Discourse markers in L2 Mandarin by Italian L1 learners

Despite the importance of discourse markers for pragmatically effective communication, surprisingly little research has been conducted on the acquisition of these markers by second language learners. In particular, to our knowledge, no research has been conducted on the acquisition of discourse markers in Mandarin L2 by Italian L1 learners.

Discourse markers have been defined in several ways by researchers working on different languages: discourse particles, pragmatic markers, modal particles (see for instance Fraser 1996, Schiffrin 1987 a.o.; for Italian see for instance Bazzanella 1995 and subsequent work, while for Chinese see Miracle 1991, Yeh & Huang 2016 and references cited there). The varied terminology reveals the difficulties in providing a comprehensive linguistic analysis. Discourse particles, in fact, are also problematic for the foreign learner, to whom they seem difficult to understand and learn. Yet, they are a crucial element of communicative competence (Schiffrin 1987).

There are general difficulties in teaching and learning the DSs of a foreign language: the difficulty to rely on a univoque linguistic classification, their multifunctionality, and the difficulty, for the teacher, in creating communicative situations where the students can apprehend and practice DSs in a naturalistic way. Nevertheless, the use of DSs is an important factor in competent expression and in the accurate comprehension of discourse, as implied by the three macro-levels of communication skills and linguistic competence in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2011). For teachers and learners, it is not always easy to explain the meaning of a DS, and looking in a dictionary is usually less than helpful. Therefore learners must therefore be made aware that meaning is not just denotational, but that can also be 'speaker-oriented', expressing the speaker's relationship to the hearer, to the utterance or to the text.

Because they are frequent in the input an L2 receives from native speakers, one would expect that L2 learners would develop and awareness of them and eventually, productive skills. Yet, pragmatic skills, such as the proper us of DSs, are well known for being difficult to master.

The present paper has different goals: (i) an investigation in some depth of the Mandarin discourse markers that are used more frequently in every day conversation, with the aim of discovering their various uses, and from these uses determine a core function for each marker; (ii) comparing the analysed Mandarin discourse markers with Italian ones, in order to propose a clear theoretical description of Mandarin discourse markers for Italian learners. This task will be also a practical value for teaching Mandarin, particularly when constructing natural sounding dialogues and teaching advanced conversation; (iii) inspired by the research of Polat (2011) on English language L2, we propose a first collection of conversations of Chinese speakers with Italian learners with different proficiency levels, to examine discourse markers used by naturalistic adult

language learners, to look for different patterns of use in context and development. Possible reasons of the patterns of different contexts and meanings of discourse markers will be discussed, especially taking in consideration the typological differences between Mandarin and Italian; this will create a small but insightful corpus of Mandarin, that we aim at develop as a tool, together with the theoretical analysis, for the study of pragmatic acquisition by Italian learners of Mandarin L2. It is important to point out, in fact, that in the acquisition of discourse markers in Mandarin by Italian learners, there are different factors that play a role. First of all, the interpretation of discourse markers vary depending on the context, but also the prosodic realization plays a crucial role. A crucial typological difference between Mandarin and Italian, is that Mandarin is a tonal language, so in the realization of the prosody of discourse markers we have to taken in account also the intereference of the tonal component, which is completely absent in languages such as Italian. This aspect is to stress the importance of a tool to teach Mandarin, not only that uses the spoken language in the most naturalistic way as possible, but also the prosodic realization could help the acquisition of multifaceted elements as Mandarin discourse markers present for a Italian learner.

The collection of data will aim also at address the following questions:

(i) Is there an order of acquisition of discourse markers? Do L2 learners demonstrate consistent patterns in the acquisition of DSs?; (ii) How do L2 learners' use of DSs differ form native use?; (iii) Do L2 learners demonstrate differences in patterns of use of DSs, compared with each other and at what stages?

Procedures and Methodology

PHASE1:

Choice of xx learners (Italian native speakers) that will be devided in three levels: elementary (A1, A2), intermediate (B1), advanced (B2, C1) (levels tested on the basis of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). The learners will be aslo requested to provide sociolinguistic information (sex, age, education, other languages…).

PHASE 2:

(1) *observation* of L2 learners of BD speaking about topics proposed by the Mandarin native speaker, and (2) *formal interview*.

As for the *observation* of spontaneous discourse, in order to encourage the production of discourse, I will use the following tasks:

(I) **The Map Task** (i.e. instruction giver), where the speaker is given the map instruction to the follower;

(II) **Spot-the-difference Picture Task**, where each participant is presented with a different version of the same cartoon-style picture, and the participants have to collaborate to find differences between the two pictures without seeing each other's picture.

The *interview* consist of four sections:

(I) **Five short questions**, designed to trigger DSs, such *hao* 'okay', dui 'right' name 'so'.

(II) **Dialogue on tape with cloze completion task**: Students are presented with a written dialogue containing blanks. Subjects have to listen to a dialogue (recorded and

transcribed) and to complete the dialogue with discourse markers that seem appropriate in the context.

The goal of this section is to test what intuitions subjects had about DSs.

(III) **Cloze completion task with list of options.** The subjects are given the same dialogue in (II) to complete again, this time with a list of DSs.

The goal here is to see whether students can recognize and accurately use DSs when provided with explicit instructions to do so.

Eventually, the results of the completion tasks are compared to see whether the provision of the DSs has any effect on the number and accuracy of the learners' use of these items.

(III) **The definition task**. Students are presented with a list of common DSs and asked to provide a Mandarin equivalent for each item: the equivalent does not have to be a literal translation, but what they think the word meant as they used it in the preceding task.