

AN OVERVIEW OF PRAGMATIC MARKERS: DEFINITIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

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Abstract

Pragmatic Markers (PMs) are short words which do not contribute to the propositional meaning of an utterance. The research on Pragmatic Markers strives to find definitions, directions and theories that can be broadly extended. However, research shows that there is no consensus with regard to definitions or their descriptions. The current study delves into a literature review to examine the range of definitions and to understand the reasons for the difficulty in agreeing on a unifying definition. As definitions are broadly based on the characteristics of a phenomenon, literature is additionally surveyed to recognise the characteristics of the PMs. The analysis shows that the main reason for the lack of consensus on a definition is the wide range of approaches that have been employed to study the PMs and the complexity of the relationship between the form and function of PMs. The definitions are closely linked to the functions of PMs. The studies show several characteristics of PMs, such as them mostly present in spoken language; in fact, they occur approximately ten times more in spoken discourse than in the written genre and their positional flexibility. They occur at interactional, interpersonal and textual levels. They perform a multitude of functions, and they are co-constructed by the interlocutors. PMs also co-occur, which extends the functions. For example, co-occurrence can lead to more emphatic or multifunctional utterances. An example of a combined function would be a PM appealing to the interlocutor for agreement while simultaneously functioning as an exemplifier. Literature reveals that there is an underlying systematicity to these combinations and their order of combinations.

Keywords: Co-occurring Pragmatic Markers, Definitions, Discourse markers, Pragmatic markers

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Introduction

Pragmatic Markers are brief words and phrases such as you know, I mean, well and you see which indicate speaker attitude and help in discourse management; therefore, they are an indispensable, integral and a widespread linguistic phenomenon especially present in spoken language. Even though they are essential, they are syntactically detachable from an utterance, and they do not add anything to its propositional meaning (Beeching, 2016). Interlocutors use PMs to guide the process of interpretation of an utterance as they provide important hints about what has been said or is about to be said (de Klerk, 2005, p.1184). However, they are often disregarded and underestimated in the important role they play in conducting a smooth conversation. The research on PMs generally has many definitions, sometimes overlapping but mostly specific to either the PMs under observation or their functions. The reasons for such disagreement are worth examining, as they enable us to comprehend our perceptions about these forms. Therefore, paper first examines the terminology of PMs used by previous research and related issues, then the characteristics as identified by other researchers and finally discusses the co- occurring PMs, which is a relatively new direction in PM related research. It should be noted that the examples used in the paper to illustrate the points gleaned from secondary resources are either created by the author or taken from the Corpus of Spoken Sri Lankan English (CSSLE, 2025, Ranaweera).

Terminology of PMs

It appears that there is no universal agreement on the terminology of PMs among researchers. The terminology considerably depends on the researchers' categorisation of functions of the PMs. Jucker and Ziv (1998, p. 1) state that "the terminological diversity reflects both the wide range of linguistic approaches that have been employed for their study, and the multiplicity of functions which these elements are said to fulfil." Beeching (2016, p. 5) selects the term PM "to highlight their interpersonal rather than textual usages, though recognising that pragmatic markers have procedural meanings". The words such as you know, well and I mean are functors or function words as opposed to content words or lexical words. Hence, considering the wide range of pragmatic functions these elements play in an utterance, the term pragmatic marker seems more appropriate than discourse marker. In most studies, PM has been used interchangeably with the term discourse marker (DM). For some scholars, PM is considered an umbrella term which includes DMs as a subset (Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg, 2011; Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Crible, 2018).

