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Special issue

[Completed, 2020] Topic shifters in a contrastive perspective

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1. Introduction

The *Journal of Pragmatics* has published many papers on discourse markers, grammaticalization, relevance and discourse coherence. Fraser's important papers, which fed the debate on discourse markers, also appeared in the *Journal of Pragmatics*. As noted by Schourup (1999), one major issue addressed by Fraser (1990:395) is the question of the universality of DMs ("To what extent do all languages share a basic set of DMs with the same core pragmatic meaning?"), and more specifically the fact that it may depend on the type of DM involved:

"Fraser suggests it is likely that all languages will have DMs like *and*, *so*, and *now*, but he questions whether this is the case for markers like *notwithstanding*, *well*, and *anyway*."
(Schourup 1999:261)

We addressed this question concerning a specific type of DM, markers of topic shifts, in a research project. The papers in this special issue are the product of this research project, which received funding from the TransferS Labex (ENS, Paris, 2014-2016), and brought together fourteen linguists from France, Belgium, and Germany¹. Its aim was to shed light on the specificities of markers of topic shifts, such as English *by the way*, *besides* or French *d'ailleurs* 'besides', *par ailleurs* 'by the way, besides', which have been given less attention than other discourse markers, especially those marking rhetorical relations (e.g. concessives, consecutives, justificatives, additives), on which there are many synchronic and

¹ Myriam Bouveret, Shirley Carter-Thomas, Michel Charolles, Benjamin Fagard, Catherine Fuchs, Pierre Le Goffic, Sophie Prévost, Laure Sarda (Lattice laboratory, CNRS, ENS, Sorbonne Nouvelle & PSL), Véronique Lenepveu (Caen), Marie-Paule Péry-Woodley (Toulouse Le-Mirail), Paul Isambert (Tours), Béatrice Lamiroy (Leuven), Gudrun Vanderbauwhede (Mons), Peter Blumenthal (Köln). We would like to thank, once again, Elizabeth Traugott for her participation in the [2018 LPTS conference](#), which gave us the opportunity to exchange views on digressive markers (among other things). In addition, we would like to thank her and Alice Ionescu for their contributions to this special issue. Thanks also to the Special Issues editor, Anne Bezuidenhout, and to the anonymous reviewers of the individual papers of this special issue.

diachronic studies, in many languages. One focus of the project was to look at the equivalence of DMs across languages and their translatability, in a contrastive perspective.

In this special issue, we thus propose a foray into the general theme of markers and discourse coherence, concentrating on *topic shifters*. More precisely, the papers gathered here address the question of the existence and translatability of *digressive markers*, a subtype or possibly a use-type of *topic shifters* (Lenk 1998, Pons Bordería and Estellés Arguedas 2009). These could also be depicted as *topic orientation markers*, a subtype of *discourse management markers* (Fraser 2009). Our first goal was thus to identify types of DMs which can be used to signal topic shifts.

Our second goal was to see whether topic shifting is performed with the same type of DMs in different languages of Europe. Studies have shown an important difference in the way Romance and Germanic speakers typically use DMs vs modal markers, respectively (Diewald 2013, Degand, Cornillie and Pietrandrea 2013). We can thus expect to find this opposition for topic shifters. Our approach is close to that developed e.g. by König (1988) or Giacalone Ramat and Mauri (2012), with an aim to go beyond language-specific phenomena and bring out general trends. Indeed, we are interested not only in the way one specific language enables speakers to manage discourse, but in the array of possibilities offered by language in general. Though this goal is probably quite ambitious for a special issue, our aim is to have a first assessment of possible strategies. The papers gathered here helped identify several of these strategies, as noted below.

Our third goal was to try to understand how these strategies emerge. It is now accepted that DMs globally follow the same grammaticalization cline from *Predicate adverb* to *Sentence adverb* and on to *Pragmatic marker* (i.e. DM), as shown by Traugott (1995; see also Traugott and Dasher 2002 and Brinton 2009). But it seems clear that there are different grammaticalization paths, specific to subtypes of markers, e.g. SIMULTANEITY > CONCESSION (see French *cependant* 'however', Marchello-Nizia 2007, Soutet 1990). Concerning topic shifters, it is natural to assume that they could also follow various grammaticalization paths, as shown for other parts of speech (see for instance Svorou 1994 for adpositions). Our question was thus which specific grammaticalization paths may lead to the emergence of topic shifters, and whether there remains a link between source construction and different use-types.

