

# Is *Back to my Point* a Pragmatic Marker? An Inquiry into the Historical Development of some Metatextual Discourse Management Markers in English\*

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## Abstract

Discourse management markers (DMMs) that “signal a meta-comment on the structure of the discourse” (Fraser 2009) are widely attested in historical data. Most discourse management markers (e.g. *and*, *anyway*, *by the way*, *but*, *now*, *then*) meet well-known criteria for pragmatic markers such as multifunctionality, opacity, optionality, (inter)subjectivity, relatively high frequency, and shortness. However, several cited in Fraser (2009), many of them topic-orientation markers, do not (e.g. *back to my original point*, *to return to my previous topic*, *if I might continue*). I propose that an account of the development of DMMs make a distinction between adverbial adjuncts, conjunct adverbials, and pragmatic markers (e.g. Hasselgård 2010). By hypothesis, change may occur along the cline: adverbial adjuncts > conjunct adverbials (> DMMs). This approach accounts for gradual form-meaning shifts and is consistent with a usage perspective on language as a dynamic system grounded in usage events (Kemmer & Barlow 1999; Langacker 2008).

**Keywords:** diachrony; discourse management markers; discourse markers; English; pragmatic markers

**Resum.** *És back to my point un marcadors pragmàtic? Una investigació sobre el desenvolupament històric d'alguns marcadors de gestió del discurs metatextual en anglès*

Els marcadors de gestió del discurs (DMM) que “assenyalen un metacomentari sobre l'estructura del discurs” (Fraser 2009) estan àmpliament provats per les dades històriques. La majoria de marcadors de gestió del discurs (per exemple, *and*, *anyway*, *by the way*, *but*, *now*, *then*) compleixen criteris ben coneguts per als marcadors pragmàtics com la multifuncionalitat, l'opacitat, l'opcionalitat, la (inter)subjectivitat, la freqüència relativament alta i la brevetat. Tanmateix, diversos casos citats a Fraser (2009), molts d'aquests marcadors d'orientació temàtica, no els compleixen (per exemple, *back to my original point*, *to return to my previous topic*, *if I might continue*). Proposo que un acostament al desenvolupament dels DMM faci una distinció entre adverbis adjunts, adverbis conjunts i marcadors pragmàtics (per exemple, Hasselgård 2010). Hipotèticament, el

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canvi pot seguir la tendència: adverbis adjunts > adverbis conjunts (> DMM). Aquest enfocament explica canvis graduals de forma i significat, i és coherent amb una perspectiva d'ús del llenguatge com a sistema dinàmic basat en esdeveniments d'ús (Kemmer & Barlow 1999; Langacker 2008).

**Paraules clau:** diacronia; marcadors de gestió del discurs; marcadors discursius; anglès; marcadors pragmàtics

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## 1. Introduction

“Discourse markers”, also known as “discourse particles” (e.g. Aijmer 2002; Fischer 2006), have been extensively studied in many languages since the 1980s, inspired by the groundbreaking work of Schourup (2016) and especially Schiffrin (1987). Work on English discourse markers (DMs) has been both synchronic (e.g. Fraser 1988, 2006a; Schiffrin 1987; Aijmer 2002) and diachronic (e.g. Brinton 2008, 2017; Traugott 2018). An issue that has been of concern for diachronic work is that historical data are for the most part written and it has been claimed that DMs are characteristic of spoken conversation. While it is true that markers like *ah*, *oh*, *um*, *uh* are found mainly in represented speech such as drama (Culpeper & Kytö 2010), modal adverbs such as *in fact*, *of course* are widely attested in historical texts (Lewis 2000) indexing the Speaker/Writer’s (SP/W’s) assessment of the degree of validity of the upcoming proposition. Even more extensively used in writing is the class of markers with “textual metafunctions” (Halliday 2004: 132). These are used as discourse management markers that “signal a meta-comment on the structure of the discourse” (Fraser 2009: 893), for example, topic-continuation or return to a prior topic.