The vast array of different terms used in the literature highlights the diverse appeal to scholars in terms of the role these items play in language. In the literature, these items have been called discourse markers (Lenk, 1998; Müller, 2005; Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 1999), discourse particles (Aijmer 1996; Barnes, 1995; Fischer, 2006; Schourup, 1985), pragmatic markers (Aijmer, 2013; Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg, 2006; Andersen, 1998; Brinton, 1996; Caron- Prague and Caron 1991; Denke, 2009; Watts, 1998), pragmatic particles (Beeching, 2002), modal particles (Weydt; 2006), theticals (Heine, 2013), and connectives (Bazzanella 1990; Degand, 2000; Fraser 2006; Lamiroy 1994; Unger 1996). They are also called hedges (Coates, 2014; Holmes, 1995; Hyland, 1998), boosters (Beeching, 2009; Holmes 1995; Hyland, 1998, 2000), fumbles (Edmondson, 1981) and punctors (Vincent & Sankoff, 1992). The rationale for dismissing PMs as trivial items or "gambits", as some of these terms suggest, is that they are simply considered items that "lubricate" conversations and are used by speakers in part to gain time (Edmondson, 1981, p. 81). However, considering the important role they play in addition to the high frequency of their use by speakers, it is problematic to simply dismiss them as 'fumbles' or 'punctors' as it implies that they have no importance and that they are a manifestation of a nervous tic. Although researchers have not reached a consensus on the most appropriate label to represent the function of these elements, all these terms suggest that they are extra-clausal.

Similarly, there is no consensus about the definition of a PM. This lack of a comprehensive definition makes it challenging to know which forms can be accepted as a PM. The selection of the definition controls the selection of the linguistic expression (Schourup, 1999). Therefore, one of the greatest needs in the field to date is an inclusive model of identification and selection (Bolly et al., 2017, p. 71). In their research, Bolly et al. (2017) suggest a model for discourse marker annotations (MDMA) to overcome this issue. Even this model depends on the subjective viewpoint of expert coders and manual identification of potential instances of DMs or PMs. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine an agreement on the definitions and items of PM in the foreseeable future.

However, there are some delineating qualities that are commonly attributed to PMs in all definitions, i.e. they are difficult to place in a traditional word class, syntactically optional and polyfunctional (Aijmer and Simon-Vandenberghe, 2011). There are a few definitions which are based on these features. For instance, Schourup (1999, p. 242) defines PMs as “a more or less open class of syntactically optional, non-truth-conditional connective expressions”. Shiffrin’s definition too touches on one of the above qualities; they are syntactically optional. Shiffrin (1987, p. 31) defines PMs in relation to units of talk as “sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk”. She explains that it was deliberate to leave the phrase units of talk vague without defining them in relation to structure, cohesion or interactional relations because all these types of units of talk influence the markers. A precise unit would limit the function of PMs. Such limitations are, however, not evident with PMs as they can be removed from the unit of talk at any time with the structure and the propositional meaning of the unit intact.

Another quality of PMs that is highlighted in definitions is that they facilitate interpersonal cohesion and can convey the underlying emotions of the speaker. They are used unconsciously to establish an intimate connection with the interlocutor (Stenström, 2019). They provide an opportunity for the hearer to interpret the verbal message in a way that the speaker’s intention is fulfilled. In this way, the PMs construct the mood and the attitude of an utterance. This is why PMs are regarded as metalinguistic indicators as well. This quality is touched on by Bazzanella (2006, p. 449) when she defines that PMs “are related to the speech situation [and] (...) express attitude and emotion”.

Aijmer (2013) observes that PMs are surface phenomena that, on a deeper level, reflect a speaker's mental processes as relevant to the ongoing conversation. Combining all the above features, Heine et al. (2021) define PM/DM in a more comprehensive manner than Furko (2017). Their definition defines the PM specifically with regard to its relevance to the grammatical structure as well as its impact on the prosodic structure as well. Therefore, this definition appears to be significantly more inclusive than the others that came before. This more comprehensive definition helps to identify and analyse PMs more consistently, as it addresses the boundaries more clearly:

"(a) invariable expressions which are (b) semantically and syntactically independent from their environment, (c) set off prosodically from the rest of the utterance in some way, and (d) their function is metatextual, being anchored in the situation of discourse and serving the organisation of texts, the attitudes of the speaker, and/or speaker–hearer interaction." (p. 6)

