

SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

THE FUNCTION OF HUNGARIAN DISCOURSE MARKERS:

**The history and present synchronic status of
the Hungarian elements *hát, -e* and *vajon***

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1. Introduction: the topic of the dissertation, its goals, and the corpus of data used

Even though the investigation of Hungarian discourse markers is a much researched field of study today, identifying the functions associated with various elements and comparing theoretical claims against actual language use data has received much less attention in the literature. Most works on Hungarian discourse markers are solely of either synchronic or diachronic focus – exceptions are Bakró-Nagy (2003), Dér (2005), and Dömötör (2008a, 2008b), which overview the history of various discourse markers (such as *lám*, Bakró-Nagy 2003; *mellesleg* and *más szóval*, Dér 2005; *úgymond*, Dömötör 2008a; and *hogy úgy mondjam*, Dömötör 2008b) from their start to the present day state. The present dissertation aims to join this latter line of investigations: to examine discourse markers in a comprehensive way. I aim to be comprehensive in analyzing both historical and present-day data, extending the focus on language use to diachronic data as well, and testing average speakers' attitudes towards discourse markers (independently of theoretical claims) and their knowledge of the functions of these elements.

In my investigation I have aimed to explore in detail the functions of three discourse markers – *hát*, *-e* and *vajon* – and to identify when the discourse marker use of these elements dates back to. Of these discourse markers, the use of sentence initial *hát* and the placement of the question particle *-e* after a negative particle (*nem-e*) as well as its multiple use in a sentence (*el-e olvasta-e volna-e* “would s/he have read it?”) are strongly stigmatized due to the Hungarian tradition of language cultivation and their treatment in the Hungarian education system. In the discussion of prescriptive rules regarding the use of these elements I aim to establish when the stigmatization of their use dates back to, in my intention to contribute also to the historiography of language cultivation.

I use both diachronic and present-day synchronic corpuses in delineating the range of the three discourse markers' functions. In addition to the aim of comprehensiveness (i.e. of combining the synchronic and diachronic perspectives), the relevance of the diachronic data also stems from the fact that the discourse marker use of these elements dates back to the very beginning of their existence – however, this function is only very poorly documented in etymological dictionaries (such as TESz or EWUng) and handbooks (such as TNyt and MNyt). In my investigation of the development of the elements in question as discourse markers I have been able to use predominantly written sources. The use of discourse markers, however, is primarily a characteristic of spoken language use even if it is recorded in writing. This has made the use of

the kind of corpus necessary where the characteristics of spoken language use are reflected in writing (cf. Haader 2009): of the dictionaries, historical works on language and other sources generally used in historical linguistic investigations, I, thus, have focused on the use of those that meet this criterion of recording spoken language features. In addition, I have also used the 1660 Sárospatak religious polemical texts (cf. Kulcsár 1999) as part of my diachronic corpus, as well as extended it to the database of the Hungarian Historical Corpus (<http://www.nytud.hu/hhc/>), which contains materials starting with 1772.

My present-day synchronic corpus includes talk shows and debate programs (such as *Pro és kontra* “Pros and cons” and *Közhang* “Public voice” on the ATV channel), the minutes of *Parlamanti Napló* “Parliament News” (Arcanum DVD library 5, http://www.parlament.hu/internet/plsql/internet_naplo), data from the Hungarian National Corpus (<http://corpus.nytud.hu/mnsz>), as well as internet forum entries. I have compared the results against, first, speakers’ intuitions and opinions regarding these elements, second, claims in the language cultivation literature, and, third, the meanings given in defining dictionaries of the Hungarian language.

2. Characteristics of the discourse markers

In the first larger section of the dissertation, the theoretical chapter, I discuss the difficulties of the delineation of discourse markers. Even though linguists investigating these agree that discourse markers connect larger segments of discourse and mark pragmatic relations, there are differences in terminology use regarding the labels of the groupings of discourse markers and their assignment into these groupings. After demonstrating the terminological variation in the Hungarian and international literature on discourse markers, I argue for the use of the term *diskurzusjelölő* “discourse marker” in Hungarian, considering it to be a neutral term which does not make reference to part of speech and does not unnecessarily limit the range of phenomena to be investigated, concentrating, instead, on functional characteristics. However, the choice of this term does not specify unequivocally the range of elements to be investigated, since it is also used in different ways by various linguists. Of the various approaches, I rely on Fraser’s (1999) definition of the term.

