Original Research Article

Small Words, Big Meaning: Pragmatic Roles of Cebuano Discourse Particles *a* and *aw*

ABSTRACT

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| **Aims:** This study investigates the pragmatic functions of two Cebuano discourse markers—***a*** and ***aw***—to understand their role in meaning-making and interactional management within naturally occurring Cebuano discourse.  **Study design:** The study used a qualitative discourse-pragmatic framework, the analysis reveals that ***a*** and ***aw*** perform a range of pragmatic functions, including signaling contrast, marking topic shifts, expressing speaker stance, and managing conversational coherence.  **Place and Duration of Study:** The data corpus consists of texts from *Bisaya* magazine, transcriptions of Cebuano radio broadcasts in the Zamboanga Peninsula, and everyday conversations among Cebuano native speakers.  **Methodology:** This study employs a qualitative, descriptive discourse-pragmatic approach to investigate the functions and meanings of the Cebuano discourse particles *a* and *aw*. Data were drawn from a purposively selected corpus comprising both written and spoken Cebuano texts. The written corpus includes short stories from *Bisaya*, a widely circulated Cebuano-language magazine, while the spoken data were sourced from local radio programs—comprising talk shows, interviews, and entertainment segments—broadcast in the Zamboanga Peninsula. Additionally, naturally occurring conversations among native Cebuano speakers were audio-recorded with informed consent to provide spontaneous data. All collected data were transcribed manually. Instances of *a* and *aw* were identified and coded based on their clause position (initial, medial, or final), as well as their syntactic proximity to other word categories (e.g., preceding or following pronominals, verbs, or noun phrases). Each token was then subjected to a context-sensitive pragmatic analysis to determine its discourse function. A semiotic analysis was also employed to interpret the possible meanings of the particles using Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1916) framework of *signifier* (the form of the particle) and *signified* (the conceptual meaning it conveys in context).  **Results:** Findings show that the Cebuano discourse particle ***a*** and ***aw*** contribute significantly to the structure and flow of Cebuano discourse, reflecting speaker attitudes and aiding in the negotiation of meaning. By foregrounding these particles, the study contributes to the broader understanding of discourse-pragmatic elements in lesser-described languages and highlights the importance of localized linguistic analysis in cross-linguistic pragmatic research.  **Conclusion:** This study explored the pragmatic and semiotic functions of the Cebuano discourse particles ***a*** and ***aw***, revealing how these seemingly simple particles encode complex layers of meaning, speaker intention, and interpersonal nuance. Rooted in natural conversations, radio broadcasts, and written texts, the data showed that both *a* and *aw* are highly sensitive to their phonetic realization—such as the presence of a glottal catch or a prolonged vowel sound—which directly affects their interpreted meaning. This observation supports the claim that prosodic features in discourse are not merely paralinguistic but carry critical pragmatic and affective information. |

***Keywords:*** *Cebuano Discourse Markers a and aw, Pragmatics, Semiotics, Philippine languages*

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of discourse markers—also known as discourse particles, pragmatic markers, or cue phrases—has garnered significant scholarly attention across fields such as discourse analysis, conversation analysis, pragmatics, syntax, and computational linguistics (Fraser, 2009; Aijmer, 2013; Blakemore, 2002). These linguistic elements are recognized not for their propositional content, but for their vital role in organizing discourse, managing interaction, and conveying speaker stance and intention. They function at the intersection of language, cognition, and social interaction, making them a rich subject of inquiry.

Despite the substantial body of research on discourse markers in global languages such as English, Spanish, Japanese, and Mandarin (Maschler & Schiffrin, 2015; Heine & Kuteva, 2020), there remains a notable gap in studies focusing on Philippine vernaculars—particularly Cebuano. Cebuano is one of the most widely spoken languages in the Philippines, yet it remains underrepresented in linguistic literature compared to Ilokano, Kapampangan, or Bikol (Liao, 2006). Existing studies rarely examine its discourse-level elements, and the pragmatic functions of its particles remain largely unexplored.

This study seeks to address this gap by focusing specifically on the Cebuano discourse particles *a* and *aw*. These short, recurrent markers, though phonologically minimal, perform significant discourse-pragmatic functions that are best understood in context. Drawing from a corpus composed of Cebuano magazine articles (*Bisaya*), radio broadcasts from the Zamboanga Peninsula, and transcribed conversations from everyday speech, this research investigates the possible pragmatic meanings of *a* and *aw*, their positional variability, and the ways they help construct meaning in interaction.

