

Some Notes on an English Discourse Marker “YOU SEE”

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1. Introduction

It has been argued that the expression ‘YOU SEE’ as a discourse marker is similar to ‘YOU KNOW’ in some ways, as shown in the examples (1) and (2):¹

- (1) a. Those seats are reserved, so *you know*, he shouldn’t be sitting here.
b. Those seats are reserved, so, *you see*, he shouldn’t be sitting here.
(Schourup (1987: 181))
- (2) a. I tried to tie my shoe but I couldn’t. I was only a small child then, *you know*.
b. I tried to tie my shoe but I couldn’t. I was only a small child then, *you see*.
(Schourup (1987: 181))

There are, however, several dissimilarities between ‘YOU SEE’ and ‘YOU KNOW’ when these expressions actually occur in various utterances, as shown in (3) and (4):

- (3) a. I wonder if he realizes that, *you know*, he shouldn’t be sitting in that section.
b. *I wonder if he realizes that, *you see*, he shouldn’t be sitting in that section.
(Schourup (1987: 181))
- (4) a. *You know*, there is nothing quite as refreshing as a Coca-Cola.
b. */? *You see*, there is nothing quite as refreshing as a Coca-Cola.
(Schourup (1987: 181))

In this short article, I will attempt to show the factors which might affect the difference in the acceptability between (3a), (4a) and (3b), (4b).

2. ‘YOU SEE’ as a Discourse Marker

The Oxford English Dictionary (VOLUME IX, p. 378) gives the description of the uses of ‘YOU SEE’ as follows:²

You see : sometimes appended parenthetically to a statement of a fact known to the hearer which explains or excuses something that provokes surprise or blame.

1657 CROMWELL *Sp.* 21 Apr. in Carlyle *Lett. & Sp.* (1845) II. 582

Because, *you see*, the present Government has 1,900,000.

1855 BROWNING *Bp. Blougram* 3

We ought to have our Abbey back, *you see*.

1892 Macmillan's Mag. July 229

A few corns of wheat must always drop off, *you see*, before one can get the harvest.

Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary (1987: 1308) gives an explanation of the uses of 'YOU SEE' as in the following:

You say *you see* when you are talking to someone about something and you are very concerned that they should understand it.

That's very nice of you but, *you see*, Kurt, I have no money...

Yes, I know, but, *you see*, computers might rule the world one day.

A similar, but a little simpler, description is given in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1995: 1283):

YOU SEE 3. (spoken) used when you are explaining something to someone.

The shop is open till 8 *you see*, so I can pick some stuff up after work.

You see the thing is I'm really busy right now.

All of these descriptions suggest that the expression 'YOU SEE' can be identified as a discourse marker, because it signals a transition in the conversational development and also signals an interactive relationship among speaker, hearer and the conveyed message. Furthermore, these dictionaries also suggest that a core pragmatic function of 'YOU SEE' is to imply that the speaker is making sure that the hearer has been able to see the intended meaning of what is being said.

3. Schourup's (1987) Analysis

Schourup (1987) examines the examples (5) and (6) below:³

(5)(=3) a. I wonder if he realizes that, *you know*, he shouldn't be sitting in that section.

b. *I wonder if he realizes that, *you see*, he shouldn't be sitting in that section. (Schourup (1987: 181))

(6)(=4) a. *You know*, there is nothing quite as refreshing as a Coca-Cola.

b. * /? *You see*, there is nothing quite as refreshing as a Coca-Cola. (Schourup (1987: 181))

He claims that ‘YOU SEE’ can only be used when the hearer is being asked to notice a reason-result relationship between the two ideas expressed in two separate clauses, while ‘YOU KNOW’ can be used whenever there is some concern over whether the hearer is able to understand.⁴ Thus, ‘YOU KNOW’ can be used as in (5a), but ‘YOU SEE’ cannot be used or is rather unusual as in (5b). Because ‘YOU SEE’ asks the hearer to see a reason-result (or result-reason) relationship between what was said before and what is being said, ‘YOU SEE’ cannot be used for introducing a new topic as in (6b).

There are, of course, some contexts in which both expressions can be used, but with a slightly different connotation:

- (7)(=1) a. Those seats are reserved, so **you know**, he shouldn’t be sitting here.
 b. Those seats are reserved, so, **you see**, he shouldn’t be sitting here.
 (Schourup (1987: 181))
- (8)(=2) a. I tried to tie my shoe but I couldn’t. I was only a small child then, **you know**.
 b. I tried to tie my shoe but I couldn’t. I was only a small child then, **you see**.
 (Schourup (1987: 181))

In (7b), Schourup explains, there is a clear reason-result relationship between the two clauses, while in (7a) there is not necessarily a reason-result relationship identified and (7a) can be paraphrased as ‘I expect that you can see my meaning here.’ The same explanation holds for the contrast between (8a) and (8b).

