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Topic shifters in a contrastive perspective: a corpus study

Benjamin Fagard* (Paris)

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to identify grammaticalization chains for discourse markers (DMs) signaling topic shifts. In order to do this, I use a parallel corpus to spot the most frequent translation equivalents of a French DM which typically signals topic shifts, *par ailleurs* “by the way”. My corpus contains 587 occurrences of *par ailleurs* and their equivalents in 12 European languages, totaling 8,212 excerpts, which I analyzed to find the translation equivalents of *par ailleurs*. This allowed me to identify 126 DMs – a mean of 10.5 per language (10 for German). I classed these DMs in broad semantic categories, based on their lexicographic description, and compared the results across languages. In German as in other European languages, the most frequent strategy appears to be the use of ADDITIVE DMs such as *außerdem* “besides”, alongside other strategies, especially DIGRESSIVE DMs such as *übrigens* “by the way”.

Keywords: topic shift, discourse marker, parallel corpus, grammaticalization chain.

0 Introduction

I present a parallel corpus study on discourse markers in German compared to other European languages,

focusing on a subtype of discourse relation, *topic shifting*, illustrated in (1), and its explicit encoding vs absence of marking.

- (1) *I'm happy I made it out alive from her annual checkup. **By the way**, you'll never guess what happened at the vet's office today.* (Traugott 2020: 122)

Example (1) illustrates the possibility of *digressive* topic shifts: while in (1) the speaker does not turn back to the initial topic (having her cat groomed), in (2) the speaker goes into a lengthy digression, but eventually turns back to the initial topic (“So I get to the boat”).¹

- (2) *You've seen it where the planes go off steam, old-fashioned, right? Old-fashioned. So they've decided to go magnetic – never been done before*

* Lattice (CNRS, ENS|PSL & Paris Sorbonne Nouvelle)

1 That this is indeed a digression seems confirmed by the fact that a journalist reporting on this speech omitted it, even though he does seem to provide a verbatim account, see (i):

(i) *“The great aircraft carrier, the Gerald Ford... it's getting close,” Trump said. “The largest ship ever built, they say. It's a massive ship. But they're having trouble with the catapult system, because it used to be steam... They've decided to go magnetic. Never been done before. And electronic. So, it's very, very complex.” He added, “We have an aircraft carrier, you can't send planes of f the damn thing. Historically, that has not proven to be a good thing for aircraft carriers.”*

(Newsmax, April 3rd, 2019; <https://www.newsmax.com/politics/navy-aircraft-carrier-emal-catapults/2019/04/03/id/910069/>, last accessed on February 10th, 2022).

– and electronic. So it's very, very complex. They have these brilliant guys from MIT, where my uncle was a professor, by the way, for 40 years, brilliant guy, Dr. John Trump. A lot of people find it hard to believe that I had a professor – one of the smartest people in the history of MIT, in my blood. You'd be surprised. A lot of things are surprising in life. But you have to go to MIT to figure out how this damn thing works. So I get to the boat. (Trump speech, April 2nd, 2019; <https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-rncc-fundraiser-dinner-april-2-2019>, last accessed on February 10th, 2022; underlined: the digression)

Topic shifts can be signaled in a variety of ways, and are sometimes not signaled at all (Section 1). My main question is what resources speakers of German and other European languages can draw on to mark it when they need or wish to do so. The hypothesis I put to the test in this paper is that there are prototypical grammaticalization chains for such markers, as there are for other areas of grammar (Heine/Claudi/Hünemeyer 1991). In order to investigate these sources, or strategies, I start out by sketching a typology of markers of topic shifts, or topic shifters (Section 2). I test this typology with a parallel corpus study using the Europarl corpus (Section 3). My results point to a prevalence of the additive strategy, found in all languages of the sample.

1 State of the art

Discourse markers (henceforth DMs) have been the focus of a vast literature bearing for instance on their classification (e.g. Fraser 2006), their use to mark discourse coherence (Lenk 1998a), or their emergence (Hansen/Rossari 2005, Brinton 2006). Concerning topic shifts, there have been a series of studies on topic orientation markers (Fraser 2009), additive markers (Forker 2016, De Cesare/Andorno 2017), a paper questioning the existence of digressive markers by Pons Bordería and Estelles Arguedas (2009), and a special issue on digressive markers (Fagard/Charolles 2020).

I adopt a broad definition of the notion of topic shift, as a change of topic which *could* be signaled explicitly, a topic being “what a proposition is about and what is at the center of current interest and about which then further information is provided” (Forker 2016: 74). A TOPIC SHIFTER² can be defined as a DM which signals a change of topic, i.e. that the “center of current interest” has shifted.

