

John Benjamins Publishing Company



This is a contribution from Language, Interaction and Acquisition 8:2
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Topic-shift discourse markers in L2 Italian

Paths of acquisition by Spanish speakers

Margarita Borreguero Zuloaga
Complutense University of Madrid

This paper examines how native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of Italian approach topic organisation (topic shift, topic closure, digressions, topic recovery, and summary) in oral interactions. The research focuses on which discourse markers (DMs) are used when speakers try to organise discourse topics, and the differences between NS and NNS when performing such metadiscourse functions. The analysis is based on data from a spoken corpus designed to study conversational strategies in Spanish learners of L2 Italian. It reveals that the acquisition of metadiscourse functions progresses at different rates depending on the function: whereas learners have a good pragmatic competence in using DMs for the introduction of new topics in conversation, they have difficulties with other functions, such as topic closure or summary. In addition, the function of topic recovery after a digression is explicitly marked by NNS by DMs which are not found in native varieties.

Keywords: discourse markers, L2 Italian, acquisition, topic management, metadiscourse functions, Spanish learners

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the functional symmetries and asymmetries in L1 and L2 speakers' use of discourse markers (DMs) in oral interactions. We are mainly interested in the way non-native speakers (NNS) deal with discourse topics in their oral productions by using DMs, and the extent to which the DMs employed in this function differ from those employed by native speakers (NS). The study is part of a larger long-term project on the acquisition of Italian DMs by NS of Spanish, a closely related language. Although there are several studies on the acquisition of Italian by Spanish speakers (and vice versa), most of these concentrate on grammatical aspects (Zurlo, 2009; Maggioni, 2010) and rarely address discourse

phenomena. The initial aim of this research¹ was therefore to assess the acquisition of discourse strategies in spoken L2 Italian by a group of L1 Spanish learners.

We adopt a functional approach, given our conviction that the functional perspective is more fruitful in acquisition research than a lexical approach, since it does not assume a previous inventory of DMs. This approach allows us to discover how many DMs are used to convey a certain function at each level, and what other strategies are available to the learner to convey a specific function (e.g. paralinguistic cues, repetition, mimicking). Thus, in this study we adopt an onomasiological approach to determine which discourse functions are activated by Spanish learners of L2 Italian and, when these functions are realized through DMs, which DMs are chosen in each case.

This paper focuses on metadiscourse functions related to topic management. Topic management in this context refers to the introduction of new discourse topics or to various aspects of an already established discourse topic (or subtopics) in conversation. Random switching from one topic to another is a well-known characteristic of informal conversation (Briz, 1998) which, together with quick turn taking, gives vivacity to these types of interactions. The assignment of discourse functions to DMs is based on Bazzanella's (1995; 2006) taxonomy, complemented by López Serena and Borreguero (2010) and revised in Borreguero (2015). We will briefly describe this taxonomy in Section 2 and offer a short summary of previous research in this field (Section 3). The corpus for this study is presented in Section 4, followed by a presentation of the DM data related to different metadiscourse functions found in our corpus (Section 5) and a discussion of our results (Section 6).

2. A functional approach to DMs: A taxonomy of discourse functions

In language acquisition, native speakers follow a function-to-form developmental process, "where the need to communicate precedes the use of a form" (Romero Trillo, 2002: 770). In contrast, NNS follow a form-to-function process, learning first lexical items which are usually contextualised in subsequent stages. According to this view, we argue that a functional approach to the study of DMs in L2 allows us to determine more clearly the acquisitional paths of NNS. Instead of focusing on the acquisition of the lexical item, we are interested in observing which DMs are displayed for a specific discourse function and to what degree these DMs differ from the ones found in NS speech.

1. Detailed information on the A.Ma.Dis. research group, its global aims and the results of our funded projects since 2006, including the corpus, database and main publications, can be found on our site, www.marcadores-discursivos.es

This approach necessitates the use of a pre-established schema of discourse functions as a starting point. Bazzanella (1995) divided DMs into two main macrofunctions—interactional and metadiscourse²—and in later works (Bazzanella, 2006) announced a third cognitive (or ideational) macrofunction already found in Bublitz's (1988), who proposes three general functions for DM: interpersonal, propositional, and textual. Taking these three macrofunctions as a starting point, López Serena and Borreguero (2010) develop a detailed taxonomy, more recently revised in Borreguero (2015).³

- The *interactional macrofunction* includes all functions linked to the relationship between interlocutors in conversation and can itself be divided into three main subgroups: (a) functions assumed by the speaker taking the turn; (b) functions assumed by addressees who have no intention of taking the floor but produce phatic cues and express emotions with respect to the speaker's text; (c) functions assumed by addressees intending to take the floor and react to what has been said.
- The *ideational macrofunction* assembles all functions that have an impact on the semantic content conveyed by the utterance. This function can be divided into two main subgroups: (a) connective functions linking semantic content across utterances, reflecting or creating logical and argumentative relations among them; (b) functions related to the conveying of modal values.
- The *metadiscourse macrofunction* groups all functions related to text building and production. These are divided into two main subfunctions: (a) functions related to the organisation of textual information; (b) functions related to the linguistic formulation of the text. This macrofunction covers all strategies used to keep the floor while having difficulties to plan an utterance and are therefore strictly linked to online planning in spoken communication. However, linguistic formulation also encompasses the reformulation function and its variants (paraphrastic and non-paraphrastic).

Note that none of these functions is exclusive to DMs. Rather, there is a variety of discourse elements that may fulfill them in oral and written discourse (e.g.

2. Bazzanella's taxonomy has been largely employed in studies on L2 Italian acquisition (cf. Bardel, 2003; 2004; Nigoević & Sučić, 2011; Jafrancesco, 2015).

3. This is, of course, only one proposed taxonomy among many others (cf. Pons, 2000, 2006), but one which we have found particularly useful for the study of DMs in learner varieties. Limitations of space prevent us from illustrating all the functions mentioned. The reader is referred to the studies cited for more detailed descriptions and numerous examples.

interjections, filled pauses, repetitions, prosodic cues).⁴ The onomasiological perspective adopted here (function-to-form) focuses on how speakers fulfill these functions in discourse and to what extent they use DMs rather than other strategies. These functions are non-exclusive in the sense that they can converge on the same DM, especially in the case of interactional functions. Moreso, given the polyfunctionality of DMs, the same DM can frequently assume more than one function in the same context (*syntagmatic polyfunctionality*, cf. Bazzanella, 1995). One frequently finds a DM marking both floor-taking and mitigating at the same time, to give just one example.⁵

3. Discourse markers in Italian L2 acquisition: Previous research

Research on the presence of DMs and their roles⁶ in second language acquisition, particularly in the case of Romance languages, goes back no more than 20 years, but some facts have already become well-established and garnered consensus. It has been observed, to date, that DMs appear from the first stages of language

4. For example, speakers use silent pauses to separate different aspects when presenting a complex issue and frequently accompany each new aspect with a hand motion.

5. Our analysis takes into account primary as well as secondary and tertiary functions of DMs. This hierarchical difference is not significant in the present study, which only considers the most salient function for each DM token. Of course, identifying the different functions of a DM is a difficult task, since pragmatic values and functions are highly context dependent. In order to reach an intersubjective agreement on the different functions, we have considered contextual aspects such as the speaker's communicative intentions, the interpersonal relationship, the current topic of conversation, and the co-text (particularly what immediately precedes and follows each DM). The identification of the different functions has been carried out by each researcher individually and then discussed among team members to establish a hierarchical classification of functions. Ideational functions tend to be more salient than metadiscursive and interactional ones. The DMs analysed in this paper have no ideational functions, and only some have secondary interactional functions such as taking or leaving the floor, which will not be addressed here.

