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Discourse Marker Use in Business Talk: A Pragmatic Analysis of Textual and Interpersonal Functions

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Abstract

Background and Aims: Discourse markers (DMs) types and roles are important in communication, as they facilitate coherence, interaction management, and interpersonal meaning. Understanding how DMs are used in business settings will help achieve the goal in business talks. This study aims to investigate how DMs function in business talk and to examine how their use varies across different speaker roles in business talk.

Methodology: This study adopts a mixed-method approach; the analysis is based on a 4,386-word transcript from a YouTube video of high-stakes business discourse featuring a moderator and two industry leaders (Elon Musk and Jensen Huang). DMs used patterns were identified using the AntConc program, and manually verified, then analyzed through Brinton's (1996) framework into textual and interpersonal functions. Each instance was coded based on its primary pragmatic function to ensure analytical consistency.

Results: The findings reveal a strong use of textual functions (76%), indicating that business discourse is primarily task-oriented, with DMs "and", "but", "so", "well" supporting organization and coherence, and DMs "uh" and "um" facilitating in real-time cognitive processing. Interpersonal functions (24%) are used to express stance, mitigate claims, and maintain professional rapport. Particularly, DM use varies across speaker roles: The moderator mainly used hedging devices ("I think", "kind of") to manage interaction, while Elon Musk and Jensen Huang use a broader range of cognitive-processing and interpersonal markers, including "well", "you know", "like", to construct explanations and engage audiences.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that discourse marker use in business talk is shaped by both cognitive demands and communicative roles. The moderator focuses on opening frames, topic management, and politeness strategies, while Elon Musk and Jensen Huang use a broader range of markers to process cognitive information, fillers, formulate ideas, manage interaction, and negotiate alignment.

Keywords: Business Talk; Pragmatic Competence; Professional Discourse; Spoken Interaction; Textual Functions; Interpersonal Functions

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Introduction

In professional settings such as meetings, interviews, discussions, and high-stakes talks, effective communication is crucial to exchanging information and developing interpersonal relationships among speakers (Ferrante, 2021). To achieve a goal in business communication, the speaker requires not only grammatical accuracy but also pragmatic competence. This competence enables speakers to manage interaction, organize discourse, and negotiate meaning in context, particularly in business settings (Brinton, 1996; Uicheng & Crabtree, 2018; Ferrante, 2021).

A key pragmatic element in spoken interaction is the use of discourse markers (e.g., “well”, “so”, “you know”, “okay”, “I mean”). These elements do not directly contribute to propositional meaning but help organize conversation and facilitate interaction (Schiffrin,1987; Blakemore,1987; Fraser, 1999). Significantly, discourse markers serve multiple functions; the same form can structure discourse (textual work) while also conveying stance or politeness (interpersonal work), depending on the context (Brinton, 1996; Andersen, 2001).

Previous studies have explored discourse markers in various spoken contexts, including telephone conversations (Schiffrin, 1987; Verdonik et al., 2013), everyday conversation (Fuller, 2003; Heine & Kaltenböck, 2022), TV talk shows (Fei & Zou, 2023), and academic seminars (Mandarsari & K, 2023). These studies collectively indicate that discourse markers help maintain coherence, facilitate turn-taking, and assist speakers in negotiating stance and alignment. However, these findings do not fully clarify how discourse markers operate in business conversations, where institutional roles and professional norms may influence their use differently from in casual conversations. Business talk often involves setting agendas, negotiating, public accountability, and strategic interpersonal positioning, providing an important context for examining how discourse markers support information exchange and professional relationship management.

To fill this gap, the current study examines the use of discourse markers in a business forum interaction involving a moderator (moderator) and two business leaders (Elon Musk and Jensen Huang). By analyzing types, pragmatic functions, and speaker-role distribution.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the types and pragmatic functions of discourse markers (DMs) in business talk.

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2. To investigate the frequency distribution and functional variations of DMs across different speaker roles in business talk.

Literature review

1. Discourse Markers as Pragmatic and Multifunctional Resources

Discourse markers are defined as sequentially dependent elements that bracket units of talk, serving to connect statements and enhance interpersonal understanding without altering the fundamental propositional meaning (Schiffrin, 1987; Blakemore, 1987). Fraser (1993b, 1999) characterizes discourse markers as pragmatic components that illustrate connections between the current utterance and earlier discourse. They help with interpretation and signal coherence, topic changes, and speaker intent. While terms like pragmatic markers and discourse markers can overlap in the literature, this study mainly uses discourse markers (DMs) for consistency.

A key element emphasized in frameworks is context sensitivity: discourse markers can serve multiple roles depending on their placement, prosody, and context (Andersen, 2001; Aijmer, 2002). This multifunctionality enables an analytical approach that distinguishes between organizational (textual) and relational (interpersonal) functions.

2. Textual and Interpersonal Functions of Discourse Markers

Discourse markers are widely recognized as multifunctional pragmatic tools whose functions vary with interactional context. They serve as linguistic signposts, aiding speakers in managing conversational flow and guiding listeners through intricate discourse, thereby preserving organization and coherence (Aijmer, 2002). From a textual standpoint, markers like so, now, and well facilitate topic shifts, mark boundaries between discourse segments, and assist in sequencing and turn-taking (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1999). Additionally, they enhance coherence by explicitly connecting ideas—for example, but and however often indicate contrast, while therefore and thus signal cause-and-effect relationships (Fraser, 1993a).