Discourse markers are notoriously difficult to categorize, as scholars disagree on their definitions and boundaries (Jucker & Ziv, 1998; Fraser, 1999; Degand et al., 2013). However, their core functions—to link discourse segments, mark speaker attitudes, and aid inferencing—are widely accepted (Schiffrin, 1987; Andersen, 2001). In Cebuano, *a* and *aw* appear frequently in spontaneous speech, often conveying contrast, hesitation, emphasis, or alignment, depending on placement and prosody. This research thus asks: What are the possible pragmatic meanings of *a* and *aw* in Cebuano oral and written discourse? In which positions do they typically occur—initial, medial, or final—and how does their syntactic positioning affect their interpretation? How does pronunciation influence meaning?

Theoretically, this work is anchored in both pragmatic theory and semiotic tradition. Bakhtin’s (1984) notion that language is always socially and historically situated underpins the study’s understanding of these particles as context-bound and dynamic. Likewise, Saussure’s (1983) semiotic framework on the arbitrariness of signs and the relationship between signifier and signified helps situate the Cebuano particles as culturally marked symbols of meaning-making. Hobbs’ (1979) theory of discourse coherence is also relevant, particularly in analyzing how *a* and *aw* guide listener inferences and organize speech flow.

Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to the documentation and analysis of Cebuano by offering a pragmatic account of its discourse particles—an area where institutional research remains sparse (Mojares, 2002). Although modest in scope, this study adds to the growing recognition that the structure and meaning of local Philippine languages merit closer scholarly attention. By examining Cebuano from a discourse-pragmatic perspective, we hope to foreground its linguistic richness and open space for further vernacular-centered linguistic research.

2. methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive discourse-pragmatic approach to investigate the functions and meanings of the Cebuano discourse particles *a* and *aw*. Data were drawn from a purposively selected corpus comprising both written and spoken Cebuano texts. The written corpus includes short stories from *Bisaya*, a widely circulated Cebuano-language magazine, while the spoken data were sourced from local radio programs—comprising talk shows, interviews, and entertainment segments—broadcast in the Zamboanga Peninsula. Additionally, naturally occurring conversations among native Cebuano speakers were audio-recorded with informed consent to provide spontaneous data.

All collected data were transcribed manually. Instances of *a* and *aw* were identified and coded based on their clause position (initial, medial, or final), as well as their syntactic proximity to other word categories (e.g., preceding or following pronominals, verbs, or noun phrases). Each token was then subjected to a context-sensitive pragmatic analysis to determine its discourse function.

A semiotic analysis was also employed to interpret the possible meanings of the particles using Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1916) framework of *signifier* (the form of the particle) and *signified* (the conceptual meaning it conveys in context). The interaction between these elements was analyzed to explore how the particles participate in the construction of meaning in social interaction. Phonological variants of *a* and *aw* were also documented to determine whether shifts in pronunciation signal shifts in pragmatic or semiotic meaning.

***2.1. Limitations***

This study is limited to two Cebuano particles, *a* and *aw*, and focuses only on data sourced from select regions in the Zamboanga Peninsula. As such, findings may not capture regional or dialectal variation across the broader Cebuano-speaking population. Furthermore, the scope of the semiotic analysis is restricted to observable meaning-making patterns within the given data, and does not yet account for historical, etymological, or sociolinguistic variables that may influence interpretation. The absence of a computational corpus may also limit the breadth of quantitative generalizations.

3. results and discussion

***3.1 Pragmatic Function of the Cebuano Particle a***

The Cebuano particle ***a*** is a versatile discourse marker appearing in various positions within clauses—initial, medial, and final—and it can precede or follow different word categories. Its phonetic realization varies depending on its pragmatic function, including lengthening and the use of a glottal catch, which contribute to the nuanced meanings it conveys.

*3.1.1. Hesitation and Cognitive Processing*

In excerpt (1), ***a*** is prolonged (***Aaa***), signaling hesitation and cognitive effort by the speaker to formulate a response:

1. S1: *Pila gani to kabuok candidates sa Ms. Universe Sheil, katong grupo ni*

*Shamcey Supsup?* [How many candidates where there in the

Ms.Universe,Sheil,that group with Shamcey Supsup?]  
 S2: ***Aaa****, murag mga eighty plus.* [ **Aaa**, maybe eighty plus.]