6. We follow Martín Zorraquino and Portolés (1999) in considering DMs as a heterogeneous group of words that do not form a grammatical category (although they originally belong to varied word classes, such as verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs and conjunctions), but a functional category characterised by marking different types of discourse relationships. Most DMs can occupy different positions in the utterance, since they play no role in the propositional structure; morphologically, they do not inflect (even when they originally belong to inflected word classes) and exhibit significantly reduced morphological variation (e.g. *ti dico* / *Le dico* 'I tell you', see below). In our study, only words that have been at least partially desemantised are considered as DMs, thus excluding interjections, such as *ah*, *eh*, *oh*, *uhm* (cf. Borreguero, 2015 for further consideration of interjections as DMs).

acquisition (Andorno, 2007, 2008; Bardel, 2003, 2004; Bini & Pernas, 2008; Diao-Klaeger & Thoerle, 2013; Ferraris, 2001, 2004) and their number rises throughout the acquisitional process (Guil, 2015, Pauletto & Bardel, 2015 for L2 Italian; Pascual Escagedo, 2015 for L2 Spanish; Hancock & Sanell, 2010 for French). The first DMs to emerge in learner varieties are phonetically ‘light’ (up to two syllables) and phonetically similar to DMs in L1, such as Italian *sì, no, ok, bene, ma*, French *oui, non, bien, alors*, Spanish *sí, no, vale, pues*. Intermediate and advanced levels exhibit an enrichment of lexical items functioning as DMs, mainly connectives, but also those linked to politeness strategies such as mitigation and intensification (Guil et al., 2008; Guil, 2009a).

However, pragmatic competence seems to improve at a slower rate than lexical and morphosyntactic competence (e.g. the use of verbal tenses), and some DMs are rare or completely absent in learner data. Consequently, experts talk of a “fossilisation” process when comparing adult learners to acquisitional paths in L1 (Romero Trillo, 2002). This phenomenon concerns not only the lexical level but also the prosodic (De Meo & Pettorino, 2012) and the functional levels. That is, some DMs are never pronounced in spoken discourse with the right intonation or adjustment of the intonation to the function. In addition, learners do not attribute to DMs exactly the same functions as native speakers, associating DMs with fewer functions or, more frequently, with more or different functions than they have for NS.

While our corpus contains many interactional and ideational DM tokens, we have chosen to focus on metadiscourse DMs, since few studies, to our knowledge, have given sufficient attention to learners’ discourse building strategies which provide learners with a clear structure and facilitate information processing for the interlocutor (but cf. recent studies: Pascual Escagedo, 2015⁷ and Jafrancesco, 2015).

Earlier studies in this field (such as Müller 2006 for L2 English) have shown that DMs with metadiscourse functions such as paraphrasing, rewording, or summing-up (e.g. *so*) are much more frequent in NS than NNS. Metadiscourse functions in L2 Italian – such as those fulfilled by discourse structuring DMs (*da una parte, d'altra parte* ‘on the one hand, on the other hand’) or paraphrasing DMs (*cioè, in altre parole* ‘that is to say, in other words’) – have not been thoroughly studied in the literature. We have found two studies on spoken L2 Italian which partially address this issue, following the methodological approach adopted here. Nigoević and Sučić (2011) explore the presence and function of DMs in Croatian learners of

7. This author adopts the same onomasiological approach but takes into account all the functions at each level, paying exclusive attention to DMs and not to other textual strategies. She observes that metadiscourse DMs are rare in her corpus of Italian learners of L2 Spanish, with only a slight increase at the advanced level (Pascual Escagedo, 2015: 153).

Italian. They find that DMs are present from the basic level, but are not very frequent in their corpus, probably due to the type of data elicited (a question-answer interview with a NS). The authors do not restrict their research to the metadiscourse functions, and pay special attention to interactional functions such as turn-taking, mitigation, agreement and disagreement, as well as markers showing learners' insecurity (which we would not consider an interactional function). They also deal with information organisation and reformulation, but without giving quantitative results for the first function. Consequently, their results and ours are difficult to compare.

More interesting is the work of Jafrancesco (2015) who studies DMs in a corpus of Spanish and German speakers. This author shows that of all DMs found in her corpus, metatextual functions are present in only 17% at the basic level, 28.4% at the intermediate level, and 31.8% at the advanced level. Notwithstanding the lower figures, it is easy to observe a clear acquisitional path which is closely related to the general improvement of the communicative competence which allows longer turns and triggers the necessity of rendering explicit the internal structure of the information conveyed in these turns.

A third study, Manili (2001), deals mainly with argumentative connectives in texts written by intermediate and advanced learners of L2 Italian, but also takes into account metadiscourse DMs such as focus operators, reformulation markers, and "delimiting" or topic shift markers (Manili, 2001: 141). Her results do not fully match our own, as shown below, but we agree with her general conclusion that metadiscourse and argumentative DMs are much less frequent in learners' discourse than interactional markers, even in written texts (in her corpus many learners opted for a dialogic form of narration). Manili's "delimiting" functions do not seem to fully coincide with what we understand as topic management functions, although she does not provide a clear definition of the term.

These functions are related to the fact that in a spontaneous conversation, even when there is a prespecified discourse topic, speakers tend to introduce new topics and digressions during the conversation. Sometimes the rapid succession of topics can be hard to follow and speakers need to signal these changes. In the literature, DMs with the function of signalling topic-shift are often called 'delimiting DMs' (Bazzanella, 1995; Jafrancesco, 2015) because they signal limits between topics. Jafrancesco (2015) has shown that DMs with this function are not only present at all levels of linguistic competence and remain constant during the language learning process, but they are also the most frequent within the group metadiscourse DMs (61% at the basic level, 67.6% at the intermediate level, and 63.3% at the advanced level of all metadiscourse DMs).⁸ This is one of the reasons that these DMs are also the focus of this paper.

8. Other metadiscourse functions considered by Jafrancesco (2015) are focusing and rewording.

4. The current study

4.1 The corpus

This study is based on data extracted from an audiovisual corpus of Italian L2 (360 minutes, approximately 38,000 tokens).⁹ The corpus, collected in 2006, consists of 36 conversations (10 minutes each) divided into three levels of proficiency (beginner, intermediate, advanced; 12 interactions per level) and two types of interactions (symmetric and informal, between learners, and asymmetric and more formal, between a learner and a native teacher). All of the informants were learning Italian in an institutional setting for four hours a week. Beginners were recorded seven months after their first Italian course (level A1.3-A2.1 of the CERF), intermediate level learners had followed Italian courses for almost three years (level B1.3-B2.1), and advanced learners had studied Italian for almost five years (level C1). Moreover, except two beginners, all informants had spent some time in Italy before the recordings: most had visited Italy as tourists (less than a month), but three informants (one intermediate and two advanced) had studied in Italy with an Erasmus scholarship (nine, four, and nine months, respectively) and kept regularly in touch with Italian NS. The context of language acquisition has a strong influence on the development of pragmatic competence (Müller, 2006), but this influence is not so easy to observe in the acquisition of metadiscourse DMs, as we see below.