Central to work on these kinds of markers have been Fraser’s various classifications of pragmatic markers (PMs) (e.g. Fraser 1988, 1996, 2006a). Importantly, he delimited the term “discourse marker” to markers that combine segments of discourse. Among questions that his approach to PMs raises is how far the term PM can usefully be stretched. For example, in Fraser (2009) discourse management markers (DMMs) such as *back to my point*, *to return to the prior topic*, *as I was saying* are considered to be DMMs and therefore PMs, although they are not understood pragmatically, but usually have “a clear tangible meaning” (Fraser 2009: 893-894). Like Fraser, I take PMs to be the umbrella category and distinguish DMs and DMMs as subclasses of PMs. Using two case studies of DMMs cited in Fraser (2009): the development of topic-resumptive *to return to X point* and *back to my point* and of digressive *parenthetically*, *incidentally*, I will argue that analyzing

these as PMs does not adequately account for the structural gradience among the markers, or for their position on the frequently found historical shift from adverbial adjunct > conjunct adverbial > pragmatic marker. This is consistent with work on Catalan “lexical connectives”, which are compositional and syntactic, e.g. *deixin-m'hi afegir* ‘let me add’ (Cuenca 2015).

I assume a usage-based cognitive model of language in which units of language are “dynamic, subject to creative extension and reshaping with use” (Kemmer & Barlow 1999: ix; see also e.g. Goldberg 2006; Langacker 2008; Bybee 2010). In this model, knowledge of language consists of form-meaning pairings. Key components of these pairings are, on the form side: syntactic, morphological and phonological properties, and on the meaning side: semantic, pragmatic and discourse-functional properties, joined by a symbolic link (Croft 2001: 18). While discourse functional properties have often been conceptualized in the cognitive linguistics literature as information structure, e.g. topic and focus (e.g. Langacker 2012) or discourse prominence, other discourse functional units are also key to coherence, production and comprehension. Such units include pragmatic markers that “situate their host unit with respect to the surrounding discourse and with respect to the speaker-hearer relationship” (Waltereit 2006: 64). The present paper is a contribution to analysis of the role of such markers in grammar.

The outline is as follows. In section 2 I characterize the terms used in this paper for expressions such as *back to my point* and *incidentally* and the data sources are specified in section 3. Section 4 briefly presents the two short case studies: *to return to X point* compared with *back to X point* and *parenthetically* compared with *incidentally*. Section 5 concludes.

## 2. Some characterizations

In this section I provide characterizations for terms that will be used in the rest of the paper: adverbial adjuncts, conjunct adverbials, pragmatic markers and subclasses of the latter: discourse markers and discourse management markers. Distinctions among classes of adverbials are well known to be problematic because there is often overlap between them and the classifications are necessarily fuzzy. Like other linguistic classes, adverbial classes are prototypical rather than discrete. Nevertheless, Greenbaum (1969) and Quirk et al. (1985) distinguish “adjuncts”, “disjuncts” and “conjuncts”.<sup>1</sup> Following Hasselgård (2010), who draws on Greenbaum, and Quirk et al., among others, I regard adjunct adverbials as “circumstantial adverbials”, typically referencing time and space and disjunct adverbials as primarily modal (e.g. *clearly*, *after all* in its concessive sense). I understand conjunct adverbials prototypically to “set up contextualising relationships between portions of text and thus to belong to the textual metafunction... (Halliday 2004: 132)” (Hasselgård 2010: 20). There is overlap between the three types of adverbials. Conjunct adverbials may derive historically from adverbial adjuncts (Hasselgård 2010: 302), as

1. Biber et al. (1999) call conjuncts “linking adverbials”, Halliday (2004) calls them “conjunctive adverbials”. For details of terminological differences among authors, see Hasselgård (2010: 22).

illustrated below by *parenthetically*. While the fact that conjunct adverbials are not an integrated part of clause structure does not distinguish them from disjuncts, their semantics does: their “primary function is connective” (Hasselgård 2010: 20). Like many adjuncts, many conjuncts have relatively contentful and monofunctional semantics.

Because in many cases DMMs derive historically from conjunct adverbials, which are themselves derived from adverbial adjuncts, I start with the latter. Note that in some cases the original adverbial adjunct use persists alongside of the later conjunct and DM or DMM uses. Sweetser’s (1990) argument that many conjunctions and modals can be interpreted in three ways is well known. The three interpretations are “real world”, “inferred epistemic” and “speech act” readings. Langacker (2008: 485) similarly points out that *then* can refer to a time in the real world, to an epistemic conclusion, and to discursive progression, as in (1) (terminology from the current paper has been added in parentheses):

- (1) a. He finished his beer, **then** he asked for scotch. (adverbial adjunct)  
 b. If his alibi stands up, **then** he’s clearly innocent. (conjunct adverbial)  
 c. As I was saying, **then**, you need to get more rest. (pragmatic marker)

### 2.1. Adverbial adjuncts

Adverbial adjuncts are prototypically adverbs used literally and referentially. Many express space, time, manner or reason and can be questioned by *when*, *where*, *how*, *why*? They are conceptual, contentful, and semantic. They can also be negated, clefted, questioned and focused, cf. (2):

