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Pragmatic Analysis of Discourse Markers in Imran Khan's English Speeches

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the strategic use of discourse markers (DMs) in Imran Khan's political speeches through a pragmatic lens, aiming to uncover how language functions to construct ideological narratives. The study utilized a qualitative discourse-pragmatic approach to analyse ten speeches by one of the political leaders from 2013 to 2022, chosen for their structure, rhetoric, scope, and subject variety. The transcripts, as secondary data, were sourced from reputable media outlets. The analysis takes a qualitative discourse-pragmatic approach, drawing on Schiffrin's and Fraser's Discourse Markers taxonomies. Each marker was detected in context and classified according to its function. The study focused on how Discourse Markers contribute to rhetorical goals and ideological framing. The DMs were categorized into five functional types: contrastive, inferential, elaborative, topic-management, and interpersonal. The findings reveal that the former PM consistently employs DMs to build moral binaries, justify political actions, amplify reformist agendas, and simulate conversational intimacy with the audience. These markers serve as rhetorical scaffolds that enhance coherence, reinforce populist appeal, and foreground ideological clarity. The study highlights how DMs—often overlooked as peripheral elements—play a central role in shaping political discourse, particularly within populist frameworks where emotional

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resonance and strategic ambiguity are key. It also underscores the pedagogical value of DMs for ESL education, advocating for their inclusion in curriculum design to foster pragmatic competence and critical language awareness. Ultimately, the study affirms that discourse markers are not merely linguistic fillers but potent instruments of persuasion, ideology, and narrative control in contemporary political rhetoric.

Keywords: Pragmatic Exploration; Linguistic Analysis; Pakistani English; Discourse Markers; Political Speech; Strategic Discourse

1. Introduction

The study was specifically conducted for academic purposes to develop strong soft skills in ESL learners through the lens of English speeches. The main purpose of the study was to gain insight into politicians' beliefs and values using Discourse Markers. Discourse markers (DMs) are integral to the fluidity and coherence of spoken and written communication, functioning as pragmatic tools that facilitate textual organization, signal speaker attitudes, and guide audience interpretation. These linguistic elements—such as *but*, *so*, *you know*, and *well*—operate beyond their syntactic roles to encode speaker intentions, manage conversational flow, and enhance listener engagement[1–3]. Within political discourse, their significance intensifies, as they contribute not only to rhetorical finesse but also to the construction of ideological boundaries and persuasive appeal. Political speeches, particularly within populist frameworks, rely heavily on strategic language to mobilize supporters, discredit opposition, and legitimize leadership. In this regard, DMs serve as subtle yet powerful instruments in shaping narratives and reinforcing moral dichotomies. While often dismissed as peripheral or ornamental, these markers hold the capacity to structure arguments, foreground ideological positions, and simulate dialogic proximity between speaker and audience. This study examines the strategic use of discourse markers in selected political speeches delivered by Imran Khan, a prominent South Asian political figure known for his populist rhetoric and charismatic public persona. The speeches were selected by the participants who had to undertake the study; however, there was not any reason to select former PM's speeches for this study, because during the coursework of Pragmatics, all the participants were given topics on most of the political speeches from Pakistan's politics to investigate what type of MDs are utilized by them. Drawing upon pragmatic theories and DM taxonomies proposed by Schiffrin[1], Fraser[2], and Blakemore[3], this analysis investigates how the former PM deploys DMs to navigate political discourse, manage audience alignment, and construct his leadership ethos. The research situates itself within the larger field of political pragmatics, offering insights into the relationship between linguistic form, ideological positioning, and performative persuasion in contemporary Pakistani political communication. The study will benefit the communication skills of ESL learners and develop critical thinking to analyse political discourse. The research work will bring more understanding of effective communication strategies. The study will critically evaluate enhanced media literacy through the lens of political messages, discourse, and narratives of their political leaders.

