

Pragmatic Functions of Discourse Particles in Lutsotso conversations

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Abstract

The study of the functions of discourse particles in the African languages has received much attention from various scholars, although not from a pragmatic perspective. A good understanding of the pragmatic functions of discourse particles in African languages can benefit language users. However, limited knowledge in this field has affected communication of ideas more clearly and concisely. This paper explores the pragmatic functions of these discourse particles in Lutsotso conversations within the Relevance Theory (RT) structure by Sperber & Wilson (1986). A combined method of native speakers' intuition and data extraction from Lutsotso conversations were used to collect data. After that, a descriptive research design was used to analyze the collected data. The findings revealed that in Lutsotso conversations, discourse particles play the following pragmatic functions depending on the context: cutting in politely, initiating a new topic, highlighting of a hypothesis that immediately follows, capturing the attention of the listeners, holding the flow and keeping one's turn, and disagreeing politely.

Keywords: *Discourse particles; Context; Conversation; Lutsotso*

INTRODUCTION

Discourse particles (DPs) have continued to generate controversial debates among linguistic scholars. Thus, there is growing interest on how speakers use these DPs and what discursive functions they carry (Schourup, [1999](#); Alami, 2015). This is because, although they do not have any semantic value in the conversation, they serve a practical function in discourse (Fraser, [1996](#); Hansen, [1997](#)). These words are essentially fillers, which is why they are more common in informal conversations, which tend to be spontaneous, although they serve various functions. This means that the meaning cannot be affected with or without their presence. These DPs are present and important in both monologue and dialogue situations. Makuto (2014) notes that conversations have elements of DPs which are not premeditated, and that they are no longer needed or useful and the feedback given while someone else is talking shows interest, attention and willingness to keep listening. To him, the best way to define discourse particles is by looking at the characteristics such as optionality. As observed by Erpert (2024), since their main function is at the level of discourse (sequence of utterances) rather than at the level utterances or sentences, DPs are relatively independent and usually do not change the truth-conditional meaning of the sentence (Schourup, [1999](#)).

The present study focuses on the functions of DPs in Lutsotso. According to Eberhard *et al.*, (2020), Lutsotso is a dialect of the Oluluhya which belongs to the Niger Congo family, Bantu. It is spoken by the Batsotso people who live in Kakamega County. The area inhabited by the Batsotso is divided into five; Butsootso North, Butsootso South, Butsootso East, Butsootso West and Butsootso Central. According to Marlo (2011), Luhya is made up of nineteen dialects which include Lubukusu, Lukhayo, Lumarachi, Lusamia, Lunyala-B, Lutura, Luloogoli, Lutirichi, Lunyore, Lwisukha, Lwitakho, Luwanga, Lumarama, Lutsotso, Lunyala-K, Lukabarasi, Lusonga, Lukisa and Lutachoni. Several studies done on Luhya languages have explored different description and analysis of processes of different Luhya varieties

such as the morphophonological processes (Ebarb & Marlo, 2015), semantic mismatches, (Mudogo, 2017) conceptual mappings (Sasala, et al., 2024) among other linguistic properties.

DPs often serve syntactic roles that vary significantly within the Luhya macro-languages. For instance, in some languages, DPs may function as markers of focus, while in others, they may indicate a shifting topic or introduce new information (cf. Diercks, 2022). The syntactic positioning of DPs can also differ in some languages, allowing more flexible placement within a sentence. This variability can lead to different interpretations of sentences, highlighting how DPs contribute to semantic meaning. For instance, in Lubukusu, certain DPs are used to signal affirmation or agreement while others may convey hesitation or uncertainty (Maloba, 2012). This variability underscores the importance of examining DPs, in Lutsotso, within their pragmatic context to fully appreciate their communicative functions.

