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## SEEKING COMMON GROUND: THE ENGLISH DISCOURSE MARKERS *OKAY*

This paper studies the cognitive role of the English discourse marker *okay* in utterance interpretation. It argues that in analysing data it is important to make two crucial distinctions. The first distinction is semantic about the type of meaning encoded by a linguistic item – conceptual or procedural. The second is a pragmatic distinction between explicitly and implicitly communicated meanings. Relying on the notions of common ground and mutual manifestness (of assumptions), I put forward a univocal semantic analysis of *okay* as a procedural indicator of a particular contextual assumption. The analysis is couched within the relevance-theoretic framework and based on data from formal and informal types of discourse.

*Keywords:* common ground, implicature, mutual manifestness, *okay*, procedural meaning, relevance theory

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Quite broadly, there are two opposing approaches to the study of meaning – radical semantics and radical pragmatics. According to the former, different meanings of an expression should be attributed to (linguistic) semantics and the role played by pragmatics should be reduced to a minimum. According to the latter, meanings, whenever possible, should be assimilated to pragmatics and the role played by semantics should be reduced to a minimum (Huang 2012).

This paper examines the meaning of the English discourse marker *okay*. Rather than subscribe to either school of thought, I adopt a contextualist view according to which, contextual variations in semantic content should be accounted for in terms of a criterion of contextual best fit. This is, in fact, the gist of the semantic underdeterminacy thesis (cf. Carston 2002): (linguistically) encoded meaning underdetermines the proposition expressed by an utterance, and therefore, inferential (pragmatic) processes are necessary to establish not only what the speaker intends to conversationally implicate, but also what (s)he intends to say.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, a sentence expresses a determinate semantic content only in the context of an utterance.

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2 I am referring to Grice's (1989) semantics/pragmatics division in the total signification of an utterance.

Working within the framework of relevance theory (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986, Blakemore 1987, Blass 1990 and Carston 2002), my starting hypothesis is that the discourse marker *okay* is a procedural, non-truth-conditional, linguistic indicator of a particular context selection.

My analysis is based on the data collected from formal (BC) and informal (SBC) types of discourse so as to ensure diversity and generality of conclusions. The BC corpus was collected during a two-year period in a multinational company in the south of France where English (especially the British variant) was used as a *lingua franca* (face-to-face and telephone conversations as well as written instances recorded in an on-line software that simulates face-to-face conversation). The SBC corpus (*Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English*) represents the American component in the *International Corpus of English* (approximately 15 hours of speech) and encompasses different ways in which native speakers use language in their lives.

The paper is organised around the following sections: section (2) presents the relevance-theoretic postulates pertinent to the matter at hand; section (3) gives a semantic-pragmatic analysis of the discourse marker *okay* and provides a rationale for the definition of its meaning; section (4) summarises the findings.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A cognitive-inferential account of human communication argued for in relevance theory (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986, Carston 2002) rests on a single criterion – *relevance*. This reflexive pragmatic principle operates universally, without exception. In verbal communication, specifically, it is triggered by the speaker's utterance as an ostensive (i.e. overt and intended) stimulus. When computing speaker meaning, the addressee follows a path of least effort by formulating interpretive hypotheses according to their accessibility and terminating the inferential process once his/her expectation of relevance on a particular occasion of utterance has been satisfied. The addressee's inferential engagement is guided by the presumption that the utterance is not only relevant enough to merit his/her attention, but is also the most relevant one given the speaker's abilities and preferences.

Relevance is not an absolute, but a comparative notion. It is a two-pronged property of an utterance: relevance decreases with the expenditure of the addressee's effort in computing speaker meaning just as it increases with adequate cognitive effects the utterance brings about. A positive cognitive effect of an utterance may be the strengthening of an addressee's existing assumption (thereby confirming it), contradiction (and hence elimination) of an addressee's existing assumption and the derivation of a conclusion (based on the speaker's utterance and an activated subset of the assumptions present in the addressee's cognitive environment).