However, all of the definitions given above either use or revise the definitions proposed by earlier scholars or describe the functions PMs perform in a particular data set. This is the main reason for either inadequate or vague definitions. Another difficulty in identifying PMs is their diverse forms. PMs come from diverse syntactic categories, including adverbs, conjunctions, verbs, etc. and even

include non-verbal expressions such as *er* and *arh*, so that many expressions are PMs in some contexts but not others. The invented examples below show the diverse syntactic categories of *like*: example 1 shows *like* as a verb, example 2 illustrates *like* as a conjunction and example 3 shows *like* as a comparative complementiser.

Example 1

I **like** ice cream.

Example 2

If you want to show bravery, **like** a man, face the problem.

Example 3

It seems **like** the health system has changed.

This multifunctionality means that PMs can be challenging to identify. The following characteristics of PMs could guide a researcher to recognise and categorise PMs

Characteristics of Pragmatic Markers

Firstly, PMs mostly occur in spoken discourse, but there are instances found in written genres as well. Previous research shows that PMs are mostly present in spoken language (Beeching, 2022; Holmes, 1995; Stenström et al., 2002). Louwerse and Mitchell (2003) report that PMs occur ten times more in spoken discourse than in written genres. However, Shakir and Deuber (2024), in their study of code-switching in Computer-Mediated Communication, such as tweets and memes, reveal that indigenized PMs are widely used in Indian English, Sri Lankan English, Pakistani English, and Bangladeshi English. This finding challenges the claim that PMs are mostly widely used in spoken discourse rather than written genres, as tweets and memes can be considered modern written genres. They contain features similar to chats and interactive speech, such as face-to-face conversations (Shakir & Deuber, 2024).

PMs operate on three levels of conversation: the interactional, the interpersonal and the textual levels (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Brinton (2017), in her comprehensive and valuable account of functions of PMs, mentions that they are present in written genres but as an alternative set of forms. Secondly, PMs are usually short phrases or individual words, whether they are used in speech or in writing. For example, there are one-word PMs such as *right* and *well*. Generally, the short phrases are limited to a combination of two words as in *you know* and *sort of*. In a sentence structure, they occupy a flexible place. For instance, they are generally not restricted to sentence-initial, medial or final position. Given below are invented examples of *you know* in these three positions. In example 4, *you know* appears in sentence initial position, and 5 shows *you know* in sentence medial position. Example 6 illustrates this in sentence-final position.

Example 4

Sentence initial position

You know not to be afraid of boredom is a great quality.

Example 5

Sentence medial position

He is **you know** a talented young man.

Example 6

Sentence final position

I think that really made me grasp the bull by the horns **you know**.

However, there are a few PMs which are restricted to a certain position in a sentence when they are used for a specific pragmatic purpose. An example would be *well* which occurs only in the sentence-initial position as in example 7. In this instance, *well* is used to mark taking a turn. In this function, *well* is always used sentence initially.

Example 7

Well the diaspora at least the word itself is from Greek.

PMs are generally perceived to have no propositional meaning. They do not affect the main message of the sentence. Example 8 is an example from a conversation in the CSSLE. *I mean* is used to introduce the phrase “they moulded us” as a justification to show that the schoolteachers trained the speaker well. “Visaka College” is the name of a school. The main message in this utterance is that speaker’s teachers at Visaka Vidyalaya moulded her. Hence, even If *I mean* is removed from this utterance this main meaning is still intact.

Example 8

My teachers at Visaka College **I mean** they moulded us.

Thirdly, PMs are regarded as optional to the syntactic structure. In example 8, the syntactic structure is intact even if *I mean* is removed. The idea would read as “my teachers at Visaka College (they, as pronoun reference to my teachers) moulded us”. Therefore, the PMs have no propositional meaning and are optional to the syntactical structure.

