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Analyzing Discourse Functions with Acoustic Features and Phone Embeddings: Non-lexical Items in Taiwan Mandarin

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Abstract

Non-lexical items are expressive devices used in conversations that are not words but are nevertheless meaningful. These items play crucial roles, such as signaling, turn-taking, or marking stances in interactions. However, as the non-lexical items do not stably correspond to written or phonological forms, past studies tend to focus on studying their acoustic properties, such as pitches and durations. In this paper, we investigate the discourse functions of non-lexical items through their acoustic properties and the phone embeddings extracted from a deep learning model. Firstly, we create a non-lexical item dataset based on the interpellation video clips from Taiwan's Legislative Yuan. Then, we manually identify the non-lexical items and their discourse functions in the videos. Next, we analyze the acoustic properties of those items through statistical modeling and building classifiers based on phone embeddings extracted from a phone recognition model. We show that (1) the discourse functions have significant effects on the acoustic features; and (2) the classifiers built on phone embeddings perform better than the ones on conventional acoustic properties. These results suggest that phone embeddings may reflect the phonetic variations crucial in differentiating the discourse functions of non-lexical items.

Keywords: Non-lexical Item, Discourse Function, Acoustic Property, Acoustic Representation, Pragmatics

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1. Introduction

People's everyday interactions include sounds that are not verbal words in the traditional sense. These sounds, such as sighs, sniffs, and grunts, are used in indexing the turn-taking in dialogues, marking stance, showing affections, and expressing roles and meanings in conversations (Dingemanse, 2020). Examples of these *non-lexical items* are *un-huh* in English as a marker showing understanding and attentiveness, while the single syllable *uh* and *um* act as fillers and disfluency markers (Ward, 2006; Buschmeier *et al*., 2011).

While these non-lexical items are important linguistically, they pose an interesting challenge to linguistic inquiry. Non-lexical items do not belong to a major word class, and some do not conform to the language's phonological requirements (Keevallik & Ogden, 2020). Moreover, while the phonetic properties of non-lexical items could be generally described, they are nevertheless "phonetically underspecified" (Keating, 1988). For example, in the study of "moan" in board game interactions, Hofstetter (2020) found "moans" involve phonetic properties related to open vowels, irrespective of their frontness, backness, or roundedness. The study suggests that a non-lexical item can not be represented as a single phonetic symbol; instead, it may refer to the vowel space for which we do not have a general phonetic symbol. Some studies, therefore, analyze these items in terms of their acoustic properties: the components' sound (Ward, 2006), the fundamental frequencies, durations, and intensities. (Shan, 2021; Ballier & Chlébowski, 2021).

In contrast to the conventional acoustic property analysis, an alternative approach to analyzing non-lexical items is through the acoustic representations learned by data-driven methods. These methods include deep learning models mapping the audio segments to the latent embedding space from acoustic data in a (self-)supervised fashion (Li *et al*., 2020; Xu *et al*., 2021; Baevski *et al*., 2020). Although the models are not explicitly trained to represent the similarities among phonetic features, studies nonetheless find the audio segments with similar linguistic properties are closer together in the embedding space (Ma *et al*., 2021; Cormac English *et al*., 2022; Silfverberg *et al*., 2021). Therefore, these phonetic representations may already encode the phonetic variability of non-lexical items to reflect their different discourse functions.

This study thus aims to investigate how the acoustic properties contribute to the non-lexical items' discourse functions and how the phone embeddings extracted from the deep learning model help differentiate those functions. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We first review related works on discourse markers and how they are analyzed with acoustic properties (Sec. 2). Next, we describe our dataset on non-lexical items (Sec. 3) in Taiwan Mandarin, in which we manually identify the items and annotate their discourse functions in interpellation video clips of Taiwan's Legislative Yuan. Finally, based on the dataset, we

conduct the acoustic property analysis (Sec. 4) and build classifiers based on the phone embeddings extracted from a deep learning model (Sec. 5). Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Related Works

2.1 Discourse Marker

Discourse markers (hereafter, DMs) have received increasing attention since Schiffrin (1987, p. 31) initially defined them as "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk." However, little consensus has been not only on the terminology[1] of DMs but on the classification frameworks. Schiffrin (1987) has proposed that DMs form a category composed of phrases, conjunctions, and interjections, and that they have a part in discourse coherence considering different planes of talk.[2] Additionally, DMs can also serve as identifiers of participation status, speaker's assumptions, or hearer's knowledgement (Schiffrin, 1987; Schwenter, 1996; Fraser, 1999).