- (2) *R*: And no one does anything about it. *H*: Was it **then** that you decided this would be your mission, your quest? (2011 NBC\_Dateline [COCA])

### 2.2. Conjunct adverbials

Conjunct adverbials are text-organizing adverbials used to specify time, space, inferential relationships, etc. in a text, e.g. *now*, *then*, *moreover*, *however*. In (3) *then* is not to be understood as ‘at a later time’ but as ‘therefore, it can be concluded that’:

- (3) And the Iraqi government was opposed to Exxon making a deal with the Kurds because they thought, OK, well, **then** they’re going to give them the oil. (2017 NPR Fresh Air [COCA])

Conjunct adverbials:

- (a) serve textual metafunctions,  
 (b) are mainly semantic, contentful and conceptual, although the metaphors they may be based on usually need pragmatic interpretation (Kao et al. 2014),  
 (c) are usually historically derived from adverbial adjuncts.

### 2.3. Pragmatic markers

Pragmatic markers provide contextualizing cues and processing instructions. For example, they signal SP/W's degree of certitude regarding the associated discourse segment (e.g. epistemic PMs like *obviously*), social standing vis-à-vis interlocutors (e.g. politeness markers such as *please*, hedges such as *well*), and relationships within text (e.g. DMs like *and*, and *but*). PMs are therefore typically primarily "procedural" rather than "conceptual" or "contentful" (Fraser 2006b;<sup>2</sup> Hansen 2008). There are gradients of specificity. Of the pair *and* – *plus*, as in *Plus, he's cute and smart and ethnic* (2017 Russell, *Immaculate Blue* [COCA]), *and* is significantly more multifunctional and therefore more general. Nevertheless, both members of the pair cue that the SP/W is making an addition. Neither is deniable, although the appropriateness of their use may be interrogated by an editor or teacher.

Various subtypes of PMs have been suggested. Here I characterize pragmatic markers in general (section 2.3.1) and two subtypes: discourse markers (section 2.3.2) and discourse management markers (section 2.3.3).

#### 2.3.1. Pragmatic markers in general

There are many characterizations of PMs, among them Aijmer (2002), Heine (2013) and Brinton (2017), but it is generally agreed (with *caveats*) that prototypically PMs:

- (i) do not contribute to the semantics of the proposition, but are pragmatic cues regarding how to interpret it,
- (ii) are multifunctional,
- (iii) are non-compositional,
- (iv) are (inter)subjective,
- (v) can occur in clause-initial position (and in many cases in several other positions as well),
- (vi) are not syntactically integrated with the clause,
- (vii) form a separate tone group (or can be set off by a comma in writing),
- (viii) are preferred in oral rather than written discourse,
- (ix) are "phonologically short" (Brinton 2017: 4); but as Brinton says, "short" has been interpreted in different ways. In English they tend not to be monosyllabic, except for basic connective DMs like *and*, *but*, *for*, *so*. Some have the form of clauses, e.g. *I think* (see Brinton 2008 on comment clauses), or of phrases, e.g. *after all* (Fraser 2009),
- (x) are highly frequent.

I add that:

- (xi) some are derived historically from conjunct adverbials.

2. Fraser (2006b) argues that discourse markers have conceptual, procedural and combinatorial meanings and that a binary distinction between conceptual and procedural meanings such as is proposed in Blakemore (1987) is untenable.

An example of (xi) is *now*. *Now* is originally an adverbial adjunct meaning ‘at this time’. It is attested throughout Germanic languages in a conjunct use signaling textual linking (Auer & Maschler 2016). In present day English it is used in conversation with what Schiffrin calls an “evaluative” sense, cueing the speaker’s “interpretation of his own talk” as something s/he “seems to prefer the hearer to adopt” (Schiffrin 1987: 245), as in (4, line c).<sup>3</sup> This is a modal PM use.

- (4) a. The best picture I think I remember in my mind is—  
 b. maybe it’s cause I was a youngster.  
 c. **Now** this’ll make y’all laugh...  
 d. But I was ver:y, ver:y affected...by *Wuthering Heights* (Schiffrin 1987: 245)

### 2.3.2. Discourse markers

In various publications, Fraser (e.g. 1988, 1996) identifies a subset of PMs that “can signal the intended relationship between adjacent discourse segments” (Fraser 2009: 893). He calls this set DMs. Being a subset of PMs, they mostly have the properties mentioned above. A restriction, however, is that, given Fraser’s definition, these PMs precede the second segment. In other words, they are typically clause-initial. By “clause-initial” is meant that they occur before the core clause, but may follow other PMs such as *please* or *well*. In Fraser (1996) DMs are subclassified as: I. Elaborative (e.g. *also, and, that is (to say)*), II. Contrastive (e.g. *but, instead, on the other hand*) and III. Inferential (e.g. *for, so, as a result (of this/that)*), and IV. Topic change markers (e.g. *by the way, incidentally, returning to my point*).

