



THE FORMATION OF THE CONCEPT OF DISCOURSE MARKERS AND THE PROBLEM OF TERMINOLOGICAL DIVERSITY: A COMPARATIVE VIEW OF ENGLISH AND UZBEK LINGUISTICS

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22246898>

ARTICLE INFO

Qabul qilindi: 27-avgust 2026 yil

Ma'qullandi: 29-avgust 2026 yil

Nashr qilindi: 31-avgust 2026 yil

KEYWORDS

*discourse marker, pragmatic
marker, terminological
diversity, metalanguage,
functional class, procedural
meaning, particle, contrastive
linguistics, identification
criteria, Uzbek language.*

ABSTRACT

The article traces the formation of the concept of the discourse marker in English linguistics and analyses the problem of terminological diversity in labelling these units. Metalinguistic terms used in English and Uzbek linguistics are compared, and it is argued that in Uzbek linguistics such units are not described as a unified functional class but are distributed across morphological categories. A standardised terminological apparatus and four operational identification criteria are proposed.

Introduction

The units speakers use to organise their talk, to signal how one stretch of discourse relates to another and to display their stance towards what is being said have attracted sustained attention over the last four decades. Expressions such as well, so, you know, I mean and actually in English, or xo'sh, mayli, demak, xullas and the enclitic particles -ku, -da and -chi in Uzbek, do not contribute to the truth conditions of the propositions in which they occur. Removing them leaves the sentence grammatically intact, yet the resulting utterance sounds abrupt or pragmatically inappropriate. This combination of syntactic optionality and communicative indispensability has made such units one of the most intensively studied and, at the same time, one of the most terminologically unstable objects of modern linguistics (Schourup, 1999).

The paradox of the field is well known: the more research has been produced, the less agreement there is on what the object of research should be called. Within English linguistics alone, largely overlapping sets of expressions have been labelled discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987), pragmatic markers (Brinton, 1996; Aijmer, 2013), discourse particles (Fischer, 2006) and theticals (Kaltenböck et al., 2011). In Uzbek linguistics the situation differs in kind rather than in degree: there is no single label at all, because the units in question have never been treated as one class. They are described separately as yuklamalar (particles), kirish so'zlar (parenthetical words), modal so'zlar (modal words), bog'lovchilar (conjunctions) and undov so'zlar (interjections), each within traditional parts-of-speech morphology. Where these units have been examined pragmatically, they have entered the description under other headings — as politeness particles within speech-act analysis (Islomova, 2025c) or as politeness markers within cross-cultural pragmatics (Islomova, 2025d).

The aim of the present article is twofold. First, it reconstructs the stages through which the concept of the discourse marker was formed in English linguistics and systematises the competing terms with respect to the theoretical assumptions behind them. Second, it compares this apparatus with the metalanguage of Uzbek linguistics and proposes a standardised set of terms together with operational identification criteria applicable to both languages.

The relevance and current state of the problem

The relevance of the topic is determined by several converging factors. The first is theoretical. Contemporary linguistics has moved from the description of the language system towards the study of language in use, and the discourse marker is a central object of this paradigm: it is the point at which the organisation of text, the management of interaction and the expression of speaker stance intersect. Yet a field whose central object lacks a stable name cannot accumulate comparable results, since two studies bearing the same title may describe partly different inventories.

The second factor is contrastive. English discourse markers have been described in hundreds of studies, and contrastive work covering English and German, French, Swedish and Dutch is well established (Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg, 2006), whereas the English–Uzbek pair has received systematic pragmatic treatment only in individual speech-act domains such as requests (Islomova, 2025c) and expressions of politeness and gratitude (Islomova, 2025d). The two languages are typologically distant: English is analytic and encodes pragmatic functions mainly through independent lexical items, whereas Uzbek is agglutinative and encodes a substantial part of the same load morphologically. This asymmetry has been shown to generate systematic transfer effects in learner language (Islomova, 2025b), and it affects the metalanguage as well: an apparatus covering both languages must be formulated in functional rather than formal terms.

The third factor is applied. Discourse markers are among the most frequently omitted elements in translation and among the least systematically presented items in bilingual dictionaries and teaching materials. Their pedagogical importance is indirectly confirmed by evidence that Uzbek learners of English overgeneralise politeness markers, inserting please and thank you where native speakers would not (Islomova, 2025d), and that early bilingual exposure is accompanied by reduced use of Uzbek honorifics and increased code-switching (Islomova, 2025a). Since these units are not identified as a class in the descriptive tradition, they are not taught as a class either.