According to Fraser (1999: 938), a discourse marker can be considered a marker of a bivalent relationship where one of the arguments (S2) occurs in the stretch of speech introduced

by it, while the other argument (S1) in a preceding stretch of speech, and the relationship between the two is made explicit by the discourse marker. Fraser's approach has been widely critiqued for greatly limiting the range of what can be considered a discourse marker, since he regards an element a discourse marker if it occurs in a turn initial position (but not if it occurs inside a turn). In addition, he does not regard an element a discourse marker if it can be associated with truth conditional meaning. In spite of this and due to his functional approach and reference to signaling a relationship between discourse segments, I adopt his basic definition of a discourse marker, supplementing it with the observations that (i) I consider the marking of attitude to be important in the case of discourse markers, and (ii) I do not regard the turn initial position to be the obligatory place for a discourse marker to occur.

I consider it to be an essential feature of a discourse marker that it has no influence on the truth conditions of an utterance, does not affect its propositional content, but has an emotional and expressive function; its meaning is procedural and not conceptual. Views differ, however, on how various functions of discourse markers in different contexts can be accounted for. Based on the literature, two main conceptions emerge with regard to the meaning of discourse markers: one is that of meaning minimalism, the other is that of meaning maximalism. According to the former, the minimal semantic meaning of elements gains further meanings during processing, while according to the latter, the originally semantically rich elements lose semantic features which are irreconcilable with the context. In order to make these views compatible with each other, Bell (1998) suggested the core/periphery model, according to which markers have a core meaning (a core function) as well as pragmatic instructions. The occurrence of the elements outside of these is peripheral. According to Bell, the core function is associated with the earliest meaning of an element from which all others can be derived. Of the various conceptions of meaning, I consider the core/periphery model to be the most suitable for the description of the functions of discourse markers because it is able to explain all occurrences of an element, and the core instruction can be associated with the earliest occurrences of the investigated elements.

I consider it to be important to emphasize the fact that discourse markers do not form a part of speech since they constitute a functional rather than grammatical category (cf. Dér 2009). This makes their range to be somewhat difficult to delineate, and, in addition, the relationship of their textual vs. attitude marking functions has not been fully clarified either. I regard both functions to be the feature of discourse markers.

Discourse markers are interesting not only from a synchronic perspective but from a

diachronic one as well, which is why in the next section of the dissertation I discuss the theoretical aspects of the interpretation of discourse markers as historical linguistic data, including the issues of data and of grammaticalization. According to most authors (e.g. Traugott 1999), the emergence of discourse markers can be considered a case of grammaticalization, during which originally grammatical or lexical units lose their previous meanings and gain textual and interpersonal functions. During grammaticalization, implicatures undergo conventionalization and encode speaker attitudes. The observation of the process of grammaticalization raises several issues, however. One of these is that of what is considered to be relevant data and how this data is interpreted. Following the principles of historical pragmatics, I accepted the available written data as a legitimate data source in identifying the earliest occurrences of discourse markers and made an attempt to use corpuses of data that reflect spoken language characteristics despite being written. I also share the opinion that, in accordance with the uniformitarian principle, it is important to take into account also the features of language use from present-day synchrony in attempting to understand the causes of historical linguistic processes.

3. Results: Three case studies

3.1. The history and synchronic status of the discourse marker *hát*

As my first case study, I examine the history and process of grammaticalization of the discourse marker *hát* in the light of language use data. I have traced the ways in which this particle has been used since its earliest occurrences: first, as an adverbial (meaning “to there” and “at that time”), next, as a conjunction (meaning “and thus”), and, finally, as a discourse marker. In its first occurrences as a discourse marker, *hát* was used in sentences referring to saying or asking something. Speaker attitudes associated with the word became a part of its meaning as an implicature, and this way *hát* started to be used for emphasis, agreement and permission. Next, it became disassociated with this context and started to denote by itself the speaker’s attitude. Based on the available data, however, it is not always possible to decide whether in a specific occurrence of *hát* the adverbial or conjunction meaning is still predominant or, instead, the discourse marker function is primary – this has prompted me to check the functions of *hát* in early texts which contained information on the circumstances and context of the creation of the text and were dated reliably. A text that satisfied both requirements was the 1660 Sárospatak

