Reviews

Karin Aijmer. *English discourse particles: Evidence from a corpus*. Studies in Corpus Linguistics 10. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2002. xv + 298 pp. ISBN 90-272-2280-0 (Eur.)/ 1-58811-284-5 (US). Reviewed by **Laurel J. Brinton**, University of British Columbia.

This attractive and highly readable book contains a finely-nuanced and richly documented study of a set of discourse particles (DPs) in Modern English, based on data from the London-Lund Corpus of spoken English, with some comparison to the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus of written English and the COLT Corpus of London teenager speech, where relevant. Covered in detail are the particles *now, oh/ah, just, sort of, actually*, and tags such as *and that sort of thing*, chosen because of their frequency in the corpus. The book has its genesis in studies of individual DPs that Karin Aijmer has published over the past fifteen or more years, though substantially revised and updated. It is a pleasure to have this work brought together in a unified text.

Aijmer begins by defining DPs as grammaticalized (or partially grammaticalized) elements in which pragmatic (textual and phatic) functions override 'literal' (lexical or referential) meaning. They may be oriented either backwards or forwards in the discourse. Formally, DPs are characterized by syntactic position (in the 'pre-front field', as insertion, or as tail), prosodic features (often separate tone units), textual distribution (in dialogic, interactive texts), and clustering tendencies (with other DPs).

Aijmer's overall approach is strictly corpus-based and 'bottom-up' (beginning with the linguistic description of individual particles). Eschewing any one technique of analysis, such as speech act theory or relevance theory, Aijmer takes a broadly functionalist perspective and utilizes a variety of discourse-analytic techniques. She attempts to identify the 'core meaning' of each particle, relating its different functions to this core or prototype in a polysemous way (what she calls a 'modified minimalist description' (p. 21)). Multiple functions can often be explained by reference to linguistic factors such as collocation,

prosody, and text type distribution. Such linguistic clues are also used to distinguish the DP use from the adverbial or interjectional use of each particle. While she admires Schiffrin's (1987) integrated approach, which explains the behavior of DPs on five different levels, she finds it sufficient to restrict her analysis to two macrolevels – textual and interpersonal. On the textual level, DPs may function on either the local or the global coherence level, what Aijmer calls a "qualifier" or a "frame", respectively. On the interactive level, DPs may be expressions of evidentiality, may function as hedges or as boosters, may relate to politeness, or may be used for floorholding.

Important to Aijmer's conception of DPs are their indexical quality and their grammatical status. The indexicality of DPs is their link "to attitudes, to participants and to text" (p. 39). Like other indexical elements, DPs require a fair amount of inferencing in order to be decoded. Indexicality plays a role in the ongoing process of grammaticalization (or pragmaticalization) of DP's. The multifunctionality of DPs follows from their indexical properties, their grammaticalization, and their emergence as fully formed DPs. (Grammaticalization is defined according to the work of Paul Hopper and Elizabeth Traugott.) Pragmatic functions are derived from propositional meaning via certain paths of grammaticalization and on the basis of pragmatic principles (such as inferencing).

Following an introductory chapter in which the theoretical background and analytic framework of the study are set out, Chapter 2 begins the analysis of individual DPs by focusing on the 'topic-changer' *now*. Aijmer argues that the core function of *now* in denoting a boundary is a direct outcome of its temporal meaning 'at the present moment'. On the textual level, *now* has numerous foregrounding, boundary-marking functions: to shift topic, to frame discourse units, to mark off turns, to delimit sub-topics, to denote steps in an argument or moves in a narrative, or to draw attention to elements in a list. But it may also serve in the background to elaborate a sub-topic or provide explanation or clarification. On the interpersonal level, *now* is a marker of subjective modality. It may introduce meta-comments (*now let me see*) or prefaces, or may be used to heighten the effect of reported or one's own speech. It may function alternatively as a speaker-oriented stance marker expressing evaluation (*now that's dreadful*) or introducing a disclaimer or opinion (*now I think*), or as a hearer-oriented stance marker of impatience, resistance, or intensity (*now come on, now wait, now look*).

The interjections *oh* and *ah* (Chapter 3) are the most multifunctional of the DPs discussed. *Oh* is often used in contexts in which the core meaning of 'surprise' is backgrounded: to arrive at a realization (*oh I see*), to express clarifica-

tion after correction, to denote emphasis or intensification, or to register objection or reaction (*oh but*). It has special uses after statements and in elicitational contexts. It may function as a 'topicalizer' or 'newsmark' to promote topic development (*oh are you?*), as a backchannel device to register reception and recognition, as a sign of assessment (*oh that's good*), or as a signal of endorsement (*oh yes, oh no*). When embedded in a turn, *oh* may also demarcate the transition to a clearer formulation or to an aside. An interesting use occurs when *oh* precedes direct quotation and marks the change to a different deictic center of talk. In comparison to *oh, ah* is more formal, does not occur in lexicalized combinations, does not serve as an intensifier, and always contains a component of pleasure. Both forms, but especially *oh*, have a variety of politeness functions in thanking, inviting, apologizing, and expressing appreciation.