Despite that earlier research considered DMs as text-connective items bonding to syntactic structures, Fischer (2006, p. 9) de fined DMs as devices involved in "turn-taking, interpersonal management, topic structure, and participation frameworks." Subsequently, Diewald (2006, 2013) suggested that DMs demonstrate pragmatic functions, manage discourse in a syntactically-independent way, and present their polyfunctionality in discourse (c.f. Fraser, 2009; Hansen, 2006; Németh, 2022).

Although numerous analyses were conducted on the pragmatic functions of DMs, they focused mostly on the associations with semantic senses and syntactic structures (e.g., Aijmer, 2011; Crible, 2017; Ford & Thompson, 1996). That is, studies of the connections between the discourse functions and the phonological information of DMs are relatively few.

2.2 Acoustic Property

The previous works which interwove DMs and their acoustic properties were mainly on the pragmatic-prosodic interface. Shan (2021) and Zhao and Wang (2019) investigated the Mandarin Chinese DMs, 你知道 *ni zhidao* 'you know' and 你不知道 *ni bu zhidao* 'you don't know', respectively. While Shan (2021) analyzed on duration, tempo, intensity, and fundamental frequencies (i.e., pitch, hereinafter F_0), Zhao and Wang (2019) examined the

[1] For instance, discourse marker (Jucker & Ziv, 1998; Schiffrin, 1987); discourse particles (Aijmer, 2002; Fischer, 2006); pragmatic marker (Brinton, 1996); among others

[2] Schiffrin has suggested the five planes of talk: the Exchange structure (ES), Action structure (AS), Ideational structure (IdS), Participation framework (PF), and Information state (InS). More details can be seen in Schiffrin (2005), Maschler and Schiffrin (2015), and Hamilton *et al*. (2015).

speech tempo, mean F_0 frequencies, and pitch accents of the DMs. In general, they have found correlations between the discourse functions and the acoustic properties. Moreover, Tseng *et al*. (2006) have suggested that connectors are predictable from speech prosody; most 'redundant prosodic fillers' are duration-triggered and manifested through narrowed F_0 ranges, whereas 'obligatory discourse markers' are syntax-triggered and manifested through widened F_0 ranges and resets.

The acoustic properties and their relevance to the pragmatic functions of DMs have also been analyzed cross-linguistically (e.g., Cabarrão *et al*., 2018; Raso & Vieira, 2016; Gonen *et al*., 2015; Beňuš, 2014). Referring to Wu *et al*. (2021), the phonetic variations of DMs in French are likely to appear in spontaneous speech and undergo phonetic reduction, considering their shorter mean phone duration and a rather centralized vowel space. Additionally, Schubotz *et al*. (2015) investigates the common English construction *you know* in terms of its duration, which is likely to be affected by the residuals of speech rate.

In addition to acoustic properties, past studies also examined the phonetic representations learned with data-driven methods. For example, Silfverberg *et al*. (2021) studied phonological alternations of Finnish consonant gradation with vector representations retrieved from RNN models. Other studies also tried to learn dense vector representations purely from text using grapheme-to-phoneme mappings with CBOW and SkipGram models (O'Neill & Carson-Berndsen, 2019). Notably, recent studies found transformer-based speech processing models (Baevski *et al*., 2020; Hsu *et al*., 2021), while not explicitly modeling phonetic properties, encoded the phonetic categorization information in the model representations, such as vowels and consonants, or fricatives and stops (Ma *et al*., 2021; Cormac English *et al*., 2022).

Tracing back to the former sections, previous literature on DMs mostly concentrated on their status at the semantic-pragmatic interface. The reviewed acoustic-related research, however, focused on those construction-wise DMs, and not to mention that the analyzed acoustic properties were limited to suprasegmental features, such as pitch and duration. In this case, the potential phonetic-pragmatic interrelationship of non-lexical items is yet to be elaborated.

3. Non-lexical Items Dataset

First, we used four interpellation video clips from Taiwan's Legislative Yuan.[3] Audio tracks were then extracted from the clips, converted into 16 bit WAV format, and resampled with 22kHz sampling rates. The overall data comprise separate interpellation of two male and two female legislators, each ranging 6-8 minutes. The equal number of genders was to balance

[3] The clips were downloaded from the Parliament TV website (https://www.parliamentarytv.org.tw/) and encoded as AAC, H.264

potential gender differences in the utterances.