Discourse markers not only organize conversation but also serve important interpersonal functions by conveying attitudes, managing stance, and building social bonds. For example, markers like 'you know' help facilitate shared understanding, while words like 'may' indicate approximation or hesitation. Hesitation sounds such as “uh” and “um” often function as floor-holders, signaling ongoing engagement during turn-taking (Andersen, 2001; Blakemore, 1987).

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Although these elements contribute little propositional content, they play a vital pragmatic role, enhancing the effectiveness of interaction (Brinton, 1996).

In professional and institutional settings, research indicates that speakers must balance clarity of task execution with relational aspects. Empirical studies often report that institutional talk emphasizes text management to meet communicative objectives, while also using interpersonal markers to uphold politeness and rapport (Ferrante, 2021; Fei & Zou, 2023). For instance, in business conversations, markers like so, first, then, and okay are frequently used to organize complex information and facilitate smooth turn-taking (Uicheng & Crabtree, 2018). Additionally, words such as so and well serve to frame responses, introduce conclusions, and steer discussions toward decision-making, exemplifying common interactional techniques in professional contexts (Bolden, 2008).

Brinton's (1996) framework is particularly useful for analyzing spoken discourse, as it clearly distinguishes textual and interpersonal functions. Textual functions involve marking boundaries, managing turns, and signaling topic changes, while interpersonal functions encompass expressing attitude, negotiating stance, and strengthening social bonds between speakers. This distinction offers a structured way to understand how discourse markers support both the transactional and relational aspects of professional communication, showing that they are not just fillers but essential for effective business interaction (Fei & Zou, 2023; Kuswoyo & Siregar, 2019; Ferrante, 2021).

3. Discourse Markers in Professional and Business Talk

Business talks, including interviews, meetings, negotiations, presentations, and discussions, represent a distinct genre of professional spoken discourse characterized by goal-oriented interaction and institutional constraints (Uicheng & Crabtree, 2018; Ferrante, 2021). In these contexts, discourse markers help with both task management, like organizing complex information and sequencing explanations, and relationship building, including hedging and maintaining rapport.

In many previous studies, the function of discourse markers is essential in promoting both clarity and coherence, especially in high-stakes business contexts where effective communication is emphasized. Bolden (2008) has demonstrated that the discourse marker "so" in conversational business functions as a textual organizer to launch new sequences and summarize prior talk,

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while also performing interpersonal work by managing participation and signaling authority in institutional settings. This was supported by Algouzi (2021), who argued that the discourse marker "so" is applicable to business talk because of its multifunctional nature.

In the professional interview, this discourse marker serves textual functions (summarizing and sequencing) and interpersonal functions (softening and stance marking). In workplace interactions, Ferrante (2021) highlights that discourse markers such as "okay", "so", and "well" play a textual role in marking boundaries between discourse phrases and an interpersonal role in mitigating transitions and maintaining collegiality. In business presentations, the study conducted by Uicheng & Crabtree (2018) has shown that discourse markers such as "so", "first", "then", and "okay" were used frequently in business talk to serve as textual functions to organize complex information, emphasize key points, and signal to maintain the turns of talk. In conclusion, the use of discourse markers in business talk not only enhances clarity and coherence but also promotes effective interaction and the cultivation of relationships among speakers.

In summary, discourse markers serve as pragmatic, multifunctional tools that improve coherence and interpersonal connection in spoken communication. While previous research highlights their importance across different genres, business conversations have been less studied, particularly regarding how speaker roles shape the functions of discourse markers in professional settings. This study addresses this gap by applying Brinton's framework to authentic business forum discussions, examining both overall patterns and role-based variations.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts Brinton's (1996) framework, which classifies discourse marker functions into textual and interpersonal functions. Textual functions support discourse organization, including framing, sequencing, topic shifting, turn management, repair, and cognitive processing, while interpersonal functions support interaction and relationship management (e.g., stance marking, hedging, confirmation seeking, alignment, and politeness).

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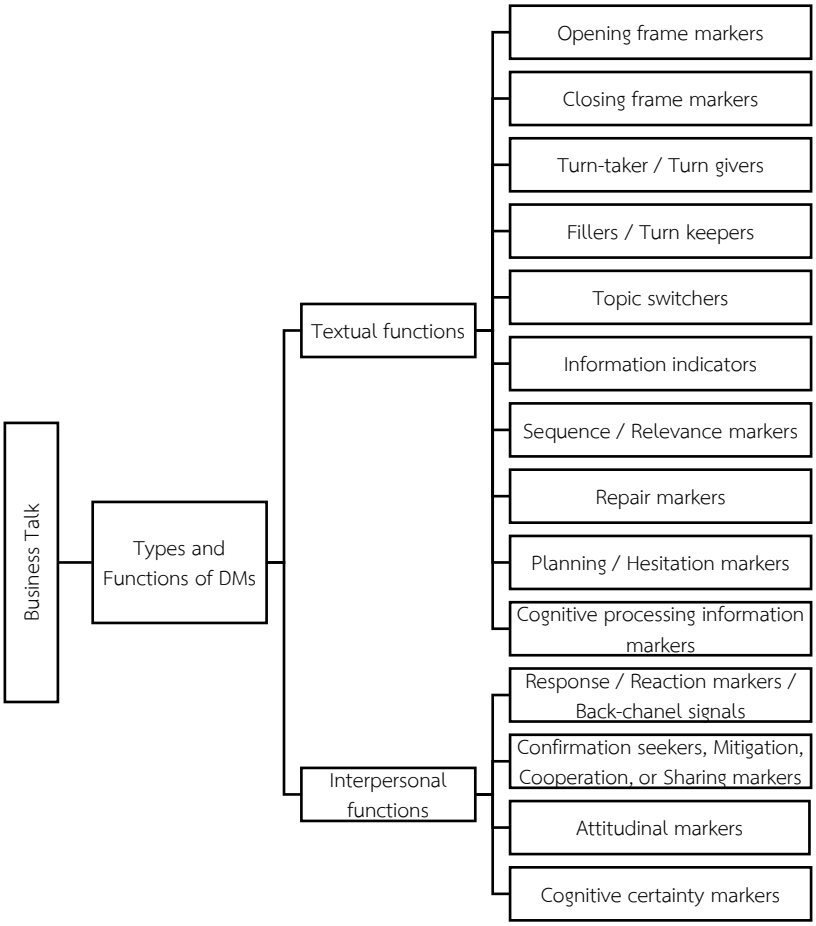