### 2.3.3. Discourse management markers

In Fraser (2009: 893) the fourth class of PMs above is recategorized within a set of Discourse management markers (DMMs): used to signal a metacomment on the structure of the discourse. DMMs are of three types (Fraser 2009: 893-895):

- (i) Discourse structure markers, which “convey the contribution of the following segment within the overall structure of the discourse”: *first, in summary, I add...*  
 (ii) Attention markers: used to “indicate that a topic change in the making”: *ah, anyway, hey, now, now then, well then...*  
 (iii) Topic orientation markers “by which the speaker’s intentions concerning the immediate future topic of the discourse can be conveyed”. These are of four types:  
 — return to a previous topic: *back to my point, to return to the prior topic, I would like now to go back to what I was discussing, that point notwithstanding...*

3. Defour (2007) provides a detailed account of the history of *now* in its various uses.

- continuation with the current topic: *as I was saying, I haven't finished yet, if I might go on, to continue...*
- digression from the current topic: *by the way, incidentally, I totally forgot, parenthetically...*
- introducing a new topic: *but, if I may change the topic, on a different note, turning to a new topic...*

These four types of DMs all involve discourse topic shifts to various degrees. Return to a prior topic does not usually involve repeating the prior topic, but rather expanding it, drawing attention to slightly new perspectives. Topic continuations tend to introduce (moderately) new content. Digression, as Pons & Estellés (2009) point out, rarely involves true digression with subsequent return to the prior topic, but rather a topic shift. It is therefore very closely related to introduction of a new topic, except that by using a digression marker SP/W purports to downplay the importance of the upcoming topic.

As Fraser (2009: 893) notes, the topic-orientation markers that he cites are mostly rather different from other PM types. They typically are: long, not short, sometimes “entire propositions”. As Fraser (2009: 894) says, several members of the set “have only one semantic meaning” and that meaning is “tangible”. This means they are not multifunctional. Furthermore, they are addressable and could potentially be refuted (“that’s not a return to your point”) (Mittwoch et al. 2002; Boye & Harder 2012). They are also largely compositional (except for *notwithstanding*). This is also true of some DMs cited above in section 2.3.2, e.g. *that is (to say)*, *on the other hand*, and *as a result (of this/that)*. Since they are not primarily pragmatic, I question whether expressions like this are really PMs or are more appropriately thought of as conjunct adverbials (if phrasal, e.g. *back to my point*) or as clause chunks (if they have clausal structure, e.g. *I totally forgot*). The question is one of categorization and recognition of the special role of PMs as underspecified expressions that contextually cue interpretations.

My question about categorization in no way denies that the function of the expressions is to signal topic-orientation, nor the possibility that they might become pragmatic markers with multifunctionality and primarily pragmatic meaning, as have clauses like *I gather*, *I find* (Brinton 2008) and the adverbial phrase *by the way* (Traugott 2020). In section 4.1 below I consider only the non-finite phrasal expressions *back to X point* and *to return X point* and their histories. Neither shows evidence of use as a PM. In section 4.2 I will compare the histories of *parenthetically* and *incidentally*; the latter is occasionally attested with some PM characteristics.

#### 2.3.4. Summary so far and an example

DMs and DMs are subtypes of PMs. They share with conjunct adverbials the property of linking clauses. They are distinct from conjunct adverbials in that they are understood primarily pragmatically. Conjunct adverbials, by contrast, are mainly conceptual and only partially pragmatic. Adverbial adjuncts are distinct from DMs, DDMs and conjunct adverbials in that they do not link clauses and are understood primarily semantically and referentially.

