Left of the left periphery: The syntax of discourse markers

Overview. Discourse markers (DM) such as English ‘oh’, ‘well’, ‘you know’, ‘eh’ etc. are traditionally considered to be purely pragmatic phenomena and as such have not received much attention within the generative framework. There are however recent efforts to explore a syntactic analysis of DMs (Haegeman 2014, Hill 2013). We aim to contribute to this body of literature by developing a formal syntactic approach that will capture universals and variation in the form, function, and distribution of DMs. We do this on the basis of a typological case-study of DMs used to request confirmation (confirmationals) e.g. English ‘eh’, ‘huh’ and their equivalents in German dialects, Medumba, and Spanish.

Proposal. Building on Speas & Tenny 2003 and Haegeman & Hill 2013, we argue for an entire layer of structure above Rizzi’s 1997 structure of the left periphery. This topmost structure, the speech act layer, can be viewed as a syntactically encoded interface between the utterance and the discourse (Haegeman 2014). We depart from previous versions of this idea in that we propose that the two topmost positions in this articulated structure are A(ddresssee)-oriented (rather than S(peaker)-oriented, as in Speas & Tenny 2003, Hill 2006). An optional A-oriented projection hosts Units of Language (UoLs) that encode (S’s evaluation of) A’s attitude towards a salient proposition (GroundA). In addition, the highest projection of the syntactic spine (CoA) hosts UoLs that express the Call on the addressee (Beyssade & Marandin 2006).

(1) [CoA [GroundA [Force [Fin …]]]]

We contend that the optionality of A-oriented projections is only apparent: sentences typically analyzed by generative linguists are in fact not embedded in conversations. In contrast, the investigation of sentences in conversational context reveals that DMs are essential, if not obligatory (Zeevat 2003; Thoma 2013).

A syntactic analysis of confirmationals. We propose that confirmationals are syntactically complex and consequently come in different flavours. In particular, confirmationals all serve to request confirmation, but they may differ regarding the object of confirmation and how the request for confirmation is achieved. In English and Spanish, requesting confirmation is achieved via rising intonation (indicated by ‘huh’), which can associate with the confirmational (if one is present) or with the utterance (in the absence of a confirmational). In Medumba, a tone language, requesting confirmation is achieved with the particle a (see (4)). All English confirmationals show a rising intonation contour. We argue that rising intonation is associated with CoA, the syntactic position where the Call on the Addressee (in this case a request for confirmation) is realized.

A source of variation for confirmationals is in their object of confirmation. For example, both ‘eh’ and ‘huh’ can be used to request confirmation of the truth of p (as in (2)); however only ‘eh’ but not ‘huh’ can be used to request confirmation that A knows that p. In (2) the contrast is apparent because it can be reasonably assumed that S would know that she has a new dog resulting in the infelicity of ‘huh’.

(2) a. You have a new dog, {eh/huh}. b. I have a new dog, {eh/#huh}.

We argue that the difference between ‘eh’ and ‘huh’ is syntactically conditioned: while ‘eh’ associates with GroundA (before it moves to CoA where it combines with rising intonation) (3a), ‘huh’ associates directly with CoA without activating the projection of GroundA (3b).

(3) a. [CoA éh [GroundA eh [Force [Fin …]]]] b. [CoA húh [Force [Fin …]]]

(To derive the sentence final-position of DMs, we assume that ForceP moves to the specifier of CoA.). In the absence of a sentence final DM in English, rising intonation in CoA associates with the entire utterance in ForceP, resulting in a rising declarative. Predictably, a sentence where S is the authority relative to p, is not felicitous with rising intonation (Gunlogson 2003).

Evidence for a syntactic analysis. Support for a syntactic analysis stems from the following considerations.

i. ‘eh’ is complex. Evidence for the decomposition of ‘eh’ into the lexical form and the intonational contour stems from the fact that ‘eh’ may also be realized without the rising intonation in which case it does not trigger a response from A. This variety of ‘eh’ is commonly known as the narrative ‘eh’ (Avis 1972). Moreover, in Medumba, the equivalent of ‘eh’ is realized by means of two distinct particles, one left peripheral, valuing GroundA and one right-peripheral, valuing CoA.
(4) \textit{kula} \text{u} \text{y}n \text{pu} \text{sw}ə \text{a}?
\begin{tabular}{lll}
PART & 2SG & have \ dog \ new \ Q \\
\end{tabular}
‘You have a new dog, eh?’

ii. Addressee agreement. In German dialects, confirmationals agree with A. Depending on whether S addresses A formally (with \textit{Sie}) or informally (with \textit{du}), the form of the confirmational changes. Note crucially that agreement on the confirmational does not correlate with the subject of the sentence. This is shown in (5c) which has a 3rd person subject and which is compatible with the formal or the informal address, depending on the relationship between S and A (formal or informal).

(5) a. \textit{Du} \text{ho-st} \text{an} \text{neichn} \text{Hund,} \text{gäu.}
you\text{INF} \text{have-2SG} \text{a} \text{new} \text{dog,} \text{CONFINF}
b. \textit{Sie} \text{hob-m} \text{an} \text{neichn} \text{Hund,} \text{gäu-ns.}
you\text{FREM} \text{have-3PL} \text{a} \text{new} \text{dog,} \text{CONF-ADR\text{FREM}}
c. \textit{Ea} \text{hot} \text{an} \text{neichn} \text{Hund,} \text{\{gäu / gäu-ns\}.}
he \text{has} \text{a} \text{new} \text{dog,} \text{\{CONF\text{INF}/ CONF-\text{A\text{FORMAL}}\}}

iii. Cross-linguistic uniformity. In all four languages under investigation, confirmationals have a similar distribution: they appear at the clausal periphery, either leftmost (4)/(5) or rightmost (4)/(6).

(6) \textit{Gäu} \text{du} \text{ho-st} \text{an} \text{neichn} \text{Hund.}
\text{CONFINF you\text{INF} have-2SG} \text{a} \text{new} \text{dog.}

Confirmationals have similar functions across unrelated languages; they encode either A-attitude, or CoA, or both. Cross-linguistic support for this correlation between distribution and function supports our claim of a universal structural basis for DMs. This correlation is unexpected in a purely pragmatic analysis.

iv. Ordering restrictions. As expected under a syntactic approach, ordering is not completely free when DMs co-occur (Haegeman 2014 for West Flemish, Lam 2014 for Cantonese). For example, the exclamative marker \textit{ma}, which associates with CoA, must linearly precede the right-peripheral confirmational \textit{gäu}.

(7) \text{\{ma gäu / gäu ma\}} \text{\ma des woa a guada fům}
\{\text{EXCL CONF/CONF EXCL}\} \text{this was a good movie}

Conclusion. Across unrelated languages, DMs share functional and distributional properties. This suggests that there is a syntactic layer along a universal spine which is dedicated to encoding A-orientation. The existence of such a syntactic layer is supported by theoretical considerations as well. Ramchand & Svenonius (2014) argue that the functional hierarchy derives in part from non-linguistic cognition. If indeed the syntactic spine is universally derived from some core functions (such as \textit{classification} and \textit{anchoring to the utterance}, Wilschko 2014) it comes as no surprise that the biological underpinnings of natural language are equipped with mechanisms to structure conversations. Based on the four languages of investment, we develop a typology of a subset of DMs, namely confirmationals, which we hope will lay the foundation for further cross-linguistic exploration of DMs through a syntactic lens.