1.1. Discourse Markers in Pragmatics

Discourse markers (DMs) have long held a pivotal yet contested position in pragmatics and discourse analysis. While definitions and classifications remain fluid across frameworks, scholars converge on their core function: structuring communication and signaling speaker intent. He introduced DMs as cohesive devices—lexical tools like *but*, *so*, *well*, and *you know*-that guide interpretation without altering propositional content. She argued that DMs manage interaction, segment discourse, and facilitate cognitive transitions[1]. In another study, it enhanced the understanding by defining DMs as pragmatic elements derived from conjunctions, adverbs, or prepositional phrases that link discourse segments[2]. His classification comprises:

- Contrastive markers (*but*, *however*)
- Elaborative markers (*and*, *furthermore*)
- Inferential markers (*so*, *therefore*)
- Topic-management markers (*now*, *well*)

Additionally, Fraser emphasized that DMs are not a distinct syntactic category but derive their interpretive func-

tion from context. She emphasized the inferential power of DMs. She asserted that markers encode procedural meaning and direct hearers toward contextual implications, thus playing a central role in pragmatic inference rather than merely joining clauses[3]. Other researchers have reiterated this multifunctionality, framing DMs as scaffolds across referential, structural, interpersonal, and cognitive dimensions, particularly in spoken discourse, where fluid interaction is crucial[4].

1.2. Interpersonal Functions and Ideological Framing

Interpersonal markers like *you know*, *believe me*, and *I mean* contribute to rapport-building and mitigation of face-threatening acts, aligning with Jucker and Ziv's[5] politeness theory. These markers not only foster listener engagement but also construct speaker ethos—a crucial element in political rhetoric. Investigators categorized these DMs as dual agents of interpersonal alignment and cognitive organization, which provide interpretive cues and simulate conversational intimacy[5].

1.3. Political Discourse and Strategic Use of Language

Political discourse is inherently strategic-a site where language operates to persuade, legitimize, and polarize. *The Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)* views political language as a vehicle of ideological power. Discourse markers, in this light, are not peripheral but performative, shaping perception and constructing reality[6]. The researcher posited that DMs manage representation, suppression, and classification, subtle functions essential in navigating political tensions. For instance, contrastive markers like *but* can redirect blame or reframe narratives, while inferential markers lend rational legitimacy to political decisions[7]. The theory of populist reason suggests that linguistic devices—particularly binary structures enabled by DMs—help define boundaries between "us" and "them," reinforcing moral polarities that energize populist discourse[8].

1.4. Imran Khan's Political Rhetorical Style

Imran Khan's rhetorical style combines populist assertiveness, Islamic moralism, and anti-elite narratives[9]. His speeches are characterized by emotive appeals, repetition, and strategic silence[10]. While previous studies explored metaphoric or thematic dimensions of his discourse, few have systematically analyzed his use of DMs as tools for political persuasion. He introduces the concept of *interdiscursivity*, describing how professionals borrow from various discursive domains—law, media, and religion—to enhance their persuasive power. Former PM's use of DMs illustrates such borrowing, blending legal-sounding clauses with religious sincerity to amplify authority and ethos[11]. One study reports that the newspapers published oversentimental articles and editorials, which went a long way in straining the relationship between the two countries[12]. In another study, the ways and means through linguistic diversity of DMs were analyzed regarding the ethnic-religious unrest in Balochistan through the political unrest in the country[13].

1.5. Research Questions

1. What type of discourse markers does Imran Khan use in his political speeches?
2. What are the pragmatic functions of these markers?
3. How do discourse markers contribute to the rhetorical and ideological impact of his speeches?

1.6. Objectives of the Study

- To classify and identify the various discourse markers that Imran Khan uses in his political speeches.
- To evaluate the practical roles of the discourse markers in political speech.
- To examine how language is strategically used to manage public opinion, establish relationships, and shape audience perception.

