
Abstract

In this chapter, we will discuss one of the core elements of successful CPs, the use of considered transition phrases. In order to establish a coherent narrative flow in a CP, no element is more important than the use of explicit transitional discourse signals or markers. Their use in CPs and other formalized spoken texts had a notably positive effect upon enhancing the cohesion and holistic comprehensibility of the CP and subsequently had a more powerful impact upon the audience. These metadiscursive choices stand in sharp contrast to the often non-considered deployment of repeated, but semantically meaningless, connectives, or the mere verbalization of section headwords. These carry little pragmatic or semantic impact and thus did not offer any anchors or arrows, guideposts indicating developments or direction to listeners/viewers. Such speakers were apparently relying on the written text alone to carry the full communicative load. As a result of, or in combination with, the explicit use of transition discourse markers, the value of enhanced prosody, particularly intonation and the pacing of speech, were readily apparent. Since FP/PSs often do not allow for much kinetic flamboyance from the presenter, the onus is upon the intonation of the speaker to more explicitly indicate the rhetorical flow of the research.

16.1 The Application of Transition Phrases to Conference Presentations

As we noted in the preceding section on summaries, conclusions, and closings, a common phenomenon in CPs involved novice presenters verbalizing the slide heading alone as the transition marker (e.g., *'Summary,' 'Methods,' 'Conclusion'*), which merely reiterated that which was already obvious from the visual text. Without a more explicit marking of the shift in discourse, a lack of support from

any further transitional signal, closing sections often lacked the impact of an actual summary or conclusion.

A failure to use transitional phrases effectively can thus have dire consequences for the impact of the CP. One NNES presenter told me how she had memorized her English slides to the point where they had become second nature, but during the actual presentation, she realized that she was lost for words at the transition points between different slides and sections and had little idea on how to connect them effectively. This, in her opinion, negatively affected the flow of the entire presentation. Each brick in the house was well-constructed, but there was no mortar to create true cohesion.

In some cases, interviewees told me that they addressed this by trying to advance their CPs by summarizing or re-formulating what they had just said (and/or the text on their slides), but felt they had ended up just stumbling awkwardly on to the next slide. This often leads to ubiquitous cases of what I refer to as ‘throwaway endings’, where the utterance is ‘completed’ by fading out into meaningless repetition or babble. One poignant example I noted was, ‘...which required an endoscopy. Endoscopy. Yes. So, yes, we... did... one. Endoscopy. Mmm.’. If a speaker is well-prepared with effective transitional discourse markers at his or her disposal, there should be no need to re-formulate any text that has already written on the slides (except, perhaps, to willfully emphasize a key or unclear point).

In summary (note the use of my own transitional phrase here), the considered use of transitional phrases or signals is a skill often utilized by successful presenters but one that may go unnoticed by novice presenters. The utilization of such explicit transition markers and signals provided a deeper sense of flow and cohesion for CP speakers.

Although it might be argued that the successful deployment of such strategies is simply the result of greater overall English proficiency, this was not supported by my observations. Rather, there were a number of presenters who employed such devices to positive CP effect, who might not be otherwise considered particularly proficient in English. On the other hand, some presenters, who used no or minimal transitional strategies—dulling the impact of their CP—were otherwise quite proficient as English speakers. In short, the considered use of transition markers had a profound impact on the overall communicative effectiveness of the CP.

16.2 Overused Transitional Conference Presentation Phrases

While many conference presenters give due consideration to the visual quality and contents of each individual slide, considerations as to how to merge these into a holistic narrative may well be overlooked and noted only when words fail the speaker in the middle of the CP. In fact, several popular presentation guides (available both in print and online) that I perused made absolutely no mention of these essential discourse markers. As a result, often there is too much focus placed by presenters upon the text in, or related to, the visible self-contained slide, meaning that less attention is paid to how the speaker will actually connect these slides in speech.

Presenters I interviewed regarding their CP anxieties, however, often made mention of the awkward and jarring effect of moving from slide to slide without deploying an adequate bridge between them. Among the comments noted were:

“I’m not worried about basic grammatical mistakes but rather by (transitional phrases or markers). I overuse ‘so’, ‘next’, ‘then’ and ‘but’. However, these sound too basic when compared to more proficient speakers. These terms lack the impact I want to express.”