The current state of the problem may be summarised as follows. In English linguistics the concept was consolidated in the second half of the 1980s. Schiffrin (1987) established discourse markers as sequentially dependent elements bracketing units of talk, while Blakemore (1987, 2002), within relevance theory, argued that such expressions encode not concepts but procedures constraining inference. Fraser (1999, 2009) proposed a narrower account in which discourse markers form one subclass of pragmatic markers signalling a relation between adjacent segments, whereas Brinton (1996) and Traugott (1995) showed diachronically how lexical items develop into pragmatic markers through grammaticalisation and subjectification. Aijmer (2002, 2013) then shifted the field towards corpus-based and contrastive description, using translation correspondences as a semantic mirror for identifying functional profiles.

In Uzbek linguistics, by contrast, the relevant units have been described within traditional morphology and syntax, or have surfaced incidentally within pragmatic studies of particular

speech acts. In work on requests, for example, *iltimos*, *marhamat*, *-chi* and *bo'ladimi* are listed together as “politeness particles”, and the enclitic *-chi* is identified as a softener of the imperative (Islomova, 2025c). The observation is accurate, but the classificatory basis is the speech act rather than the unit: *-chi* is described where it happens to occur, not as a member of a functional class with a distribution of its own.

Materials and methods (the experimental part of the study)

The study is metalinguistic in character: its material consists not of language data as such but of the terms by which scholars describe language data. The investigation was carried out in four stages.

Stage one: assembling the terminological sample. A sample of monographs and journal articles in English linguistics published between 1976 and the present was compiled, together with academic grammars of Uzbek and recent contrastive pragmatic studies of the English–Uzbek pair (Islomova, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d). For each source the term used, the definition given, the inventory of units covered and the theoretical framework adopted were recorded.

Stage two: componential analysis of definitions. Each definition was decomposed into elementary components — “does not affect truth conditions”, “syntactically optional”, “prosodically separate”, “connects discourse segments”, “expresses speaker attitude”, “encodes procedural meaning” — which made it possible to distinguish genuine theoretical disagreement from mere notational variation.

Stage three: contrastive mapping of metalanguages. English terms were mapped onto the categories of Uzbek grammatical description. Mapping was functional: for each English term it was asked which Uzbek category covers the same functional territory, and conversely, which portion of each Uzbek category falls within the scope of the class.

Stage four: verification through operational tests. The proposed criteria were verified on a control sample of utterances from both languages, including the request and gratitude sequences documented in earlier contrastive work (Islomova, 2025c, 2025d). Four tests were applied: omission, substitution, positional mobility and prosodic separability. Units satisfying at least three of the four were treated as core members of the class, the remainder as peripheral.

The methods employed were the descriptive-analytical method, componential analysis of metalinguistic definitions, the contrastive-typological method with function as the *tertium comparationis*, and operational testing.

Analysis of the results

1. The stages of formation of the concept. The concept crystallised through four stages. At the pre-terminological stage the units were treated within the theory of textual cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), which described conjunctive adjuncts but left spoken-language items such as *well* and *you know* outside the description. At the second stage the class was constituted as an object in its own right: Schiffrin (1987) supplied the dominant label and an empirical demonstration that these items are systematically distributed rather than random fillers, while Blakemore (1987) supplied the semantic foundation by distinguishing conceptual from procedural encoding. At the third stage the class was internally differentiated (Fraser, 1999; Jucker & Ziv, 1998). At the fourth, current stage the field has become corpus-driven and contrastive, attention shifting from defining the class to describing the multifunctionality of

individual items (Beeching, 2016; Crible, 2018); it is characteristic of this stage that the terminological question is increasingly treated as unresolvable in principle (Heine, 2013).

2. The typology of competing terms. The componential analysis made it possible to arrange the principal terms according to the breadth of the class they designate and the theoretical commitment they carry (Table 1).

Table 1

Principal terms and their theoretical commitments

Term	Defining criterion	Scope of the class	Framework
Discourse marker	Signals a relation between discourse segments	Narrow: connective items	Schiffrin (1987); Fraser (1999)
Pragmatic marker	Expresses speaker attitude and manages interaction	Broad: includes non-connective items	Brinton (1996); Aijmer (2013)
Discourse particle	Formal: short, uninflected, prosodically weak	Narrow: formally restricted	Fischer (2006)
Procedural expression	Encodes a processing instruction, not a concept	Cross-cutting: defined semantically	Blakemore (2002)
Thetical	Syntactic independence from the host clause	Cross-cutting: includes clausal units	Kaltenböck et al. (2011)

Two conclusions follow. First, the terms are not synonyms with different spellings: they differ in the criterion by which membership is decided, which is why the inventories they generate only partly overlap. Second, the criteria belong to different levels of analysis — some functional, some formal, some semantic, some syntactic — so that the choice of term effectively determines the results before the investigation begins.

3. The state of the metalanguage in Uzbek linguistics. The contrastive mapping revealed that the functional territory covered in English by a single class is distributed in Uzbek description across at least five morphological categories (Table 2).