Within the research group, in order to achieve our first goal, we started by analyzing the uses of the French DM *par ailleurs* 'by the way [lit. *via elsewhere*]'. It is not a core topic orientation marker, but it seems to be used, in Modern French, like *d'ailleurs* 'besides [lit. *from elsewhere*]', in order to signal and facilitate topic shifts, as one of a series of DMs used to signal and manage topic shifts. We then tried to identify other DMs with similar uses. Among these DMs are spatial adverbs such as *ailleurs* 'elsewhere' or *parallèlement* 'in parallel', which can easily take on a temporal meaning but can also signal a change in topic (*Parallèlement, nous nous sommes intéressés à ...* 'At the same time, we took an interest in...'). While *parallèlement* implies a similarity relation between two entities (Sarda and Charolles 2010), *ailleurs*, which is a deictic adverb (esp. in Spoken French) with anaphoric uses (esp. in Written French), implies a contrast between two locations. This notion of contrast is etymologically present in *ailleurs*, as it is in the adverb *autrement* 'otherwise', which implies a difference in manner. In Spoken French, *autrement* (Lamiroy and Charolles 2005) may signal a radical topic shift (*Autrement, comment ça va ?* 'By the way, how's it going?') or introduce a 'simple' alternative (*Il venait par le bus, autrement il prenait sa voiture* 'He would generally take the bus, and otherwise he would take his car').

The same goes for French *sinon* '(or) else', which may alternate with *autrement* in both use types. This contrastive value is less present in French *au fait* 'in fact, by the way (lit. at the fact)', which can be used in Spoken French to close the ongoing topic and promote a new one, or *en fait* 'in fact', which may signal a correction or the fact that the host utterance is not connected to the previous one. This is also true of DMs such as *à propos* 'by the way' (Prévost 2011), *justement* 'about that', which signal the fact that the host utterance both follows the previous ones and does not pertain to the same topic (see also other French equivalents of *besides* or *anyway* such as *au demeurant* 'besides, anyway (lit. at the remainder)', *du reste* 'besides, anyway (lit. of the rest)', *au reste* 'besides, anyway (lit. at the rest)', *pour le reste* 'besides, anyway (lit. for the rest)', *quoi qu'il en soit* 'still, whatever (lit. whatever be it)', *toujours est-il que* 'still, at any rate (lit. always is it that)') (Lenepveu 2015).

Concerning our second goal, we had multiple options, as there are various ways of comparing languages – one can merely look at the structure of two languages, or compare possible sentences, using acceptability tests or ratings. Linguists who are convinced of the importance of usage-based approaches will turn to corpora, but even then the choice remains vast. One option is the use of parallel corpora (i.e. corpora containing texts which are translated from one language into another, and vice-versa) (McEnery and Xiao 2007), another option is that of comparable corpora (i.e. corpora containing texts which are comparable in terms of genre, for instance), which offer more genuine data, but cannot be used directly to compare the equivalence of markers in different languages. Conversely, while translation corpora offer the obvious advantage of bringing forth directly translation equivalents, they are biased by nature, as is well-known. We investigated this question with a parallel corpus approach, starting with the Europarl corpus (in order to have a common basis for all languages) and completing this corpus study with contrastive studies on pairs of languages, using both parallel and comparable corpora. The papers in this issue (specifically Ionescu, Vanderbauwhede and Lamiroy, Bouveret and Carter-Thomas, Fagard and Blumenthal) offer a taste of what results this research can bring forth: while translation corpora help uncover possible equivalents, comparable corpora and language-specific studies are needed, in a second phase, to check the validity of this equivalence. This highlights the need for more limited contrastive studies and language-specific studies, in order to check the extent to which specific DMs are indeed used as markers of topic shift, be they additive or digressive. Vanderbauwhede and Lamiroy (this issue), for example, show that one of the problems in translating *par ailleurs* into Dutch is that translators sometimes have difficulties understanding its function in specific contexts.