Discourse Particles and their Pragmatic Functions

Diewald (2011) suggests that DPs derive morphologically from other word classes, most often from content words. For instance, the discourse particle “well” derives from the adverb ‘well’ and the particle ‘like’ derives from the adjective or conjunction form of “like”. DPs have almost all their original meaning as content words; thus, they are semantically empty, and their meaning or function is understood by conventionalized implicature. It is also very imperative that we get a clearer view on the specific properties of discourse particles. First, they exhibit optionality, in the sense that their removal does not alter or change the grammaticality of its host utterance (Makuto, 2009). Second, they show orality. This implies that discourse particles occur primarily in spoken discourse (Makuto, 2014). They are often contrasted with interjections, conjunctions and certain subclass of adverbs. In order to do that well, we have to look at other categories of particles which include: Focus particles that include, *like*, found in English language (Rashid-Bachi & Alhassan, 2022). They integrate the utterance into the interjections in the

communication process. This paper focuses on the pragmatic functions of DPs in Lutsotso and how they are responsible for effective communication during conversation.

RESEARCH METHODS

We collected data from various conversations, out of which 33 discourse particles were extracted. Systematic sampling technique was used to sample 10 discourse particles for analysis. This was in line with Mudogo (2017) and Barasa (2024), who stated that a minimum sample of 30% of the study population is considered effective in generalizing the population of the linguistic elements of the investigation.

The sampled DPs represent a broad spectrum of functions, such as signaling affirmation, hesitation, politeness, or emphasis. The inclusion of DPs that serve various roles provides a comprehensive overview of how DPs contribute to meaning-making in a conversation. This variety allows analysis of the pragmatic implications of these DPs in different contexts. The respondents comprised of 25 native speakers of Lutsotso who were chosen by the snowball sampling method. As argued by Charmaz (2006), samples do not generally need to be greater than 60 participants for selecting qualitatively inclined sample size.

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

In a conversation, the exchange is so defined that it produces results. The constitution of the results is determined by the illocutionary (and other) acts, which are realized by the elements of which the exchange is, composed (Edmondson, 1981). A speaker produces a discourse particle being part of the utterance in reference to an addressee (Makuto, 2009). It therefore has an illocutionary force realized in the functions that it serves in the outcome of an exchange.

Schourup (1983) notes that discourse particles have multiple functions and one of them is that it allows the speaker to show his or her mental processes in an appropriate manner this implies that there is room in the tone of a conversation for much private thought. We form overall judgments, plan provisional responses, rank and revise store questions, foresee the need for further conversation and routinely do these things while someone else is talking or while we ourselves hold the turn.

The idea of linking and subdividing of components are covered under the textual function for instance, when one wants to mark the change of topic and unbrokenness and consistency in the communication pattern, the return to topics after diversion the interpersonal function covers the relation between addressor and addressee and the expression of the subjective elements of linguistic communication for example, feelings and attitudes. The pragmatic functions of discourse particles in Lutsotso were categorized on the foundation of the tenets of Relevance Theory, which was developed by Sperber & Wilson (1986), and deals with the cognitive principle in the communication of humans. Sperber & Wilson (2012) asserted that utterances provide manifestations of assumptions that the hearer has so many other possible interpretations therefore, an utterance should be predictable enough for easy interpretation so as to maximize relevance; therefore, the listener should be guided by the speaker towards the meaning that is intended.

The discourse particles are used to make utterances mutually manifest. This is possible as the speakers employ them to guide the listener towards a specific interpretation. The interlocutor therefore utters an utterance possible for another interlocutor to make relevant interpretation so that he or she can receive the intended meaning by the initial interlocutor.

As noted by Sperber & Wilson (1986), an input which could be either processed data or an idea or a thought, can be relevant when the listener generates greater cognitive effects and uses minimal processing effort to process the input

and when this takes place, there is always an increase in the relevance. Communication signal which provides positive cognitive effects by the listener can be perceived for it to be relevant. Signals that are veiled receive minimal cognitive effects, thus making it hard to attain relevance.

From the collected data, we identified and described the following functions of discourse particles in Lutsotso;

Cutting in politely

The data collected clearly reveal that the discourse particles were employed to cut in politely. The impoliteness which could occur without these particles during any conversation was avoided. The speaker feels respected when interrupted by the listener, and this could be possible if and only if the interrupter does it by the use of relevant discourse particles. The tone changes during the production of these particles whereby the tone falls. Look at the examples given below to see how they were used.