Secondly, the audio segments of non-lexical items (e.g., *uh*, *em*, and *ho*) were annotated by three native speakers via Praat 6.2.03 (Boersma & Weenink, 2021). Each non-lexical item acquired two tags, one for functional *Role* and one for pragmatic *Meaning*. Referring to Ward (2006), we defined the six candidates of *Role* as follows:

- BACKCHANNEL, which occurs repetitively and shows the agreement of the hearer; it often overlaps the main channel[4] of the utterance.
- CFT (Clause-final token), which occurs in the sentence-final position and ends certain turn of talk.
- DISFLUENCY, which refers to the onset or coda of a word that can hardly be recognized due to its discoursal incompleteness.
- FILLER, which serves as a connector between two sentences or a sentence-initial particle of the speaker.
- RESPONSE, which occurs in the main channel and often indicates a flippant attitude.
- OTHER, which represents the non-lexical item not belonging to the above types.

Similarly, we summarized the following eight candidates for *Meaning*. It is noted that certain non-lexical items may carry multiple pragmatic meanings, and that the candidates below are not mutually exclusive. Thus, one non-lexical item is allowed to be annotated with multiple *Meaning* tags.

- authority. The speaker demonstrates his profession, personal experience, or intention in the speech.
- control. The speaker is in control of knowing exactly what to say or do next.
- concern. The speaker lacks confidence in his own words or tries to show respect to the audience.
- thought. The speaker takes the words (from himself or the other participant) as involving or meriting thought.
- dissatisfaction. The speaker is unsatisfied with his own words, the conversation, or the other participant.
- new information. The speaker wants to express that he has received new information; the

[4] see also Heinz (2003), Li *et al*. (2010), and McNely (2009) among others.

speaker successfully lets the other participant understand the topic of the speech.

- old ground. The speaker is expecting to move on to the next topic since he has already acknowledged the current one.
- neutral.

In sum, a total of 143 non-lexical items produced by the legislators were manually annotated. We then moved on to extract the acoustic properties for the dataset.

4. Acoustic Property Analysis

With the assumption that the discourse functions may encode phonological variations, we illustrated our data collection and the annotation for non-lexical items in Sec. 3. The following sections (4.1 and 4.2) then present the analyses and results of acoustic properties.

4.1 Property Extraction

For each non-lexical item, we retrieved six conventional acoustic properties: mean pitch, duration, F1, F2, F3, and nasality, via customized Praat scripts (Styler, 2017). As formant frequencies construct the vowel space, F1 is determined by the vowel height, F2 is determined by the vowel backness, and F3 is determined by the vowel roundness.[5]

In terms of nasality, it can be quantified by ***a1-p1*** (for high vowels such as [i, u, y]) or ***a1-p0*** values (for non-high vowels such as [a, o, ə, e]). Since most of the annotated non-lexical items are realized and transcribed with non-high vowels, only the ***a1-p0*** values were considered. While ***a1*** stands for the amplitudes (in *dB*) of F1, ***p0*** stands for the amplitude of the nasal peak below F1 (Chen, 1997; Cho *et al*., 2017; Chiu & Lu, 2021).

Subsequently, to build up the most comprehensive acoustic properties, the values of F1, F2, F3 frequencies and ***a1-p0*** amplitude for each annotated non-lexical item were measured at 5 different time-points (i.e., the 10%, 30%, 50%, 70%, 90% time-points within each item interval). The retrieved acoustic data for 715 tokens[6] were processed and modified into machine-readable forms using the pandas package (The Pandas Development Team, 2020) in Python 3.8.9 (Python Core Team, 2021).

The statistical analysis was performed via the lmerTest package (Kuznetsova *et al*., 2017) in R 4.2.1 (R Core Team, 2022). Some factors contain rare categories were therefore re-coded. Specifically in the candidates of *Role*, DISFLUENCY and RESPONSE in were merged into

[5] The higher the F1, the lower the vowel; the higher the F2, the more anterior the vowel; the lower the F3, the rounder the vowel (Flanagan, 1955; Lindblom & Studdert-Kennedy, 1967).

[6] Each 143 annotated non-lexical items were measured at 5 different points, resulting in 715 tokens.

OTHER, considering their extremely few occurrences. As for the candidates of *Meaning*, the items with multiple candidate tags were recoded as complex. The OTHER and complex were set as references in *Role* and *Meaning* factors, respectively. Finally, Box- Cox transformations (Box & Cox, 1964) were applied to each response variable to reduce the non-normalities in the distributions.