Learner interactions were recorded with a videocamera; the researchers were seldom present. Learners received only vague indications about the topic of conversation and the fictitious roles they had to assume (friends, students sharing a flat). In all cases, there were task-oriented interactions (such as buying a present for a mutual friend, or getting a job as a baby-sitter for an Italian family), yielding semi-spontaneous interactions. NS data came from productions of NS participating in the asymmetric interactions, and from two other NS participating in the same task-oriented interactions. The number of participants and their levels of proficiency are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants in the A.Ma.Dis. Corpus

	Italian native speakers	Italian L2 learners		
		Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
Participants	4	4	4	4

9. By tokens we mean the number of linguistic elements in a text separated by blanks, which are automatically counted as words by a text processor.

Each NNS took part in four interactions (two symmetric and two asymmetric). We counted the number of tokens and turns in symmetric interactions to compare NS and NNS interactions quantitatively. Our corpus contains 16 symmetric interactions, approximately ten minutes each, four for each level and four between NS. As shown in Table 2, the total number of tokens increases, as expected, with improved linguistic competence (basic: 4,974 tokens, intermediate: 7,538, advanced: 8,344), reaching similar figures to NS (8,141 tokens) at the end of the acquisition process analysed here. However, evaluating the number of turns is far more complicated. NS interactions have fewer turns, but their turns are longer as they have greater facility to build a complex text and develop argumentation (an extreme case is interaction NAT1 with only 56 turns). However, no progressive decrease in the

Table 2. Tokens and turns in symmetric interactions

Native speakers					
	NAT1	NAT2	NAT3	NAT4	TOTAL
Tokens	1867	1982	2165	2127	8141
	22.9%	24.3%	26.6%	26.1%	100%
Turns	56	110	102	103	371
	15%	29.6%	27.4%	27.8%	100%
Beginners					
	1SG1	1SG2	1VA1	1VA2	TOTAL
Tokens	2005	1585	604	780	4974
	40.3%	31.9%	12.1%	15.7%	100%
Turns	221	162	101	104	588
	37.6%	27.5%	17.2%	17.7%	100%
Intermediate					
	3SG1	3SG2	3VA1	3VA2	TOTAL
Tokens	2064	2016	1827	1631	7538
	27.4%	26.7%	24.2%	21.6%	100%
Turns	192	246	217	179	834
	23%	29.5%	26%	21.4%	100%
Advanced					
	5SG1	5SG2	5VA1	5VA2	TOTAL
Tokens	2511	2168	1629	2036	8344
	30%	26%	19.6%	24.4%	100%
Turns	292	265	130	168	855
	34.1%	31%	15.2%	19.6%	100%

number of turns is observed in NNS in the corpus. On the contrary, beginners with 588 turns are closer to NS than advanced learners (with 855). On the other hand, intermediate and advanced learners' interactions are much livelier than basic level interactions, as speakers take the floor with greater facility. This tendency could, therefore, explain the higher number of turns.

4.2 Data treatment

In order to study the acquisitional process, interactions were transcribed in Conversational Analysis transcription conventions as well as in the CHAT-LAN conventions established by the CHILDES Project (MacWhinney, 2000), and exhaustively read to identify all the DMs and their occurrences. Each DM was coded for one or more discourse functions according to its context of occurrence. All this information was collected in an Access Database in order to be able to make an automatic query by DM, level of proficiency, type of informant, and function. Each index/file card in the database contains information about the conversation (number, type, place of registration), the informant (type, level of proficiency), the DM, its function, its context of occurrence, and other relevant information to understand its functions (such as position, whether it is part of a chain of DMs, or prosodic features).

The advantages of having such an amount of information at our disposal is that we can track various parameters, e.g. the number of DMs at each level of proficiency, the functions ascribed to a single DM, and the number of DMs fulfilling a single function across the corpus. Here we will focus on which DMs are chosen by the learners to serve the purpose of expressing metadiscourse functions, and particularly to signal changes in discourse topics.

5. Results

5.1 Metadiscourse functions in learner varieties: Topic management in L2 Italian

We analyse only the metadiscourse functions found in the corpus which are related to discourse topic management. We are mainly interested in how L2 Italian learners introduce new discourse topics during interaction, how they shift to a new topic or subtopic, and how they close one topic when moving to a different one. We will try to identify the type of DMs employed to fulfill all these functions both in the speech of native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS).

In order to further distinguish these functions, we have identified five different subfunctions: topic introduction or shift (5.1.1), topic closure (5.1.2), digression (5.1.3), recovery of a previous topic (5.1.4), and topic summary (5.1.5).¹⁰

Table 3. DMs used to introduce or change topic in interaction (most frequent DMs in light grey)

	BEGINNER	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED	NATIVE	TOTAL
<i>allora / e allora</i>	3		9	10	22
<i>anche / e anche</i>	1	1	5	2	9
<i>anzi</i>				2	2
<i>ascolta</i>				1	1
<i>be' / ma be'</i>		1		1	1
<i>bueno (Sp.)</i>	1	2			3
<i>comunque</i>			1	5	6
<i>dunque</i>		1	1	2	4
<i>e</i>	72	65	43	88	268
<i>e poi / e dunque / e quindi</i>	1	2	11	23	37
<i>invece / e invece</i>			1	5	6
<i>ma / e maⁱ</i>	5	10	9	10	34
<i>no / no sì / sì</i>		4	22	9	35
<i>per quanto riguarda</i>	1			15	16
<i>per quel che riguarda</i>		1			1
<i>però</i>	1	3	9		13
<i>poi</i>			3		3
<i>riguardo a</i>				1	1
<i>ti dico / le dico / ti spiego / le spiego / (ti) direi</i>		1	2	23	26
<i>tra l'altro</i>				1	1
<i>vediamo</i>				1	1
Total	85	91	115	209	500

i. Sometimes *ma* 'but' is pronounced as [me] due to a transfer with French *mais* 'but'.

10. These functions do not fully coincide with those analysed by Jafrancesco (2015) who considers the following subfunctions: addition/transition, closure/conclusion, introduction, listing, marking reported speech, marking internal quotes of previous text fragments, and digressions.

5.1.1 *New topic or change of topic*

Introducing a new topic or changing the current topic of conversation is a meta-discourse function fulfilled by a great variety of DMs (in this corpus we have 31 different DMs and DM combinations, as seen in Table 3, and a total of 500 tokens).

The most frequent by far is initial *e* ‘and’ which is present from the basic level (72 tokens) with a frequency surprisingly close to that of NS (88 tokens). According to Guil (2009b: 1517–1518), *e* in initial position, and especially when prefacing questions, introduces a topic which is part of the shared knowledge of the interlocutors, either because it has been previously mentioned in the discourse or because it has been activated in a particular semantic frame. It does not only link two consecutive turns but reinforces coherence between different parts of the spoken text introducing different aspects of a macro-topic (Mandelli, 2004: 137; Guil, 2009b: 1507). The phonetic simplicity of this DM and its semantic and pragmatic similarity to the Spanish DM *y* ‘and’ may explain its rapid acquisition in this function. Initial *e* can introduce three different types of topic:

- a. A new discourse topic in conversation: in (1) where the topic ‘summer holidays’ is introduced after simulating a usual order in a bar.