However, PMs are not completely devoid of meaning (Brinton, 2017). In fact, they are considered essential for the pragmatic meaning. This is illustrated in example 9 taken from CSSLE where *like* precedes “a year” to indicate an estimation. It is the approximative use of *like*. The presence of *like* shows that the time period ‘I’ worked in the hotel could be less than a year. If *like* is removed, the utterance would indicate that ‘I’ worked for exactly one year, which is not the proposition the speaker intended to convey. Therefore, *like* is not entirely devoid of propositional meaning in this instance.

Example 9

I worked at a hotel for **like** a year

Example 10 is another example of this essential pragmatic meaning. In example 10, without the PM, the hearer may not know that a reference is made to common knowledge between the speaker and the hearer. The speaker is referring to the living room that is familiar to the hearer as well by using *you know*. We can remove *you know* and the meaning of the utterance would be intact. However, the interpersonal reference and the effect it would have on the speaker- hearer relationship would be lost. By referring to common knowledge the speaker is strengthening her relationship with the hearer as it has a sense of inclusion. The distance of the relationship between the hearer and the speaker is shortened.

Example 10

A: well I normally keep all my books in my living room **you know** our living room upstairs

As noted above, most of the PMs are polyfunctional. Beeching (2016) reports five functions for *like* and nine for *well* in her study of British English. For example, *like* is used for exemplifying, approximation, to quote, to focus and to hedge. Each function depends on the role that the PM plays in each discourse situation. The characteristics such as PMs being short phrases, optional to the syntactic structure, their polyfunctionality help a researcher to discern PMs in an utterance from other linguistic items to a great extent when vague definitions do not help.

We also need background knowledge or inferential schemata surrounding an utterance to understand the role of PMs (Aijmer, 2013). All utterances are part of a socio-cultural context. They construct their meaning from this background information. Their meaning also depends on the relationship between the interlocutors. The interlocutors interpret the meaning of the PMs simultaneously although the meaning has never been extrinsically discussed. In other words, this context bound meaning is co-constructed by the speakers. This co-construction is successful only if the speakers have “access to a large number of linguistic and extra-linguistic conventions in order to use pragmatic markers” (Aijmer, 2013, p. 15). This can be seen in examples 11 and 12 taken from the CSSLE.

Example 11

<01HM> and it was a fairly controversial film and yours your role as well arh one what how do you handle sex nudity suggestive sex on stage

<01AF> it's er I don't think that I was handling sex or nudity on I was playing a character er er it's the er need of the role the whole script wanted that character to behave in such a way that's the way certain peo= people behave

<01HM> sure

<01AF> you know

<01AF> that's her natural life so I have to play the role of that er the life of this role Gothami er I was not doing any sex or you know and in that role to er for the role to develop and for us to er come to the er mmmeme to bring out the meaning and the issue behind the character ha= certain situations have to be er shown in the

Example 11 is a conversation between the interviewer <04AM> and the female actress

<01AF>. You know in this discourse refers to sex-related action in a movie scene. <01AF> does not explicitly describe what entails such action but uses the PM you know so that the hearer, with his access to the common knowledge about the field, can understand what was meant. This is an example where the speaker taps common knowledge with the PM you know.

Example 12

<06AcF> **you know** they either sit in front of televisions or

<08HM> the computer

<06AcF> phones or computers and everything information everything is fed to them

To provide some context, example 12 is a conversation between an academic and an interviewer from the CSSLE. The academic mentions that she conducts workshops for children to improve their theatre and creative skills. She mentions that today's children are always either in front of the television and that is the reason that such workshops are needed. She uses the PM *you know* to refer to the common knowledge of how children spend their time in today's world. Her invite for the common knowledge is successful as her interlocutor <08HM> too suggests yet another device that the children use adding to her idea.