religious polemics: I have demonstrated that the occurrences of *hát* found in its text cannot be regarded as Latinisms, as is claimed in the literature (Juhász 1992: 776), but, instead, as a connecting element which, at this time, had “at that time” as one of its meanings, but also expressed emphasis and the speaker’s attitude. The word was used in the polemics only by proselytizing Roman Catholics in their questions, and in addition to signaling the opposition between the addresser and addressee of the question, the element also strengthened the attack-like nature of the question. Data from later centuries demonstrate an evaluative and emotional additional meaning and emphasizing function of the word. Since regional dialects preserve the archaic characteristics of a language, I have compared historical linguistic data against data from dialect atlases and examples from sources on regional variation as well. In addition to the emphatic and rhetorical use of the word, these sources have also shown a rich range of meanings. Data from talk shows and parliament speeches have refined the picture even further. On the basis of the empirical data it can be stated that whereas the locative adverbial meaning of *hát* has fully disappeared from Hungarian and the time adverbial function can be considered entirely out of date by now, *hát* is still used for the marking of the logical relations and most often used as a discourse marker. I have documented several uses of *hát* in this function: it is used as a general response marker, as well as to signal the continuation of speech on the speaker’s part or self-correction, serves as a means of the speaker explaining themselves or of emphasizing a statement or command. When it signals speaker attitudes, it can signal a heightened emotional state (anxiety, indignation, or surprise) or strengthen the rhetorical nature of a question, and, thus, function as an element of politeness (as a face saving mechanism).

3.2. The history and present-day status of the discourse maker -e

There are different views regarding the process of development of the question particle -e, namely, whether it developed from an interjection (Berrár 1957), demonstrative pronoun (Zaicz 2006), conjunction (Simonyi 1882), or a verb of negation (Simoncsics 2003) – however, what is certain is that, regardless of the etymology of the word, the earliest examples of its use demonstrate an expression of speaker attitudes. The explanation of the various uses of the question particle are complicated by the fact that throughout its history, the particle has been used in a range of syntactic positions rather than only in the position regarded as its standard position

today. Its syntactic position was discussed in prescriptive rules from early on (Imre 1873, Simonyi 1879), however, its use in positions not complying with the norm and its communicative functions were not discussed at all in the literature for a long time. The earliest examples of “strange” word order date back to the Hussite Bible, all of which can be explained by specific communicative reasons or the topic–focus articulation of the sentence they occur in. In order to comprehensively overview the functions of the discourse marker *-e*, I have investigated non-standard structures from present-day language use, specifically, data from both regional and social dialects. Data from regional dialects have shown that in archaic dialects the particle retains an attention drawing and highlighting function in addition to a basic modal question function. This highlighting function motivates attaching the particle to the element which is emotionally emphasized. Non-standard forms from social dialects also show considerable variation: the particle is attached either to the element to be emphasized as far as the desired meaning is concerned, or to the last element of a structure believed to form a unit. The movement of the particle can be traced back to pragmatic reasons: questions opening with *nem-e* constitute statements of the opposite meaning, and the question particle attached to the negative particle weakens the force of the statement. Thus, this kind of use of the question particle can even be regarded as a politeness strategy. Besides, in the case of both this and other variants of non-standard word order, fashionable expressions, playing with language, and the desire to break the norm can also serve as motivation for their use, especially in the case of texts of spoken language use in writing (e.g. text messages, IRC etc.). The multiple use of the question particle *-e* within the same sentence (*nem-e akartad-e volna-e megtenni-e* “would you have wanted to do that?”) is motivated by the desire either to emphasize, or to consciously diverge from the standard.