(1) T: *d'accordo / &eh cameriere per favore / una coca cola e / (RISATE) una coca cola e unn un tè latte*↓

Ch: *e che cosa fai questee quest'estate? / questa estate?* (1SG1, 18–19)¹¹

T: ‘ok / &eh waiter please / a coke and / (LAUGHS) a coke and aa tea with milk

Ch: and what are you doing this summer? / this summer?¹²

- b. A further development of an already established discourse topic by dealing with new aspects or subtopics: in (2) the learners role-play students sharing an apartment discussing what to do now that the rent has increased. Each new proposal is introduced by *e*. One solution is to divide the rent between more people: M proposes to look for a third flatmate, shifting to a new subtopic which is semi-active in the conversation.

11. Corpus references indicate levels of proficiency (1=beginners, 3=intermediate, 5=advanced), the recording location (SG = Segovia, VA = Valencia), identification of interaction type and topic (1–2 symmetric, 3–6 asymmetric). Initials indicate participants: NS are Laura (L), Eugenio (Eu), Lucio (Lu) and Oliviero (O); NNS beginners: Teresa (T), Chelo (Ch), Carolina (C) and María José (MJ); intermediate: Laura (La), Belén (B), Mar (M) and Noemí (N); advanced: Mila (Mi), Baldo (B), Elena (E) and Paula (P).

12. Translations of the examples are intended to facilitate comprehension of the Italian text and do not provide an exact gloss.

- (2) N: *[un] appartamento dove tu abiti / e in periferia ci vogliono tantissimi
[tempo per andare lì / per andare a lavoro]*
M: *[sì / lo so / sì / sì sì / hai ragione hai ragione] / sì / e cosa pensi ah / di /
uhm / cercare una terza persona?* (3VA2, 28–29)

N: ‘an apartment where you live / besides in the suburbs you need so much time to get there / to get to work

M: yes / I know / yes / yes / yes / you are right you are right / yes/ and what do you think /ah/ about / uhm / looking for a third person?’

- c. The first discourse topic in conversation. This is a rare function only present at the basic level and never used by NS, who may consider it difficult for the listener to open a conversation with this DM which always recalls a previous topic or at least a general discourse frame. However, as the introduced topic in (3) refers directly to the communicative situation (which can be considered shared knowledge between the speakers), the use of this DM is not so awkward in the specific context.

- (3) L: *ciao / [come va?]*
Ch: *[ciao] (()) / Laura / va bene?*
L: *sì / gra[zie / ti ringrazio / sto bene]*
Ch: *[ee→ / e la ce]na te piace?* (1SG4, 1–4, L is a NS)

L: ‘hi / how are you doing?’
Ch: hi / Laura / are you ok?
L: yes / thanks / thank you / I am ok
Ch: eee / and are you enjoying the dinner?’

However, with this exception, DMs are rarely used to signal topic-shift in beginner productions, limited to single tokens of *allora* ‘then’, *però* ‘but’, *anche* ‘also’, *per quanto riguarda* ‘regarding’. In fact, the higher frequency of *e* with beginners (72 tokens) compared to intermediate and advanced learners (65 and 43 tokens, respectively) may be due to the very reduced number of DMs that beginners have at their disposal, while learners with better pragmatic competence are able to use other DMs with the same function, thereby avoiding excessive use of one lexical item.

Other DMs used for this function in the corpus, though at a much lower frequency, emerge from the combination of *e* and a marker whose original semantics indicated temporal succession or conclusion such as *e poi*, *e quindi*, *e dunque*, *e allora*. In this case, the path of acquisition is very clear: tokens of these DM combinations are almost absent at the basic level, and become more present in the intermediate and advanced level, although they are much more frequent in NS than in NNS. In most cases, the introduced topic is also somehow semi-active in the conversation. In (4), which is part of an interview, different aspects of the interviewee’s

education are tackled, and the DM combination *e poi* and *e* introduces a question about college education. Bear in mind that this cannot simply mark temporal succession, since the question about academic education comes after talking about language skills, two aspects that are not necessarily chronologically related.

- (4) O: =*e la verità è che mi / mi piace molto eee→ / ancora non lo parlo molto bene però↓*
 Lu: *e e poi / come /// eee come scuola↑ / cosaa→ / uhm / lei ha fatto una scuola di educatore?* (NAT4, 58–59, Lu and O are NS)
- O: ‘and the truth is that I / I like it a lot eehm / I still cannot speak it very fluently but
 Lu: and and then / what kind /// and what kind of school / what / uhm / have you studied in a teacher college?’

The situation does not improve significantly at the intermediate level, except in the use of adversatives *ma* and *però* ‘but’ as DMs specialised for this function (ten and three tokens, respectively), a discourse function which has been pointed out by Giuliani and Zonta (1983). *Ma* is almost completely desemantised in this function; it has lost its adversative function and assumes only a delimiting function between discourse topics. Ferraris’ (2004) study on the acquisition of *ma* also confirms the presence of adversative connectives at the intermediate level, while in lower levels *ma* has only interactional functions (such as turn taking). In her data, the metadiscourse function of *ma* is much less frequent than the interactional function. *Ma* as a marker of topic shift is also mentioned by Manili (2001: 147–148, 166), together with *adesso* ‘now’, which is not used in our corpus. In Manili’s data, it signals an abrupt topic shift in a narrative, usually followed by *all’improvviso* ‘suddenly’. However, other functions are frequent too, such as adding new information to a preestablished topic or adversative connection¹³ (Manili, 2001: 162–163).

More interesting are the changes observed at the advanced level: DMs such as *e poi* ‘and then’ (5) and *no* ‘no’¹⁴, which have almost no presence in previous levels, serve this purpose:

13. Adversative connection appears very early in learner varieties but expressed by a limited number of DMs. In L2 Italian these tend to be *ma* and *però*, followed by *invece*; other markers, such as *tuttavia* or *bensi*, are almost non-existent in written and spoken texts alike (Andorno, 2007; Borreguero, 2009a, b). Thus, Manili (2001: 177) notes “an overuse of *ma*”.

14. However, most tokens of *no* and *no sì* are used by a single learner, so this could be interpreted as idiosyncratic use.

- (5) E: = *sempre lo stesso problema dei letti*↑ / *che non ce li abbiamo*↓§
 P: § *i letti*→
 / *e poi io ho la-la bruttissima esperienza con- con lee / le camere doppie*
per[ché =] (5VA2, 39–40)
- E: ‘we have always the problems of the beds / because we don’t have more
 P: the beds → / besides I have a- a dreadful experience with shared rooms
 because’

Other DMs rarely used in lower levels are more systematically used here, such as *allora* (nine tokens), *anche / e anche* (five tokens), *però* (nine tokens, but note that *però* is never used by NS for this function). As noted above, the variety of DMs employed at this level could explain the decrease of tokens of the otherwise omnipresent *e*.

Finally, in comparing NS use to learner interlanguage, we have observed three important differences: (a) as expected, NS employ a wider variety of DMs (15 different DMs vs. only 7 for beginners, 11 for intermediate and advanced learners), and produce many more of them (209); (b) NS use DMs that are never (or almost never) found in the interlanguage, such as *e poi*, *per quanto riguarda* (see below), and variants of *ti dico/Le dico*. There are 26 tokens of the latter in our corpus, 23 from NS and only three from NNS (one at the intermediate level and two at the advanced level). These specific markers introduce a new topic by drawing the interlocutor’s attention specifically by directly addressing them with a pronoun (*ti / Le* ‘you’), as in (6). This is a powerful discourse strategy that is rarely found in learners.