Figure 1 Brinton's classification of DMs functions, adapted from Brinton (1996) and Fei & Zou (2023)

Methodology

Research Design

A mixed-method approach was used in this study because discourse marker analysis relies on both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative analysis identifies distributional patterns such as frequency and speaker differences, whereas qualitative analysis explores how discourse markers function pragmatically in business communication. This approach allows for both pattern identification and contextual interpretation.

Data Source and Selection Criteria

The dataset used in this study is a publicly accessible YouTube video titled 'FULL: Elon Musk Makes Shocking Future Predictions at U.S.-Saudi Arabia Forum Alongside Jensen Huang.' It

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was selected because it showcases genuine contemporary professional speech within a formal institutional environment with a moderator and two business leaders. Unlike scripted speeches or edited interviews, this interaction includes extended spontaneous responses rather than a scripted monologue, making it a perfect example for studying the use of discourse markers in professional communication.

This video was selected based on four key criteria. Firstly, it features a formal institutional setting with a moderator and industry leaders, indicating structured business communication rather than casual talk. Secondly, it includes long, unscripted exchanges that reveal normal talk, cognitive effort, and the organization of discourse. Thirdly, the discussion covers important business topics like AI, robotics, economic shifts, and tech strategy, ensuring the language is professional and high-level. Lastly, it presents clear speaker roles, moderator versus industry leaders, allowing analysis of how discourse markers differ between them.

Since discourse marker studies rely on naturally occurring spoken data, the video offers a suitable corpus for examining how speakers handle information flow, stance, and interaction within a real business forum setting.

Corpus Scope

1. Video length: 28.32 minutes
2. Total transcript length: 4,386 words
3. Speaker word counts:

   Moderator: 1,098 words

   Elon Musk: 1,396 words

   Jensen Huang: 1,892 words

4. Interaction type: moderator-led forum discussion with extended leader participation turns.

This structure makes the data set particularly suitable for discourse marker analysis because it allows comparison between topic-initiating speech and extended explanatory speech, two interactional contexts in which discourse markers often perform different textual and interpersonal functions.

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Data Collection and Transcription Procedure

The transcript was sourced from YouTube and compared with the original audio-visual recording to fix errors and confirm completeness. Unclear sections were replayed; if a segment remained ambiguous, items were omitted from analysis when their discourse-marker status couldn't be reliably determined. The final verified transcript served as the basis for analysis.

Research Instrument

This study employed AntConc corpus analysis software to identify potential discourse markers from the transcript, using Brinton's inventory. The classification and functional framework from Brinton (1996), adapted from Fei and Zou (2023), was applied to categorize and interpret these markers as either textual or interpersonal. All data, including frequency counts and coding results, were systematically organized and documented in Microsoft Excel for analysis and presentation.

Data Analysis Procedures

Step 1: Identification of candidate discourse markers

AntConc was used to identify candidate markers consistent with Brinton's inventory.

Step 2: Contextual verification of discourse-marker status

Each item was examined in context to verify that it functions as a discourse marker rather than a content word. For instance, "so" was included when it introduced or sequenced discourse but excluded if it solely acted as an intensifier in a non-discourse role.

Step 3: Functional coding (primary function rule)

Since discourse markers serve multiple functions, each item was assigned a primary role based on its strongest pragmatic contribution in the surrounding turn. When two functions appeared possible, the following priority rule was applied:

- If the item mainly organized discourse structure (sequencing, boundary marking, topic shifting), it was coded as textual.
- If it mainly expressed stance, mitigation, alignment, or face management, it was coded as interpersonal.

Step 4: Quantification and reporting

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Frequencies were recorded and presented for general functions and individual speaker patterns. In addition to raw counts, this study suggests reporting normalized frequencies (per 4407 words) to facilitate comparisons among speakers with varying speaking lengths.

Reliability, Validity, and Ethical Considerations

To enhance reliability, the transcript was verified against the original video, and frequency counts were manually checked. Ethically, the study uses publicly available data solely for academic purposes. The talk is presented without manipulation, and the analysis emphasizes linguistic patterns rather than personal judgments of speakers.

Results

The results of this study were presented in two parts. They revealed: Part 1) the types and functions of DMs used in business talk, and Part 2) the distributions and functional use of DMs across speakers in the business talk.