Here, the particle ***a****, (*prolonged sound as **aaa**) functions as a hesitation marker, allowing the speaker to buy time and demonstrate unpreparedness to provide a precise answer. This use parallels hesitation phenomena observed in other languages, which serve to maintain conversational flow and signal the speaker’s mental processing (Clark & Fox Tree, 2002; Schiffrin, 1987). The prolonged sound further emphasizes this uncertainty, consistent with findings that such phonetic cues are integral in managing interactional dynamics (Fraser, 2009).

*3.1.2. Indirect Persistence and Request*

Excerpt (2) illustrates how ***a*** can express indirect persistence in a demand or request, marked by (**?** ) a glottal catch and prolongation:

(2)S1: *Mo request ko Kuya bi kanang disco music.* [ I want to request Kuya, a disco

music]  
 S2: *Mellow naman atong music ron Day di na pwede disco*.[ Its mellow music this

time, not for disco]  
 S1: ***Aaa?,*** *sige na Kuya.*[Aaa, come on Kuya]

Here, the particle ***a*** softens the insistence, functioning as an indirect strategy to negotiate a request without overt confrontation, aligning with politeness theory where mitigation reduces potential face threats (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The glottal catch adds emphasis, indicating subtle insistence.

*3.1.3. Disagreement and Opposition*

In excerpt (3), ***a*** accompanied by a glottal catch (**a*?***) signals disagreement or opposition to a prior statement:

(3)S1: *Mo abroad naman daw si Michael Ta. Naa gyuy maghilak sa tago ani.*

[Michael is going abroad,Ta. Somebody shall be crying in secret.]  
S2: ***A?*** *siya nalang pod akong hilakan*.[ **A?** why would I cry for him.]

This use of *a* functions as a discourse marker expressing contrast or dissent, similar to discourse particles in other languages that mark contrast or correction (Traugott, 2015). The glottal catch underscores the speaker’s resistance to the assertion.

*3.1.4. Expression of Anger or Warning*

Excerpt (4) demonstrates ***a*** as a marker of anger or warning, again with a prolonged sound:

(4)S1: *Kanaug ba diha, Tantan. Mahulog ka gani*.[ Get down here Tantan.You

will fall down.]

S2: *Dili man habog Ma.* [ Ii is not high,Ma]  
 S3: ***Aaa*** *nagita gyud nig bali ning bataa*.[ **Aaa**, this kid is looking for fracture]

Here, ***a*** (prolonged sound as aaa) intensifies the speaker’s emotional stance, signaling displeasure and issuing a warning. This pragmatic function aligns with research on affective discourse markers that convey speaker attitudes beyond propositional content (Jucker & Ziv, 1998).

*3.1.5 Compliment and Appreciation*

As a clause-final particle, ***a?*** can express compliments or appreciation, marked by (?)a glottal catch as in excerpt (5):

(5)*“Kugihana ni Julius* ***a?,*** *maayo man paliwatan,” pasiaw ni Arlene diri nako.*

[“Very diligent is Julius, a?, a good one to sire.” Joked Arlene to me.]

This usage reflects how particles serve interpersonal functions, facilitating social bonding and positive face work (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1999).

*3.1.6.Sudden Realization*

Excerpt (6) shows ***a*** indicating a sudden realization or insight:

(6)*“Nadaot man kaha ang pono ni Bay Arsenio,* ***Aaa,*** *basin gidula-dulaan ni Delfin mentras wala pa mi didto sa baylehan*.”[ Arsenio’s sound system was broke, maybe Delfin play with it while in the dancehall]

The particle ***a*** here functions as a cognitive marker, similar to discourse markers in other languages that signal a change in the speaker’s mental state or the introduction of new information (Schiffrin, 1987).

*3.1.7. Feeling of Dismay*

In excerpt (7), ***a*** conveys a feeling of dismay:

(7)S1: *“Sigeg gasto imong anak didto Sing, sa gawas perme mokaon,” butyag pa*

*ni Nang Betty.*  
S2: *“****A?,*** *nag-antos ra gani mi diri ug sigig bulad, bantay lang to inig uli.”*

The particle here marks affective stance, expressing concern and mild protest, resonating with the role of pragmatic markers in conveying speaker emotions (Jucker & Ziv, 1998).

*3.1.8. Semiotic Functions*

Applying Saussure’s (1983) semiotic model, the particle ***a*** operates as a signifier which signified varies according to context, intonation, and phonetic features such as lengthening and glottal stops. The arbitrary bond between signifier and signified is evident in the range of pragmatic meanings—from hesitation, insistence, disagreement, to emotional expression—that *a* encodes. Its multifunctionality demonstrates how small linguistic units carry rich semiotic weight in discourse, shaping social interaction and interpersonal meaning.