2. Materials and Methods

Ten speeches were purposively selected to achieve representativeness across key thematic domains pertinent to the study, including motivation, instructional clarity, cultural relevance, and student engagement. These speeches stem from varied classroom settings and grade levels, reflecting differences in pedagogical approaches and learner responses. The selection prioritized thematic diversity to encompass a wide range of communicative strategies and

instructional outcomes, thereby improving the generalizability of the research findings. Transcriptions were completed manually and cross-checked with audio recordings to ensure optimal accuracy. Minor disfluencies and relevant non-verbal cues were included to preserve pragmatic and interactional elements essential for analysis. The study focuses specifically on ten significant speeches delivered by the former PM between 2013 and 2022, noted for their structural and rhetorical proficiency, broad political and geographical relevance, and wide-ranging subject matter. As with the other speeches, the required transcripts were obtained from recognized media repositories, political parties' sanctioned repositories, and from various transcription sites. Each speech was analyzed for its frequency, types, and strategic function of discourse markers, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the former PM's rhetorical style. Some of the notable speeches and demographic audiences are in **Tables 1** and **2**.

Table 1. Political speeches of Imran Khan.

No.	Political Speeches of Imran Khan
1.	Victory Speech (July 26, 2018) – delivered after the political party's win in the general elections, outlining key governance priorities and his vision for a "Naya Pakistan."
2.	United Nations General Assembly address (September 27, 2019) – focused on islamophobia, Kashmir, and global justice, emphasizing Pakistan's moral stance.
3.	United Nations General Assembly address (September 24, 2021) – addressed issues of regional peace, climate change, and Afghan stability.
4.	Post-ouster national address (April 9, 2022) – broadcast after Khan's removal from office via a no-confidence vote, calling for public mobilization.
5.	Minar-e-Pakistan rally speech (March 23, 2013) – a landmark speech ahead of the 2013 general elections, establishing the political party's reformist agenda.
6.	D-Chowk sit-in speech (August 21, 2014) – during the Azadi March sit-in, critiquing electoral rigging and asserting demands for justice.
7.	COVID-19 national address (March 22, 2020) – addressing the nation about pandemic strategy, economic relief measures, and national unity.
8.	Independence Day speech (August 14, 2020) – reflecting on national challenges, youth empowerment, and ideological identity.
9.	Speech to overseas Pakistanis (December 20, 2021) – delivered via virtual link, emphasizing remittances, patriotism, and diaspora contribution.
10.	Lahore Jalsa speech (October 29, 2022) – a post-premiership rally advocating early elections and criticizing perceived external interference.

Table 2. Audience demographics.

Audience Type	Speech Contexts	Demographic Traits	Rhetorical Features/DMs Used
General Public/Masses	D-Chowk Sit-in (2014), Minar-e-Pakistan Rally (2013 & 2022), Post-Ouster Address (2022)	Politically active, urban middle-class, PTI supporters	Contrastive DMs (*but*, *however*), Topic-management DMs (*now*, *look*)
Youth & Students	Peshawar University Speech (2021), Campaign Speech (2013)	University students, young professionals, reform-oriented	Interpersonal DMs (*you know*, *I mean*), Inferential DMs (*so*, *therefore*)
International Audience	UNGA Speeches (2019 & 2021)	Diplomats, global leaders, international media	Formal tone, Inferential DMs (*therefore*, *so*), Elaborative DMs (*also*, *furthermore*)
Overseas Pakistanis	Speech to Overseas Pakistanis (2021)	Diaspora communities, remittance contributors, patriotic expatriates	Emotional appeals, Interpersonal DMs (*believe me*), Elaborative DMs (*and*, *also*)
ESL Learners & Educators	Pedagogical implications section	Advanced English learners, ESL teachers, curriculum designers	All DM types used as instructional tools to teach pragmatic competence and rhetorical awareness

3. Results

This section analyzes discourse markers across ten selected speeches by Khan, categorized into five pragmatic functions. Each subsection highlights examples and functions of DMs in the rhetorical strategies used in each speech.

3.1. Contrastive Markers Ideologies

Contrastive markers such as but, however, and yet are pivotal in Imran's creation of moral binaries and the "us versus them" populist narrative, as shown in **Table 3**.

These markers construct adversarial binaries: *clean vs. corrupt, people vs. elites, justice vs. Injustice*, hallmark traits of populist rhetoric. They enhance their persuasive impact by clearly positioning Imran Khan and the political party on the moral high ground.