3.3. The history and present-day synchronic status of the discourse marker *vajon*

The third case study examines another question word, the element *vajon*. I have shown that despite of the unsettled origin of the word (namely, whether it goes back to the conjunction *vagy* and the interjection *vaj*, Simonyi 1882; the verb *vall*, Kassai 1817 and Beke 1915–1917; or the copula, Zolnai 1893 and Klemm 1923), the discourse marker function of this element can be clearly detected from the very start: the very first examples of its use are in wh-questions where the element signals the speaker’s attitude. Even in the earliest occurrences it was not used to elicit information but to express the speaker’s doubt in connection with the content of what they were

saying. It was used to signal uncertainty, speculation, worry, scorn and contempt, often turning the content of the statement into its opposite. This function of *vajon* has been retained over time. Analyzing present-day parliament speeches, I have identified two main uses of this question word: first, it occurs in questions that the person asking the question expects an answer to, and, second, in rhetorical questions. The latter all constitute statements of the opposite meaning. And even though formulating a question as a statement can be considered a politeness strategy, the presence of *vajon* in the question still signals the speaker's attitude and contrasting opinion. An analysis of the communicative situation of parliament speeches has demonstrated that the discourse marker *vajon* serves a competitive strategy where it signals an opposite meaning rather than doubt and questioning.

4. The evaluation of discourse markers and linguistic superstitions attached to them

Of the discourse markers discussed in the case studies, the use of sentence initial *hát* and the non-standard placement and multiple use of the question particle *-e* are heavily stigmatized in Hungary (cf. Szabó 2008). Stigmatization, however, is not limited to these elements but affects several other discourse markers as well due to the fact that language cultivation as well as primary and secondary school teachers' practice considers several of them to be filler elements that have no function and are to be avoided. In the next sizeable section of my dissertation I examine the varying evaluation of discourse functions and linguistic superstitions attached to them. In addition to the descriptions prohibiting and stigmatizing speech fillers, the literature concerning such discourse markers now also includes accounts of functional explanations of these, however, only stigmatization reaches the average speaker. Most criticism is focused on sentence initial *hát*, so the roots and current status of this linguistic superstition are discussed in detail through an analysis of speakers' reflections on it in various internet forums. Stigmatization of *hát* is present in everyday thinking about its use even though this discourse marker is widely used sentence initially in practice. Various language attitudes emerge from internet based texts: identifying with the linguistic superstition is present just like its refutation and rejection. The linguistic superstition is now widely questioned in most internet forum inscriptions on the basis of often heard and used examples containing sentence initial *hát*, however, frequent references to and repetition of the superstition still contributes to its continuing preservation. In other cases the superstition becomes part of the utterance as a metalinguistic remark, turning into a means of

style formation and text organization and serving as the basis for a new language game.

5. What discourse markers signal according to speakers

Independently of theoretical frameworks and claims in the literature as well as of indirect linguistic data, in my dissertation I have aimed to show how speakers evaluate the discourse markers under investigation (i.e. elements *-e*, *hát*, and *vajon*), namely, how often and in what function they use them. In order to analyze this, I have carried out a questionnaire based study. I have included three kinds of tasks in my questionnaire: first, I have used minimal pairs of sentences to investigate the function of the discourse markers; second, I have directly asked subjects about the typical range of use of the discourse marker, independently of context, also asking subjects to provide an example; and third, I have elicited metalinguistic comments from subjects.

I have presented the functions attributed to the investigated discourse markers by the subjects of my questionnaire based study in detail and illustrated with figures, and used statistical analysis to check for correlations with age and gender. I have used Chi-square and Yates' correction for continuity as well, employing the usual level of $p < .05$ as a cutoff for testing statistical significance.

Testing for correlation with gender was motivated by the fact that, according to works in gender linguistics (cf. Huszár 2009), there is a difference between women's and men's communicative strategies, making it important to see what functions are associated with the various discourse markers by women vs. men. My only preliminary expectation was that using discourse markers as a politeness strategy would be more widespread among women.

Testing for correlation with age was carried out because I was interested in finding out how primary and secondary school education affects subjects' responses. Thus, I compared the results of subjects under vs. over 18 (the upper limit of compulsory schooling in Hungary), expecting that the stigmatization of discourse markers would be stronger among the younger group of subjects.

The following hypotheses were supported by my findings:

- (i) The stigmatization of the investigated discourse markers is strong among speakers.
- (ii) The emotional, expressive, interactive and textual functions of the discourse markers are recognized and used by naïve speakers.

(iii) There are no statistically significant differences between the gender and age groups with regard to the functions associated with the discourse markers by speakers.

(iv) Speakers' opinions regarding discourse markers are in parallel with the claims of the core/periphery model.

However, I have had to reject the hypothesis that speakers regard the propositional content of utterances unaffected by discourse markers, since the findings have contradicted it.