Another NNES said, *“I know of common (English discourse markers) like, ‘Given X...’ or ‘Due to Y...’, but I lack the skill in using them properly. Therefore, I end up using simpler phrases like ‘then’ or ‘next’, which means that my presentation appears a little less... well... scientific.”*

Of the total number of FP/PS presenters I observed, almost 40% performed CPs in which some combination of *‘and, then, next, so,’* or *‘also’* served as the *only* transition marker(s) used between sections or slides. This paucity of forms contrasts strongly with Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999) comprehensive taxonomy of linking adverbials used in oral transitions. The biggest problem, however, was that these connectors were often used haphazardly and indiscriminately, without any real meaning, function, or regard for the semantic, pragmatic, or rhetorical properties normally attributed to their usage. Rather, they were often used only as acoustic fillers between sections or slides and not as a meaningful discourse signal or rhetorical device. Similar findings have been noted in Japanese presentations (Anthony, Orr, & Yamazaki, 2007), who noted that in some cases the speaker employed no transitional markers at all.

In my own observations, I observed some presenters marking the transition for each and every transition with *‘then’*, which, in most cases, has a temporal or logical connotation, or *‘so’*, which generally connotes a cause–effect or process–result process, when there was in fact no such logical or semantic connection intended. These ill-considered usages made the slides seem more like a compilation of disjointed utterances laid upon one another, as opposed to the type of coherent flow from say, hypothesis to result or from premise to conclusion, that one would normally expect from academic researchers.

‘Next’ was the most common—and, perhaps, the least cohesive—of these sole transitional items. On some occasions, it was used in a manner that was completely bereft of any semantically meaningful impact, (although among the more proficient presenters it was used only to indicate a major sequential move in the CP, e.g., *‘Next, I’d like to go over some of the new methods that we used.’*)

‘Next’ should *not* be used to indicate every sequence or to connect every slide in the CP. For example, if the context makes it obvious that the speaker is indicating a sequence, saying *‘next’* is unnecessary. The audience knows that when the speaker advances their slides the new one will be the *‘next’* one. If a section heading appears on the slide the audience knows that it follows the previous item. In such cases, the term *‘next’* is rendered redundant.

Employing these overused, and often cohesion-challenged, transition terms also had an unfortunate side effect—that being they served to mute or inhibit effective pacing and intonation (more on this will be discussed in later sections). When the

often intricate cohesive relationship between slides or sections of the CP is not adequately conveyed to the audience, the flow of the CP runs the risk of being lost. After all, the impact of a CP is not merely the sum of the quality of the individual slides. In more direct terms, it means that such a presenter is likely to bore or confuse the audience. This consideration alone should be sufficient reason to pay more attention to how one uses transitions.

Novice presenter overuse of result/inference adverbials such as ‘then’ or the causative/temporal ‘so’ has also been noted by Zareva (2009), who declares these to be a sign of ‘inappropriate register,’ (p. 59). Not surprisingly, it was difficult for many in the audience that I observed to connect the different rhetorical sections of CPs in which ‘then’ and ‘so’ were deployed only as acoustic filler. Was the sequence being described chronological? Causative? Adversative? Additive?

As a result of the failure to consider or adequately employ transition strategies, such presentations lose cohesion, resulting in a lack of attention from the audience or requests for clarification on basic points during the follow-up discussion session. As Zareva (2011) suggests, the effective usage of appropriate ‘linking adverbials’ ‘...allows presenters to inject themselves into their work and helps them walk the audience smoothly through the complexity of their arguments’ (p. 7).

In short, when the audience is not adequately guided by familiar signposts, they can easily become lost, having no rhetorical framework significant enough to offer questions or develop further commentary. In my observations, presenters who appeared to not give due consideration to their use of transition forms tended to have lower-impact CPs.