Typological approaches (König 1991, Forker 2016) and language-specific studies indicate that topic shifts can be signaled by a wide variety of means. Analyzing a political speech, Cortés Rodríguez and Hidalgo Downing (2015) identify a wide range of strategies, from vocatives (*Señor presidente* “Mister President”) to aboutness markers (*a propósito de...* “about...”), including zero marking.

Among the strategies investigated in this paper are ADDITIVES, such as English *too* or *also*, which can be used to signal topic shifts. Forker (2016: 73) defines them after König (1991: 3) as “focus-sensitive operators indicating existential quantification over

² Semantic and functional categories, such as ADDITIVE, DIGRESSIVE, CONCESSIVE, are, from this point on, in small caps.

alternatives with respect to the material contained in the scope and the inclusion of some alternatives as possible values for the open proposition in their scope”. It appears that they can, in some cases, be used pragmatically to add a new topic, especially when they are in clause-initial position, as illustrated by the contrast between (3) and (4).

(3) *Mary came. John **also** came.*

(4) *Mary came. **Also**, John told me to give you this.*

In (3), *also* is placed next to the verb; it functions as a typical ADDITIVE, adding a new element to the subject of the previous verb. In (4), *also* is clause-initial and is used as a TOPIC SHIFTER: in this case, it is quite clear that John’s message has little to do with Mary. The “alternative” given as a “possible value” here concerns the discourse level, in line with the tendency of the clause-initial position to trigger topic shifter uses (see Fraser 2009, Traugott 2020).

Topic shifts can also be signaled by DIGRESSIVES, which could be defined as topic shifters introducing a temporary shift. This is a problematic category, as one recurrent question in studies on topic shifters is the possibility of returning to the previous topic. Charolles (2020: 66) notes that “[t]he idea that digressions can be definitive is rather counterintuitive, since one rather expects them to be closed quickly”; indeed, turning back to a previous topic can be signaled “with an explicit utterance such as *getting back to...* or *anyway*” (Grosz/Sidner 1986: 195), or even *so*, as in (2) (“**So** I get to the boat”). There seems to be a consensus, however, on the idea that topic shifters can introduce both topic shifts and digressions or, to put it differently, that the topic shift they introduce can be temporary or

definitive (Van Kuppevelt 1995: 821). Fraser (2009) shows that the functions of topic orientation markers (e.g. *incidentally*, but also non-lexicalized constructions such as *before I forget*) include, among other things, the signaling of both topic shift and digression. Traugott (2020: 122) notes that “Prototypical DDMs [digressive discourse markers, B.F.] in contemporary English cue a discourse topic shift or change”, in line with Pons Bordería and Estelles Arguedas’ (2009) claim that topic shifters do not imply a return to the original topic. Finally, Charolles (2020) acknowledges that, while *par ailleurs* often introduces digressions, in some uses it merely introduces a topic shift with no return to the previous topic. In this paper, I will therefore not distinguish systematically between *digression* and *topic shift*, analyzing digressions as a subtype of topic shift.

As noted above, topic shifts can also be signaled by ABOUTNESS markers, which can be defined as signaling topic continuation. Though this is rather counter-intuitive, diachronic studies show that there is indeed a tendency for markers of continuity to come to signal topic shifts, as in the example of French *à propos* (“about this” > “by the way”), illustrated in (5).

(5) (French)

*Des véhicules développés sur ordre seront beaucoup trop chers et personne ne les achètera. Et à **propos**, le vélo électrique que j'utilise a été fabriqué en Chine.*

(English)

*If they are developed to order, then the vehicles will be unacceptably expensive and nobody will buy them. **By the way**, the electric bicycle I ride was made in China.*
(Europarl7, #40455962, Koehn 2005)

Conversely, topic shifts can be signaled by CONCESSIVE markers – such as English *but* in (6) – which explicitly mark the new topic as contrastive.

- (6) *What deserves more thought is the other aspects of Europe's response to the crisis, **but** we should avoid worrying about our image and concentrate instead on the substance, as the High Representative rightly said.* (Europarl7, #38938473, Koehn 2005)

To my knowledge, there is no study dedicated specifically to a typology of *strategies* speakers may use to mark topic shifts. My goal in this paper is to lay the foundations for such a typology, with a pilot study on European languages. The cultural proximity between European languages may lead us to think that there has been a slow but steady leveling of linguistic differences (see Haspelmath 2001: 1506–1507; Horst 2013: 182), the outcome being what has been termed “Standard Average European” (Whorf 1956 [1939]). From that point of view, in a typological perspective, a focus on European languages might well yield “Euroversals” (van der Auwera 1998) rather than universals – something which seems to be confirmed by broader typological studies: Forker (2016: 71) thus explains that in European languages “the functional range of [additives] is more limited than in other languages”. As a result, I do not aim to uncover universal grammaticalization paths of topic shifters, but *prevalent strategies in European languages*, which can then fruitfully be tested against a larger sample of languages.