Part 1 The Types and Functions of DMs Used in the Business Talk

Table 1 The Types of DMs Used as Textual Functions in the Business Talk

Textual Functions	DMs	Occurrence	Percentage
Cognitive processing of information markers	uh, um	102	30.1%
Opening frame markers	And, but, now, so, well,	69	20.4%
Fillers	And, but, so, alright, uh, um	65	19.2%
Information indicators	And, so, then, the reason for	43	12.7%
Turn takers	so	17	5%
Topic switchers	but, now, so	12	3.5%
Sequence/relevance markers	And, and then, so, first, then	10	2.9%
Repair markers	I mean, you know, in fact	10	2.9%
Closing frame markers	all right, okay, then,	6	1.8%
Planning/hesitation markers	like, I guess, perhaps,	5	1.5%
	Total	**339**	**100.00**

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As presented in Table 1, the distribution of discourse markers (DMs) across ten functions, with a total of 339 occurrences were identified in the data. The analysis shows that the distribution is greatly toward four primary functions. They are dominated by cognitive processing markers (30.1%), followed by opening frame markers (20.4%), fillers (19.2%), and information indicators (12.7%), which occur considerably more frequently than others.

The cognitive processing information markers constitute the major category, with 102 occurrences, accounting for 30.1% of the entire set of discourse markers. These markers, primarily “uh” and “um”, indicate online processing during speech. The second most frequent category was opening frame markers, which occurred 69 times (20.4%). These markers, such as “and”, “but”, “now”, “so”, and “well”, were used to signal the beginning of discourse as well as claim attention from the hearers. Fillers “and”, “but”, “so”, “alright”, “uh”, and “um” appeared frequently, with 65 occurrences, representing 19.2% of the total. The fourth most frequent category was information indicators, which were moderately expressed, with 43 instances (12.7%) that served to emphasize or clarify information.

Turn takers occurred 17 times, accounting for 5.0% of the data. Topic switchers were less frequent, with 12 occurrences (3.5%), indicating relatively limited explicit signaling of topic shifts. The frequency of sequence or relevance markers and repair markers was identical; each occurred 10 times, accounting for 2.9% of the total. These markers were used to organize the discourse and to clarify any unclear information. Closing frame markers appeared only six times (1.8%), while markers of planning or hesitation were the least frequent category, with five occurrences, representing 1.5% of all discourse markers.

Overall, the results indicated that discourse markers associated with cognitive processing of information, opening frame markers, fillers, and information indicators dominate the dataset, while closing markers and planning or hesitation markers appear comparatively infrequently.

Table 2 The Types of DMs used as Interpersonal Functions in Business Talk

Interpersonal Functions	DMs	Occurrence	Percentage
Attitudinal markers	I think, just, actually	27	25.2%

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Interpersonal Functions	DMs	Occurrence	Percentage
Mitigation (hedging)	well, you know, like, I think, sort of, kind of	26	24.3%
Cooperation/Sharing markers	you know	17	15.9%
Response markers	alright, yes, yeah,	11	10.3%
Confirmation seekers	really, exactly, yes, yeah	11	10.3%
Back-channel signals	yeah, Oh yeah	8	7.5%
Cognitive certainty markers	of course	7	6.5%
Total		**107**	**100.00**

As shown in Table 2, there are 107 occurrences of discourse markers (DMs) serving interpersonal functions in the dataset. Overall, attitudinal markers and mitigation (hedging) markers were the most frequently used categories, while cognitive certainty markers were the least used.

Attitudinal markers, including “I think”, “just”, and “actually”, accounted for the largest proportion, with 27 instances (25.2%). This was meticulously followed by mitigation (hedging) markers such as “well”, “you know”, “like”, “I think”, “sort of”, and “kind of”, which occurred 26 times, accounting for 24.3% of the total markers. These two functions occurred in nearly half of all interpersonal functions, highlighting the speaker’s tendency to express stance, soften claims, and manage interpersonal relations during the business talk.

Cooperation or sharing markers, mainly expressed through “you know,” were also quite common, with 17 occurrences (15.9%), showing an attempt to engage the listener and build shared understanding. Response markers (e.g., “alright”, “yes”, “yeah”) and confirmation seekers (e.g., “really”, “exactly”, “yes”, “yeah”) were used at the same frequency, each appearing 11 times and making up 10.3% respectively. These markers helped keep the interaction smooth and signaled agreement or understanding.

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In contrast, back-channel signals like “yeah” and “oh yeah” occurred less frequently, with eight instances (7.5%). Cognitive certainty markers were the least common category, occurring only seven times (6.5%), indicating a relatively limited use of explicit expressions of certainty in the discourse.

Overall, the findings indicate a distinct usage of discourse markers that articulate a particular stance, mitigate statements, and facilitate interpersonal interaction rather than convey a strong epistemic certainty.

Table 3 The Distribution of DMs Functions in the Business Talk

Functions	Occurrence	Percentage
Textual functions	339	76%
Interpersonal functions	107	24%
Total	446	100.00

As presented in Table 3, discourse markers (DMs) in business talk mainly serve textual functions at 76%, compared to 24% for interpersonal functions of all discourse marker occurrences. With a total of 446 occurrences, these findings reveal that discourse markers are mostly used to organize and structure discourse rather than to manage relationships or express speaker stance.