As for our third goal, we believe it is important to take into account diachronic issues if we want to understand how such DMs can emerge. In several instances, these markers arise as a result of the grammaticalization of spatial adverbials, as in the case of French *d'ailleurs* and *par ailleurs* (Fagard and Charolles 2018); though it also seems to be the case with *by the way*, a corpus study reveals that things might not be quite that simple (Traugott, this issue). At any rate, spatial markers are only one of many sources, as illustrated by the cases of *by the way* and *incidentally* (ibid.): as noted by Traugott in her paper (this issue, 134), the range of sources of digressive DMs "appears to be quite large, even among the European languages". Indeed, there seem to be many other sources, including manner adverbials (prevalent in Romanian, see Ionescu, this issue), epistemic adverbials (e.g. Spanish *por cierto* 'for certain', see Pons and Estellés 2009), and even the verbalization of punctuation marks (English *parenthetically*, Italian *tra parentesi*, cf. Fiorentini and Sansò 2019). Additives (i.e. adverbials denoting addition) seem to be frequently used as equivalents of French DMs signaling topic shifts, at least in English (Bouveret and Carter-Thomas, this issue) and German, with a cline from more additive (and

connective) functions to more digressive ones (Fagard and Blumenthal, this issue). Another interesting dimension of crosslinguistic variation is the degree of grammaticalization of these markers: the studies gathered here suggest that they might be more grammaticalized in French than in other languages, e.g. in terms of paradigmaticization (Vanderbauwhede and Lamiroy, this issue), lexical and morpho-syntactic variation (Ionescu, this issue) – there is evidence of this phenomenon for French vs English, Dutch and Romanian.

2. Papers

The papers gathered in this issue offer a theoretical overview (Paper 1), contrastive studies of French *d'ailleurs* and *par ailleurs* (Papers 2-5), and a corpus study of the diachronic development of digressive DMs in English (Paper 6).

In the opening paper of this special issue, “Discourse topics and digressive markers”, **Michel Charolles** investigates the various options speakers have when signaling topic shifts. Discourse, be it everyday conversation or written text, bears on topics which change with the information provided by the speaker(s)/writer(s). When introduced, new information is expected to bring something to the local current discourse topic, but also to the general global topic it contributes to give shape to. This implies the existence of various levels: sentence topics as well as local and global discourse topics. The article aims to clarify some of the theoretical orientations underlying the linguistic studies on topics of discourse and digressive markers. The notion of discourse topic (DT) introduced in the 1970s by van Dijk (1972, 1977a, 1977b) has no place in the models developed since the 1980s by Hobbs (1978, 1990), Mann and Thompson (1986, 1988), Asher and Lascarides (2003) and others. These models do without DT, for the reason that the rhetorical relations they advocate were sufficient to explain common sense intuitions on (dis)continuity and (in)coherence of discourse. At the same time, van Kuppevelt (1995a, 1995b) advocates a model based solely on DT relations. With the development of systematic annotations of corpora, studies on discourse markers have increased, including markers of topic shifts. The last part of the paper deals with *d'ailleurs* and *par ailleurs* French adverbials, which are commonly used as a marker of digression. The analysis of these two DMs show that they are polyfunctional and involve both rhetorical relationships (addition, justification) that make the link with the previous utterances, and framing relationships indexing the incoming discourse (announcing of a topic shift, or a return to a previous DT).

In their paper “*Par ailleurs*: Something new or more of the same?”, **Myriam Bouveret and Shirley Carter-Thomas** analyze the semantic values and informational role of the French discourse marker *par ailleurs* (literally “by elsewhere”) in modern academic writing. Although the French marker has no generally accepted standard translation in English, the authors’ hypothesis is that the contrastive focus can serve as a heuristic to help identify the main function of *par ailleurs* as a DM and to better understand its potential role in signaling topic shifts. On the basis of a corpus consisting of one hundred French PhD thesis abstracts and their accompanying translations in English, analyzing a number of features (sentence position, text position, co-textual environment and discourse functions), they distinguish five main discourse functions of *par ailleurs*: (1) return to a prior topic, (2) addition or continuation (3) enumerative addition, (4) alterity, and (5) digression. A second stage of their analysis

involves identifying and examining the English translation equivalents of *par ailleurs* used in the accompanying English abstracts.