2 Corpus study

In order to identify markers of topic shifts, I conducted a contrastive corpus study, using a parallel corpus, which I describe in this section.³

2.1 Methodology

Using parallel (or translation) corpora is a complicated choice. While comparable corpora offer more genuine data, they cannot be used directly to compare the equivalence of markers in different languages. Conversely, while parallel corpora offer the obvious advantage of directly bringing forth translation equivalents, they are biased by the translation process itself. In this study, I use a parallel corpus (see McEnery/Xiao 2007 for arguments on the use of parallel corpora).

The methodology adopted for this study is the following: with the help of the SearchEngine interface, I accessed the Europarl corpus (Koehn 2005), a parallel corpus with data in all official European languages, gathered from the European Parliament Proceedings. I used version 7 (2015), which includes texts in 21 European languages. I extracted tokens of *par ailleurs* for which the interface found equivalents in all other languages of the corpus.

³ I conducted a series of corpus studies, taking also English or German as starting points, and looking for translation equivalents of e.g. *furthermore*, *by the way* or *außerdem* (Blumenthal/Fagard 2020); I also traced each DM back to its non-grammaticalized source, and classified them accordingly in subtypes of diachronic grammaticalization chain. Given the extremely limited space available, however, I cannot describe these investigations in further detail here.

The basic idea is that these excerpts, having *par ailleurs* in the French version, all contain some kind of topic shift. Some languages proved to have insufficient covering, or an important proportion of (transcription or concordance) mistakes: they were excluded from the corpus, which thus contains 587 occurrences of *par ailleurs* in French and translation equivalents in German and 12 other European languages (Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish and Swedish), i.e. a total of 8,212 excerpts.⁴ Note that the translations into a given language are not necessarily direct translations from the source language (cf. Cartoni/Zufferey/Meyer 2013: 36); part of the corpus is liable to result from translations via a pivot language, generally English. Since I am not interested in the translations of *par ailleurs* specifically, but in the presence (or not) of a topic shifter in contexts in which *par ailleurs* is used in French, this is only a minor inconvenience.

After identifying the translation equivalents of *par ailleurs* in each occurrence, I applied the coding scheme described in the following sub-section.

2.2 Coding scheme

My goal was to look for regularities in the way topic shifts can be marked in different European languages. In order to do this, I adopted a two-step classification of DMs, distinguishing (a) main use, as given by monolingual synchronic dictionaries, and (b) source

⁴ Many of these excerpts were incomplete or absent, and had to be retrieved manually from the website of the European Parliament (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/>). Though the corpus often indicates the nationality of the speaker, it seemed necessary to check this systematically in order to be sure of the original utterance.

meaning, as provided by monolingual etymological dictionaries. Concerning the *main use*, I started out with two main categories, *digressive* and *additive*, drawing on the distinction between *digressions* and *topic shifts* outlined in Section 1. Based on their lexicographic definitions, I thus coded English *furthermore*, which is described as introducing an element “in addition to what precedes”, as an ADDITIVE (7). Similarly, I coded English *by the way*, which is described as introducing an element “by way of interjection or digression”, as a DIGRESSIVE (8). Some items fit in neither of these categories, and were clearly CONCESSIVES, such as Portuguese *mas* “but”; I coded them as such (9).

- (7) (English) *furthermore*
 - (a) *additive* [source: “in addition to what precedes: *besides*”, Merriam-Webster, online edition]
 - (b) adverb with spatial component [further + more];
- (8) (English) *by the way*
 - (a) *digressive* [source: “by way of interjection or digression: *incidentally*”, Merriam-Webster, online edition]
 - (b) spatial adverbial [by + DET + way];
- (9) (Portuguese) *mas*
 - (a) *concessive* [source: “porém, contudo, todavia, no entanto (i.e. still, however)”, Porto Editora]
 - (b) non-spatial adverb [Latin *magis* “more”].

The two main strategies found as translation equivalents of *par ailleurs* in my corpus are DIGRESSIVE and ADDITIVE DMs, along with three other strategies. The CONCESSIVE strategy appears in a few languages, with concessive DMs and connectives, including

temporal adverbials with varying degrees of concessive meanings (from simple pragmatic implicatures to lexicalized uses as CONCESSIVES), e.g. Spanish *al mismo tiempo* “at the same time”. This seems to confirm the affinity of concessives with additives noted by Forker (2016: 77), though she shows that ADDITIVES are often used in concessive clauses, while my study seems to indicate that CONCESSIVES can be used to signal topic shifts, as translations of DIGRESSIVE or ADDITIVE markers. As noted by Lenk (1998b: 248), concessive such as English *anyway* and *however* also present affinities with digression, being used to signal the end of a topic or the closing of a digression.