In sum, pragmatic inference is a relevance-driven process: in order to spare the addressee's gratuitous processing effort (e.g. easily accessible assumptions) and yet enable him/her to achieve adequate cognitive effects, the

speaker will encode just what is necessary and leave the rest to the powerful pragmatic system to work out the intended meaning.

The intended meaning comes in two types: explicatures and implicatures. A speaker-meant proposition is explicit if it is the result of pragmatic development of an incomplete logical form encoded by an utterance – (*base-level*) *explicature*, or is a higher-order description of a generic speech act type (i.e. saying that *P*, asking whether *P* or telling the addressee that *P*, where *P* is the propositional form of an utterance) or of the speaker's propositional attitude (or of any other comment) on the base-level explicature. These are potential *higher-level explicatures* whose actual relevance depends on context. Any other proposition communicated by an utterance is an *implicature*: either a speaker-meant assumption which the addressee activates in the context of utterance (*implicated premise*) or a contextual implication of the speaker's utterance (*implicated conclusion*). Implicated premises and conclusions vary in their interpretive strength: strong implicatures are those communicated assumptions whose derivation is crucial for the speaker-meant interpretation. Successively weaker implicatures of an utterance fall within the addressee's cognitive environment of individual hypotheses formation and confirmation.

We now come to the final point pertinent to my subsequent analysis of the discourse marker *okay* – the semantics-pragmatics interface. This is the issue of how linguistically-encoded meaning provides input to the inferential phase of utterance comprehension: in a conceptual or procedural way. Conceptual meaning enters into the representational content of an utterance; that is, it contributes constituents to the explicit side of communication: the proposition expressed by an utterance/explicature<sup>3</sup> or higher-level explicature (e.g. the so-called “content words”, sentence adverbials and some discourse markers, such as *consequently*). Procedural meaning, by contrast, encodes specific inferential routes in the manipulation of conceptual representations; that is, it indicates how the addressee should “take” the utterance. Procedural meaning may surface at the level of explicature (e.g. tense markers, deictics and discourse particles that signal the process of lexical modulation), higher-level explicature (e.g. mood indicators and interjections) and implicature (e.g. discourse connectives and some discourse markers). The cognitive semantic distinction reflects, in essence, the central relevance-theoretic view of the mind in terms of representations and computations.

3 An utterance expresses a (pragmatically enriched, truth-evaluable) proposition. If the proposition is, simultaneously, communicated by the speaker (i.e. (s)he is committed to the validity of the propositional content), it becomes the (base-level) explicature. Ironic utterances, for instance, have the proposition expressed but no (base-level) explicatures because the speaker is distancing himself/herself from the propositional content which (s)he attributes to someone else. The relevance of ironic utterances lies in implicitly communicating a specific attitude to the proposition expressed – a higher-level explicature that conveys the speaker's dissociation (e.g. mildly amusing, mocking, sarcastic, etc.).

### 3. THE COGNITIVE ROLE OF OKAY

Leech and Svartvik (1994: 13) regard *okay* as a discourse filler whose function is mainly interactive. In his sociopragmatic taxonomy of English pragmatic markers<sup>4</sup>, Fraser (1996: 171) classifies *okay* within a general group of basic markers which have “representational meaning” in that they “contribute conceptual information over and above that of the propositional meaning”. In other words, basic markers are supposed to specify the illocutionary force of an utterance. Alongside other interjections and emotive words or phrases, *okay* is a message idiom because it “signals entire basic message” and stands alone as a separate sentence (1996: 176). The particular basic message that *okay* expresses, says Fraser, is agreement (also conveyed by *uh-huh*, *yes!*, *yeah!* and *yup!*) but it may also be used “as a discourse marker to signal speaker’s intention to reorient the ongoing conversation” (ibid.).

Although comprehensive, Fraser’s classification misses a central point, namely, that taxonomies have to be based on a cognitive theory which takes into account the issue of how bits of linguistic information interact with context to contribute to interlocutors’ interpretation of an ongoing conversation. This was one of the early claims of relevance theory:

[I]t is one thing to invent, for one’s own theoretical purposes, a set of categories to use in classifying the utterances of native speakers. It is quite another to claim that such a classification plays a necessary role in communication and comprehension.