4.2 Evaluations

To explore the effect of discourse functions on the acoustic properties, we conduct statistical analyses with linear mixed-effects models and classification tasks with SVM.

Statistical Modeling.

Apart from the two discourse functions (*Role* and *Meaning*), we also take *Transcriptions* into consideration. As *Transcriptions*, annotated for segment identification, reflects the annotators' perception for each non-lexical item, it is likely a control variable that poses significant effects on the properties. Thus, for the evaluation of each acoustic property, we actually compare two models: one full linear mixed-effects model (composed of *Role*, *Meaning*, and *Transcriptions*) as well as one counterpart baseline model (composed of only *Transcriptions*).

Table 1. Model comparisons of linear mixed-effects in different response variables. The comparisons are between the base model, which only contains transcription and random intercepts, and the full model, which additionally includes discourse function predictors. For brevity, only comparison statistics are shown. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

	Chiq	Df	*p*-value
Duration	83.79	9	<.001 ***
Pitch	124.66	9	<.001 ***
F1	10.12	9	.341
F2	20.32	9	.016 *
F3	7.62	9	.573
Nasality	15.29	9	.083

Table 1 illustrates the sequential (Type I) ANOVA results for the linear mixed-effects models, in which one specific acoustic property is used as the dependent variable. Specifically, the acoustic properties that reach statistical significance among the model comparisons are Duration, Pitch, and F2, suggesting that certain types of roles and meanings present additional effects on acoustic properties, after controlled for the transcriptions. These results imply that the discourse functions show additional effects on the Duration, Pitch, and F2.

Table 2. Parameter estimates of discourse functions in the linear-mixed effect models. The variables of transcriptions are included in all models, but their estimates are not shown in the table for brevity. Response variables are Box-Cox transformed, the parameters are therefore in the transformed scale. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

	Duration	Pitch	F1	F2	F3	Nasality
(transcriptions)			--			
CFT	0.034	12.04***	35.68	6.28	10169.4	4.03
FILLER	0.042	14.92***	2.67	1.22	10 913.4	5.67
authority	−0.016	3.87**	3.98	2.29***	−6832.3	2.52
control	−0.013	0.16	3.49	7.87	2345.1	0.18
dissatisfaction	−0.052	−10.07***	45.70	3.16**	−9942.1	4.08
neutral	−0.016	0.05	58.17	1.58*	1948.2	0.30
new information	−0.267**	10.17***	−40.21	1.65	−5134.1	−2.71
old ground	−0.003	0.82	−4.51	1.31	3383.3	0.13
thought	−0.288***	−2.36	97.46	1.55	2643.0	2.75

To further examine such possibility, Table 2 compiles the fixed-effect results of the full linear mixed-effects models for the acoustic properties, where the discourse functions[7] are the predictors. We find that both types of discourse functions show the most significance on Pitch, which corresponds to the reviewed works in Sec. 2.2. Yet, only certain types of *Meaning* show correlation with Duration and F2; not to mention the other three acoustic properties (i.e., F1, F3, and Nasality) which do not show any statistical significance.

Support Vector Machines.

Support Vector Machines (SVM) model is implemented for the classification tasks, in which the acoustic properties are used in prediction of discourse functions. As we assume that the discourse functions may reflect in the phonological variations of the non-lexical items, linear models such as SVM are applicable.

We use random 70-30 splits for training and testing data. While the training data comprise 500 tokens, the testing data comprise 215 tokens. A random guessing model, serving as a *the-most-frequent baseline*, is also implemented for comparison. It calculates the frequency

[7] Notice that the aforementioned BACKCHANNEL (as Role) and concern (as Meaning) only exist in the supplementary annotation for those non-lexical items produced by the administrative officers in opposition to the legislators. Data are reserved for the future studies.

distributions of all discourse functions, and then it invariably predicts the most frequent class. We use the accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score to evaluate the performance of the two models.

Table 3. Evaluation of acoustic models

Role	Acc	Pr	Rc	F1
acoustics	.76	.15	.20	.17
acoustics-base	.76	.15	.20	.17
Meaning	Acc	Pr	Rc	F1
acoustics	.48	.09	.14	.11
acoustics-base	.38	.04	.10	.06

Table 3 shows that both models, based on the acoustic properties, find it harder to predict *Meaning* than *Role*. Specifically, the acoustics achieved slightly better accuracy (.48) and precision (.09) than the baseline (.38 and .04). In the prediction of *Role*, however, the performance of the models was very similar. It implies that the acoustics in fact does not acquire much advantage in predicting discourse functions. This observation is consistent with the results of the previous liner mixed-effects model, in which we found few correlations between the acoustic properties and the discourse functions. Therefore, we attempt to find other presentations of phonological variations that may better capture the candidates of discourse functions with higher accuracy.