The following examples from (9) to (13) show that his analysis would be quite adequate:

- (9) ALISON : You think I should tell him about the baby?
 CLIFF : It’ll be all right...**you see**. Tell him.
 (John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, p. 29)⁵
- (10) JIMMY : The last time she was in a church was when she was married to me. I expect that surprises you, doesn’t it? It was expediency, pure and simple. We were in a hurry, **you see**. Yes, we were actually in a hurry!
 (John Osborne, op. cit., p. 58)
- (11) HELENA : Oh, my dear, he’ll find somebody. He’ll probably hold court here like one of the Renaissance popes. Oh, I know I’m throwing the book of rules at you, as you call it, but, believe me, you’re never going to be happy without it. I tried throwing it away all these months, but I know now it just doesn’t work. When you came in at that door, ill and tired and hurt, it was all over for me. **You see**... I didn’t know about the baby. It was such a shock. It’s like a judgement on us.
 (John Osborne, op. cit., p. 101)

(12) WOMAN OFFICER : Didn't they have you sign a card when you opened the account?

SAM : Tell her Carl Bruner opened it for you by phone and asked you to come in today.

ODA MAE : *You see, you see* Carl Bruner, he, he opened it for me by phone, that account. And, and now he's asked me to come in today.

(*Ghost*, Paramount Pictures, p. 79)⁶

(13) LASZLO : I'm sure you'll excuse me if I am not gracious...but *you see* Major Strasser, I'm a Czechoslovakian...

(*CASABLANCA*, Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., p. 27)⁷

In all these examples, we can notice the addresser's intention which indicates that the addressee can grasp a reason-result connection between the two things that have been said. However, is the notion of a reason-result relationship a single pragmatic factor that significantly affects the uses of the discourse marker 'YOU SEE'? In the next section, I will analyze the collected data and suggest several factors that would affect the uses of the expression 'YOU SEE.'

4. Analysis of Data

The first and second linguistic data come from BNC ON-LINE. Let us examine examples (14) and (15):

(14) That was my work, then when she came down on duty, she would sit one side of the table with her books and I would sit the other and count all the money, *you see*, then I would take this money er, in a bag, through on to the black through the, past the ticket collector and take it to the booking office and they took it from me and took it when they took their money to the bank. (BNC)⁸

(15) No there was er three lads in the double bed and er another two lads and er another two lads in the single bed in one room, and mother was in front of course she had husband in those days *you see* when we were growing up, there was a it was not unusual to sleep top-to-tail if we had any pals, if we had a party and we had any pals we'd sleep top-to-tail one with a head at the bottom and others with their head at the top, sounds like something out of the Dickens when we you start talking about it, don't it? (BNC)

In (14), we cannot notice a reason-result relationship between the two clauses before and after the expression 'YOU SEE'. All we can notice is a kind of temporal sequence of actions ; sitting, counting the money, and taking the money in a bag, etc. In a similar vein, in (15), we cannot notice the relationship between the two things expressed before and after 'YOU SEE,' either.

The third example comes from *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne :

- (16) JIMMY : Anyone who's never watched somebody die is suffering from a pretty bad case of virginity. For twelve months, I watched my father dying...when I was ten years old. He'd come back from the war in Spain, **you see**. And certain god-fearing gentlemen there had made such a mess of him, he didn't have long left to live. Everyone knew it...even I knew it.

(John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, p. 61)

In (16), between the two clauses 'He'd come back from the war in Spain' and 'he didn't have long left to live,' we cannot notice any clear-cut reason-result connection. 'YOU SEE' in Jimmy's utterance seems to be used only to ensure the hearer's understanding, which is quite similar to a pragmatic function of 'YOU KNOW.'

The fourth and fifth data comes from the classic movie *CASABLANCA* :

- (17) FERRARI : I was just telling M'sieur Laszlo that unfortunately, I am not able to help him.

ILSA : (troubled) Oh.

LASZLO : (to Ilsa) **You see**, my dear, the word has gone around.

(*CASABLANCA*, Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., p. 58)

- (18) RICK : You'll excuse me, gentlemen. Your business is politics. Mine is running a saloon.

STRASSER : Good evening, Mr. Blaine.

Rick walks out of the SHOT, toward the gambling room.

RENAULT : **You see**, you have nothing to worry about Rick.

STRASSER : (his eyes following the direction Rick has gone) Perhaps...