Part 2 The Distribution of DMs across Speakers in the Business Talk

Table 4 Speaker Word Counts and Distribution of Discourse Markers (DMs)

Speaker role	Words	Total DMs	Textual %	Interpersonal %
Moderator	1,098	53	83.02	16.98
Elon Musk	1,396	227	73.13	26.87
Jensen Huang	1,892	166	77.71	22.29
Total	4,386	446	76.01	23.99

Table 4 shows that the corpus comprises 4,386 words and 446 recorded instances of DMs. Elon Musk has the highest number of DMs, which are linked to longer spontaneous explanatory turns that create more opportunities for cognitive processing and framing cues. The moderator

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has a lower DM density, associated with shorter agenda-setting turns. Jensen Huang's moderate occurrences indicate longer explanations focused on providing information.

Table 5 The Distribution of DMs across Speakers as Textual Functions in Business Talk

Textual functions	Moderator		Elon Musk		Jensen Huang	
	DMs	Occurrence (%)	DMs	Occurrence (%)	DMs	Occurrence (%)
Opening frame markers	and, but, now, so, well	20 (45.5%)	and, but, now, so, well	30 (18.1%)	and, but, now, so	19 (14.7%)
closing frame markers	all right, okay	2 (4.5%)	okay	1 (0.6%)	all right, okay, then	3 (2.3%)
turn takers	and, so	4 (9.1%)	and, so	8 (4.8%)	and, so	5 (3.9%)
fillers	and, uh	3 (6.8%)	and, but, so, uh, um	32 (19.3%)	and, so, alright, uh, um	30 (23.3%)
Topic switchers	and, but, now	5 (11.4%)	and, but, now	4 (2.4%)	and, so	3 (2.3%)
information indicators	and	5 (11.4%)	and, so, then	7 (4.2%)	and, so, then, the reason for	31 (24.0%)
Sequence/relevance markers	so	1 (2.3%)	and then, then	3 (1.8%)	and, first, then	6 (4.7%)
Repair markers	-	-	I mean, you know, in fact	8 (4.8%)	you know, in fact	2 (1.6%)
Planning/hesitation markers	-	-	like, perhaps, I guess,	5 (3.0%)	-	-
Cognitive processing of information markers	uh	4 (9.1%)	uh, um	68 (41.0%)	uh, um	30 (23.3%)
	Total	44 (100%)	**Total**	166 (100%)	**Total**	129 (100%)

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Table 5 shows how discourse markers (DMs) are used for textual functions by three speakers: the moderator, Elon Musk, and Jensen Huang. Overall, clear differences are seen in both how often and in which ways the participants use discourse markers.

For the moderator, opening frame markers were the most common category, accounting for 20 occurrences (45.5%). This shows a strong reliance on markers such as “and”, “but”, “now”, “so”, and “well” to initiate discourse and control interaction. Information indicators and topic switchers were the next most frequent categories, each making up 11.4% of the total, followed by turn takers and cognitive processing markers, both at 9.1%. Significantly, no occurrences of repair markers or planning/hesitation markers were found in the moderator’s speech.

In contrast, Elon Musk’s speech consisted of cognitive processing information markers, which appeared 68 times (41.0%). This was followed by fillers, with 32 instances (19.3%), indicating a strong tendency toward real-time processing and hesitation. Opening frame markers were also quite common at 18.1%. Other categorized functions, such as turn takers, repair markers, and information indicators, occur at lower rates, each under 5%. Planning or hesitation markers were present but made up only 3.0%.

Similarly, Jensen Huang showed a high frequency of cognitive processing markers and fillers, each contributing 30 occurrences (23.3%). Information indicators were particularly salient in his speech, accounting for 31 instances (24.0%), which is substantially higher than that of the other two speakers. Opening frame markers represented 14.7%, while sequence/relevance markers appeared more frequently than in the other speakers’ discourse. However, no planning or hesitation markers were observed in Jensen Huang’s data.

In summary, the moderator relied mainly on opening frame markers to structure interaction; on the other hand, both Elon Musk and Jensen Huang showed greater use of discourse markers as cognitive processing and fillers. These patterns indicate speaker-specific preferences in managing discourse structure and real-time information processing during business discussions. The examples of DM use as textual functions are as follows:

Example 1 – Opening frame marker (moderator):

“So, we’re talking about… let’s start with you, Elon…”

Signals like “so” mark a transition to a new agenda segment and help steer the flow of interaction. The marker aids the moderator in transitioning from contextual framing to direct

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questioning, illustrating how initial framing markers facilitate agenda setting and interactional control in business conversations.

Example 2 – Cognitive-processing marker (Elon Musk):

"Well, it's mostly not disruption, it's uh creation."

Signals like "uh" indicate that the speaker is thinking in real time and help maintain fluency while planning the next statement. These markers aren't mistakes; they serve as interactional tools to smooth conversation flow.

Example 3 – Fillers (Jensen Huang):

"And uh, the reason for that... is that computing was done differently in the past."

In this example, "uh" functions as a floor-holding device, enabling the speaker to continue elaborating while structuring the explanation. The marker helps maintain coherence and signals that more information is coming, supporting the idea that fillers in business talk are often used strategically rather than indicating hesitation.