Instance 1 (Circumstance: Conversation revolves around the culture of wearing of trousers by boys and girls)

Speaker C: *Khwisie endolanga endi shichila emibiri chiabakhana shichikasiring mutsilong'i ta lakini chiabasiani chikasanga ...'*

'To me, I think that the bodies of girls are not meant for trousers but for boys they are'

Speaker B: **Haya**, *lirebo liakhabiri libere mbu, abandu shibalalamikanga nibalola omwana omusiani nafwalile ilong'i lakini nali omwana omukhana balalamikanga sana shichila shi? Shikabetsanga...*

'**Okay**, the second question is that, how come people do not complain when they see a boy putting on a trouser but they do when a female child does? It is not...'

Speaker B: **Kachila lenga**, *nekaba mbu Mulongo anyala yetsa ingo saa sita tsieshiro nawe witse saa mbili mupaka obole worula; nobulayi kweli?*

'**Because see**, if a boy puts on a pair of trousers and you also put on a pair of pants and girls owe us explanations, is that right?'

Speaker C: *shikanyalikhana ta*

‘By no means’

Speaker B: *Kho, khubole mbu shinamakhuwa amalayi ta?*

So, should we say that is not good?

In the above conversation, the interlocutor B cuts in to take over the floor even before the initial interlocutor is not yet done explaining how the culture is unjust to the female gender in comparison to the male gender when it comes to the idea of putting on trousers. Interlocutor B has used the particle *haya (okay)* to cut in politely so as to ask a question concerning the idea of wearing trousers by both genders. The discourse particle *kachila lenga (because see)* has been used by interlocutor B to cut in politely proceeds to discuss on the subject by adding that if a male child puts on a trouser nothing bad happens to him but if a female child does the same, she is rebuked and even beaten thoroughly. The interlocutor C fails to feel disrespected by interlocutor B because he has used the discourse particle *kachila lenga (because see)* to start off the turn. The discourse particle used has plays the role of easing the utterance so that the interlocutor C does not seem as she is impolite. Fukada. & Asato (2004) note that few people appreciate being interrupted. It can be viewed as rude, signaling that what they are saying is unimportant. While talking over people when they are speaking should be avoided, but sometimes it is important. For example, Anindya, (2014) claimed that you may have something important to say that cannot wait, you may need to gain understanding or clarification, or you could have to correct faulty information on a critical matter. Makuto (2009) comments that other reasons include need to provide timely input, getting a meeting or conversation back on track, or cutting off a long-winded talker.

There is nothing as beautiful as politeness in our communities even though it manifests differently across all cultures. What we need to understand is that politeness is a universal. This means that the practical application of good manners or etiquette is in all societies and it is demonstrated differently. Each and every

society has its own unique way of showing it. Cutting, (2002), observes that cutting in politely is done for a particular or specific purpose to strengthen the bond between the interlocutors to avoid misunderstanding that can arise during a conversation. In addition to that, one should always remember that politeness is indicated by shunning away from impolite cutting in and it appears to prevent misunderstandings between diverse cultures. According to Brown, (2015), politeness helps greatly in the regulation of one's emotions. This means that there should be an ability to respond to the demands of experience with the range of emotions, which should be in line with the social norms. The use of etiquette in communication is made possible by using discourse particles to avoid conflicts between the speaker and the auditor. According to Leech (1973), the method used to do away with animosity is by the use of these particles and they enhance a good relationship between the interlocutors. This implies that politeness can help the language users to manage and solve conflicts in a better way or manner as illustrated in instance 1 above.

In the discourse particle *kho* 'so' in the conversation above, the interlocutor B provides the interlocutor C with context that favouring one gender over the other is not good at all. From the context, the listener is able to conclude that the listener, the female gender is neglected and not given their freedom like their counterparts. *Kho* "so", therefore, encodes a pragmatic meaning.

New Topic initiation

During any conversation, topics keep shifting, which is made possible by using discourse particles. These topics touch various aspects of life. For instance, during a conversation, speakers may be talking about marriage and suddenly shift to politics. Observe the conversation given below:

Instance 2, (Circumstance: changing of the topic from the rottenness of the world to anticipated drought and then overprotection of the female gender at the expense of the male gender by the societies)

Speaker A: *Kata eshialo shiabola toto?*

‘Even the world is rotten surely?’