3.2. Inferential Markers

Inferential Discourse Markers (*so, therefore, that's why*) are used to justify decisions, actions, or narratives, as illustrated in **Table 4**.

Inferential markers help the former PM rationalize his actions as unavoidable or morally justified. These markers reinforce a coherent narrative and underpin his ethos as a rational leader[14].

3.3. Elaborative Markers

Elaborative Discourse Markers (*and, also, furthermore*) help build cumulative arguments and highlight multifaceted policy goals, as shown in **Table 5**.

Imran uses Elaborate Discourse Markers to build layered appeals—often mixing emotional, logical, and nationalistic arguments. They increase the impression of policy depth and credibility.

3.4. Topic-Management Markers

Topic-management Discourse Markers (*now, look, let me tell you*) function to shift focus, organize speech, or emphasize transitions, as illustrated in **Table 6**.

These Discourse Markers help organize discourse and guide audience interpretation. They foster clarity, increase engagement, and reinforce leadership control.

3.5. Interpersonal Markers

Interpersonal Discourse Markers *(you know, I mean, believe me*) reflect conversational cues and build rapports, as shown in **Table 7**.

Table 3. Contrastive discourse markers in English speeches.

Speech	Example	Function
1. Victory Speech 2018	"We will run Pakistan like it has never been run before, but we will not tolerate corruption anymore."	Contrasts reformist vision with past government.
2. UNGA Speech 2019	"Islam is a religion of peace, however**,** the world sees it through the lens of terrorism."	Establishes ideological distance from Western narratives.
3. UNGA Speech 2021	"We tried to warn the world about Islamophobia, but they did not listen."	Highlights neglect by global powers.
4. D-Chowk Speech 2022	"The people are with us, yet the institutions failed us."	Contrasts popular support with elite betrayal.
5. Minar-e-Pakistan 2022	"They call it sedition, but it is the voice of freedom."	Reframes accusation as patriotism.
6. Address to Nation 2014 (Dharna)	"We were peaceful, but the police attacked us."	Creates a division between peaceful protest and state violence.
7. Election Campaign Speech 2013	"They had their turn, now it's our time."	Implicit contrastive marker (*now*) marking change of power.
8. COVID-19 National Address 2020	"We cannot afford lockdowns like Europe, however, we will protect our poor."	Balances economic realities with moral duty.
9. Peshawar University Speech 2021	"Youth should be empowered, but only through merit."	Compare empowerment with responsible mechanisms.

Table 3. *Cont.*

Speech	Example	Function
10. Post-Ouster Televised Address 2022	"This is not about me, but about Pakistan's future."	Personal sacrifice vs. national stakes.

Table 4. Inferential discourse markers in English speeches.

Speech	Example	Function
1. Victory Speech 2018	"The people have voted for change, so we will bring a new Pakistan."	Justifies political reforms.
2. Unga speech 2019	"Kashmir is under lockdown; therefore, it is our moral duty to speak out."	Presents moral logic.
3. Unga speech 2021	"India's actions are illegal, so we demand international intervention."	Connects action to obligation.
4. D-chowk speech 2022	"They tried to silence us, that's why we are on the streets."	Justifies protest.
5. Minar-e-Pakistan 2022	"The system is broken, so we need real independence."	Constructs necessity.
6. Address to Nation 2014	"People are disillusioned, so they have joined our movement."	Logical cause-effect of support.
7. Campaign Speech 2013	"The youth have no jobs; therefore, we must fix the economy."	Blames unemployment on governance.
8. COVID-19 Address 2020	"Our healthcare system is fragile, that's why smart lockdowns are needed."	Public health logic.
9. Peshawar Uni. Speech 2021	"Without education, there can be no progress. So, prioritize it."	Logical appeal for reform.
10. Post-ouster Address 2022	"They removed me through conspiracy; therefore, we must resist."	Justification for resistance.

Table 5. Elaborative markers in English speeches.