Table 6 The Distribution of DMs across Speakers as Interpersonal Functions in Business Talk

Interpersonal functions	Moderator		Elon Musk		Jensen Huang	
	DMs	Occurrence (%)	DMs	Occurrence (%)	DMs	Occurrence (%)
Response markers	alright	1 (11.1%)	yes, yeah	7 (11.5%)	yeah	3 (8.1%)
Back-channel signals	Oh yeah,	2 (22.2%)	yeah,	1 (1.6%)	yeah	5 (13.5%)
Confirmation seekers	-	0	really, yes, yeah	10 (16.4%)	exactly	1 (2.7%)
Mitigation (hedging)	I think, kind of	3 (33.3%)	well, you know, like, I think, sort of, kind of	17 (27.9%)	well, you know	6 (16.2%)
Cooperation or sharing markers	you know	1 (11.1%)	you know	8 (13.1%)	you know	8 (21.6%)
Attitudinal markers	I think, just	2 (22.2%)	I think, just, actually	17 (27.9%)	I think, just, actually	8 (21.6%)

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Interpersonal functions	Moderator		Elon Musk		Jensen Huang	
	DMs	Occurrence (%)	DMs	Occurrence (%)	DMs	Occurrence (%)
Cognitive certainty markers	-	0	of course	1 (1.6%)	of course	6 (16.2%)
	Total	9 (100%)	**Total**	61 (100%)	**Total**	37 (100%)

As shown in Table 6, the spread of discourse markers used for interpersonal functions across three speaker roles: the moderator, Elon Musk, and Jensen Huang. Overall, noticeable differences are seen in both how often and in what ways the participants use discourse markers.

For the moderator, a total of nine discourse markers were identified. Mitigation markers were the most common category, accounting for 33.3% of all occurrences, mainly expressed through phrases like “I think” and “kind of”. Back-channel signals and attitudinal markers each accounted for 22.2%, indicating the moderator’s tendency to signal attentiveness and stance. Response markers and cooperation or sharing markers were used rarely (11.1% each), and no confirmation seekers or cognitive certainty markers were found.

On the other hand, Elon Musk used a significantly higher number of interpersonal discourse markers, totaling 61 instances. Mitigation markers and attitudinal markers were the most common categories, each making up 27.9% of the data. These markers (e.g., well, you know, I think) indicate a tendency to soften statements and share personal opinions. Confirmation seekers also played a notable role at 16.4%, showing active engagement with the interviewer. Cooperation or sharing markers made up 13.1%, while response markers accounted for 11.5%. Meanwhile, back-channel signals and cognitive certainty markers were used sparingly, each representing only 1.6% of the total.

Similarly, Jensen Huang showed a strong dependence on interpersonal discourse markers, with 37 instances noted. Cooperation or sharing markers and attitude markers were the most common categories, each making up 21.6%, highlighting a focus on shared understanding and personal stance. Mitigation markers accounted for 16.2% of occurrences, along with cognitive certainty markers, which also accounted for 16.2%—significantly higher than in the other two speaker roles. Back-channel signals accounted for 13.5%, while response markers were less common at 8.1%. Confirmation seekers appeared only once (2.7%).

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Overall, the findings show that while all speakers used discourse markers to handle interpersonal relationships, their functional uses varied depending on the speaker's role. The moderator relied more on hedging when posing questions, whereas Elon Musk and Jensen Huang used a wider range of interpersonal markers to express stance, negotiate alignment, and build rapport. The examples of DM use as interpersonal functions are as follows:

Example 4 – Mitigation (moderator):

"I kind of agree with both of you..."

In this example, "kind of" somewhat minimizes the agreement and weakens the claim. Rather than demonstrating full alignment, the moderator adopts a cautious, partial stance, helping maintain neutrality in the discussion.

Example 5 – Attitudinal markers (Elon Musk):

"I think Tesla's going to make the first actually useful humanoid robots."

In this example, "I think" indicates personal evaluation and stance. The marker enables the speaker to show confidence while presenting the statement as an opinion rather than a confirmed fact.

Example 6 – Cooperation or sharing Markers (Jensen Huang):

"It used to be retrieval-based computing, you know, systems were designed to retrieve information."

In this example, the phrase "you know" appeals to shared understanding and encourages the audience to follow along. It acts as a cooperation marker that fosters alignment and engagement.

Discussion

The results of the present study can answer both research questions. They are (1) What types and functions of discourse markers (DMs) in business talk? and (2) What is the distribution and functional use of discourse markers (DMs) across speakers in business talk?

The first research question related to the types and functions of discourse markers (DMs) in business talk. This part includes (1) DM types and functions used in Textual functions, and (2) DM types used in Interpersonal functions.

1) DM Types and Functions used in Textual Functions

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The analysis of textual functions indicates that business discourse tends to be highly task-oriented, with a primary focus on organizing information and maintaining coherence. In particular, the occurrence of cognitive-processing markers such as “uh” and “um” accounting for approximately 30.1% suggests their crucial role in spontaneous speech. These markers appear to facilitate ongoing thinking, reflecting a need for planning time amid cognitive load. In leadership communication, speakers often engage with complex strategic and technical topics, which naturally heightens their reliance on such markers to manage their immediate thoughts without losing the conversational flow. This pattern aligns with Schiffrin's (1987) findings, which underscore the importance of discourse markers in organizing spoken interaction and enhancing discourse coherence. According to Schiffrin, markers like “uh” and “um” serve as pauses for cognitive processing and help maintain the coherence of spoken exchanges.

