

The Department of French and Italian is pleased to present
A PhD dissertation defense

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Monday, August 3, 2020

1:00 pm – via Zoom

Discourse Markers in Second-Language French

Abstract:

This dissertation examines the acquisition of discourse markers by foreign language learners of French. Discourse markers are those little words such as “donc” and “alors” (both sometimes translated as “well” or “so” depending on the context) that are highly frequent in speech and contribute to discourse cohesion. Native speakers of French employ them extensively, and without them, learner discourse can seem stilted, unnatural or be difficult to follow. Despite their importance, they are largely ignored in the foreign language classroom and are generally presumed to be nearly un-acquirable without extensive immersion experience. And even with advanced language proficiency and extensive immersion experience, prior research has largely concluded that learners cannot or do not employ discourse markers like native speakers. With this in mind, I examine this presumed limitation of learners at three different proficiency levels. Thirty-eight learners and twelve native speakers participated in an unstructured interview and completed three tasks: a narrative film retell, a film discussion and role-play scenarios. Learner and native speaker speech was analyzed to identify every discourse marker used. Discourse markers were coded for frequency, variety and the range of functions expressed. Results indicate that the frequency and variety of discourse markers produced does increase with proficiency. Learners at each proficiency level rely on a core group of discourse markers that increases with their proficiency. And as the variety of discourse markers available to learners expands, there are shifts in the functions that different discourse markers can express. Ultimately, learner use of discourse markers is much more varied and nuanced than suggested in prior research on French and does not simply represent a failure to acquire a critical feature of spoken French.

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