The ABOUTNESS strategy, with markers such as Dutch *in dit verband* “in this context”, is very rarely used. However, this does seem to be a common strategy for marking topic shifts, at least in some languages, e.g. with Spanish DMs such as *a propósito* “about” (see Cortés Rodríguez and Hidalgo Downing 2015: 292–293).

The last strategy I identified is zero marking, in which *par ailleurs* has no explicit equivalent in the target language – a strategy which seems quite widespread, as it appears in all languages of the sample except Bulgarian and Czech (which, for these two languages, might result from a corpus bias).

3 Results

One striking albeit not unexpected result is the dispersion of “translation equivalents” of *par ailleurs*, in all languages of the corpus: from 39 in Spanish and

Danish to 69 in German. Of course, this may be partly due to the fact that *par ailleurs* is sometimes the source of the translation, sometimes itself the translation of another DM, or even an addition by the translator (when the source text has no corresponding DM).

As could be expected, all equivalents or translations do not appear with the same frequency. On the contrary, some are quite well-represented, while others appear very seldom. A total of 337 different constructions appear only once as equivalents of *par ailleurs*, and 529 different constructions appear less than ten times, making up for 80.4 % of types but less than 15 % of tokens. In the following, I focus on the most frequent items, which are likely to be more adequate translation equivalents of *par ailleurs*. There are 126 such markers, making up 86.5 % of tokens, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequent equivalents and translations of French *par ailleurs*.

Language	frequent equivalents (≥ 10 occ.)	Cumulative frequency
Czech	12	471
Danish	11	491
German	10	424
Greek	8	446
English	9	471
Spanish	8	488
Hungarian	11	454
Italian	9	451
Dutch	10	459
Polish	10	450

Portuguese	9	478
Romanian	9	471
Swedish	10	481
Total	126	6,035

The first goal of this corpus study was to check the most frequent strategies for the expression of topic shifts. The results indicate a prevalence of the ADDITIVE strategy, as shown in Table 2 and illustrated in example (10).

(10) (German)

*Ich will **auch** nicht alles immer nach Europa schieben.* (Europarl7, #33158155, Koehn 2005)

This also confirms earlier findings showing that an important function of such particles is the signaling of contrastive topics and topic shifts (Forker 2016: 74 ff.).

Table 2: Main strategies found in the corpus.

Language	ADDITIVE	ZERO MARKING	DIGRESSIVE	CONCESSIVE	Total
Czech	377	57	37		471
Danish	365	65	45	16	491
German	319	77	16	12	424
Greek	367	46	33		446
English	372	47	42	10	471
Spanish	356	65	51	16	488
Hungarian	326	77	28	23	454
Italian	302	100	35	14	451
Dutch	367	68	24		459
Polish	340	80	19	11	450
Portuguese	215	64	160	39	478

Romanian	358	63	50		471
Swedish	379	61	25	16	481
Total	4,443	870	565	157	6,035

This also confirms the importance of two other strategies: zero marking, and DIGRESSIVES, both strategies appearing in all languages. In some cases – 9 in total –, zero marking is present everywhere except in French, as in (11), in which the (German) source text does not explicitly signal the topic shift.

(11) (French)

*Une appellation réglementée et protégée pour les produits provenant de régions montagneuses et de zones dépourvues d'OGM doit **par ailleurs** être introduite.*

(German)

Wir brauchen eine Neueinführung einer geregelten und geschützten Bezeichnung für Erzeugnisse aus Berggebieten und aus gentechnikfreien Gebieten. (Europarl7, #35895990, Koehn 2005)

The use of CONCESSIVES is less prevalent.

4 Conclusion

Drawing on a parallel corpus, this study shows the importance of a few strategies for the marking of topic shifts in European languages. The most prevalent strategy found for equivalents of *par ailleurs* is the use of ADDITIVE markers, found in all languages of the sample; the use of DIGRESSIVE markers is also frequent, and found in all languages of the sample. Other strategies include zero marking and the use of CONCESSIVES. Another finding is the high degree of

dispersion of the translations, with no less than 39 to 69 different equivalents of French *par ailleurs* in each language.

Concerning the source meanings of these markers, preliminary results suggest that they typically follow a restricted set of grammaticalization paths, including the basic semantic feature of SIMILARITY (“equally”), ADDITION (“in addition”, “what is more”) and DISTANCE (“beyond this”) for ADDITIVES, and mainly that of SPATIAL ALTERITY (“elsewhere”) for DIGRESSIVES. However, further research on individual languages is needed to verify this.

These strategies are not expected to be valid for non-European languages, i.e. they might be present elsewhere but are probably not the only ones, and probably not even the most frequent ones in other language families. Another issue to take into account for further research is that a typological investigation into linguistic strategies for the marking of topic shifts would need to include not only discourse markers but also syntactic strategies such as marked word order and syntactic position.

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