16.3 Micro- and Macro/Superstructural and Macrostructural Markers

An important distinction has been made between micro- and macromarkers by Andeweg (2009), who suggests that ‘Micro-markers are small cues that indicate relation between sentences or pause-fillers (e.g., ‘*and, but, so, well*’). Macro-markers, rather, signal the relation between whole text segments. Macro-markers instruct the listener to comprehend the following discourse in a special way.’ (p. 3) Andeweg further noted that the position of the transition marker was crucial, as his study’s survey respondents claimed that the insertion of a transition marker just before clicking the next slide was perceived as a better structured and more coherent presentation.

Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet (2003) noted that *WH*-cleft structures and existential constructions (e.g., ‘*What I’m going to talk about today is/There are three elements I want to discuss.*’) were commonly employed as signal markers in CPs, as they serve a discourse framing function by both reviewing and previewing information by packaging and signaling.

In Heino, Tervonen, and Tommola’s (2002) study, Andeweg’s micro-markers and macro-markers are conflated under the broader category of ‘metadiscourse’. According to Heino et al., CP listeners/viewers have the dual burden of grasping

essential information while following and decoding the superimposed metadiscourse. Since ‘...spoken discourse is evanescent and must be processed by the listener in a single pass. Listeners will therefore benefit from signals that guide the construction of content and the speakers’ attitudes’ (p. 127). According to Heino et al., metadiscourse constituted over one-third of *all* presentation vocabulary items. It is these items that allow listeners to activate organizational frames.

The term ‘metadiscourse’ here also includes forms that go by various other names, including discourse markers, structural markers, organizing and evaluative bracketing (Schiffrin, 1994), informative and attitudinal markers (Vande Kopple, 1995), plus textual and interpersonal discourse (Luukka, 1992).

Heino et al. (2002) noted four distinctive metadiscourse types in CPs. These were categorized as follows: structure-oriented, validity-oriented (the most common form), interaction-oriented, and context-oriented. In their study, macrostructure markers were used more frequently than superstructural markers

Structural-oriented aspects of CP metadiscourse identified by Heino et al. include the following two categories:

1. Superstructural markers. These include opening and closing signals, ‘announcers’ (ubiquitous in Swales (1990) highly influential CARS model), section shifts, and reminders. These need to be included in CPs because spoken research is not organized the same as written RPs, since, as we have noted, CP speech is deployed more as narrative (Thompson, 1998). The CP audience generally knows the canonical form of a research presentation, so the speaker can save time by ignoring the explicit signals of any RP superstructure.

Instead, the CP speaker may utilize:

2. Macrostructural markers. These include sub-topical transition indicators, such as new episode flags or ‘attention getters’ (*‘now, well’*). Heino et al noted that such sub-topic organizers occurred every 45 s. These are described as ‘habitual fillers’ in instructional monologues—semiotically empty but useful for tying bits of spoken text together (Schiffrin, 1994). Macrostructural markers also include sequencers (*‘first, second...’*), section internal reminders, clarifiers, elaborators, and justifiers.

Presenters, however, should be aware that overuse of these markers may also make the audience feel like their comprehension skills and/or intellect is being underestimated.

Questions and Exercises for Sections 16.1–16.3

1. Explain the difference between micro- and macro-(or superstructural and macrostructural) discourse markers.
2. Give two reasons why the effective use of transition markers is a key feature of performing an effective CP.

3. What is the problem with reading slide or text headers alone as a means of marking a transition in spoken discourse?
4. Write an example in which the linking adverbial ‘so’ is used correctly and effectively, and one case in which it is being used only as ‘acoustic filler’.

16.4 Transition Phrase Samples and Descriptions

Those conference speakers who explicitly utilized transitional expressions as discourse signals regularly displayed, and created, greater cohesion between the slides and the various sections of the presentation, generating a flow conducive to a greater understanding of the contents, and thus invariably managed to draw in or sustain the attention of their audience.

It may appear at first glance that I am advocating that CP speakers use more elaborate terms simply for the sake of appearing more eloquent, but in fact all the authentic phrases listed hereafter added a great deal of value in terms of successfully conveying moves, relationships, section markings, and rhetorical flow in academic CPs. Most prominent among these were variations on the six following forms and patterns:

- *Following this/that...* (explicit time sequencing)

‘So’ and ‘then’ both have logical, as well as temporal, connotations. Therefore, if trying to emphasize a sequence of events ‘*Following this/that...*’ will not only signal the sequence function more clearly but will also force a break in speech that allows the speaker to breathe and inject intonation more suited to expressing a process.

e.g., ‘First we injected the mice with X. Following that, we extracted tissue samples...’