Speech	Example	Function
1. Victory Speech 2018	"We will reform the police, and we will improve education."	Multi-pronged reform narrative.
2. Unga Speech 2019	"We support Palestine, and we oppose oppression everywhere."	Expanding ideological scope.
3. Unga Speech 2021	"Climate change affects us all, also, poor nations need justice."	Adds humanitarian angle.
4. D-chowk Speech 2022	"This is our fight for sovereignty, and for your children's future."	Emotional intensification.
5. Minar-e-Pakistan 2022	"We stood firm, furthermore, we were peaceful."	Emphasizes moral integrity.
6. Address to Nation 2014	"We want fair elections, and we want accountability."	Lists reform demands.
7. Campaign Speech 2013	"We need schools, hospitals, and jobs."	Holistic development message.
8. COVID-19 Address 2020	"We protected the poor, and kept the economy afloat."	Shows policy balance.
9. Peshawar Uni speech 2021	"You must think critically, and serve society."	Vision for youth.
10. Post-ouster Address 2022	"They violated the Constitution, and insulted democracy."	Moral and legal critique.

Table 6. Topic-management discourse markers in English speeches.

Speech	Example	Function
1. Victory Speech 2018	"Now, let me tell you about our foreign policy."	Introduces new theme.
2. Unga Speech 2019	"Look, what's happening in Kashmir is inhumane."	Directs listener attention.
3. Unga Speech 2021	"Let me be clear, we want peace, not war."	Signals emphasis.
4. D-Chowk Speech 2022	"Now, I will speak from the heart."	Creates intimacy.
5. Minar-E-Pakistan 2022	"Let me tell you why we are here today."	Sets the stage.
6. Address To Nation 2014	"Now, we move to phase two of our protest."	Chronological sequencing.
7. Campaign Speech 2013	"Look, we have a plan for every sector."	Asserts competence.
8. COVID-19 Address 2020	"Now, about vaccines…"	Focus shift.
9. Peshawar University Speech 2021	"Let me share a story."	Narrative introduction.
10. Post-Ouster Address 2022	"Look, this is bigger than politics."	Adds moral urgency.

Table 7. Interpersonal discourse markers in English speeches.

Speech	Example	Function
1. Victory Speech 2018	"Believe me, I'll be accountable."	Trust building.
2. Unga Speech 2019	"You know, Islam doesn't preach violence."	Appeals to common ground.
3. Unga Speech 2021	"I mean, how long will the world ignore this?"	Signals frustration.
4. D-Chowk Speech 2022	"You know, I've always stood for justice."	Personal ethos.
5. Minar-E-Pakistan 2022	"Believe me, we will not back down."	Reinforces resolve.
6. Address To Nation 2014	"I mean, what more do they want?"	Expresses grievance.
7. Campaign Speech 2013	"You know, the youth is our strength."	Rapport with younger voters.
8. COVID-19 Address 2020	"Believe me, I care about every citizen."	Humanizes leadership.
9. Peshawar University Speech 2021	"I mean, think critically."	Encourages reflection.
10. Post-Ouster Address 2022	"You know, this is not about revenge."	Appeals to emotional logic.

These markers serve face-saving and empathy-building functions. They simulate dialogue, reduce social distance, and reinforce Imran's image as a political leader[15].

According to Beard[16], cohesion in discourse is fundamentally established through discourse markers, which are essential for ensuring unification and clarity within any given text. Their framework specifically addresses the strategic use of markers in political language to achieve persuasive coherence. Similarly, the study conceptualises discourse as interaction extending beyond sentence boundaries, demonstrating how discourse markers contribute to the interpretation of extended communication[17].

In another research, it posits that discourse simultaneously occupies social and cognitive domains, attributing an ideological dimension to discourse markers[18]. One study further examined this context, asserting that in political discourse, ideologies permeate everyday language, with discourse markers acting as subtle mechanisms of power embedded within the text[19]. An analysis also argued that political language is significantly influenced by these markers in efforts to shape perception and construct narratives of legitimacy[20]. Another analysis asserts that political discourse is inherently pragmatic, with discourse markers serving persuasive and argumentative functions that help frame prevailing ideologies[21]. Both researchers expanded on this by analysing 'institutional talk', illustrating how political speakers employ interactional markers to assert authority and engage audiences[22].