- (6) Eu: [*quindi conosci abbastanza bene*] *una zona abbastanza*↑ / *ti dico* / *il complesso / alberghiero è abbastanza nuovo mi sembra che l’abbiano inaugurato l’anno scorso // il campo da golf l’hanno inaugurato sei mesi fa perché io ci sono stato*→ / *così ho fatto*→ /// (3VA5, 223, E is a NS)
- Eu: ‘[then you know quite well] an area quite / I tell you / the hotel / structure is quite new I think it has been inaugurated last year // the golf club has been inaugurated six months ago because I was there / so I have done ///’

Per quanto riguarda is only present in NS (15 tokens), and absent from NNS' discourse except for one occurrence at the basic level. The striking use of *per quanto riguarda* at this level can be explained as a consequence of the mirror effect, that is, the fact that learners repeat expressions that are very often used by the native interlocutor, as seen in (7), where Eu is the native speaker and C the learner.

(7) Eu: *perfetto // ee poi per quanto riguarda per esempio il luogo / noi andremoo vicino aa→ / a Malaga↑*

C: *sì*

Eu: *più a sud↑ / [verso]*

C: *[al mare?]*

[...]

Eu: *per cui / non so / vivresti con noi↑ / staresti lì con noi*

C: *ok*

Eu: *eee / per quanto riguarda le mansioni↑ / non so se / &eh*

C: *e cosaa // devo fare?*

Eu: *sì / &eh / io non so se ti piace lo sport / pensavamo di farti fare anche [attività=]*

[...]

Eu: *= possiamo fare così*

C: *per quanto riguarda i soldi?*

Eu: *sì / lo stipendio→ / io ho pensato una cifra intorno ai mille euro*

(1VA3, 103–106, 111–115, 177–179)15

Eu: *'perfect // and then regarding for example the place / we will go near tooo / to Malaga*

C: *yes*

Eu: *further south / [towards]*

C: *[to the sea?]*

[...]

Eu: *therefore / I don't know / you would live with us / you would stay there with us*

C: *ok*

15. This is a role-played job interview for a babysitter – one of the more rigidly structured interactions. The NS has a very active role as the employer posing questions to the learner. There are several issues that have to be addressed, such as time, salary, timetable, the children and the tasks, so topic introduction and change are particularly necessary in this conversation. The NS frequently use topic introduction DMs, such as *per quanto riguarda* 'as far as x is concerned' (25 tokens in the corpus), but we have only found two such tokens in the interlanguage, indicating that the mirror effect is very weak in asymmetric conversations. However, this particular occurrence of *per quanto riguarda* at the beginner level can only be explained as a consequence of the mirror effect.

- Eu: aaaand / regarding your tasks / I don't know if / &eh
 C: and what // do I have to do?
 Eu: yes / &eh / I don't know if you like sport / we were thinking about you
 doing some [activity]
 [...]
 Eu: = we can do so
 C: regarding the money=
 Eu: yes / your salary / I have thought something around one thousand euro'

(d) L2 Italian speakers resort to some DMs for functions that are not frequent in NS, such as additive focus particles (cf. *anche*) and adversative connectives (cf. *ma* and *però*). In (8) both learners discuss what to offer a shared friend for her birthday; after considering different options, B introduces a completely new suggestion (something to eat) using an emphatic *anche* (another example of how DMs combine with prosodic cues to convey the same meaning).

- (8) B: ANCHE / mi viene in mente qualcosa di mangiare / proprio [fatta=]
 (5SG1, 210)
 B: 'ALSO/ I can think of something to eat / something home made'

In addition, we have found some cases of code-switching (9). Since changing the topic is quite a difficult function for a beginner, it comes as no surprise that learners code-switch and use DMs from their L1 (*bueno* 'well') to signal the introduction of a new topic.¹⁶

- (9) Ch: *devo*→ / *no* / *dobbiamo aspettare cinque minuti*↓ / (RISATE)
 T: *lo stai caricando anche* [la=]
 Ch: [sì]↓
 T: = *batteria*?
 Ch: *anche la batteria*↓ / (RISATE)
 T: (RISATE) / *bueno* *possiamoo*→ / *vado a fare un un caffè* ↑ // *sì / si vuoi*
sì / gradisci un caffè ↑ / *e mentre possiamo pensare en altre*→ / *en altre*
possibilità↓ (3SG1, 110–115)
 Ch: 'I must / no / we must wait for 5 minutes/ (LAUGHS)
 T: you are also charging [the=]
 Ch: [yes]
 T: = battery?
 Ch: also the battery / (LAUGHS)

16. This could also be the case for *però*. Distinguishing phonetically similar DMs such as Italian *però* / Spanish *pero* has been one of the main problems during the analysis. It is difficult to assess when a token is a case of transfer or when the learner has acquired the Italian lexical item without its prosodic profile.

T: (LAUGHS) / well we can / I go to make a a coffee // yes / if you want to
yes / would you like a coffee / and in the meantime we can think about /
about other possibilities'

Spanish DMs such as *bueno*, *hombre*, *o sea* appear frequently in the interlanguage of Spanish speakers even at advanced levels (Maggioni, 2010: 31). These code-switching phenomena have usually been interpreted as a strategy to resolve communicative problems in the target language.

In any case, a change of topic is not always explicitly marked by a DM. Speakers (both NS and NNS) can resort to other discourse strategies to indicate a topic change such as word order alternation, prosodic breaks or pauses, or an utterance with explicit information announcing a new topic (10).

(10) Eu: *ah / una domanda / una curiosità / come hai studiato tu l'italiano? /
dov'è che l'hai [imparato?]* (1VA3, 263; NS)

Eu: 'ah / a question / a curiosity / how come you have studied Italian? /
where have you [learned it]?'

5.1.2 Topic closure

Topic closure is not typically marked during conversation, because the introduction of a new topic is enough to close the active topic. Yet, many interactional DMs that signal agreement (such as *ok*, *va bene*, *bene*, *d'accordo*, *certo*) can also be interpreted as a kind of closure. Once the interlocutors have agreed upon something, they feel ready to move to a new topic. Therefore, in our analysis we have only taken into account the DMs that explicitly signal the closure of a topic after an agreement has been reached. This is the case in (11), where after a long talk about what to eat in the city of Segovia (turns 193–249), the learner reintroduces a previous topic (main attractions to visit in Segovia) after the NS uses *ok* (in turn 249), which can be considered a topic closure marker.

(11) L: *è molto calorico va be' però se poi uno dopo cammina*
La: *sì / è vero*
L: *smaltisce un po' quindi / [ah ok]*
La: *[è vero] e ci sonoo altro posti che visitare chee tu
sai chee uhm / uzzh che ci sono tantissimo castelli*
(3SG4, 247–250, L: NS, B: NNS)

Table 4. DMs used for topic closure

	BEGINNER	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED	NATIVE	TOTAL
<i>allora</i>	2		3	10	15
<i>comunque</i>				1	1
<i>d'accordo</i>	9		1	12	22
<i>dunque</i>			1		1
<i>niente</i>				2	2
<i>ok</i>	1	5	2	18	26
<i>quindi</i>		1			1
<i>sì</i>		2		1	2
<i>va bene</i>	2	2	1	5	10
Total	14	10	8	49	81

L: 'it's a lot of calories ok but if afterwards you walk

La: yes / it is true

L: you work it off a little bit so / [ah ok]

La: [that's true] and there are other places to visit that you know that uhm / uzzh that there are so many castles around'

We have observed an important difference in the corpus in native vs. non-native use of closure DMs. The most striking fact, however, is not that NS use more DMs than NNS, but rather that no clear acquisitional process could be outlined—beginners use more DMs than advanced learners (excluding the use of *d'accordo* by beginners, which can be explained as a transfer phenomenon¹⁷), and the most used DMs are different at each level. In any case NNS do not use any DM that does not have the function of topic closure in NS speech, with the exception of *dunque* and *quindi* 'then, therefore' that in L1 Italian have mainly interactional and logic-argumentative functions, such as taking the floor after a question or presenting a consequence, respectively. Quantitative results are presented in Table 4.