(Sperber and Wilson 1986: 244)

This drawback aside, Fraser was right when he described the “meanings” of *okay* as those of agreement and reorientation just as Leech and Svartvik were right to highlight its interactive function. However, to consider *okay* to be semantically ambiguous would be to subscribe to a polysemy fallacy<sup>5</sup> and neglect the role played by context in determining lexical meaning. Instead, I follow Grice’s (1989) methodological principle, assuming that *okay* has a univocal semantics. This crucially depends on whether it is possible to provide a pragmatic account which relates the meaning that is common to all uses of the word with the meanings which are context specific.

*Okay* cannot encode a conceptual type of information for to do so it would have to figure as a representational constituent of the proposition expressed/explicature affecting its truth conditions. This, clearly, is not the case. The only other possibility is to form part of a higher-level description by encoding the illocutionary force of an utterance in which case *okay* would have a representation akin to illocutionary adverbials such as *frankly* in (1):

(1) Frankly, Rhett Butler doesn’t give a damn anymore.

4 Pragmatic markers, according to Fraser, include basic markers (e.g. *I promise* and *mark my words*), commentary markers (e.g. *frankly* and *I insist*), parallel markers (e.g. vocatives and *the heck*) and discourse markers (e.g. *but* and *incidentally*).

5 The view that contextually derived distinct senses of a particular lexical item should be analysed as an instance of polysemy.

The utterance communicates the higher-level explicature ‘The speaker is saying frankly that Rhett Butler doesn’t give a damn anymore’. More generally, the adverbial modifies the illocutionary verb (‘I say/ask/suggest frankly that *P*’) and does not have any truth-conditional contribution to the proposition expressed/explicature. This seems to be Fraser’s (1996) position. However, it is not easy to provide unequivocally a parallel conceptual representation for *okay* (i.e. something like ‘I say/ask/suggest in agreement that *P*’, even less so for the reorienting meaning).

This brings us to an alternative approach to the semantics of *okay*, viz. that the marker encodes a procedural type of information. And procedural encodings are fairly illusive in nature:

Conceptual representations can be brought to consciousness; procedures cannot. We have direct access neither to grammatical computations nor to the inferential computations used in comprehension. A procedural analysis would explain our lack of direct access to the information [discourse markers] encode.  
(Wilson and Sperber 1993: 16)

This is the position I take in this paper: the discourse marker *okay* is a proper semantic constraint on the relevance of implicitly communicated assumptions.

In order to examine how *okay* constrains inferential computations in utterance understanding, I shall briefly discuss the turn-initial *okay* used in replies and see how it relates to the cognitive effects of strengthening an existing assumption (2), derivation of contextual implications (3) and denials (4), which are commonly indicated by the discourse connectives *after all*, *so* and *but*, respectively (cf. Blakemore 1987):

- (2) A: You must have another drink.  
B: After all, it’s my birthday./Okay, it’s my birthday.
- (3) A: It’s your birthday.  
B: So I must have another drink./Okay, I must have another drink.
- (4) A: Alex is a politician.  
B: But he’s honest./?Okay, he’s honest./Okay, but he’s honest.

In (2) *after all* constrains the relevance of the proposition it prefaces to that of better evidence thereby strengthening A’s claim. In (3) *so* indicates a reversal of the inferential relation: the prefaced proposition is to be taken as a conclusion derived from A’s claim and the implicit premise ‘One is expected to drink more on one’s birthday’. *Okay* is compatible with both types of cognitive effects but it does not directly encode either of them.

Example (4), on the other hand, shows that *okay* is incompatible with denials unless the cognitive effect of contradiction and elimination of an existing assumption is explicitly signalled by a contrastive marker, such as *but*. B’s reply is differently interpreted: without *but*, *okay* signals the inference that the explicature ‘Alex is a politician’ is used as a premise together with the implicated premise ‘All politicians are honest’ for the derivation of the explicated conclusion ‘Alex is honest’; with *but*, A’s explicature is conceded with *okay* but

the explicated conclusion is understood as a denial of the implicated assumption 'All politicians are dishonest'.