In academic writing, research work introduced the concept of meta-discourse, analogous to spoken discourse markers, highlighting their role in allowing leaders to position themselves and address their audiences[23]. The research study, through appraisal theory, explored evaluative elements in speech and underscored the significance of interpersonal markers in fostering rapport with audiences[24]. Another research emphasised the use of rhetorical devices such as metaphors and discourse markers in political language, particularly regarding credibility and the assertion of ideological dominance[25].

To enhance communication, Abbasi asserts that academic and social anxiety impact the performance and cognitive functioning of ESL learners[26]. The competitive environment of contemporary academia further intensifies this anxiety, as students experience apprehension about failure while striving for achievement[27]. The study further highlights that the pursuit of social acceptance is a notable contributor to student anxiety. Abbasi emphasises the phonetic and cognitive components of communication skills, including pronunciation, grammar, listening, and reading abilities, as essential techniques for university students in Pakistan. Deficiencies in English-speaking proficiency at the tertiary level are frequently attributed to suboptimal instructional practices within schools and colleges. Through a survey of 40 teachers from diverse sectors employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, Abbasi et al.[28] examined ESL teaching strategies across Pakistan. Their findings indicate that private institutions utilise more effective teaching approaches compared to public ones. The research underscores the necessity for enhanced teacher training programmes, workshops, and seminars to improve ESL educators' methodologies and students' communicative competencies[29]. ESL/EFL instructors need to be aware of the challenges their students encounter. Insufficient practice is a primary contributor to weak speaking skills among learners; consequently, students are encouraged to enhance their proficiency through regular speaking activities. To foster greater class participation, teachers should motivate students by creating a supportive atmosphere and demonstrating a friendly manner[30]. Collectively, this body of research enhances our understanding of discourse markers in pragmatics and political communication.

These studies demonstrate that discourse markers perform critical pragmatic functions, such as facilitating cohesion, persuasion, and ideological framing, rather than merely serving as linguistic fillers. This is especially pertinent when analysing speeches by political figures like Imran Khan.

4. Discussion

Discussions of the findings in relation to political discourse, leadership communication, and public persuasion, specifically focusing on how Imran Khan uses discourse markers to achieve rhetorical and pragmatic goals. The approach of using contrastive markers to construct parallel belief systems vs. them or degenerate vs. ethical, populist speeches that reduce complex issues into moral binaries. This frame reinforces political polarization further by surrounding political talks as a battle of good versus evil, where the former PM casts himself and his supporters as the good

and his opponents as degenerate or lacking morals. This strategy suggests two things: By creating a crack between the political party and other parties, Imran Khan increases his supporters' sense of collective identity. They perceive themselves not just as voters, but as members of an imperative which activates strong emotional attachment and loyalty. While moral decomposition is useful for strengthening the loyalty base, it can heighten the divisions within society. The constant opposition of good and evil severely reduces the possibility for language, compromise, nuanced discussion, and the softening of a highly aggressive political culture.

Marking conclusions (so, hence, that's why) are important because they relate actions to their justifications. This coherence aids in proving his political motives. For instance, when explaining the consequences of past actions or events, such as the need for demonstrations, the former PM depicts his actions as rational and justifiable by using 'hence'. Perceiving policies and actions as the results of systematic injustice serves to strengthen the former PM's leadership image as a person whose populist tendencies are genuinely sympathetic to people's needs. This reinforces his mentality of a straightforward person who seeks, and acts based on logic. This line of reasoning also helps Imran defend some of his controversial ideas and actions, such as unconventional foreign policy or defiance of institutional authority. Such continuous use of markers enables him to portray these actions as the result of some outside or historical forces, instead of depicting them as relevant decisions. Whereas, Obama employs colloquial language characterised by straightforward vocabulary and concise sentences, making his communication accessible to a broad audience. Conversely, Rouhani utilises more complex terminology and maintains a formal and challenging style of expression [31].