In the present study, it was observed that opening frame markers such as “and”, “so”, “well”, “but”, and “now” constitute approximately 20.4% of initial discourse signals and appear to play a vital role in organizing dialogue and managing interactional flow. These markers are often used to imply transitions to new discourse segments, frame responses, and indicate the structure of upcoming talk. According to Gao (2025), especially in planned speech contexts such as TED talks, the marker "and" signals the start of discourse and establishes logical links between sentences, thereby facilitating the continuity of communication. Similarly, research by Bolden (2008) and Turiman (2020) suggests that the marker “so” is frequently employed in job interview settings to start dialogue and control conversations towards relevant topics. This highlights the flexible nature of discourse markers across diverse communicative contexts. Furthermore, Fei and Zou (2023) emphasize that these markers not only signal the beginning of an utterance but also help structure following messages, underlining their importance in discourse organization.

This study indicates that fillers constitute approximately 19.2% of speech and are integral as floor-holding mechanisms, serving to safeguard speaker turns during the formulation of ideas, an essential skill in high-stakes professional settings. According to Fei and Zou (2023), their analysis of discourse markers in TV talk shows reveals that both lexical items, such as “and,” “well”, and “alright”, and non-lexical fillers, such as “uh” and “um”, function as delay tactics. These tactics facilitate discourse maintenance and help speakers preserve their turn. While the employment of fillers can pose challenges, given that audiences may perceive them as interruptions, their

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significance warrants further discussion. Fillers are not only crucial for maintaining the speaker's turn but also for filling pauses, granting speakers additional time to retrieve their thoughts during real-time communication (Kuswoyo & Siregar, 2019). It can thus be argued that discourse markers in professional contexts, especially within business communication, primarily serve to organize textual structure and support cognitive processing rather than simply managing discourse overtly.

2) DM Types used in Interpersonal Functions

The findings indicate that attitudinal markers (25.2%) and mitigation or hedging markers (24.3%) are predominantly employed as interpersonal discourse markers in business communication. For example, discourse markers such as “I think”, “just”, and “actually” serve to express personal opinions, whereas markers like “well”, “you know”, “like”, “I think”, “sort of”, and “kind of” function to soften statements, thereby maintaining politeness and safeguarding professional relationships. This aligns with Brinton’s (1996) study, which found that discourse markers play a role in interpersonal communication by signaling speaker stance and managing social relations. Furthermore, these results corroborate previous findings by Ferrante (2021), which suggest that speakers strategically use discourse markers like “really”, “absolutely”, “basically”, “actually”, and “exactly” to convey their attitudes during workplace conversations. The study also reveals that speakers not only use the above-mentioned markers, but also incorporate words such as “honestly”, “I think”, “just”, and “well” within their utterances to articulate attitudes more explicitly.

Mitigation or hedging strategies are frequently observed in business contexts, serving to temper statements and mitigate the potential for face-threatening remarks. This function is particularly important for maintaining positive interpersonal dynamics during workplace interactions. Fei and Zou (2023) emphasize that such markers are vital for steering listeners toward a less confrontational interpretation. Their study shows that speakers commonly use formulations such as “like,” “let’s say,” and “I would have to say” to avoid sounding excessively assertive.

Cooperation and sharing markers, such as “you know”, play a significant role in developing interpersonal engagement and shared understanding, accounting for 15.9% of usage. This observation aligns with findings from Mandarsari and K (2023), who observed that “you know” is frequently used in academic contexts to serve multiple functions, including sharing knowledge and establishing common ground. Similarly, Baik (2024) noted a shift in the use of “you know”,

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from primarily functioning at the sentence level to becoming a versatile tool that facilitates interaction through cooperation and shared understanding. These insights suggest that interpersonal discourse markers in business communication are mainly used to manage attitudes and social relationships, rather than to explicitly express stance or convey total commitment.

The second research question related to the distribution and functional use of discourse markers (DMs) among speakers in business talk. This section consists of (1) the distribution of DMs across speakers as textual functions in business talk, and (2) the distribution of DMs across speakers as interpersonal functions in business talk.

1) The Distribution of DMs across Speakers as Textual Functions in Business Talk

The findings indicate variability in the use of discourse markers for textual functions among the three speakers, which appears to be influenced by their respective roles and communication objectives in organizing conversations and managing real-time interactions within a business setting. Interestingly, these differences may not reach statistical significance when role and goals are taken into account. Notably, the moderator frequently employs opening frame markers such as “and”, “but”, “now”, “so”, and “well”, with an effectiveness rate of 45.5%. This pattern could suggest an ability to initiate discussions, steer interactions, and regulate the flow of conversation. Supporting this, prior research by Mandarsari & K (2023) and Fei & Zou (2023) underscores the significance of opening frame markers in textual functions, especially in aiding the moderator or host in managing ongoing conversations. Additionally, the use of specific opening frame markers seems to facilitate smooth transitions and maintain coherence throughout interactions, as documented by Turiman (2020), Ferrante (2021), and Gao (2025). These observations highlight the crucial role that discourse markers play in engaging conversational dynamics and enabling seamless topic shifts.

In comparison, Elon Musk and Jensen Huang exhibit a higher frequency of cognitive processing markers (41%; 23.3%) and fillers (19.3%; 23.3%). This suggests their active engagement in formulating ideas during real-time conversations, which may reflect a less structured communication style, potentially affecting clarity. These findings align with prior research indicating that, in high-stakes discussions where clarity and coherence are focused, cognitive processing markers serve an important function in allowing speakers additional time to recall

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appropriate words or formulate their next point. Similarly, fillers are often observed to function as floor-maintaining signals (Ferrante, 2021; Fei & Zou, 2023), supporting their role in managing conversational flow.