Speaker B: *Tsinyanga tsino eshialo shiakalukhana. Shishiri shinga tsinanga tsiefu ta.*

‘Nowadays the world has changed. It is not like our days.’

Speaker A: ***Haya**, nomanyile mbu ishimiyu shitsanga?*

‘**Okay**, are you aware of the coming drought?’

Speaker C: *serikali kekhangang iyabe amayabo amanji.*

‘The government should dig more wells’

Speaker A: ***Bulano sasa**, endolanga endi abana abasiani balekhwa sana.*

‘**Now**, I think boys have left completely’

Speaker B: *Kho kenyekhananga mbu yetsulilwe?*

‘So, he is supposed to be remembered?’

Speaker A: *Kachila nolalinda omwana omusiani ta, yetsa okhukora.*

‘Because if you will not take care of a male child, he will get lost’

There is good evidence of the shifting from one topic to another by the use of discourse particles in the conversation shown above.

Instance 2 above shows the discourse particle (DP) ***bulano sasa (now)*** uttered by the first speaker (A), to mark the introduction of a new topic, concerning the overprotection of girls at the expense of boys. Initially the topic was about the drought that was being predicted and how to provide remedy.

Looking keenly at the conversation that took place between the interlocutors in Lutsotso above, one will also realize that the new topic has been initiated by the use of discourse particle ***haya (okay)***. As we all know, discourse particles can

occupy different positions in an utterance depending on the specific functions they are playing. The particle *haya (okay)* has occupied the initial position to signal or mark speaker A's initiation of the new topic. They have been talking about the rottenness of the world, and then decide to introduce a new topic of drought in our country and how to handle it and then move to neglect of the male gender and its negative effects. Before a talk is initiated or begun, it is preceded by relevant discourse particles.

Highlight of a hypothesis that immediately follows

Discourse particles in Lutsotso conversations provide propositions to the listeners concerning the expected utterance. They can be used to point to the immediate utterance that has yet to be spoken. This means that they can be used to refer to back to what has already been stated. The listener's active participation can be quickly drawn in the conversation as it captures the attentiveness in preparation of what will come immediately in this manner.

Consider the following conversation below.

Instance 3 (Circumstance: It is at the chief baraza where a chief and locals are discussing on how to reduce theft cases in the community)

Speaker A: *Sasa khulakhola khurie khupungusie obwifi?*

'Now what can we do to reduce theft cases?'

Speaker B: *Abana abashiri ababukha bechesibwe okhuruka tsingokho nende tsimbusi tsiamabere* 'Children still young to be taught how to keep chickens and goats for milk.'

Speaker A: *Balamanya akhubilinda obulayi?*

'Will they keep them well?'

Speaker C: *Khubechesie okhubilinda mumera indayi.*

'We teach them to take care of them.'

Speaker B: *Otushe okhumanya mbu abebusi kenyekha babechesie nibashiri abatiti.*

'You know parents ought to teach them while they still young'

In the conversation above, interlocutor B employs the discourse particle *otushe okhumanya mbu* (**you need to know that**). The particle is uttered with a raised tone and then preceded by a brief stop. Before then, an interlocutor was giving his views concerning the reduction of theft cases in the community. He then uses the particle *otushe okhumanya mbu* (**you need to know**) before his clear introduction of a talk about what must be done to deal with the problem at hand. The particle provides a clue on what to envision in the utterance since the interlocutor had been discussing about keeping chickens and goats.

Looking keenly at the chat given above, interlocutor B while discussing about female children, he uses the discourse particle *otushe okumanya mbu* (**you need to know that**) which precedes the uttered talk about those people who work well because they are quite aware of the available finances after they have offered their services. The particle draws a special attention to a hypothesis with reference to as the reason behind the passion shown by the workers when it comes to working and the theory is that the reason could be available financial motivation.

Capturing the Auditor's Attentiveness

The data collected from the field showed that discourse particles capture the listeners' attention. From the field, it was revealed that before a speaker starts talking; he or she has to ensure that his or her listener is attentive for the message to be passed across.