In their paper “Contrastive linguistics as a discovery procedure. A case study of two French Discourse Markers: *d’ailleurs* and *par ailleurs* and their Dutch counterparts”, **Guðrun Vanderbauwhede and Béatrice Lamiroy** analyze the extent of the overlap between French *d’ailleurs* and *par ailleurs* and their Dutch counterparts. Their study is based on a parallel corpus (Macken *et al.* 2011). The study of a sample of a hundred tokens for each type shows that, very often, the French DMs are simply not translated at all in Dutch. Whereas French explicitly signals the argumentative relations between clauses, Dutch rather leaves them unexpressed (or signals them in a different way). In the corpus selected by the authors, *par ailleurs* is translated by 15 different DMs, *d’ailleurs* by 10. This suggests that DMs are less paradigmaticized (Lehmann 2015³) in Dutch – hence less grammaticalized. Despite the lexical variation, a quantitative analysis of the Dutch translations clearly shows the different functions of the two French DMs as described by Fagard and Charolles (2018): whereas *d’ailleurs* is mostly translated as *overigens* ‘anyway’ and *trouwens* ‘by the way’, showing that its main function is to add an argument in order to strengthen a claim that was made previously, that of *par ailleurs*, which is often translated by *bovendien* ‘moreover’, is rather to introduce a new argument or a new topic into the discourse.

In the following paper, “Topic shifting: A contrastive study in German and French”, **Benjamin Fagard and Peter Blumenthal** compare the marking of topic shifts in French and German. In both languages, different markers can be used whenever the speaker wants to signal explicitly a topic shift. With a parallel corpus study, using the Europarl corpus (Koehn 2005), with English as a pivot language, the authors analyze some 8,000 occurrences of three English DMs and their equivalents in the two other languages. The English DMs chosen for this purpose are *by the way*, a typical marker of topic shifts, and two others which may be used among other things to signal topic shifts, *besides* and *furthermore*. The authors thus identify a series of typical and less typical topic shifters in the two other languages: German *zudem* ‘besides, moreover’, *ferner* ‘furthermore’, *außerdem* ‘besides, moreover’, *darüber hinaus* ‘moreover’, *übrigens* ‘by the way, incidentally’, *im Übrigen* ‘incidentally, by the way’ and French *d’ailleurs* ‘moreover, besides’, *en passant* ‘in passing, by the way’, *à (ce) propos* ‘by the way’, *en outre* ‘moreover, besides’, *par ailleurs* ‘furthermore, besides’, *de plus* ‘moreover, furthermore’, *du reste* ‘moreover, besides’.

In her paper “Topic shifters in Romanian: a contrastive study”, **Alice Ionescu** investigates Romanian topic shifters in a contrastive perspective, using a pragmatic approach based on conversational logic, theories of pertinence and on coherence/cohesion studies. She notes that, in Romanian, studies on topic shifters are at their very beginning, and the parallel corpora investigated so far only display a small number of equivalents of French topic shifters – for instance *de fapt* ‘in fact’, *de asemenea* ‘similarly’, *dealtfel* ‘otherwise’, *în plus* ‘besides’, *pe de altă parte* ‘on the other hand’. Moreover, the study of the Romanian equivalents of French topic shifters has shown that, often, the same marker combines two functions, depending of the discourse strategies developed and the discourse context, which makes its semantic interpretation more difficult. In order to identify a wider range of topic shifters in Romanian, besides bilingual corpora provided by online dictionaries, the author includes data from modern and contemporary translations from French into Romanian.

In the last paper of this special issue, “The development of “digressive” discourse-topic shift markers in English”, **Elizabeth Closs Traugott** investigates the emergence of a series of digressive markers in English. On the basis of a corpus study, she shows how the three metatextual discourse markers and the now obsolescent marker *by the way* developed out of adverbials into topic shift markers. This development is a case of subjectification. *By the way* has recently also come to be used ‘transgressively’ in the context of *Oh*, to signal disapproval of someone else’s actual or imagined statement. This is a case of evaluative intersubjectification evoking social norms. The approach is constructionalist (see Traugott and Trousdale 2013). After briefly outlining the history of the four ‘digressive’ discourse markers, the question is posed whether it is reasonable to posit an abstract schematic construction for the markers that Mittwoch et al. (2001) regard as a set.

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