5. Phone Embeddings

As the conventional acoustic properties did not show promising results of capturing the discourse functions, we reached out to phonetic vector representations, in which the phonological variations of non-lexical items might be encoded.

Instead of the common end-to-end models trained on waveforms and language-specific transcriptions in ASR tasks, we chose the *Allosaurus* model by Li *et al*. (2020)[8] for retrieving the phone embeddings. Specifically, the Allosaurus is a universal phone recognizer integrating an ASR encoder with an allophone layer, in which language-independent phone distributions are directly recognized and mapped into language-dependent phoneme distributions.

We first examine the phone embeddings learned by the phone recognition model. In the video clips collected in Section 3, the model automatically identifies 29,218 phones in the conversations. To investigate the phone organizations in the embedding space, we then extract

[8] https://github.com/xinjli/allosaurus

the bi-LSTM representations[9] with which model predicts the phones as phone embeddings. Next, we average these embeddings by their predicted phones and obtain 34 phone centroids in the embedding space. We follow the literature (Cormac English *et al*., 2022) and conduct hierarchical clustering with Ward linkage based on the Euclidean distances between the centroids. The clustering results are shown in Figure 1a and Figure 1b. We not only observe clear clusters of vowels and consonants but observe that the fricatives and stops tend to be close to each other with similar phonetic properties. The patterns suggest that the phone embeddings might reflect the phonetic variations in our conversation data.

Moreover, we inspect the clustering structure of recognized phones that occurred in the non-lexical items. Figure 1c shows the two-dimensional t-SNE (Pedregosa *et al*., 2011) visualization of the 640-dimension phone embeddings obtained from Allosaurus. The same phones tend to form distinct clusters, and the general distinction between vowels and consonants is still observed in the figure. It indicates that the embeddings may represent their corresponding phonetic properties. As Li *et al*. (2020) have shown in their studies, Allosaurus has the advantage of multilingual phone recognition and involves more phonological knowledge. It is thus appropriate for us to leverage these phone embeddings, by which the discourse functions of non-lexical items may be encoded.

5.1 Classification Task

The output data by Allosaurus (i.e., the phone embeddings and phoneme transcriptions) are aligned with our annotations of discourse functions for non-lexical items. It is noted that only the phoneme, whose timestamp matches the 715 tokens of non-lexical items, are kept for the classification tasks. The data is split randomly 70-30 into training and testing datasets as in Section **4.2**.

We also implement a linear SVM model and a random guessing model serving as a *the-most-frequent baseline* for the classification tasks.[10] The only difference here is that we replace use the acoustic properties with the phone embedding vectors to predict the candidates of the discourse functions.