In sum, the Cebuano particle ***a*** is a dynamic discourse marker that performs various pragmatic functions depending on its phonetic form and syntactic position. Its uses range from managing cognitive processing, signaling stance, regulating politeness, to expressing affective attitudes. This study contributes to the growing body of research on discourse particles by elucidating the nuanced roles of ***a*** within Cebuano interaction, framed within established pragmatic and semiotic theories.

**Table1.**  
*Summary of Pragmatic Functions and Semiotic Meanings for the Cebuano Particle* ***a***

| Signifier | Pragmatic Function | Semiotic Signified (Meaning) | Phonetic Feature | Example |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Aaa* | Hesitation marker | Trying to figure out what to say; unpreparedness to respond | Prolonged sound, clause-initial | (1) |
| *Aaa?* | Polite insistence | Indirect persistence of a demand or request | Prolonged sound with glottal catch | (2) |
| *A?* | Disagreement marker | Disagreement to a prior assertion | Clause-initial with glottal catch | (3) |
| *Aaa* | Anger or warning | Expresses frustration or a warning | Prolonged sound, clause-initial | (4) |
| *a?* | Compliment/appreciation marker | Expression of praise or admiration | Clause-final with glottal catch | (5) |
| *Aaa* | Sudden realization | Mark of realization or understanding | Prolonged sound, clause-initial | (6) |
| *A?* | Dismay or disappointment | Speaker’s emotional reaction to negative news | Clause-initial with glottal catch | (7) |

***Note****. The glottal catch is represented by a question mark (?) and is based on the transcription system used by Tanangkingsing (2010).*

***3.2. Pragmatic Functions of the Cebuano Particle* *aw***

The Cebuano particle ***aw*** serves as a multifunctional discourse marker with distinct pragmatic and semiotic roles that facilitate interactional coherence and meaning negotiation in conversation. As a clause-initial particle, *aw* primarily operates to manage the flow of information, signaling speaker attitudes and cognitive states through context-dependent functions.

*3.2.1. Repair Marker*

One central pragmatic function of ***aw*** is as a repair marker, signaling the speaker’s correction or modification of a prior utterance (example 8):

(8) “Nag-ihaw baya ug baka si Joling, Merl, **aw**, kabaw diay.” [Mer,Joling

slaughtered a cow, **aw,** carabao that is.]

Here, ***aw*** initiates a reformulation, allowing the speaker to replace “baka” (cow) with “kabaw” (carabao). This aligns with Schiffrin’s (1987) notion of discourse markers as tools for conversational repair that maintain interlocutor alignment and coherence. Repair markers like *aw* mitigate potential misunderstandings and ensure mutual intelligibility (Fraser, 1999).

*3.2.2. Epistemic Awareness*

Another pragmatic role of ***aw*** is to express epistemic awareness or recognition of known information, as illustrated in examples (9) and (10):

(9) “Bay Delfin, gipangita raba ka sa imong mama.” [ Friend Delfin, your mother is

looking for you.]  
(10) “**Aw**, nagkita namis Mama, Bay. Puwerte ganing sukoa, hehe.” [ **Aw,** I have met

my Mom,friend. She was so mad,hehe]

In these contexts, ***aw*** signals the speaker’s acknowledgment or confirmation of information already accessible within the shared knowledge of interlocutors. This function supports discourse coherence by marking the common ground (Andersen, 2001; Traugott, 1995).

*3.2.3. Cognitive Update or Correction*

Further, ***aw*** marks a cognitive update or correction when a previous assumption proves inaccurate, as seen in (10):

(10) S1:“Sigi baya gihapon ug kita si Miriam ug iyang bana, Gil.”[ Miriam and her

husband are still seeing each other, Gil.]  
 S2: “**Aw,** abi nako ug nagbungol na sila.”[ **Aw,**I thought they were cooling off]

Here, ***aw*** signals the speaker’s realization of a wrong assumption, functioning as a meta-communicative device that revises the interlocutor’s shared knowledge state. Such epistemic signaling aligns with Aijmer’s (2002) work on discourse particles expressing changes in belief or awareness.

