (176) which is also unusually long. Haselow mentions "*no well but actually*" (2018: 1)*,* but unfortunately it is not clear whether the author retrieved it from a corpus.
8 It should be mentioned that some studies demonstrated that personal relationships in the workplace are very much affected by differences in status among speakers, both in terms of hierarchy and in terms of cultural background (Fine & Soucey: 2005; Friginal, 2009; Holmes & Marra: 2002b). While these issues are beyond the scope of this work, they are still pertinent to this type of reflection and they should be further explored.

Transcription Conventions

1. VERBATIM Transcription: word-for-word, all names of people and places anonymized

2. Spelling Conventions & Discourse Markers

okay	ain't	Y'all
alright (one word) for all right	wanna	I'mma = short for I am gonna
cuz = short for because	gonna	

 Ah, duh, hmm, mmm, mm-hmm, nah, okay, oh, uh, uh-huh (affirmative), uhm, unh-uh (negative), wow, yeah, etc.

 For numbers, numerals (1, 2, 3, etc.)

3. Punctuation: only question marks are necessary

4. Annotations (i.e., words not spoken by participants):
   – Square [ ] brackets indicate
      a. Background noise: [keyboard, etc.]
      b. Verbalizations: [laughter, sigh, snort, etc.]
      c. Untranscribable AAC participant vocalization: [voc]
      d. Unintelligible utterances: [unclear]
   – Quotation marks ("x") indicate speech using an AAC

5. Pausing
   – Two seconds or less: [+]
   – More than two seconds, measure and record : [0:25] (25 seconds)

6. Overlap
When speakers speak at the same time, [overlap] in the location where the overlap begins. Then add the overlapped part on the next line

Laura Di Ferrante

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