The distinction between adverbials and PMs may be exemplified by *anyway*, a highly complex and multifunctional marker which has been analyzed in different ways that are relevant to the present study. *Anyway* is listed as a topic orientation marker in Fraser (2009). I mention 3 studies of *anyway* here, all of which analyze *anyway* as marking connectivity but exemplify the tradition of distinguishing adverbial and PM use, while at the same time highlighting the problems of the distinction in their analyses. Ferrara (1997) identifies 3 functions: additive (*'besides'*), dismissive (*'nonetheless'*), and resumptive (*'reconnecting segments of discourse'*). She considers only resumptive use to be PM use<sup>4</sup> because it connects "utterances or levels of discourse". The other two functions are considered to be adverbial uses because they "retain semantic content and occur mainly in sentence-medial and sentence-final position" (Ferrara 1997: 347). Lenk (1998) identifies 4 functions, 3 of which she calls propositional uses; the fourth function, topic closure, is what I call the DMM use. Coll (2009) also identifies 4 functions. She distinguishes 2 types of connectivity: continuation (adverbial) and digression closure, or discontinuity. Coll concludes that use of *anyway* in initial position to signal digression closure is (what I call) the DMM use of *anyway*; it is used in present day English with comma intonation. As Coll (2009: 12) points out, dismissives "always connect[] to previous discourse", whether in clause-initial or -final position. As I show below, that does not, however, entail that they are PMs.

### 3. Data sources

Contemporary data are derived from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), a corpus of 560 million words from 1990-1917. COCA is a balanced corpus with representative spoken, fiction, magazine, and newspaper texts of roughly comparable length per year. Spoken data is largely from TV and radio talk shows, and therefore public interaction, which makes it more suitable than casual conversational data for comparison with written historical data.

Historical data are drawn from two electronic data bases. For the earlier period, I draw on *Early English Books Online* (EEBO), a corpus of books in print during the period 1470-1700. EEBO has the significant advantage of being large (755 million words). However, it is not balanced or parsed. It should be noted that each text bears the date of publication, not composition, e.g. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is dated 1477, almost a hundred years later than it was written (between 1387 and 1400). The corpus used for the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is *The Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA), a 400 million word corpus from 1809-2009. This corpus is balanced in that it represents fiction, magazines, and newspapers with texts of roughly comparable length per decade.

Corpus searches were conducted manually. Only clause-initial examples were selected, as this is the position in which the *Es* have most potential for signaling a DMM relationship between a first segment D1 and a second segment D2.

4. Following Schiffrin, Ferrara and other authors mentioned in this paragraph refer to DM (not PM) use. They distinguish only "adverbial" and "DM" uses (not adverbial adjunct and conjunct adverbial uses).



#### 4. Brief case studies

In this section I briefly present the developments of *to return to X point* and *back to X point* (section 4.1), and of *parenthetically* and *incidentally* (section 4.2).

##### 4.1. The histories of *to return to X point* and *back to X point*

Both *to return to X point* and *back to X point* are historically based on the metaphor AN ARGUMENT IS A JOURNEY (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 89-95), which is related to the “conduit metaphor” of language structure that Reddy (1993) famously identified over 40 years ago. Both are non-finite and both involve *point* (borrowed from French in the early 13<sup>th</sup>C) preceded by a determiner (X) that is either a personal possessive pronoun (*my, our, your, his, her, their*) or *the*. Furthermore, although they have some distributional differences, both mean approximately the same thing when used in contexts of text management. *Point* is usually used in the corpora as a spatial term (e.g. *point of departure*), but in the *Es* analyzed here it is used in the figurative sense of “matter under discussion, argument” (OED *point* 10).

*To return to X point* appears 11 times in initial position in EEBO from the 1630s on. 3 examples attest *my*, 2 *our*, and 6 *the*, e.g.:

- (5) a. at last follows the ruine of the authours, together with the ruine of others:  
**to return to our point**, it came so about here: the warre began betwixt  
 scotland and england;  
 (1644 Hume, *History of the houses of Douglas and Angus* [EEBO])
- b. or rather impose upon the world any thing, though never so false, to serve  
 their own Villanous ends: but now **to return to the point**, viz: the proposal  
 to kill the king, (1682 Dangerfield, *The grand imposter defeated* [EEBO])

8 examples appear with *the main point*. Note that in (6) all of *but nowe to the main point ... by the error of loue* is syntactically a conjunct adverbial used to make a transitioning metacomment linking *Thus does Christ sup with us* with the main clause *Christ is said to X*. *Point* is modified by both the adjective *main* and a relative clause. This suggests that *to return to the point* is contentful and adverbial.