That the meaning of *okay* is incompatible with the notion of contradiction is supported by the fact that the marker is frequently used to mitigate disagreement in front-stage interaction. In my data, the utterance-final *okay* with the rising intonation was most common when the addressee's request for action could not be immediately complied with. Being potentially face-threatening to interlocutors (Brown and Levinson 1987) delays were commonly redressed with *okay*. The tag seems to have signalled that the speaker was checking the addressee's understanding and agreement. The following example illustrates:

- (5)<sup>6</sup> A: I need to have this QCID changed to fall on another office. It's urgent!  
 B: Sure, no problem. What's the work order?  
 A: Well, I didn't open it. It's URGENT and the queue bank is empty now.  
 B: But you know the procedure.  
 A: Yes, but-  
 B: Well, we can't change the QCID [without]  
 A: [Yes,] but I need it immediately.  
 B: We'll change the QCID IMMEDIATELY, when you open a work order. They are anyhow done regularly. So, you open a work order and let us know. And we'll do it.  
Okay?  
 A: But- Okay. I'll do it.

(BC)

*Okay* with the falling intonation typically co-occurred with a marker of contrast (e.g. *but* or *only*) which signalled disagreement with what had previously transpired. As a dispreferred speech act disagreement was then mitigated by the use of *okay*. The following example illustrates:

- (6) A: We accept that the problem may have been caused by a loop message but we need to open a PTR each time because we have to see the PNR to determine if it is the problem of our IRIS system or the super-agent and to correct it.  
 B: Okay. But when a PNR is non-retrievable in this type of circumstance it usually means that this has been purposely done to avoid further looping and dumps. The first place to search could be your inventory system PNR to confirm or eliminate if looping generated from there. Perhaps that could save a little time.

(BC)

6 The transcription used here follows the notation given in Atkinson and Heritage (1984: ix/xvi):  
 , continuing intonation ('more to come')  
 . falling intonation (as at the end of declarative sentence)  
 ? rising intonation (as at the end of interrogative sentence)  
 ! animated tone  
 CAPITALS emphatic stress or acronym  
 Underlining word commented on  
 - incompleteness or self-interruption  
 [ ] overlapping utterances ('[' onset of overlapping talk; ']' offset of overlapping talk)

This function of *okay* as a marker of pseudo-agreement is not unlike that of the *yes, but* cluster. However, while *okay*-prefaced disagreements indicate that the speaker has given some deliberation to the preceding propositional content, the *yes, but* cluster is more peremptory and superficial in this respect (although both are essentially conciliatory).

In sum, *okay* functioning as a mitigator is first and foremost a marker of cooperation that brackets a dispreferred speech act: with the falling intonation, it signals that cooperation is maintained; as a tag, it signals that cooperation is asked for.

The interactional, mitigating, function of *okay* that is so typical of formal discourse is more or less entwined with certain other, transactional, functions that surfaced in informal usages in my data (i.e. face-to-face conversation between friends or family members). These functions I provisionally group as agreement proper, concessive agreement, concessive receipt of new information (the *oh, okay* cluster) and agreement for topic conclusion (i.e. Fraser's "re-orientation"). The following excerpts illustrate:

(7)<sup>7</sup> Marilyn: Let's cook those-

Pete: Wash them?

Marilyn: Yeah.

Pete: Did-

Marilyn: Wash them.

Pete: .. did you want them broken smaller, or,

Marilyn: Oh, I think they are good like that.

Pete: Okay.

(SBC)

(8) Harold: I think you think, you better go back to your table, fa=st.

Jamie: Ri=ght.

Harold: .. Apparently. .. I'll f- I'll tell you when I'm fifty what you think, okay?

Jamie: (Hx) That'll be weird when you're fifty. .. Wonder what you'll look like.