*3.2.4. Alternative Action or Contingency*

Finally, ***aw*** can indicate the introduction of an alternative action or contingency when the preferred option is unavailable, shown in (11):

(11) “Kung walay promo sa eroplano, **aw,** magbarko nalang ko.”[ If there is no airline

promo, aw, I will take the boat]

This usage highlights ***aw*** as a marker guiding interlocutors through shifts in discourse plans or decisions, maintaining conversational coherence in light of new contingencies (Hobbs, 1979; Prince et al., 1982).

*3.2.5. Semiotic Functions*

From a semiotic perspective by Saussure’s (1916/2011) theory of the linguistic sign, *aw* functions as a dynamic signifier whose signified meaning varies contextually. It is not fixed to a single semantic value but acquires different pragmatic meanings depending on conversational context, intonation, and speaker intent. For example, as a repair marker, ***aw*** signifies “correction” or “replacement,” whereas in epistemic contexts, it signifies “acknowledgment” or “realization.”

This flexibility underscores the semiotic principle that meaning arises from the relational system within language and context. The particle’s signified meanings emerge through interaction with interlocutors and situational factors, exemplifying the interactional and negotiable nature of discourse markers (Traugott, 1995; Schiffrin, 1987).

Moreover, the phonetic and prosodic variations of ***aw*** (e.g., presence of glottal catch, stress) further enrich its semiotic load, modulating its pragmatic force and interpretive nuances. This multimodal signaling highlights the interplay between form and function in pragmatic-semantic meaning-making.

**Table 2.**

*Summary of Functions for the Cebuano Particle "aw"*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Signifier | Pragmatic Function | Semiotic Signified (Meaning) | Phonetic Feature | Example |
| aw | Repair marker | Correction or replacement of a previous utterance | Clause-initial,neutral tone | (8) |
| aw | Information marker (already known) | Indicates prior knowledge or recognition of a reported event | Clause-initial,assertive tone | (9) |
| Aw | Correction of a false assumption | Realization that a prior belief or assumption was incorrect | Clause-initial,corrective tone | (10) |
| aw | Introduction of an alternative | Signals a shift to an alternative plan or option | Clause-initial, contrastive tone | (11) |

4. Conclusion

This study explored the pragmatic and semiotic functions of the Cebuano discourse particles ***a*** and ***aw***, revealing how these seemingly simple particles encode complex layers of meaning, speaker intention, and interpersonal nuance. Rooted in natural conversations, radio broadcasts, and written texts, the data showed that both *a* and *aw* are highly sensitive to their phonetic realization—such as the presence of a glottal catch or a prolonged vowel sound—which directly affects their interpreted meaning. This observation supports the claim that prosodic features in discourse are not merely paralinguistic but carry critical pragmatic and affective information.

The Cebuano particle ***a***, for instance, serves a wide range of pragmatic functions, including hesitation, insistence, disagreement, realization, appreciation, anger, and dismay. These functions are cued not only by the position of *a* in the clause (initial or final) but also by its prosodic form. From a semiotic perspective, following Saussure’s (1916) framework of the signifier-signified relationship, ***a*** functions as a sign whose meaning is contextually constructed. Its phonetic variants serve as signifiers that point to particular emotional or cognitive states of the speaker—the signifieds—such as uncertainty (*Aaa*), confrontation (*A?*), or realization (*Aaa*). This aligns with the idea that linguistic signs are not fixed but fluid and emergent in discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Likewise, the clause-initial particle ***aw*** performs key discourse functions such as signaling repair or correction, indicating a change in assumption, or expressing prior awareness or choice. The use of *aw* as a repair marker or as a pivot for reinterpretation is especially relevant to pragmatic theories of information structure (Levinson, 1983) and Grice’s (1975) Cooperative Principle, particularly the maxims of quality and relevance. The presence of *aw* often reorients the hearer’s interpretive frame, providing cues for re-evaluating the preceding utterance. This reinforces the particle’s role as a discourse-level indexical marker that guides inference, implicature, and speaker alignment.

The findings underscore that Cebuano discourse particles are not mere fillers but are integral to meaning-making in spoken interaction. Their semiotic force—realized through prosody, position, and context—offers insights into how emotions, interpersonal stance, and information flow are managed in real time. While the omission of these particles may not completely obstruct understanding, their presence significantly enriches the interpretive texture of an utterance and can alter its pragmatic impact.

These results contribute to broader discussions in pragmatics and semiotics by reaffirming that even the smallest linguistic units, such as discourse particles, perform multifunctional and multimodal roles in communication. Further research is encouraged to examine other Cebuano particles or to compare these findings across other Philippine languages, potentially revealing typological patterns and pragmatic universals in Austronesian discourse behavior.

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