- *It is important to note...* (highlighting)

This highlighting phrase should only be used one or two times during the presentation or else its overall impact may be weakened. For example, it was used very effectively in one CP summary: ‘*It is important to note that these were the first such trials conducted under these conditions.*’

Emphasizing the importance of a certain section or feature of the CP should precede the point being emphasized. Adding, ‘*This is important*’ after the statement has been made is anti-climactic. The speaker wants to prepare the audience for the key point in the same way that a road sign tells you of an approaching sharp curve before, and not after, you have passed the section in question.

The phrase, *'This is really important!'* was also noted as a post-textual emphatic on a handful of occasions. However, this may well come across to an academic audience more as a personalized, emotional plea than as a rhetorical signal of emphasis.

- *Let me expand on that...*
- *Looking at this in more detail...* (expansion/extension)

There will be several points in any presentation in which the presenter wishes to explain some feature in more detail. In order to indicate this transition, as we have seen, the consecutive usage of *'and'* *'so,'* etc., will often not do the trick. On the other hand I have noticed numerous competent CP speakers using the phrase above, and it indeed exudes an educated and erudite tenor. The second phrase is similar in function but appears to be slightly more common when the speaker is referring to charts, photos, diagrams, and the analysis of statistical results.

- *Getting back to our main point...* (an anaphoric—going back — reference), and
- *I'll come back to that, the reason as to why X occurred* (a cataphoric—forward looking—reference)

After presenters had entered into some expansive detail or a topical tangent, they often wished to draw audience back to the main frame of the CP. A frequent and effective way to guide the audience back to the flow or a main theme was simply to employ the former phrase. *'I'll come back to that later'* performs a similar function in the opposite direction, indicating the future addressing of a theme or point that has just been raised.

- *OK, so where does that leave us?* (summarization)

The above phrase marks a successful transition from the discussion to results, summaries, or even conclusions. Rhetorical questions such as this tend to stimulate the audience's interest. This phrase often provides an effective framing of, and entrance into, the closing sections of the CP.

- *What we learned/discovered/found/don't understand is...* (pseudo-cleft structure)

Cleft structures such as these are often used by proficient English speakers as signals of summaries and results. Using such transition forms appeared far more effective than simply saying *'Summary'* because it added both an epistemological frame and an evaluative, interpersonal note to the CP. In other words, rather than stating the data resulting from research, the speaker states the summary in terms of how knowledge has been (or might be) expanded and/or what questions remain.

16.4.1 CP Transition Phrases Commonly Used for Elaborating and Emphasizing

Besides the six core examples presented above, a number of other effective transitional phrases were used by competent and effective presenters in the CPs I observed, all of which succeeded in aiding the flow of the presentation. These include six further following speech act categories, all accompanied by authentic examples taken from CPs.

Among the most common transitional phrases used by proficient presenters to emphasize an important point, were:

- *It is important to take note of/consider X,*
- *The most important point to consider is...*
- *What's more interesting is that...*
- *What I'd especially like to point out/emphasize is,*
- *Let me elaborate on X a little further*

The latter two items are particularly interesting in that they serve as direct speech acts, cases in which the speaker explicitly uses a performative verb to state what they are doing.

16.4.2 CP Transition Phrases Commonly Used for Clarifying and Defining

If a speaker has to clarify or define a term or concept using a transition phrase, the following phrases might be considered:

- *that is, which means,* (for clarifying or elaborating upon implications)
- *such as x,* (for conveying a more academic tenor than 'like' or the overused, 'for example')
- *in brief,* (for introducing a quick summary)
- *Interestingly,* (this evaluative adverb tends to catch the audience's attention and also helps to foster a dynamic change of intonation)
- *So, what is 'X' then?* (the presenter gives particular emphasis when intoning the word 'X' in order to mark his intention to define the term)
- *Who is familiar with these terms?* (this is an example of a dialogic element in a CP—one in which the presenter is engaging in—albeit brief—a discussion with the audience)
- *So, reading serves here as input and writing as output* (repeating key concepts as a summative phrase enables clarification)