4.1. Implications for Political Discourse

Additionally, Khan's use of multiple elaborative DMs (and, also, furthermore) suggests that he wants to construct a coherent story around his leadership and his initiatives. These indicators often point to the existence of more sophisticated policy initiatives, giving the impression that the former PM has a wide worldview regarding Pakistan and its future. The creation of several policy domain frameworks, from social welfare to economic shifts, adds to the seeming complexity and comprehensiveness of his platform. This approach is particularly effective for leaders seeking to appeal to multiple segments of the population. The repetition of 'and' creates a sense of unity and oneness. As Imran attempts to mix the different parts of governance, he paints a picture of an integrated Pakistan where fairness in social dealings, economic development, and pride for one's nation reside harmoniously. This type of framing works well in discussing national identity discourse. Still, there is a danger of flooding one too many promises, which, if not actualized, could lead to the suspicion of insincerity. Topic-management markers such as now, look, and let me tell you are useful for commanding focus and organizing the flow of the talk. These markers guide the discourse, but they also enhance interaction by creating an impression of casual dialogue, which is ideal for speeches meant for mass mobilization. The topic management markers used by the former PM enable him to control the flow of the discourse by leading the audience through sections of the lecture, guiding the speed and direction of the discussion. This managed control reinforces his role as a leader who directs discourse and responds to the needs of the people.

The conversational discourse with the audience is further deepened using markers such as let me tell you and look. This technique is effective in persuasive political discourse because it helps foster an emotional bond between the speaker and the people, making the audience feel as if their voices are not only heard but considered as well in the whole process. This technique is particularly effective in rallies and formal events where a direct and personal touch is needed to harness and build momentum. Terms such as *you know*, *I mean* and *believe me* help mitigate social distance between the former PM and his audience, assisting in face-saving moves. That helps him maintain the personal of a leader while being relatable, down-to-earth, and not just a political figure.

Such traits approximately decrease Khan's formality and enhance his humanization as a person grappling with real-life issues and emotions that everyday Pakistanis feel. This is particularly important in populist rhetoric, when the leader is trying to build an image of authenticity and proximity to the common people. In terms of interpersonal aspects, these markers contribute to rendering the overall tone more polite and less confrontational, especially when discussing sensitive topics (e.g., political opposition, institutional cri-

tiques). Former PM employs these markers to diffuse tension and foster a connection with the audience, especially on the most contested themes. These cues further enable the former PM not to disenfranchise segments of the audience by fostering an atmosphere of shared respect and understanding. The consequences of these discourse markers reveal Khan's efficient and strategic use of language in political communication. The way he utilizes DMs helps him express and sculpt ideas while also managing feelings, spinning politics, and establishing divides. With these sophisticated linguistic techniques, the former PM has fashioned a political persona that is regarded as sensible yet fervent, progressive yet populist.

4.2. Implications for ESL Pedagogy

4.2.1. Teaching Pragmatic Competence

ESL educators are encouraged to incorporate discourse markers (DMs) into instruction, emphasizing their pragmatic functions beyond grammar. DMs can signal speaker intention, manage conversational flow, and influence ideological tone. Example: Introducing contrastive markers such as *but* or *however* enables learners to recognize how speakers reframe arguments or present counterpoints within persuasive exchanges.

4.2.2. Contextualized Language Learning

Utilizing authentic political speeches as instructional materials provides learners with exposure to the use of DMs in persuasive and emotive contexts. This approach enhances learners' ability to interpret implicit meanings, discern speaker attitudes, and identify rhetorical strategies—crucial skills at advanced proficiency levels.

4.2.3. Critical Language Awareness

Promoting critical analysis of DMs aids learners in understanding their role in ideological framing, including the construction of moral dichotomies and the legitimization of authority. Such activities contribute to media literacy and equip learners to navigate complex political rhetoric in multilingual settings.

4.2.4. Strategic Messaging

Political communicators can employ DMs to structure narrative flow, create a sense of dialogic engagement, and reinforce ideological consistency. Example: Inferential markers like *so* or *therefore* serve to provide rational justification for policy stances, while interpersonal markers such as *you know* help establish rapport with audiences.