(SBC)

<sup>7</sup> The transcription conventions used for the SBC data follow the original notation in the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English presented in Bois *et al* (1992):

- abrupt cut-off
- [ ] overlapping talk
- . final intonation
- , continuous intonation
- ! animation
- ? appealing intonation
- .. short pause
- ... long pause
- (H) inhalation
- (Hx) exhalation
- = extended sound or syllable

*Okay* in (7) and (8) has the function of agreement proper. It is a backward-pointing indicator that signals the inferential derivation of an implicit assumption ‘I now see (understand) what you mean’ (7) and ‘Do you see (understand) what I mean’ (8). As a marker of backward confirmation – given or asked for – *okay* highlights the relevance of the proposition that has just been presented. By confirming the relevance of the interlocutor’s contribution (or by seeking it for the own contribution), the speaker is at the same time displaying his/her attentiveness to the verbal stimuli and the ground is, at least, prepared for cooperation.

(9) Doris: And n=ext thing you knew, it was just overcast .. well the smoke all blew in. Just like there was a fire. Right around close. (H) And it was just .. dense. You couldn’t even hardly see, very far away. (H) Okay then, ... it- .. that- .. s- .. it just kinda blew the some in, and then blew it out, but, then it was real hazy, and there was just dust particles, all over.

(SBC)

(10) Lynne: You said you never made the horseshoes.

Lenore: But-

Lynne: ... Well u=m, when we put em on a horse’s hoof, all we do, (H) they’re already made. .. They are round. .. We pick out a size. .. you know we’d, like look at the horse’s hoof, and say, okay, (H) this is a double-aught.

(SBC)

Excerpts (9) and (10) illustrate the function of concessive agreement. This group of usages is somewhat peculiar for two reasons. One is exemplified in (9) where *okay* is part of a narrative (i.e. the speaker’s extended turn). The other is exemplified in (10) where *okay* prefaces the metarepresented proposition introduced by a verb of saying, which cancels a descriptive (i.e. truth-based) interpretation of the proposition expressed (‘This<sub>x</sub> is a double-aught’<sup>8</sup>) and presents the information as a resemblance-based.<sup>9,10</sup> This function of *okay* clearly begs the question of how to account for the postulated backward confirmation, and hence expected cooperation, in the light of the presented data. The question is, however, more apparent than real. Here, as well, the speaker is seeking the addressee’s cooperation, but the inferential derivation of an implicit assumption is slightly different in that concession comes into play: ‘If you are prepared to accede to what I’ve been telling you so far, I’ll reach my conclusion/explain my point’ (or simply put ‘Grant me this and I shall...’).

8 The subscript letter ‘<sub>x</sub>’ is used as a symbol of the pragmatic process of reference assignment for the indexical *this*.

9 In interpretive language use, the speaker is echoing someone else’s mental representation (a thought or utterance) by conveying his/her attitude (endorsing or dissociative) to the proposition expressed. Herein lies the relevance of a metarepresentation. The speaker may attribute a metarepresented proposition to the addressee, a third person, people in general, or to himself/herself at a time other than the time of utterance (Carston 2002).

10 Interpretive language use may also be indicated by pragmatic particles, such as English *like*, Serbo-Croatian *kao* and *ono* and Sissala *ɛ* (cf. Blass 1990, Andersen 2000, Mišković-Luković 2010 and Premilovac 2010).



This again points to the highlighted relevance of an *okay*-utterance in terms of backward confirmation and interactive cooperation.

(11) Jamie: (Hx) That'll be weird when you're fifty. .. Wonder what you'll look like.

Harold: .. Nobody's fifty, don't worry about it.

Jamie: Oh, okay. Ha ha ha.

Harold: .. Y=ep.

(SBC)

(12) Kathy: All you have is twel=ve kids?

Sharon: .. What?

Kathy: You only have twelve kids?

Sharon: No-

Kathy: So you have fifteen fourth-graders, and five third-graders.