The shortest discussion (Chapter 4) treats the interpersonal particle *just*, which Aijmer sees as having a double function as a weakening (downtoning) and strengthening (intensifying) particle. With expressions of extreme or excess, *just* may denote the speaker's emotional bond with the hearer and serve the purpose of positive politeness, while in collocation with markers of tentativeness such as *I think*, it can soften the force of a face-threatening act and serve the purpose of negative politeness. In persuasive discourse, *just* may serve a rhetorical purpose in emphasizing the illocutionary force of an utterance.

In Chapter 5, Aijmer argues that the 'adjuster' *sort of* has two central functions. As an evidential, it may adapt a lexical item to a new instance, mark an expression as a type of metaphor, indicate a numerical approximation, signal lexical imprecision or a lexical gap, and introduce a self-repair. As an affective (interpersonal) marker, it serves as a downtoner (or compromiser), it hedges strong opinions (hence positive politeness), it establishes common ground, especially in collocation with *you know*, and it reduces imposition (hence negative politeness). These functions relate to the 'core meaning' which is metalinguistic and procedural: "to signal that the hearer will be able [to] figure out the meaning of what is said even if it [is] only approximate" (p. 209). Aijmer notes that, unlike other DPs, evidential *sort of* may affect the truth value of an utterance.

Chapter 6 treats a variety of 'referent-final tags', such as *and so on, and things, and things like that, or something, or anything,* and *or so*, which constitute lexicalized phrases and must be treated non-compositionally. On the textual level, they serve as a signal to the hearer to interpret the preceding element in the discourse as an illustrative member of a more general set. On the interpersonal level, they may express tentativeness, intensification, or approximation. They frequently collocate with *you know/see* and other forms that help negotiate common ground. *And*-tags have a 'concretizing' function in expanding and

illustrating; by circumventing the need to give an exhaustive list, they avoid tedious description, speed up a narrative, or invoke a certain ambience. If they contain the universal quantifiers *all* or *everything*, they may serve an intensifying function. *Or*-tags express numerical approximation or tentativeness, and thus serve purposes of negative politeness.

The final discussion (Chapter 7) is of the DP *actually*. Because meaning and use are often unhelpful, Aijmer considers position (utterance- or clause-final, utterance-initial, and post-head) as the defining characteristic of the DP in contrast to the adverbial function of *actually*. The core meaning of the DP relates to the lexical meaning of *actually*: it expresses a discrepancy between reality and what appears to be the case. It has two major functions, contrastive ('but actually') and emphatic ('and actually'). In the former function, the speaker may distance himself from the factuality of an earlier utterance, express an opposition between different points of view, or attempt to change the hearer's perspective. In the latter function, the speaker may provide explanation or justification (*actually, I think/to tell you the honest truth*) or may suggest that information is unexpected. In final position, *actually* may be interpersonal and positively polite, serving to soften what has been said by foregrounding it as a subjective opinion.

The few criticisms that I have of this work do not reflect on its overall – and obvious – strengths. The discussion of grammaticalization remains rather underdeveloped, and alternates between a synchronic and a diachronic view of the process. Discussions of the grammaticalization of individual particles either make brief reference to the work of others or do little more than rehearse general principles of grammaticalization (e.g. subjectification, change in scope) without focusing on changes in the particle in question. Undoubtedly, I am revealing my own interests here in the diachronic development of discourse particles (see Brinton 1988). In the end, the discussion of grammaticalization seems rather tangential to the main line of synchronic analysis in this work. For me the concept of the "indexicality" of DPs , albeit Aijmer sees this as their "most important property" (p. 5), also remains somewhat nebulous, and its contribution to grammaticalization unclear. Finally, although Aijmer is critical of the overly abstract 'core' meanings provided by those taking the minimalist approach to semantics (e.g., the approach of Anna Wierzbicka), her postulated core meanings are often as equally broad, as in the case of *just* whose core meaning "functions as an instruction to the hearer to interpret the utterance as the expression of an attitude" (p. 158). And Aijmer is forced several times to admit that the core meaning of a particular particle is difficult or impossible to specify.

These minor points aside, Aijmer's book represents an important contribution to research in the area of discourse particles in English, and to research in

discourse particles generally. While studies of individual discourse markers abound, they are scattered throughout journals and collected works and are variable in their methodology, source of data, and reliability. Very few full-length studies of English discourse particles exist. The most recent, Blakemore (2002), takes a 'top-down' approach using relevance theory. Closest in approach to the current study is Lenk (1998), likewise based on data from the London-Lund Corpus (as well as the still unpublished Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English). However, Lenk examines a rather different set of particles (*anyway/anyhow, however, still, incidentally, actually, what else*) and is primarily concerned with their global textual function as discourse-structuring devices. Some older book-length studies (Goldberg 1980; Schourup 1985; Erman 1987; Schiffrin 1987) examine rather different sets of particles and are based on more limited data.

References

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