In sum, PMs are short phrases with no propositional meaning yet performing poly functions in contexts co-constructed by speakers emanating context dependent meaning

Co-occurring Pragmatic Markers

Pragmatic marker combinations or co-occurring PM are a relatively new field in PM research in all varieties of English and even other languages (Lohmann & Koops, 2022). Examples of co-occurring PMs in English are *well you know*, *well I mean*, and *I mean you know*. In a study based on the British component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-GB), they are described as “a combination of two or more non-identical, immediately adjacent” PMs (Haselow, 2019, p. 4). This phenomenon of co-occurrence is also known as clustering (Maschler, 1994), combining (Fraser, 2013) or sequencing (Lohmann & Koops, 2022). Important aspects of these co-occurring PMs such as the choice of combination or the factors that determine their linear order are not fully understood yet. For instance, we know that certain PMs can combine with one another to create a more emphatic utterance than can be conveyed with one individual PM. Example 13 from CSSLE illustrates the emphatic force created by the combination of two PMs. In this context, <04AF> claims to be a vegan. She describes that there are non-vegan food cravings sometimes. Both *you know* and *like* can be used individually on their own in this context. Yet by using them together there is an appeal to the interlocutor for agreement and at the same time *like* acts as an exemplifier. It introduces an example situation that happens to <04AF> with regard to non-vegan food craving. This appeal to the interlocutor together with exemplification further attracts attention to the idea of what happens with a craving for non-vegan food.

Example 13

<03HM> like ribbon cake can make me go non vegan in the first sight

<04AF> oh my God yes but like I've kind of trained myself to just taste it and not binge eat it

<03HM> okay

<04AF> **you know like** sometimes when you see something you're like you keep

<03HM> that's true

<04AF> going for it and you'll just end up eating the whole thing

The principles that direct such combinations and the choice of combinations inform us about the thinking patterns of the user and underlying grammar patterns of language. The literature on co-

occurring PMs has revealed possible reasons for co-occurrences. For instance, Aijmer (2002) argues that co-occurring PMs are functionally similar. Lohmann & Koops (2016; 2022) likewise assume that similar functional categories or the functional complementarity of PMs might prompt them to form combinations. In a theoretical investigation that synthesised the results of previous research on BrE, AmE and French, Lohmann & Koops (2022) state that the tendency for functionally similar markers to co-occur is very high. An example of two PMs with similar functions combining with each other for a function similar to their individual functions is given in this example 14 from CSSLE.

Example 14

<08EM> er well my er personal er yeah my personal er thing is **like you know** er we
we are an island

One of the functions of the PM *like* is to show hesitation. A function of *you know* is word search. The utterance in example 14 has many filled pauses that indicate hesitation. Therefore, it can be assumed that the speaker is hesitating and searching for words in this utterance. Therefore, he has combined *like* and *you know* both for the purpose of hesitation and word search. Haselow (2019) analyses such combinations as a communicative strategy to overcome disfluencies in real time speech.

Crible (2018) examines co-occurring PMs in a data set called DisFrEn. It is a collection of spoken English and spoken French. The texts for the spoken English comes from ICE-GB and the Backbone project (Kohn, 2012) which also features BrE. In this corpus analysis of both English and French, he finds that 20% of all PMs in the corpus are co-occurring PMs. French co-occurrences were more common than English co-occurrences. He also states that the most frequent patterns of co-occurring PMs were to express similar or complementary functions.

There is research on the flexibility of sequencing of PMs as well. The little research available shows that ordering is constrained by the position of the PM (Haselow, 2019; Crible & Degand, 2021). Crible (2018) claims that co-occurrences are more frequent in sentence-initial position than other places. Haselow (2019) investigates the sequencing behaviour of turn initial and final PMs. His markers include a combination of PMs such as *you know* and *well* and DMs such as *then* and *because*. He identifies three functional domains in which the PMs and DMs typically operate, which are interaction, discourse structure, and cognition. Interaction domain refers to all functions related to the management of the interlocutor interaction, such as organising turn-taking and setting up the conditions for successful uptake of an upcoming message. An example of such a PM sequence from the PMs that the present study concerns would be *well I mean*. The second domain, discourse structure, refers to the relationship between the discourse units. It indicates the relationship between discourse units and implied meanings or inferences. An example would be *you know like* as given in example 13. *You know like* in that example connects the reference to non-vegan food craving to an example of what happens when the speaker gets an opportunity to eat non-vegan food. Therefore, it connects one discourse unit with another. The third domain pertains to the interlocutor's cognitive states. An example of a general function of cognition domain is providing a cue for an utterance interpretation. An example from CSSLE is *I mean you know* where nuancing and appeal to common knowledge is combined as in example 15. Example 15 from CSSLE shows co- occurring PMs in the third domain which provides a cognitive cue for an utterance interpretation.