Musk's frequent use of fillers and opening frame markers appears to indicate a spontaneous, exploratory speaking style, whereas Huang's combination of cognitive processing cues with information indicators seems to emphasize clarity and a well-structured explanation. It is worth noting that the usage patterns of these discourse markers are closely associated with their respective communicative roles in business discourse (Tree, 2010; Tabitha & Bram, 2024). The moderator seems to focus on maintaining interactional control and framing the discourse, while Musk and Huang, as business leaders, employ markers that facilitate thinking processes and organize information. This suggests a level of functional flexibility in the use of discourse markers within professional communication contexts (Ferrante, 2021; Fei & Zou, 2023).

2) The Distribution of DMs across Speakers as Interpersonal Functions in Business Talk

The findings suggest notable variations in the use of discourse markers (DMs) for interpersonal functions among the moderator, Elon Musk, and Jensen Huang. While all speakers use interpersonal markers to manage relationships and express stance, the frequency and functional emphasis show differences according to their roles. This aligns with Brinton's (1996) perspective that interpersonal discourse markers are driven by the speaker's pragmatic goals rather than their distribution across participants.

In the case of the moderator, a minimal use of interpersonal discourse markers was observed, primarily relying on mitigation markers (33.3%) to soften questions and uphold politeness. Such a pattern may indicate a supportive function, emphasizing the importance of minimizing imposition in basic interactions, as highlighted by Brown and Levinson (1987). The employment of back-channel signals (22.2%) and attitudinal markers (22.2%) further points to attentiveness and limited stance expression. Conversely, the absence of confirmation seekers and cognitive certainty markers suggests a role focused on facilitating responses rather than asserting viewpoints. These observations are consistent with Fraser's (1999) view that discourse markers serve as pragmatic commentary, aiding the moderator in steering the interaction without imposing personal opinions.

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In comparison, Elon Musk and Jensen Huang demonstrate a notably broader utilization of interpersonal discourse markers. Musk consistently employs mitigation (27.9%), attitudinal markers (27.9%), and confirmation seekers (16.4%), which may reflect an engaging interactive style aimed at negotiating alignment and actively encouraging listener participation. Huang, on the other hand, also uses cooperation (21.6%) and attitudinal markers (21.6%), but his frequent use of cognitive certainty markers (16.2%) suggests a stronger epistemic stance and confidence in articulating knowledge. These observations are consistent with Brinton's (1996) framework, which characterizes interpersonal markers as tools for negotiating authority, establishing alignment, and increasing participant involvement. Overall, the patterns observed imply that the deployment of interpersonal discourse markers is significantly influenced by the speakers' roles, with the moderator maintaining interactional balance, while the business leaders appear more focused on constructing their stance and rapport in the context of business communication.

Conclusion

This study investigated the types, functions, and distribution of discourse markers in business conversations. The results show that discourse markers serve as essential pragmatic tools in professional spoken interactions by supporting both discourse organization and interpersonal interaction.

Regarding the first research question, the findings show that discourse markers in business talk mainly serve textual functions, highlighting the task-oriented nature of professional discourse. Speakers frequently use markers such as "uh" and "um" to aid cognitive processing, and use words like "and", "so", "but", and "well" to structure discourse, ensure coherence, and maintain the floor in conversation. These markers help speakers in managing real-time idea formation, organizing thoughts, and guiding listeners through complex explanations. Additionally, interpersonal markers operate as a complementary layer. Phrases such as "I think", "just", and "actually" indicate stance, while markers such as "well", "you know", "sort of", and "kind of" soften claims and promote professional rapport. Overall, these findings demonstrate that discourse markers support discourse organization, cognitive planning, and interpersonal interaction in business communication.

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Regarding the second research question, the findings indicated that the use of discourse markers is strongly influenced by the speaker's role. The moderator mainly uses opening frame markers and mitigation strategies, reflecting the moderator's role to introduce topics, manage turns, and keep interactions flowing. Conversely, Elon Musk and Jensen Huang use more cognitive-processing markers and fillers, suggesting a more spontaneous speaking style that involves detailed explanations and real-time reasoning. Their wider use of interpersonal markers also points to active stance-building and audience engagement. These role patterns demonstrate both the adaptability of discourse markers and their reaction to organized functions in business conversations.

Overall, the distinction of textual functions shows that business communication underlines coherence, sequencing, and information management. Simultaneously, interpersonal markers help speakers maintain politeness, alignment, and professional rapport. It contributes to understanding how pragmatic features operate in professional discourse and provides valuable insights for both research and pedagogy. The results suggested that discourse markers function at the crossroads of discourse organization and social interaction, rather than belonging solely to either.

Recommendation

The results indicate that discourse markers should be considered a vital part of Business English and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) teaching. Educators should clearly illustrate how these markers help in discourse structure, cognitive understanding, and interpersonal harmony in professional conversations. Teaching methods may include analyzing real business discussions, role-playing, speaking exercises, and presentation training to help students use markers effectively across different professional roles. Teaching materials should provide contextualized, corpus-based examples rather than isolated phrases, and assessments could measure pragmatic success alongside linguistic accuracy. Future research should study discourse marker use across genres, cultural settings, and proficiency levels, as well as how explicit instruction influences learners' coherence, fluency, and professional communication skills over time.

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