The marker *ok* is used almost exclusively by NS (11). *D'accordo* is used by both beginners and NS, but as mentioned earlier, the tokens in beginner interactions are produced only by two learners proficient in L2 French and are likely to be a transfer phenomenon. The native use of this DM is illustrated in (12), from

17. Two beginners with good knowledge of French (one working as a French teacher), produced 58 tokens of *d'accordo*, (similar to French *d'accord*) while the other two beginners produced none. We have found more positive and negative DM transfer between L2 and L3 than between L1 and L2.

Ch: uhm uhm

T: but I think that if we can fix an appointment / talk to her

Ch: ok / we can visit the apartment / if / if you want to'

Again, this use is probably a transfer from French *d'accord*, as it is restricted to two proficient French speakers (except for a single token at the advanced level). Other closure DMs are very rare in the corpus. We therefore conclude that learners have particular difficulties in acquiring this function and do not explicitly mark the closure of topics and subtopics.

5.1.3 *Digressions or temporary shifts to a new discourse topic*

We have found only two tokens of a prototypical digression DM (such as *a proposito* 'by the way') in NS turns. It appears that this function is not fulfilled by DMs in our corpus. This does not mean, of course, that NNS and NS speakers do not digress from the main thread of discourse at various points. Rather, digressions are marked as simple introductions of new topics or through other devices such as interjections and prosodic markers. Moreover, in NS the introduction of a digression is reinforced by some metalinguistic comments such as (14).

- (14) O: *ah / a proposito / scusa se ti interrompo e cambio discorso però / mi interesserebbe sentire un po' / laa→ / la tua opinione / in Italia si parla tantoo / di Zapatero / di questoo→ / nuova / maniera di fare la politica / eccetera / in Italia soprattutto la sinistra / è veramenteee→ / uhm / molto / direi quasi tifosa di questo Zapatero // eee // ma qua come- come- la gente come lo vede?* (NAT3, 57)

O: 'ah / by the way/ excuse me if I interrupt and change topic but / I am interested a bit / in your / your opinion / in Italy people talk a lot / about Zapatero / about this / new / way of making politics / etc / in Italy particularly the left / is really / uhm / very / I would say almost a fan of this Zapatero // aaand // but here how- how- do the people see him?'

5.1.4 *Topic recovery*

Unlike digressions and topic closure, the recovery of a previous discourse topic after a digression is a metadiscourse function which is usually explicitly marked by a DM. Although the number of DMs with this function in the corpus is low, this could be due to the linear development of the interaction, especially in asymmetric dialogues, where there is little opportunity to go back to previous topics. In addition, this function can be fulfilled by an utterance and not exclusively by DMs, as in (15–16) where the NS playing the role of the interviewer goes back to the job description with *come le dicevo* 'as I told you', after the topic closure marker *d'accordo* 'ok'.

- (15) L: *ah / quindi / le farebbe anche bene insomma / no?*
 B: *si si*
 L: *ah / d'accordo / ehm // &eh appunto come le dicevo stiamo cercando questa persona perché venga con noi al mare con i bambini ee vorremmo andare nella zona di Malaga [più o meno]* (3SG5, 65–67)
- L: *'ah/ so / it would be good for you then / no?*
 B: *yes yes*
 L: *ah / ok / ehm // &eh precisely as I told you we are looking for someone to come with us to the sea with the children and we would like to go to the area of Malaga [more or less]'*
- (16) Lu: *[guardi / da noi] / innanzitutto si tratta di di questo periodo di vacanze / poi non lo sappiamo come organizzeremo la la cosa però chiaramente / se dovremo ricorrere a una persona e con lei ci troveremo bene / magari / il nostro rapporto /potrà continuare però // tornando↑ / aa→ // alle vacanze / no? / le dico noi noi andremo↑ / ooo / nella Costa del Sol / &eh§*
 (NAT4, 61)
- Lu: *'[look / with us] / first of all it is for the holiday season / so we don't know how we will organise things but clearly / if we need someone and we are happy with you / maybe / our relationship can continue but // going / baack to // to the holidays / ok? / I tell you we we will go / eeither / to the Costa del Sol / &eh§'*

While this function is almost absent in the beginner and intermediate levels, we have 24 tokens of such DMs in the advanced level, although the only DM consistently used for this function is *però* 'but', which is never used in this way by NS. More interesting is the learners' increasing awareness of textual mechanisms to signal the return to a prior topic. In (17), the topic of buying a present in the sex shop recurs regularly during the conversation.

- (17) E: *no / però qualcosa dobbiamo trovare perché / allora / praticamente / avevamo pensato / lui c'ha questo zaino che porta sempre in giro con- con- con lui però è un poo' / vecchiao↓ / °(che fa un po' cagare)° / e quindi / avevamo pensato comprare / uno zaino così / carino come parte del regalo // poi c'era l'altra Elena che diceva di andare al sex shop / ee comprare qualcosa di divertente (2") [(())]*
 [...]
- P: *cinque persone→ / °(be' / qualcosa si può fare)° non è chee / e poi che questo del sex shop es un poo' buffo perché↑ / poi compri sempre le stesse cose→*
 [...]
- E: *si / (3") e poi questa cosa del sec- del sex shop lo facciamo pure↑ / si / dai*

(5VA1, 14, 57, 94)

- E: 'no / but we must find something because / well / practically / we had thought / he has this backpack that he always carries with-with-with him but it is a bit / old / °(it stinks)° / and then / we had thought / a backpack soo / pretty as a part of the present / besides there was Elena proposing to go to the sex shop / aand buy some funny stuff (2")
[...]
- P: five people / °(well / we might do something)° / and then this sex shop stuff is a bit weird because / you always buy the same stuff after all
[...]
- E: yes / (3") an then this sec- sex shop stuff we do it too / yes / come on'

This is one of the discourse functions where the difference between NNS and NS does not consist of a smaller variety and quantity of DMs in the interlanguage, but rather of a higher quantity and a certain abuse, i.e. learners attribute to markers discourse functions that they do not typically have in L1 Italian. This is the case of *dunque*, *e poi*, *effettivamente*, *niente* and *però* to which advanced learners attribute the function of picking up the thread of discourse after a digression.