Getting an auditor's full attention during any conversation is necessary, though it does not happen automatically. From the data collected from the field, it was clear

that these discourse particles used to get the attention of the hearer create good rapport between the speakers during their talk. Consider the conversation below:

Instance 4 (Circumstance: the issue of equality between male and female is under discussion)

Interlocutor P: *Khokali mbu omundu omusatsa niye wimoni ndafu?*

‘So, is it that men are superior?’

Interlocutor Q: ***Ololanga**, kata niwitsa khumikunda, abandu bakhasi shibanyolanga ta.*

‘**You are seeing**, the same thing applies even to land ownership’

Interlocutor R: *Mba likhuwa lienelo liali mukatiba yabandu bakana kalinji kari omusatsa ouli nende abakhana bonyene shianyala okhubakabira omulimi ta? Lenga, omusatsa niyebule abakhana bonyene oulilanga mbu kata fulani shiyebula ta.*

‘It was obvious in the rejected constitution that daughters could not inherit land from

their fathers and a man who had no sons was seen as barren’

Interlocutor P: ***Lenga**, balolanga bari abasiani nibo abana ne abakhana ta.*

‘**Look**, they only regard boys as children and not girls at all’

The interlocutor Q used the discourse particle *ololanga* (you are seeing) before the major utterance. As the conversation was going on, it was observed that when the particle was put into use, the auditor or the hearer compelled to pay his attention to what was about to be passed across by the speaker. Apart from the named discourse particle above, ***lenga* (see) played the same role in** getting the hearer's attention very well. We need to note that that particle is found at the initial position of a talk. This shows the significance of the query, which is why the interlocutor decides to begin with a discourse particle before presenting that question.

Kato (2000), argue that concentration of awareness on some phenomenon to the exclusion of other stimuli is very crucial in achieving communicative goal in any

conversation. This implies that one has to focus on the discussing taking place instead of losing his or her attentiveness to other irrelevant things around the environment. Discourse particles in Lutsotso help in following the right steps of focusing on the discreteness of unprocessed data, which can be personal or social. The taking possession by the mind, in a clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought is what gives us attention, and it is made possible by the use of discourse particles.

Holding the floor and keeping one's turn

Cutting (2002) argued that holding the floor is a situation in which a participant is speaking in a discourse while the other participants wait for him to finish what he or she has to say. The other person is holding the floor. Whenever two or more people are conversing, there is always a tendency of one of them trying to interrupt in order to give their opinions. Looking closely at the conversation that is taking place below, you will realize that one holds the floor and keeps the turn by using discourse particles. The one talking can decide to continue holding the floor and keep his or her turn despite many attempts from the other listener to interrupt. Let us look at the instances when such can happen:

Instance 5 (Circumstance: the traditional sports and games are under discussion at the market place)

Interlocutor M: *Ne emibayo nachio chialinji chirie?*

‘How were sports and games?’

Interlocutor N: *Abana abasiani nabakhana balapimana tsingufu. bulano mulachesiana musaa*

ne bulano muchesiane tsingufu bulano abakhana nabasiani bulano

mulachesiananga

tsingufu kho abasiani...

‘Children used to play according to their gender whereby boys used to do wrestling **and now** they could compete amongst themselves to see who won’

Interlocutor M: *Abakhana banyala okhupa abasiani hasi?*

‘Did the female gender outwit the male one?’

In the conversation above, interlocutor N is giving his contribution in relation to sports and games in the communities and without hesitation, interlocutor M at the same times wants to pose a question as a way of contributing but interlocutor N holds the floor and keeps her turn by using the discourse particle ***ne bulano*** (**and now**). Interlocutor M is hindered from giving her contribution. In the meantime, she continues to discuss on how the female gender used to outsmart the opposite gender. It is evident that even before she is done with turn, interlocutor M grabs her turn and inquires whether girls could outwit boys.

Polite Disagreement

Song (2016) states that no conversation can start and end without disagreeing with one another. The interlocutors hold different views and opinions concerning ideas or matter. To be able to disagree politely without hurting each other’s feelings, they must employ discourse particles appropriately. Disagreeing politely enhances good rapport between the language users. Communication is made effective and efficient when these particles are correctly used in conversations. Cook (1983) observed that the discourse particles enhance cooperation between the first and the second interlocutors and remedy the challenge of appearing unfriendly.