16.4.3 CP Transition Phrases Commonly Used When Explaining Research Methods

- *While exposing X to Y, during exposure to Y...* (NNESs should remember that ‘while’ is followed by a verb phrase, and ‘during’ by a noun. Both present effective alternatives to ‘so’, ‘then’, ‘as’, or ‘when’)
- *For this reason,* (this phrase is more explicit and academically situated than ‘so’ or ‘because’)
- *The question here is X.* (an effective way to express a research or hypothetical question along with, ‘We hypothesized that...’)
- *Initially,* (a more academic alternative to ‘first’ or ‘at first’)
- *By/in doing so,* (effective in creating narratives that express goals or purposes)
- *Therefore, our aim was to X.* (‘aim’ is more product-oriented than ‘plan’ and expresses a research purpose more precisely than ‘goal,’ which tends to be more results-focused.)
- *We have followed this protocol.* (‘protocol’ is often a more accurate and precise term than ‘method,’ particularly when it refers to a prescribed form of research inquiry)
- *I don’t have to explain this, do I?* (an effective example of both recognizing and affirming the knowledge level of peers in the audience. This phrase can also offer a welcome, lighthearted touch)
- *We explored the X hypothesis. What is the X hypothesis?* (the use of a rhetorical question to precede an explanation. Note also the cohesion established by repeating the term ‘hypothesis’)
- *So, how did we start?/So, how do we actually measure X?* (rhetorical questions explicitly marking methods)
- *We focused on the four following parameters.* (marking the beginning of an explanatory sequence)
- *Using the X classification system,* (connecting research categories to research practices or activities)

16.4.4 CP Transition Phrases Connected to Introducing Results

- *Basically,* (this item was, unsurprisingly perhaps, used widely and repeatedly. Many NNES presenters preferred to use the term ‘anyway,’ but this could imbue the subsequent text with a throwaway character or unintentionally mark a return to a previous theme, both of which are quite distinct from the reductive or narrowing function of the term, ‘basically’).
- *Despite, unless* (these terms might be thought of as ‘general English,’ but in fact they were underused in many CPs. These are often preferable to using multiple prepositions to make the same point)
- *To our surprise,* (an evaluative term working as an attention grabber)

- *As a result*, (this phrase shows cause/effect, before/after relationships much more succinctly than connectors and prepositions such as, ‘for, so,’ and ‘and’)
- *Here are the indicators of X* (explicit references to visible lists, data, or statistics were generally effective)
- *So what is the mechanism?*(rhetorical questions such as this were also very effectively used in the results section)
- *The first possible reason is x.* (‘Possible’ serves as a more academic hedge in terms of tenor than do ‘maybe’ or ‘probably’)
- *When it came down to X, however, there was a significant difference. Let’s compare the two.* (a combination of research strategies preceding a comparison of results. The word ‘was’ was emphasized by the speaker through stronger intonation to indicate the significant result)
- *But those studies contrasted sharply, while this study...* (the deictic terms, ‘those’ and ‘this’ were emphasized through stronger intonation to make the subsequent contrast explicit)
- *If + will/then + results* (using If-then If-will forms when expressing results or methods allowed intricate causal relationships to be more readily grasped by the audience)

16.4.5 CP Transition Phrases Connected to Referencing

As noted earlier, sometimes the speaker will want to refer back to an earlier section of the CP. In such cases, I can suggest the following authentic and recurring examples.

- *As I said/mentioned earlier, As shown previously* (anaphoric—backwards-looking—references)
- *If you recall, I earlier noted/said that...* (this anaphoric reference appeals because of the explicit connection made to the audience, as well as the speaker’s text)
- *I’ll discuss/explain this a little later on.* (a cataphoric—forward-looking—reference)

16.4.6 CP Transition Phrases Connected to Advancing the Narrative

- *OK, let’s move on to X/So, where are we going next?* (explicitly signifying a major shift)
- *Consequently*, (indicating a cause/effect relationship with a greater academic tenor than ‘so’)
- *Subsequently* (indicating before-and-after or other temporal relationships)
- *The second category I have identified is...* (a sequencing cleft to delineate categories)

16.5 Cautions Related to Using Transition Phrases

To end this section, a few cautionary notes regarding ineffective or misused transitional phrases have been added in order to steer the novice presenter and NNES speaker away from some common ‘bad practices’.