Example 15

<04AM> that's what company should adopt not sack and reduce salary and what is this

I mean you know can you imagine a person in this situation going home and saying
you know children your father or mother has lost my job I don't have a job from tomorrow

In CSSLE, <04AM> is an actor who is also a CEO of a company. He mentions that some of the CEOs in some Sri Lankan companies fired their employees to manage their businesses during the pandemic. With the use of *I mean you know* he prepares the listener to an opposing idea. Preceded by “what is this” he implies that he questions this decision by the CEOs, and he appeals to the interlocutors to accept his idea. The speaker implies that he believes the listener too agrees with his opinion, thus provides a cue for utterance interpretation.

For his research, Haselow (2019) uses a spoken section of the ICE-GB. Then he selects all individual two-part PM combinations and rates the likelihood of a given word to be followed by another word such as *well I think*. The results reveal that the linearisation order corresponds to a particular temporal logic. The functional motivation that is underlying a speaker's thought process is the orientation in discourse processing. Therefore, PMs that ranked higher within a function preceded those that ranked low. This is one possible order that PMs co-occur. In other words, there is a logical and predictable order for the PMs to combine with one another that is linear, temporal and function driven.

Another explanation of an order is provided by Crible and Degand (2021) who explore the variables that govern the ordering of the DMs in a study that looks at DMs more broadly but includes PMs. They analyse all DMs from LOCAS-F, a multi genre corpus of monologues and dialogues in French. This corpus of 36, 912 words includes a range of speeches from political speeches to radio interviews and casual conversations. They finalise three ordering tendencies in their data: the syntactic category of the DM, domains and functional strength. They suggest that weak PMs or sequential domain PMs come first in a combination. Nevertheless, they declare that it is still not conclusive how the DMs combine with each other as more than one tendency is possible for a single sequence. Interestingly, 18 sequences such as *bon ben (well)*, *alors donc (well so)* and *ben en fait (well actually)* remain unexplained by any of these factors. Crible and Degand (2021) assume that these sequences cannot be categorised as they are not restricted by a rigid syntactic rule like the other DMs.

In sum, the literature on co-occurring PMs shows that there is an underlying systematicity to these combinations and their order of combinations. Also, what we understand from the comparisons between English and French co-occurring PMs is that there are cross-linguistic or language-specific PM behaviour. Not all sequences can be explained by the existing ordering tendencies or generalisations. Therefore, these should be further investigated, as should the effect of combinations on the individual meanings of the PMs. Whether such combinations result in new idiomatic expressions or remain compositional is a question to investigate.

This paper aimed to achieve an introductory overview of research pertaining to PMs. First, it looked at the problem of diverse definitions and terminology that seem to be inherent in research on PM and then, investigated the reasons for such disagreement. This was followed by a brief overview of the characteristics of PM. In conclusion, the idea of co-occurrence of PMs was examined. There is certainly scope to write definitions of PMs that would ensure consistent classification for researchers working with different theoretical frameworks. A more inclusive definition would yield more unified findings that will allow comparison and synthesis among different studies. More corpus-based research using a comprehensive definition can certainly make us understand the PM inventory for different registers as well. Future research could also lead to understand the general principals of co-occurrence.

Finding the reasons for certain preferences with regard to PM combinations would unravel important information about human thinking.

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