Sharon: Uh= no. .. I have like seventeen fourth-graders and five third-graders.

Kathy: Oh, okay. So then what you do is, you sprinkle the fifth-graders out evenly. .. And you make the fourth-graders .. take the responsibility for teaching them.

(SBC)

Excerpts (11) and (12) illustrate the function of a concessive receipt of new information. Syntactically, the discourse marker *okay* comes as the second constituent of the (non-compositional) cluster *oh, okay*. On the one hand, the interjection *oh* signals the speaker's acknowledgement of a new piece of information (Fraser 1996) proffered in the preceding discourse segment (or of information management, according to Schiffrin 1987). On the other hand, *okay* signals the speaker's acceptance of such information as an agreed concession to his/her own topical agenda.

(13) Pete: Are they just going .. on that, or-

Marilyn: Uh .. you wanna put em in a .. colander, and then .. wash em.

Pete: Yeah.

Marilyn: Oh I see, we have to .. big ones. .. Instead of .. good. Good good. ... Okay, now=. How much do you guys each want like .. half of that?

Pete: Sure.

(SBC)

(14) Roy: Could I beg my indulgence, my dear? That I might slip in past you here?

Marilyn: You can. Sure. .. Okay, so did we decide we do or do not want potatoe=s?

Roy: I think potatoes are excessive. I think we have enough food here.

Marilyn: Peter?

Pete: Um, that's fine.

(SBC)

Excerpts (13) and (14) illustrate the function of topic closure agreement. Opening a new topic is typically indicated by the marker *now* (13) (cf. Atkinson and Heritage 1984, Schiffrin 1987 and Stević 1997) but also by *so* in (14), which otherwise prefaces the speaker's conclusion, and by *so then* in (12) partly repeated here as (15) for convenience:

- (15) Kathy: So you have fifteen fourth-graders, and five third-graders.  
 Sharon: Uh= no. .. I have like seventeen fourth-graders and five third-graders.  
 Kathy: Oh, okay. So then what you do is, you sprinkle the fifth-graders out evenly. .. And you make the fourth-graders .. take the responsibility for teaching them.

(SBC)

The difference between the *so*-utterances in (14) and (15) lies in the degree of the speaker's commitment to his/her claim (i.e. to the proposition expressed/explicature): higher tentativeness of the speaker's conclusion in (14) is syntactically conveyed by the subject/auxiliary inversion; higher certainty of the speaker's conclusion in (15) is conveyed by the indicative mood (regardless of the addressee's subsequent acceptance (agreement) or rejection (disagreement) to close the conversational topic). This, however, does not affect the discourse function of the marker *okay*, which, by back-pointing to the previous discourse segments, signals the speaker's acceptance to an invitation for topic closure.

So far I have shown that *okay* is a multi-functional marker. Nonetheless, this should not be taken as an argument for the view that multi-functional markers are necessarily polysemous.<sup>11</sup> In order to account for the core semantic meaning of *okay*, which underlies the discourse functions attested in my data, I shall resort to two related notions pertinent to verbal communication: *common ground* (Huang 2012) and *mutual manifestness* (Carston 2002).

Common ground refers to a set of implicit assumptions that interlocutors not only share in communication, but also take them for granted (i.e. linguistic knowledge, contextual knowledge and real-world knowledge). It may be communal or personal. The former is based on community membership while the latter encompasses joint perceptual and linguistic experience in a communicative act that is based on interlocutors' past experience as community members.<sup>12</sup> This is one construal of *context*.

In the relevance-theoretic framework, *context* is (psychologically) defined as a subset of assumptions that are cognitively activated on the basis of the speaker's utterance. A crucial step in utterance understanding, from the perspective of the speaker-addressee's joint interactional endeavour, is to com-

11 Cf. Halliday's (1985) treatment of *but*. Cf. Bell's (1998: 518) criticism of Halliday's analysis because it leads to two different conclusions: *but* is either polysemous (signalling three different relationships between disjunctive propositions: adversative, replacive and concessive) or is semantically vague (signalling various context-sensitive meaning relationships).