‘*Especially*’ is a booster/intensifier that is often overused, thus reducing the intended boosting impact. It was occasionally rendered among NNES presenters as the rare, and somewhat awkward, adjective ‘especial’. ‘*In particular*’ retains a slightly stronger academic tenor.

Two other commonly used transitional phrases that readers might also want to be wary of are: (1) *Next I’m going to talk about/go into X* and (2) ‘*Another point is...*’, both of which can make it appear as if the presenter is merely progressing through a list or sequence. If the speaker is in fact doing so, their usage is perfectly viable but novice presenters should keep in mind that effective CPs will very rarely, if ever, consist of lists or sequences alone—and over-dependency upon these can bolster the impression that the CP is nothing more than an accumulation of discrete item points.

As mentioned above, another transitional expression to be careful with is, ‘*Anyway...*’. The canonical English function of ‘*anyway*’ is to diminish the value of what the speaker has previously said or to mark a section of text as topically parenthetical. Therefore, if used as a transitional phrase, the term might be misinterpreted as being dismissive. ‘*Getting back to (my main point)*’ or ‘*Regardless...*’ can provide a similar function without the dismissive connotation.

NNES presenters should also beware of using the following phrases:

a. *From the viewpoint of X.*

‘*Viewpoint*’ here usually refers to someone’s opinion and thus is not normally used as a categorizer. ‘*As far as X is concerned*’ would be preferable.

b. *In the therapeutic options...X*

If the speaker is selecting certain items for emphasis and expositional discussion, ‘*Among X*’ or ‘*As for X*’ would be preferred.

c. *As for/In regards to X/Additionally/Furthermore...*

All of these four phrases are well-established and widely used among presenters of all stripes. However, they deserve a special mention here because in my observations, other, less felicitous, choices were often considered functional equivalents and used in their place.

For example, standard itemizers in many NNESs’ L1 lexicons often become rendered as ‘*About X*’ in English. However, ‘*about*’ does not serve an initial topic introduction function in English and is also typically used in more informal settings.

'As for' and 'In regards to/Regarding' carry out the function of introducing new topics, items, and categories with a more appropriate academic tenor.

'Moreover' is an item that tends to be both overused *and* misused—it typically indicates additional logical and/or philosophical connotations, as when the speaker is expanding upon a conceptual basis—than do 'additionally/furthermore', which simply signal the introduction of further data or detail.

Among humanities CPs in particular, I also noted a number of cases in which the speaker completed a section of text by using a very abrupt summative phrases such as:

...And that's that. So now let's look at...
Yeah, so what I mean is...

These serve as flawed examples of what I have mentioned earlier regarding CPs being expressed in the manner of a dialogue in order to establish rapport or an interpersonal dimension with the audience. Readers might want to consider whether the above forms actually help to impart the interpersonal function of a CP or simply serve as inarticulate acoustic filler, lacking definition or purpose, with the possible uptake of disengaging an academic audience.

Questions and Exercises for Sections 16.4 and 16.5

1. Think of effective transition phrases for each of the following CP cases:
 - a. Marking an abrupt change of topic
 - b. Introducing a second item or turn when outlining a procedure
 - c. Moving from explaining effect to explaining causes
 - d. Shifting from explaining methods to discussing results
 - e. Indicating temporal markers when shifting from background information to procedures
 - f. Shifting from an opening or outline to the main body of the CP
2. Why does the author warn readers about using 'anyway' and 'moreover' as transition markers?
3. Explain a common procedure that you carry out every day (such as the activities you typically carry out at home before leaving for work or school) as a speech activity, record your speech, and then note which transition markers you used most. Next, tell a funny or interesting story, record it, and again note the transition markers used. Which transition markers did you find most effective and/or appropriate according to your speaking purpose?
4. Think of two transitional phrases that can be useful for each of the following functions:
 - (a) elaborating/emphasizing
 - (b) explaining research results
 - (c) introducing research results

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