- (6) thus doth christ sup with vs: but nowe **to returne to the maine point** againe,  
 from which wee haue a little digressed, as elsewhere, by the error of loue,  
 christ is said, to be fedde among the lylies,  
 ‘thus does Christ sup with us: but now to return to the main point again, from  
 which we have digressed, as elsewhere, through the error of love, Christ is  
 said to be fed among the lilies’  
 (1603 Playfere, *Hearts delight* [EEBO])

An expression with similar meaning, *to return/retourne to X purpose* is attested from the 1520s on in EEBO and is more frequent than *to return to X*

*point* (123 examples in initial position in EEBO in all spellings vs. 11 *to return to X point*).

Already infrequent in EEBO, *to return to X point* is even less frequent in COHA, and appears in initial position only with *the* in X (3 examples) all with a relative clause referring to digressions, as in (6). It has almost obsoleted by the time of COCA, where 1 example is attested with *the*, and 1 with *your*, used at a turn (7):

- (7) There's a reason why two-thirds of young people now believe that socialism is a better solution for American economics than capitalism. It's because they've lost (INAUDIBLE). *Chen*: But, John, **to return to your point**, it would be interesting to see the first fault line between the Republican majority in the Congress and the president. (2017 CBS *Face the Nation* [COCA])

As for *to return to X purpose*, it is not attested in either COHA or COCA. Apparently the infinitival marking of RETURN TO A PRIOR TOPIC is disfavored. Marginally more widely used is *returning to the X* (where X is *argument, claim, proposition, script*), but a location is far more likely to occur in X than a language-related term.

While use of *to return to X point* has declined from the 16<sup>th</sup>C on, *back to the point* has increased very slightly. *Back to X point* (also spelled *poynt*) is not attested in EEBO except once with the modifier *principal* in a text that is a translation from French (8). It is lexical and not initial:

- (8) muste not the eagles beare witness against vs at the great day,  
 must not the eagles bear witness against us on the great day  
 if we be retchlesse now? but let vs come **back to the principall poynt**  
 if we are reckless now? but let us come back to the principal point  
 which i touched at the beginning,  
 which I touched on at the beginning,  
 (1574 Calvin, *Sermons*, trans by Golding [EEBO])

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>C *come/get/bring back to the point* appears to have been used idiomatically, but still lexically, as evidenced by COHA:

- (9) a. Mr. Dicksey was here sharply reprimanded, informed that his suspicions and hearsays were not wanted, and requested to come **back to the point**. He came back. 'My lady wouldn't give him anything, then he got mad'  
 (1874 Fleming, *A terrible secret* [COHA])
- b. But the way my blood pressure is these days because of all the aggravation I'll probably go first. Anyway, to get **back to the point**, I tell the both of them that I know they want to be alone (1981 Owens, *Chucky's hunch* [COHA])

(9b) suggests conjunct use in the context of a verb of locution (*tell*). In (9b) *get* also suggests a syntactic blend of *back to the point* with *to return to the point*.

There are no examples with a personal pronoun determiner (*my, our...*) and none of initial **back to the point** until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>C:

- (10) They don't have children. Why didn't she just leave? **Back to the point**, men now have to be more attentive to what women tell them. (1994 *Psychology Today* [COHA; also cited in COCA])

A few examples of initial *back to my/your point* are attested in COCA, mainly in the spoken genre.

- (11) set the tone for the kind of president he wants to be and sort of that unifying message. And you know, **back to your point**.<sup>5</sup> The best way he's going to get this country together is to get people working again (2016 Fox Hannity [COCA])

Several examples introduce a phrase (*back to your point about X*) or are followed by *at hand*. In sum, even in spoken COCA the expression is neither frequent nor yet fully routinized. It does not have the characteristics of PMs.

To conclude this subsection, RETURN TO A PRIOR TOPIC is mainly marked by lexical expressions, if it is marked at all. Nouns following *to* introduced by *return* and *back* refer to space (the majority), people (e.g. *sister, tribe*) or a discursive topic such as *argument, claim, point, purpose*. While *purpose* is preferred in EEBO texts, *point* has come to be preferred in the 21<sup>st</sup>C. As for *to return to the topic*, in initial position it is usually followed by a PP (e.g. *of aliens, of compassion, of food*) rather than by a clause. There is no evidence that the two expressions discussed here are DMMs (i.e. pragmatic markers), other than that they are sometimes used to signal a relationship between D1 and D2. They are, however, candidates for the category of conjunct adverbials, metatextual adverbials that have a linking function, but are primarily semantic. It is possible that *back to the point* will come to be used as a DMM at a later time, because it is attested in speech in COCA. However, change of *back to X point* seems unlikely as there is no direct enabling factor for such a development. Specifically, there is no DMM in the sense discussed here in the category of RETURN TO A PRIOR TOPIC markers and therefore no direct exemplar (see Bybee 2013 on the importance for change of exemplar models). Likewise, absence of a formal exemplar among PMs in general involving the form *to V PP* suggests that *to return to X point* is unlikely to be used as a DMM.