(*CASABLANCA*, Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., p. 27)

In (17), there seems to be no reason-result relationship expressed before and after 'YOU SEE.' If any, it is an indirect or vague relationship. In (18), we cannot notice a direct reason-result relationship expressed in the two utterances by Rick and Renault. Here again, if there is any reason-result relationship, it could be recognized through non-verbal context, not through verbal context.

The final example comes from *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by Arthur Miller:

- (19) WILLY : I've been wondering why you polish the car so careful. Ha! Don't leave the hubcaps, boys. Get the chamois to the hubcaps. Happy, use newspaper on the windows, it's the easiest thing. Show him how to do it, Bliff! **You see**, Happy? Pad it up, use it like a pad. That's it, that's it, good work. You're doing it all right.

(Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, p. 21)⁹

Here again, there would be no clear-cut reason-result relationship expressed before and after 'YOU SEE' in (19). By using the expression 'You see, Happy?,' the addresser Willy might simply be saying "I expect you will see my meaning, Happy."

The linguistic data (14) to (19) shown above suggest that Schourup's analysis cannot account for all the occurrences of 'YOU SEE,' and we have to recognize several subtypes of pragmatic functions of 'YOU SEE.'

5. Summary

In this short article, I have reviewed Schourup's (1987) analysis of the discourse marker 'YOU SEE' and suggested that there are many linguistic data concerning 'YOU SEE' which would not seem to be relevant to a pragmatic notion of a reason-result relationship. Examples (14) to (19) in Section 3 also suggest that even though the reason-result relationship might be noticed, it can be recognized indirectly or non-verbally, that is, through non-literal or non-verbal clues.

There are, of course, many questions to be solved in order to offer a systematic or unified description of the uses of 'YOU SEE.' These questions are left untouched in this article. I leave the questions for another time.

NOTES

*I would like to thank Giles Parker for answering my questions about English data and for improving my English. All remaining inadequacies are my own.

1. We can identify 'YOU SEE' as a discourse marker based on the definition given in *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (1999: 1086):

'Discourse markers are inserts which tend to occur at the beginning of a turn or utterance, and to combine two roles: (a) to signal a transition in the evolving progress of the conversation, and (b) to signal an interactive relationship between speaker, hearer, and the message.'

See for further discussion of the notion of 'discourse marker,' Schiffrin (1987: 312ff), Fraser (1990: 384ff).

2. 'YOU SEE' is sometimes abbreviated to just 'SEE' as in the example below :

Ernie : I have pencils right here to write with, Bert. Now, we got, ah paper. I'll take that paper, Bert. *See*, we have the paper to write on. (*Forrest Gump*, p. 292)
Many dictionaries treat 'SEE' as an variant of 'YOU SEE', but we do not go into this matter any further in this paper.

3. As for the uses of 'YOU KNOW,' *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* (1987: 1308) gives the following explanation:

You say 'you know'

1. to emphasize or to draw attention to what you are saying.
2. to fill a gap in a conversation, for example, when you are uncertain about what you are saying or what you are going to say next.
3. when you are trying to explain more clearly what you mean, by referring to something that the person you are talking to knows about.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1995:785) also gives a similar description of the uses of 'YOU KNOW':

You know (spoken) is

- a) used to emphasize a statement.

(e. g.) There'll be trouble, *you know*.

I don't like to brag about, *you know*, I did do pretty well.

- b) used when you need to keep someone's attention, but cannot think of what to say next.

(e. g.) I was just, *you know*, looking through my slides before you came.

- c) used when you are explaining or describing something and want to give more information.

(e. g.) That padding that you put on the car, *you know*, that stuff on the doors.

- d) used to start talking about something.

(e. g.) *You know*, it's a sad thing about this guy.

4. Schourup (1987) suggests that 'YOU KNOW' has two basic functions : one is to check whether the hearer has understood the speaker's implication (assuring understanding) and the other is to remind the hearer of something (reminder). From a functional perspective, both uses of 'YOU KNOW' are concerned with ensuring that the hearer's understanding corresponds to that of the speaker. A further examination of data, however, would reveal this dichotomous distinction is not so clear-cut.
5. This citation is from John Osborne, 1964, *Look Back in Anger*, Tokyo: Kaibunsha Publications, p. 29.
6. This example is from the Scenario *Ghost*, Paramount Pictures, 1995, Tokyo: Screen Play Publishing Co., Ltd., p. 79.
7. This is from Scenario *CASABLANCA* (1943) by Epstein, J. et al. Tokyo: Tsurumi Shoten, p. 27.
8. This example is from British National Corpus ON-LINE <http://thetis.bl.uk/lloup.html>.
9. This example is from Arthur Miller, 1949, *Death of a Salesman*, Penguin Books, p. 21

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