4.2.5. Populist Rhetoric and Audience Alignment

Findings demonstrate that DMs facilitate the construction of leader-centred narratives, appealing to shared values and collective concerns. Analysts can leverage this understanding to better interpret populist strategies and evaluate their impact on public opinion.

4.2.6. Policy Communication Training

Incorporating these insights into training programs for public officials and spokespersons can enhance the clarity, coherence, and persuasiveness of official communications and public statements.

This study offers a nuanced exploration of how discourse markers (DMs) function as strategic linguistic tools in former PM's political speeches, revealing their pivotal role in shaping ideological narratives, guiding audience perception, and reinforcing political legitimacy. Drawing on the pragmatic frameworks of the current study, the analysis categorizes DMs into five functional domains: contrastive, inferential, elaborative, topic-management, and interpersonal, each contributing distinctively to rhetorical coherence and persuasive impact. Across ten speeches spanning nearly a decade, former PM's consistent and deliberate use of DMs illustrates their capacity to:

- Construct moral binaries (e.g., "us" vs. "them")
- Justify political actions and policy decisions
- Amplify the breadth and urgency of reformist agendas
- Manage narrative flow and thematic transitions
- Foster rapport and simulate conversational intimacy with audiences

These findings underscore the performative power of language in political discourse, particularly within populist frameworks where emotional resonance and ideological clarity are paramount. DMs, often dismissed as peripheral or ornamental, emerge here as central to the architecture of persuasive speech-encoding speaker intent, enhancing interpretive cues, and aligning audience sentiment. The study contributes to the broader field of political pragmatics by:

- Validating the relevance of Western pragmatic models

in South Asian political contexts
- Demonstrating the ideological and rhetorical utility of DMs in populist communication
- Offering a replicable methodology for analysing political speech through a discourse-pragmatic lens

Ultimately, the study affirms that discourse markers are not merely linguistic accessories but strategic instruments of political performance. Their deployment reflects a calculated effort to influence, mobilize, and legitimize, making them indispensable to the study of contemporary political rhetoric.

5. Conclusions

The study reveals that Imran Khan predominantly uses contrastive and inferential discourse markers (DMs) in his political speeches. This analysis has revealed that discourse markers function not only as fillers in Imran's political speeches, but also as building blocks that formulate philosophies, construct narratives, and define strong arguments. In view of other research on political discourse, accompanied by the theoretical insight of the current study framework, this study argues that the former PM uses discourse markers strategically in order to aid explanatory, practical, and ideological analysis. Contrastive markers create what may be termed as double bind resistance that energizes populist ideology, while inferential markers justify actions by aligning them with rational and moral frameworks. Constructive discourse markers allow for enhanced framing strategies, depicting Imran Khan's vision as multidimensional. Topic shift markers organize his discourse and maintain audience attention, while social relation markers build connections, further enhancing his populist image as a leader in touch with the people.

An analysis of discourse contributes significantly to the understanding of political etymology. In addition to other methodologies, the use of discourse marker pragmatic processes is instrumental in constructing political ethos, engaging audiences, and sustaining narratives within Pakistan's highly partisan media environment. Subsequent research may expand on this approach by exploring interparty comparisons or tracking changes in the use of discourse markers across election cycles. These concepts are foundational to media literacy, civic engagement, and political communication in modern liberal democracies. The study highlights the importance of adopting a critical perspective when interpreting the language of Pakistani politicians, as it often contains underlying ideologies. This critical awareness can enhance public understanding of Pakistani politics. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate how linguistic strategies can be leveraged to increase public awareness of the limitations within the existing political system. Future researchers aiming to analyse language use in Pakistani political speeches may find this study offers a valuable framework for examining political rhetoric.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, T.N. and A.M.A.; methodology, T.N.; validation, T.N. and A.M.A.; formal analysis, D.B.; investigation, T.N. and A.M.A.; resources, T.N.; writing—original draft preparation, T.N.; writing—review and editing, T.N.; visualization, D.B.; supervision, A.M.A.; project administration, A.M.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board Ethics in the Pragmatics coursework. The study is based on secondary data.

Informed Consent Statement

Secondary Data was used.

Data Availability Statement

The data is available and will be provided if required.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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