Table 2

Mapping of the functional class onto Uzbek grammatical categories

Uzbek category	Typical units	English functional correspondence	Status in the class
Yuklamalar (particles)	-ku, -da, -chi, -a/-ya, axir	you know, after all, surely, tag questions	Core; morphologically bound
Kirish so'zlar (parentheticals)	aslida, to'g'risi, aytmoqchi, darvoqe	actually, in fact, by the way, anyway	Core

Uzbek category	Typical units	English functional correspondence	Status in the class
Modal so'zlar (modal words)	albatta, ehtimol, shekilli, menimcha	certainly, probably, I think	Partly: epistemic subclass
Bog'lovchilar (conjunctions)	demak, shuning uchun, ammo, lekin	so, therefore, but, however	Only in sentence-initial use
Undov so'zlar (interjections)	e, voy, ha, hm, qani	oh, well, right, come on	Peripheral; boundary cases

The mapping demonstrates that the Uzbek categories rest on a formal-morphological basis, whereas the class of discourse markers rests on a functional one, so that the two classifications cut across each other. Demak is a discourse marker when it opens an utterance and signals an inference drawn from preceding talk, but not when it functions as an ordinary intra-sentential connective. Conversely, the enclitic -ku is never treated as a discourse-level unit in traditional description, although functionally it performs the work carried in English by you know, after all and emphatic do.

4. The status of Uzbek enclitic particles. The most consequential result concerns the enclitics. When the four tests were applied to -ku, -da and -chi, these units satisfied three of the four criteria: they do not affect the truth conditions of the host proposition, they are syntactically optional, and they are prosodically distinguishable. They fail only positional mobility, since they are bound to the host word. That failure, however, follows from the agglutinative type of the language rather than from the functional nature of the units. Existing descriptions corroborate the functional side of this result: -chi is documented as a softener converting a bare imperative into a mitigated request, as in boringchi and kelingchi, and is grouped with iltimos and bo'ladimi among the means of reducing imposition (Islomova, 2025c). Functionally this is the work of an interpersonal marker; formally it is a suffix. If positional mobility is retained as a defining criterion, an entire class of functionally equivalent units in agglutinative languages is excluded by definition, which is why the present study replaces it with the broader criterion of syntactic non-integration.

The result may be generalised: the same pragmatic functional load is distributed differently across levels of language structure depending on typological type. Quantitative evidence points in the same direction. English speakers were found to use please in 82% of requests, whereas Uzbek speakers used iltimos in 54%, and thank you occurred in 90% of English gratitude exchanges against 70% for rahmat (Islomova, 2025d). The lower frequency of the free lexical exponents in Uzbek does not indicate lower politeness; it indicates that part of the functional load is carried elsewhere — by honorific verb forms, by address terms and by the enclitics themselves. A metalanguage adequate for contrastive work must therefore be indifferent to the formal status of the exponent.

5. The proposed terminological apparatus. On this basis a three-level system is proposed for Uzbek linguistics. The superordinate term pragmatik markerlar (pragmatic markers) designates the entire functional class of units that do not contribute to propositional content but perform textual, interpersonal or cognitive-processing work. Within it, diskurs markerlari (discourse markers) designates the subclass signalling relations between discourse

segments; modal-pragmatik markerlar designates the subclass expressing speaker stance and attitude towards the addressee; and enklitik pragmatik markerlar designates the morphologically bound exponents specific to agglutinative languages. At the operational level, membership is decided by four criteria — non-truth-conditionality, syntactic optionality, syntactic non-integration and prosodic distinguishability — with at least three required. Multifunctionality is treated not as an obstacle to classification but as an inherent property of the class, which entails that annotation must be multi-layered.

Conclusion

First, the terminological diversity observed in this field is not a matter of arbitrary preference but a reflection of competing theoretical commitments: each term encodes a different criterion of class membership, and the choice of term predetermines the inventory of units and the results obtained. Second, the concept developed in English linguistics through four stages, from the description of textual cohesion to the present corpus-based and contrastive phase.

Third, in Uzbek linguistics the units concerned have not been established as a unified functional class; they are distributed across five morphological categories established on formal grounds, and where they have been examined pragmatically they have been subordinated to the description of particular speech acts (Islomova, 2025c, 2025d) rather than treated as a class in their own right. Fourth, Uzbek enclitic particles satisfy the substantive criteria of membership and fail only positional mobility, itself an artefact of agglutinative morphology; replacing that criterion with syntactic non-integration makes a typologically neutral description possible.

Fifth, the three-level apparatus proposed here, together with the four operational criteria, provides a metalanguage applicable to both an analytic and an agglutinative language. The results may be applied in university courses in pragmalinguistics, discourse analysis and contrastive linguistics, in the compilation of bilingual dictionaries in which the functional meanings of such units are at present largely absent, and in teaching materials addressing the pragmatic transfer and marker overgeneralisation documented among Uzbek learners of English (Islomova, 2025a, 2025d).

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