#### 4.2. The histories of parenthetically and incidentally

*Incidentally* and *parenthetically* are markers of DIGRESSION FROM THE CURRENT TOPIC (Fraser 2009: 895). As mentioned in section 2.3.3, Pons & Estellés (2009) have argued that digression markers typically signal shift to a new

5. I take the period here to reflect a pause. Punctuation in the SPOKEN transcriptions in COCA is not linguistically sophisticated (Mark Davies, p.c.).

topic, rarely return to an old one such as the term “digression” might suggest. The prototypical digressive marker in Present Day English is *by the way*. Originating in a spatial adverbial expression meaning ‘on the way’, it came to be associated with talk and with the metaphor AN ARGUMENT IS A JOURNEY, a context in which it came to be used as a conjunct adverbial. Finally, in the mid-17<sup>th</sup>C it came to be used as a topic-shifting DMM (Fraser’s type INTRODUCE A NEW TOPIC), and as a polite hedge (Traugott 2020). Here I revisit the histories of two relatively marginal markers of digression, *incidentally* and *parenthetically* (outlined in Traugott 2020). Both originate in manner adverbs and both exemplify the proposed shift from adverbial adjunct > conjunct adverbial. In addition, there is some evidence that *incidentally* came to be used with some characteristics of DMM function in the late 19<sup>th</sup>C, but neither fully meets the characterization of PMs in section 2.3.1.

*Parenthetically* is attested in its literal meaning ‘in a parenthetical way’ from the 17<sup>th</sup>C on, largely restricted to relatively formal registers. Because it refers to a manner of discourse structuring, specifically adding material as a qualification or elaboration, it normally occurs in metalinguistic contexts. It is infrequent in the data (4 hits in EEBO, 159 in COHA, 155 in COCA, 23 of them in the phrase *cited parenthetically*), and usually appears clause-internally or finally. However, some clause-initial uses appear in COHA in the mid 19<sup>th</sup>C, at first in the context of verbs stating the discourse function intended (*remark, state, add*), e.g. (12a, b) and later independently of such contexts (12c):

- (12) a. [the floors] are so bad that they must be covered with carpets whether the occupants wish it or no. **Parenthetically**, I may state, that the carpenter’s trade in New York city is in a melancholy state. (1875 Cook, *Beds and tables* [COHA])
- b. We saw things of which we had never dreamed, largely, I must say, because we had never visualized this war. **Parenthetically** I may add that no one can who has not been in the midst of it. (1918 Ames, *Science at the front* [COHA])
- c. the student will often perceive the costs of making a change to be a significant barrier or constraint to pursuing alternative courses of action. **Parenthetically**, similar barriers may also apply to students who have been admitted to a major, but who subsequently find it unsatisfactory and unfulfilling. (2014 Barber, *The disillusionment of students* [COCA])

Examples like those in (12) suggest that *parenthetically* came to be used in initial position as a hedge introducing a point that the writer or speaker wishes to make and that it is only marginally digressive (Traugott 2020). It is, however, connective, does not have the literal meaning ‘in a parenthetical manner’, but implicates ‘parenthetically speaking’. In other words, its use overlaps with that of “style stance adverbials” like *frankly, honestly* (Biber et al. 1999: 857).

As a manner adverb, *incidentally* refers to chance occurrence, but almost all examples attested appear in the context of metalinguistic commentary, where it

means ‘in passing’. While relatively infrequent compared to *by the way* of which there are 18,360 in COCA (raw count), it occurs somewhat more frequently than *parenthetically* (76 instances in EEBO from the 1610s on, 3260 in COHA, and 2333 in COCA, all raw count). It does not occur in initial position in EEBO, except in one comparative construction (*as primarily ... so incidentally*). Clause-initial uses that suggest conjunct adverbial status appear in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup>C in COHA. From the 1870s on there are examples which can be interpreted as topic-shift markers:

- (13) One might quote almost at random whole pages, and even whole chapters. **Incidentally** the absurdity of classical education for a boy, with no taste and no aptitude for it, engages her satire, (1874 Wilkinson, *The literary and ethical quality of George Eliot's novels* [COHA])

Even though D1 (*one might quote...*) with the subject *one* is presented as an impersonal statement, use of *incidentally* gives the reader initial access to Wilkinson’s subjective personal viewpoint and implies ‘in passing I add’. This viewpoint is further elaborated on with use of *absurdity*. Uses in fiction from the mid 20<sup>th</sup>C on with *Oh* suggest that *incidentally* was thought of as suitable for signaling both a dramatic topic-shift and a hedge, a use that persists in COCA, not only in fiction (14a) but also in spoken data (14b).