12 In contrast to the notion *privileged ground* that refers to the information available to the speaker, or one of the interlocutors (Huang 2012).

bine the speaker's utterance with a subset of the addressee's existing assumptions to attain a mutual cognitive environment in which every manifest (i.e. evident) assumption becomes *mutually* manifest (i.e. the interlocutors become aware that they share such assumptions).

The core semantic meaning of the discourse marker *okay* lies in constraining the inferential derivation of the assumption that what is currently on the "conversational table" (i.e. the preceding discourse segment(s)) is (or should be) understood as uncontroversial and accepted for the purpose of further conversational exchange.<sup>13</sup> This mutually manifest assumption, triggered by *okay*, constitutes a (personal) common ground for ongoing conversation.

By way of conclusion, the following table summarises the semantic meaning and pragmatic contribution of the discourse marker *okay* advocated in this paper:

THE DISCOURSE MARKER OKAY	
LINGUISTIC SEMANTICS	procedural meaning
'REAL-WORLD' SEMANTICS	non-truth-conditional meaning
PRAGMATICS	implicit communication, context selection

Table 1: The cognitive role of the discourse marker okay

#### 4. WINDING UP

This paper set out to examine the core meaning and interpretation of the English discourse marker *okay*. The aim was to address the issue of how *okay* contributed to the relevant interpretation of the surrounding discourse given its various functions.

The analysis pivoted around two basic distinctions: a cognitive semantic distinction between conceptual and procedural types of meaning, and a pragmatic distinction between explicitly and implicitly communicated propositions.

My findings point to the conclusion that *okay* is a (non-truth-conditional) procedural marker of context selection. It indicates an inferential route in the computation of the preceding utterance(s) such that it gives access to the implicit premise that, given the context, the speaker cooperatively consents to what has been said (or is cooperatively seeking such a consent in *okay*-tags).

Although this study was not envisaged in statistical terms, the following figures might be significant for a further, more quantitatively-oriented analysis of the distribution of *okay* in speech: 30% agreement proper, 25% concessive agreement, 20% receipt of new information and 25% agreement for topic closure. Last but not least, mutual manifestness (of assumptions) and common

<sup>13</sup> I am referring, of course, to the propositional content and not to the illocutionary force of a preceding discourse segment; e.g. the addressee may acknowledge his/her understanding and acceptance of the propositional content of the speaker's utterance and yet choose to neglect its illocutionary import (as in requests for action).

ground constitute a good starting point for a contrastive study of discourse markers that share this core cognitive role in utterance interpretation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicate this paper to Prof. Regina Blass, a dear colleague and persisting explorer into the intricacies of procedural meaning. Her recent passing away has deprived the relevance-theoretic circle of an exemplary scholar.

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## KA ZAJEDNIČKIM PRETPOSTAVKAMA: ENGLISKI MARKER DISKURSA OKAY

### Rezime

*Okay* je polifunkcionalan izraz u engleskom jeziku. Uz to, spada u najučestalije pozajmljenice u savremenim jezicima. Iz interkulturalne perspektive, moglo bi se, štaviše, govoriti o svojevrsnoj konceptualizaciji ovog izraza kao potencijalno univerzalnog „leksičkog idioma“.

Ova studija je, međutim, posvećena analizi značenja izraza *okay* prema načinu na koji se on koristi u engleskom jeziku. Sledeći pragmatički, metodološki princip, da značenja ne treba semantički (tj. polisemično) tumačiti bez preke potrebe, došli smo do zaključka da *okay*, kao marker diskursa, kodira proceduralnu informaciju o relevanciji implicirane premise da se prethodni propozicioni sadržaj prihvati kao nekontroverzan radi kooperativnog nastavka ili završetka konverzacijonog čina.

*Кljučне речи:* implikatura, *okay*, proceduralno značenje, teorija relevancije, uzajamna manifestnost, zajedničke pretpostavke

Примљен 6. јуна 2015. године  
Прихваћен 1. јула 2015. године