The quantitative results for topic recovery DMs (Table 5) indicate that this function is much more frequent in advanced learners than in NS. However, the small number of tokens makes it difficult to identify a single DM having this

Table 5. DMs used for topic recovery

	BEGINNER	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED	NATIVE	TOTAL
Topic recovery					
<i>allora</i>	1	2	2	3	8
<i>comunque</i>				2	2
<i>dunque</i>			1		1
<i>e</i>		1	2	1	4
<i>e poi</i>			2		2
<i>e quindi</i>			1		1
<i>effettivamente</i>			1		1
<i>le dico</i>				1	1
<i>ma</i>		1	2	1	4
<i>niente</i>			2		2
<i>no</i>			2	1	3
<i>però</i>			11		11
Total	1	4	24	9	38

function (except maybe *però* 'but'). The small number of DMs with this function can be explained, as noted above, by the strict linear development of the interactions, which presents little opportunity to go back to previous topics, or at least speakers' focus on moving forward with the conversation than on developing old topics.

5.1.5 Summarising

The final topic management strategy is the summarising function. When speakers consider that they have reached an agreement about some issue or provided enough information about it, they may be willing to summarise the information presented previously. This strategy reflects good management of discourse information and requires appropriate linguistic competence. There is a considerable gap between NNS and NS in the use of DMs for this function (Table 6).

Table 6. DMs used for topic summary

Summary	BEGINNER	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED	NATIVE	TOTAL
<i>allora</i>			2		2
<i>bueno</i>	1				1
<i>cioè</i>		1			1
<i>dunque</i>			1		1
<i>in fin dei conti</i>				3	3
<i>insomma</i>				38	38
<i>ok</i>	1	2			3
<i>poi</i>				1	1
<i>quindi</i>			1		1
<i>va bene</i>	1				1
Total	3	3	4	42	52

However, it must be noted that 38 out of 42 NS tokens are of the DM *insomma* 'to sum up', which was used by only two of our four NS, and was particularly frequent in the turns of one speaker specifically (33 tokens). Learners cannot identify the right DM to mark this function which is, consequently, rarely present in their discourse. Thus, they have recourse to other DMs (typically markers of topic closure or end of interaction) and even to code-switching (e.g. beginner-level *bueno*). We can therefore say that this function is not very frequent in the corpus, except in the turns of a single NS, and is therefore likely to be an idiosyncratic phenomenon.

6. Discussion

The data support the claim that DMs appear very early in L2 acquisition. This is especially the case when NNS are native speakers of an L1 closely related to the target language such as Spanish and Italian. Previous studies which have compared Italian DMs' acquisitional processes in different groups of NNS (e.g. Nigoević & Sučić (2011) for Croatian learners of L2 Italian; Manili (2001) and particularly Jafrancesco (2015) for Spanish and German native speakers of L2 Italian) have shown that DMs are much more frequent in NNS having a Romance language as L1 (and this directly correlates with a higher number of turns in conversation).

Although DMs with metadiscourse functions are not as frequent as DMs with interactional/interpersonal functions (cf. Guil, 2015; Jafrancesco, 2015; Manili, 2001; Nigoević & Sučić, 2011; Pascual Escagedo, 2015), DMs signalling topic-shift form a consistent group in L2 Italian learners' corpora. With few exceptions, we can say that not only the number of tokens increases along the acquisitional path, but also the variety of DMs employed by the learners (cf. Jafrancesco, 2015: 25–27). However, the current data confirm the more general hypothesis that learners overuse some discourse markers while underusing others, compared to NS. There is a variety of hypotheses about the cause of this asymmetry in use, from lack of exposure to oral input, to transfer problems from the learners' L1, to difficulties in comprehending the semantics of the connectives (Zufferey, Mak, Degand, & Sanders, 2015).

In our study of the acquisition of DMs by Spanish learners of Italian we have focused on the functions (an onomasiological approach) instead of on single lexical elements (a semasiological approach), in order to identify the communicative strategies that have already been acquired at different levels, and to assess to what extent these strategies are accomplished through DMs. Moreover, the onomasiological approach allows us to adopt a different perspective from the usual one in acquisitional studies and in studies on DMs in general. It stems from the belief that “a sound comparison between native and non-native discourse marker use has to be carried out at the level of individual functions and not just of the discourse markers in general” (Müller, 2006: 242). Instead of focusing on the single lexical items, their presence and functions in learner varieties, the focus here is on which discourse functions are carried out by learners, what strategies they resort to in each case (prosodic cues, vowel lengthenings, pauses), when they use DMs and which ones they use for which functions.

Moreover, the onomasiological approach offers a clearer picture of the different stages in the acquisitional process as far as the presence of DMs is concerned, but also highlights the development of certain discourse functions. DMs do not have a homogenous distribution in the different functions in the L1, and this should be a

starting point to assess the progress in language acquisition (other factors such as situation, text type, and discourse genre should also be taken into account). Thus, it would be easier to contrast not only L1 and L2, or different learner varieties, but also differences in the use of DMs across languages, which could prove to be a useful tool for translation purposes. Finally, this perspective conceives of DMs as one of many discourse strategies (linguistic resources such as NP and whole utterances, but also prosodic cues and other paralinguistic phenomena, mimics, kinesics) and makes possible a global understanding of the complexity of interlanguage and of its dynamic evolution, which is not limited to an increase of lexical elements and morphosyntactic constructions.

Our analysis clearly shows that DMs are rarely employed to mark topic recovery or a digression, and that in these cases NS and NNS tend to resort to other strategies. However, functions such as topic introduction rely heavily on DMs, which become the preferred discourse strategy (a result consistent with Jafrancesco, 2015: 35). Furthermore, the onomasiological approach allows us to better compare L1 and L2, revealing which functions are expressed primarily by DMs in the learner varieties and which are not, which lexical elements fulfill the same functions as in native varieties and which do not. This comparison clarifies that the acquisition of a lexical item does not necessarily imply that NNS are able to use that lexical item in the appropriate functions, and makes it easy to identify divergences from the L1.

Table 7 shows a sharp asymmetry between the various functions analysed, although the corpus was designed to compare NS to NNS at each level of proficiency separately and therefore does not allow a global comparison between total

Table 7. Metadiscourse functions of topic management and DM tokens

	BEGINNER (4)	INTERMEDIATE (4)	ADVANCED (4)	NNS (12)	NS (4)
Topic introduction / shift	85 17%	91 18.2%	115 23%	291 58.2%	209 41.8%
Topic closure	14 17.3%	10 12.3%	8 9.8%	32 39.5%	49 60.5%
Digression				0	2 100%
Topic recovery	1 2.6%	4 10.5%	24 63.1%	29 76.3%	9 23.7%
Summary	3 5.8%	3 5.8%	4 7.8%	10 19.2%	42 80.8%

numbers of NNS and NS. However, we can determine that DMs in L1 Italian are used mainly for topic-shift and introduction, are less frequent in topic closure and summary, and rarely used for other functions such as digression. More interesting is the case of topic recovery after a digression, which is explicitly marked by advanced learners with various DMs (mainly *però* 'but'), while NS resort to DMs much less frequently (and never use *però* 'but' for this function). This is a clear example of metadiscourse functions that, although performed by learners, are clearly different from NS production; first, because learners lack the appropriate DM and resort to a DM which is never found in NS varieties, and second, because NS tend to prefer other strategies to perform this function. This difference can be interpreted as a case of pragmatic fossilisation, if we define this concept as a phenomenon in which "a non-native speaker systematically uses certain forms inappropriately at the pragmatic level of communication" (Romero Trillo, 2002: 770).