Looking at the data given below, one will realize that interlocutor A is inquiring from B concerning getting married to those husbands who drink and B responds to the inquiry. Before she gives her piece of mind, she begins by the particle ***bulano*** (**at the moment**) to begin giving explanation contrary to interlocutor A. she does this to politely disagree.

Instance 6 (The circumstance: It is at the baraza and people are discussing about causes of family wrangles)

Interlocutor A: *Nee abasatsa nabo? kama okhuba nende omusatsa unywetsanga?*

‘And husbands? As in getting married to drinking husbands?’

Interlocutor B: *Bulano otushe okhumanya efwe shikhunyala okhumanya halala nabasatsa*

shiabenabo tawe.

‘Now you have to be aware that we cannot stay with such kind of husbands’

Interlocutor A: *Kata kakhaba bahana ikhwe.*

‘Even if they paid dowry’

Interlocutor B: *Nobulayi, khulamenya nebutswa omanyane obulwani shibuwetsanga ta.*

‘Good, we will stay with them but you know wrangles never end’

The excerpt above shows how the discourse particles *bulano otushe okhumanya mbu* (now you have to be aware of **that**) come before the utterances that show disagreement in a polite way. The occurrence of these particles before these utterances softens the utterances that disagree. The presence of these particles show that the two communicators hold different views about the drinking husbands and their wives.

The speaker uses the DP to enable the listener in deriving contextual implications. The listener should be aware that the wrangles never end. The initial interlocutor communicates to the second interlocutor about the wrangles using the particle, *bulano otushe okhumanya mbu* ‘now you have to be aware that’. The speaker therefore minimizes misinterpretations of the wrangles. In instance 6 above, the discourse particle appears at the beginning of the utterance to communicate the hearer that he or she should know what the interlocutor has in the mind.

A discourse particle can be employed to shorten the psychological distance between the interlocutors. The relationship between the two segments of the

discourse is implicit when a discourse connective is overlooked, and therefore, the processing effort the listener uses to interpret is not the same as when the discourse particles is used as a connector (Liu, 2016). The discourse particle mentioned above in this case means that there is a shared knowledge between the interlocutors, creating a shared context that reduces the psychological distance between them.

Example 7 (Situation: The informants are arguing about affordable housing levy)

Speaker A: *Halafu nditsa okhumentakho mbu ebindu bya housing levy shibilikho ebilayi tawe.*

‘And then I can add that things of housing levy are not good’

Speaker B: *Kho amakhuba ka housing levy karusibweho?*

‘So, the things of housing levy should be removed?’

Speaker C: *Lenga, amakhuba ka housing levy niko kabiyinjia ikanduri yefu*

‘**Look**, housing levy is what destroys our country’

In the instance provided above, it is clearly revealed that interlocutor C disagrees with the other party on the housing levy issue by deploying the discourse particle ***lenga*** (**look**). This appears first then followed an explanation how housing levy affects our country negatively. The auditor does not feel threatened by the speaker because the particles have softened the utterances. In addition to that the interlocutor employs C uses the discourse particles ***yahani bulano*** (**I mean**) which precedes a query on doing away with housing levy. It does not appear impolite due to available particle.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to fill the existing knowledge gaps on Lutsotso pragmatic functions with particular emphasis on discourse particles. The study used a combined method of native speakers’ intuition and data extraction from conversations in Lutsotso. The combination of methods enhanced the contextual validity of findings by ensuring they reflect authentic language practices. Native intuitions helped situate linguistic features within their social and cultural contexts.

Lutsotso discourse particles have pragmatic functions as shown from the presented and analysed data. The positions occupied by these particles determine the pragmatic functions played. There are three positions which can be occupied by these particles which include: the initial, middle and the final. Those at the initial position play key roles such as signalling a new turn in a conversation. The discourse particles that appear at the initial position in utterances are used to indicate that the listener should know something that the speaker has in mind already, and therefore, the speaker does the work of reminding the listener that the utterances they wish to make are vital and relevant. Such particles are employed in signalling the speaker's communicative intention, but they do not contribute to the expressed proposition. Those found at the middle positions play crucial roles such as fillers and those at the final positions functions as topic switching.

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