- (14) a. ‘as I explained to the Citizens’ Committee first thing this morning... Oh, **incidentally** in telling them what a slick gunslinger you were, Smith, I sort of -- well? implied that I knew right well who you were”. (1949 Shott, *Renegade's trail* [COHA; ellipsis original])
- b. I’m sure that there’ll be questions for you. Look at this panel. They know it. Oh, **incidentally**. you know why Ron Jeremy, the porn producer, sits on the end of the panel? (1994 Ind\_geraldo, *Celebrity Gossip* [COCA])

*Incidentally*, it can be concluded, is closer to DMM use than *parenthetically* in terms of frequency, subjectivity, and intersubjective, hedging use. Unlike *parenthetically*, it is not used with the characteristics of a style adverbial, i.e. it is not understood as ‘incidentally speaking’.

## 5. Conclusion

I have argued that there is a gradient from adverbial adjunct to conjunct adverbial to DMM form-function pairings. Adverbial adjuncts are semantically conceptual, contentful, addressable and largely monosemous. They are usually used clause-internally. As characterized here, conjunct adverbials are partially semantically conceptual, contentful, and addressable (i.e. partially secondary). They are largely polysemous with adverbial adjuncts and can occur clause-initially. The fact that conjunct adverbials link D1 and D2 does not mean they are DMMs. DMMs are clause-initial, primarily pragmatic in meaning and not addressable. The gradient is shown in (15):

## (15) Adverbial adjunct - Conjunct adverbial - Discourse management marker

In addition to signaling topic-orientation, both conjunct adverbials and DMMs may be used to signal interpersonal hedging, indexing that the content of the upcoming D2 might be regarded by the Addressee as in some way face-threatening.

Historically, change may occur along the gradient provided the source semantics is compatible (in the case studies the source semantics of certain spatial and manner adverbials). But not all conjunct adverbial adjuncts come to be used as DMMs, hence the parentheses in (16):

## (16) Adverbial adjunct &gt; Conjunct adverbial (&gt; Discourse management marker)

Many current DMs and DMMs have undergone the full shift, e.g. *but, anyway, by the way, now, then*. However, some alleged DMs and DMMs currently still function exclusively as connective adjuncts (*to return to my point*) or, because change is gradual, may be used with a few PM features (*back to my point, incidentally*). They can be tracked for further changes that might make them more centrally pragmatic in the future.

The issue is not simply one of categorizing and of terminology. It is an issue of how we think about language use, whether synchronically or diachronically. Expressions are form-meaning pairings that are units or combinations of units that can be used dynamically and are subject to change. They are in many cases on a gradient of functions or on gradients of multiple functions. To the extent that a grammar is intended to model knowledge of a language and use of that language (cf. Goldberg 2019), it should include the gradient from adverbials to pragmatic markers.

Some future areas of research have been suggested by the present study:

- (a) How can PMs best be accounted for in usage-based cognitive grammar?
- (b) What is the interconnection of topic-orientation markers with social factors such as hedging?
- (c) How is topic closure marked (see Coll 2007 and Lenk 1998 on *anyway*, as mentioned in section 2.3.4)? Are there markers of complete closure? What different kinds of closure are signaled by digressives within the larger category of topic-shifters?
- (d) For the topic-orientation function RETURN TO A PRIOR TOPIC in English, semantically conceptual conjunct adverbials appear to be preferred. Why is this so, and is there cross-linguistic evidence for this restriction?
- (e) How generalizable to metatextual markers is the observation that contexts referring to locution (e.g. *argue, note, remark, say*) are crucial enabling factors in the development of DMs and DMMs?

## Data bases

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- DOEC *Dictionary of Old English Corpus*. 2009. Compiled by Healey, Antonette diPaolo, Holland, Joan, McDougall, Ian & McDougall, David, with Xiang, Xin. University of Toronto. <<http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/CoRD/corpora/DOEC/index.html>>
- EEBO *Early English Books Online*, 1470s to 1690s. Corpus created as part of the SAMUELS PROJECT (2014-2016). <<https://www.english-corpora.org/eebo/>>
- OED *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2018. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <<http://www.oed.com/>>

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