Turning our attention to the acquisitional path, we observe that the expected acquisitional path (Jafrancesco, 2015: 11) is found only in the case of markers of topic introduction and shift. Here, the number of DMs increases from one level to the next (85 for beginners, 91 in the intermediate level, and 115 for the advanced), although the total number of DMs with these functions in NNS is still much smaller than the total number found in NS speech (209). Yet, there is a clear difference in the acquisitional process of the various DMs employed by the learners. Whereas initial *e* 'and' is very frequent at all levels, including beginners, the acquisitional path is clearer in combinations of *e* + temporal adverb (*e poi, e allora* 'and then') or a conclusive connective (*e quindi, e dunque* 'and therefore'), the latter only making a notable appearance in advanced learners. In contrast, DMs used very frequently for topic introduction in NS speech (such as *per quanto riguarda* 'as far as x is concerned' and *ti dico / ti spiego* 'I tell you / I explain to you') are almost completely absent in NNS, and mark the limits of acquisition by Spanish learners. Note that formal dissimilarity with L1 does not seem to play a role here, as the Spanish equivalent *en cuanto a* is formally not very far from the Italian marker *per quanto riguarda*, and there are also similar grammaticalised forms of Spanish *te cuento / te comento* 'I tell you' used as DM.

In the other metadiscourse functions analysed, we find two possibilities:

- a. cases of unachieved acquisition, evident in the use of DMs for topic closure and summary. The number of tokens with this function is very low in our corpus, and there are only slight differences between the levels (hardly any difference between the levels in summarising and, surprisingly, decreasing numbers in topic closure: 14 occurrences for beginners but only 8 at the advanced level). However, these functions are expressed through DMs with relative frequency by NS (49 and 42 tokens, for topic closure and summary respectively).

NS prefer *ok* (18 tokens), *d'accordo* (12) and *allora* (10) to mark topic closure, whereas in NNS data, no marker appears to be consistently employed in this function. As for summarising, *insomma* 'to sum up' is the preferred options for NS, whereas learners inconsistently use a variety of DMs which are not found in L1 Italian.

- b. one case of overuse or incorrect extension of the DM to mark a function which is not normally marked this way in L1 Italian. This is the already mentioned case of *però* 'but' as a marker of topic recovery. Note that at the beginner and intermediate levels, there are almost no DMs with this function (one and four tokens, respectively), but there is a significant increase in tokens at the advanced level due to overuse, although the number of types and tokens of DMs with this function is very low (nine tokens in the whole corpus).

These facts are still hard to explain, and they contradict the general expectation, but we must not forget that learners' idiosyncrasies are an important and disruptive aspect when analysing learner varieties, especially in relatively small interlanguage corpora.

Another interesting result, which was identified by Manili (2001: 152), is that semantically transparent DMs (*e*, *allora*, *quindi*, *ma*, *però*) are more frequent at the beginner level than other items whose meaning is more difficult to understand (*comunque*, *dunque*), or that contradict linguistic intuition based on simple items (such as *eppure*, which is not the result of *e* and *pure*), or collide with formally similar elements in L1 (*tuttavia*, which has a different meaning to Spanish *todavía*).

Finally, phenomena such as L1- (or other L2-) transfer and code-switching are less frequent in this function than in the interactional function. We have found only one case of code-switching, the Spanish DM *bueno* 'well', which indicates a topic shift (two tokens at the beginner level, and one token at the intermediate level) and summarising (one token at the beginner level). They appear at the lower levels of linguistic proficiency and indicate that functions have been appropriately acquired but that the learner is still lacking enough lexical resources to convey them. This problem seems to be solved at the advanced level.

7. Conclusions

DMs are a good index of pragmatic competence in L2 learners, but the acquisitional path learners follow to master these elements is far from linear. They acquire different lexical items in different phases of the learning process, but they do not employ them with the same functions as NS. Learners may use markers too often, possibly with functions that are not found in L1 speakers, or too little

and sporadically. It therefore becomes very difficult to assess their acquisition. Learners may turn to different communicative strategies (such as explicit utterance, code-switching, or prosody) for discourse functions where NS use a DM. In some cases there is a clear progressive increase in types and tokens of DMs used, while in other cases no significant difference between levels is evident and we face a fossilisation phenomenon.

As for the path of acquisition for topic management functions, we can say that beginners use DMs mainly to signal the introduction of a topic or subtopic (and therefore a deviation from a previous topic), a function fulfilled almost exclusively by the DM *e* 'and'. This is the only function which is systematically expressed through a DM at this level. Numbers are much lower for topic closure, where the only DM with a significant number of occurrences is *d'accordo* 'I agree', which is an idiosyncratic production. Almost no DMs were used to signal functions such as digression, topic recovery, and summarising.

At the intermediate level, the use of DMs improves slightly: *e* continues to be the most used DM to mark the introduction of a topic, but other DMs (such as *ma* 'but') appear more frequently in this function. No significant differences are noted with regard to the use of DMs in the other four functions, which are only sporadically marked by DMs. The situation changes at the advanced level, where we observe an increase of DMs in quantity and variety. The introduction of a new topic continues to be the prevailing function in our corpus, but at this level *e* marks only half of the cases, and other DMs (such as *e poi* 'and then' and *no*) are systematically employed, as learners move closer to the NS use. A remarkable phenomenon is the overuse of *però* 'but' as marker of topic recovery, a function rarely signalled by DMs in NS speech. There are no changes to the remaining three functions.

To conclude, marking the introduction of a new topic or subtopic is the first consolidated topic management function in the Italian interlanguage of Spanish learners; topic recovery is systematically marked by DMs only at the advanced level, differing from NS use. However, we must bear in mind that two of these functions (digression and topic recovery) are not explicitly marked in the NS speech by a DM, leading to an interesting discussion with regard to the choice of strategy to signal discourse functions, which are prone to be marked through DMs and for which the speaker resorts to other linguistic and paralinguistic means.

Acknowledgements

This research was developed within the frame of the project "Information structure and discourse markers in developing spoken competence in L2 Spanish and Italian" (FFI2011-24960)

financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness and coordinated by the author. I would like to thank some of the members of the A.Ma.Dis. research group at the Complutense University of Madrid; Paloma Pernas and Eugenio Gillani for their help in collecting the data for this investigation and for their comments on a previous version of the paper; and Marianna Di Stefano for creating the database, which has been a very useful tool for this study. I also appreciate the insightful comments of three anonymous reviewers.

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Resumé

Cet article explore la façon dont les locuteurs natifs (LN) et les locuteurs non-natifs (LNN) de l'italien gèrent l'organisation des thèmes (topics) dans l'interaction orale (changement de thème, clôture d'un thème, digression, reprise d'un thème et résumé). Notre recherche se concentre sur les marqueurs du discours (MD) qui sont employés lorsque les locuteurs tentent d'organiser les thèmes de leur discours et sur les différences entre les LN et les LNN dans l'accomplissement de ces fonctions métadiscursives. L'analyse est basée sur les données d'un corpus oral construit pour étudier les stratégies conversationnelles des apprenants espagnols de l'italien langue seconde et permet de conclure que l'acquisition des fonctions métadiscursives évolue à des rythmes différents selon le type de fonction: alors que les apprenants ont une bonne compétence pragmatique dans l'emploi des MD pour introduire de nouveaux thèmes dans la conversation, ils éprouvent des difficultés avec d'autres fonctions telles que la clôture ou le résumé d'un thème. Par ailleurs, la fonction de reprise d'un thème suite à une digression est marquée explicitement par les LNN à travers des MD absents chez les LN.