Since it would be important to test the hypotheses used in this study on a larger sample, I plan to continue the research reported on in this dissertation by expanding the range of discourse markers under investigation and using further methodology, including studying the role of intonation as well. The present work has already shown that discourse markers are associated with a wide range of functions, and that they signal much more complex and sophisticated meanings than what defining dictionaries and linguistics handbooks claim about them. The synchronic and diachronic findings of this dissertation have provided ample proof that a comprehensive approach in the study of discourse markers is essential.

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- Az *-e* kérdő partikula nyomában [Tracing the question particle *-e*]. 8th National Conference of PhD Students in Linguistics, Szeged, November 11–12, 2004.
- A sárospataki hitvita nyelvi elemzése – különös tekintettel a kérdésekre [A linguistic analysis of the Sárospatak religious polemics, with a special focus on questions]. 5th Conference on New Results in Historical Linguistics, Szeged, April 26–27, 2007.
- A *hát* diskurzusjelölő partikula használata a kérdésekben [The use of the discourse marking particle *hát* in questions]. 5th Semiotica Agriensis Conference, Eger, October 19–21, 2007.
- A *hát* diskurzusjelölő partikulához kötődő nyelvhasználati stratégia [The language use strategy associated with the discourse marker *hát*]. Conference on Sign and Meaning, Budapest, October 29–30, 2007.
- A diskurzusjelölő partikulák a kérdésekben [Discourse marking particles in questions]. 11th Conference of PhD Students in Linguistics (LingDok), Szeged, December 6–7, 2007.
- A diskurzusjelölővé válás folyamatáról [On the process of the development of discourse markers]. 18th Congress of Hungarian Applied Linguists, Budapest, April 3–5, 2008.
- Partikula és/vagy diskurzusjelölő? [Particle and/or discourse marker?]. 2nd Conference on “Discourse in Grammar – Grammar in Discourse: New perspectives in the description of the Hungarian language”, Arts Faculty, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, November 11–12, 2008.
- Hogyan (ne) tanítsuk a diskurzusjelölőket? [How (not) to teach students about discourse markers?]. 19th Congress of Hungarian Applied Linguists, April 16–18, 2009.
- Diskurzusjelölők a parlamenti beszédekben [Discourse markers in parliament speeches]. 11th International Conference in Applied Linguistics and Communication in Dunaújváros, May 7–8, 2009.
- Adalékok a *vajon* kérdőszó történetéhez [New findings on the history of the question word *vajon*]. 6th Conference on New Results in Historical Linguistics, Szeged, October 14–15, 2009.
- Mit jelölnek a diskurzusjelölők? [What do discourse markers mark?]. 12th International Conference in Applied Linguistics and Communication in Dunaújváros, March 11–12, 2010.
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- A diskurzusjelölők funkciója – a nyelvhasználók szerint [The function of discourse markers – as speakers see it]. 20th Congress of Hungarian Applied Linguists, Debrecen, August 26–28, 2010.
- A diskurzusjelölők mint nyelvtörténeti adatok [Discourse markers as historical linguistic data], Conference on Data in Historical Linguistics: Validity and Interpretation, Linguistics Institute, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, September 30 – October 1, 2010.

- A diskurzusjelölők emocionális és expresszív funkcióiról [On the emotional and expressive function of discourse markers]. Conference on Linguistic Functions: Style and Connection. Kodolányi János Főiskola, Budapest, October 18–19, 2010.
- A Twitter szövegei a diskurzuselemzés szemszögéből [Twitter texts from a discourse analytical aspect], Conference on Culture and Language, Cultural Linguistics: New Perspectives in the Description of the Hungarian Language, Arts Faculty, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, November 23–24, 2010.
- A diskurzusjelölők funkciói a számok tükrében [Quantitative aspects of the functions of discourse markers], A Conference organized by the Institute of Modern Philology, Arts Faculty, University of Miskolc, together with the Association of Hungarian Applied Linguists and Language Teachers, and the Linguistics Committee of the Miskolc Chapter of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Miskolc, January 17, 2011.
- Diskurzusjelölők az internetes szövegtípusokban [Discourse markers in internet based text types], 13th International Conference in Applied Linguistics and Communication in Dunaújváros, Dunaújváros, March 31, 2011.