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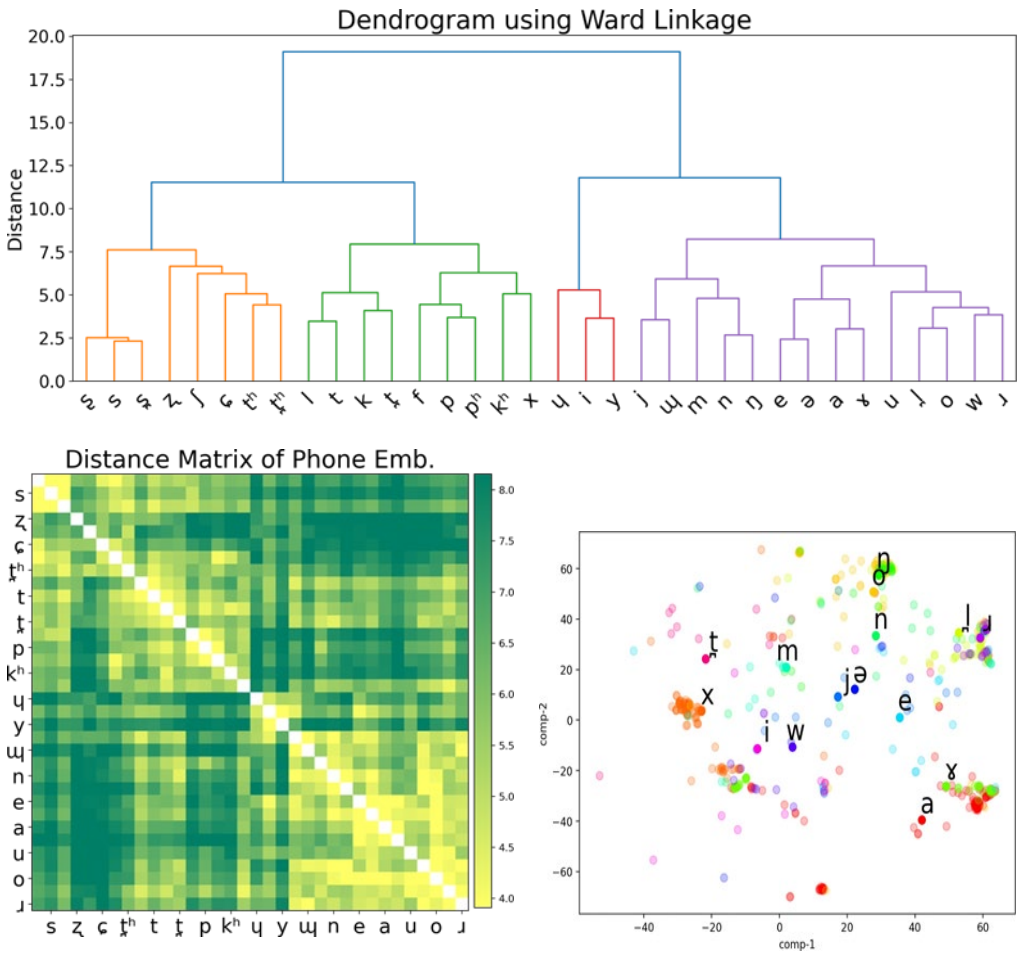
[9] Referring to the comments from the reviewers, the bi-LSTM representations are used as the phone embeddings considering their better performance than the other representations (i.e., the 40-dimension MFCCs and the phone logits) generated by Allosaurus.

[10] Regarding the comments from the reviewers, the linear SVM model and the model baseline are adopted to not only display the data distributions but highlight the results of Allosaurus, as we mainly focus on whether the phone representations really help us explore non-lexical items. Based on the results, we did find the the model using phonetic realizations performs better in predicting the discourse functions, and we expect future research to develop better representations and state-of-the-art models that allow us to describe non-lexical items more appropriately.

(a)



(b) (c)

Figure 1. (a) The dendrogram of the hierarchical clustering with Ward linkage. The links are color-coded for visual references. Generally, the top left and right branches loosely correspond to consonants and (semi-)vowels. The leftmost branch (orange) are mostly fricatives (e.g., s, ʂ, ɕ); the one on the right (green) includes stops (e.g., k, t, p). (b) The distance matrix shows a consistent pattern with the one in the dendrogram. (c) The t-SNE projection of the phones in non-lexical items. Only the most-frequent 15 phones are shown for clarity. IPA symbols mark the median points of each category.

5.2 Evaluation Results

As shown in the upper part of Table 4, phone emb. stands out with the highest accuracy (.92) and precision (.96) in prediction of *Role*. While baseline presents the accuracy of .78, the acoustic models (see Table 3) show even lower accuracies (.76) and precision (.15). As for predicting *Meaning*, phone emb. Significantly outperforms its baseline and remains the highest in accuracy (.77) and precision (.84) among all models. In general, phone emb. presents superior performance than the other models in prediction of both discourse functions.

Table 4. Evaluation of classifiers based on phone embeddings

Role	Acc	Pr	Rc	F1
phone emb.	.92	.96	.87	.91
baseline	.78	.16	.20	.18
Meaning	Acc	Pr	Rc	F1
phone emb.	.77	.84	.68	.72
baseline	.42	.05	.11	.07

Moreover, both models (i.e., acoustics and phone emb.) are better at predicting *Role* than *Meaning*, likely due to the fact that *Meaning* comprises more types of candidates and internally more equal distribution. In this case, the gap between the accuracies of phone emb. (i.e., between .92 and .77) is still the smallest among the models. This suggests that our model is better at capturing the discourse functions by using the phone embeddings, the phonetic realizations, than the statistical acoustic properties.

6. Conclusions

This paper focuses on the phonetic-pragmatic interrelationship of non-lexical discourse markers in Taiwan Mandarin. As we assume that the discourse functions may be captured by the phonological variations, we firstly analyzed on the common acoustic properties (i.e., duration, nasality, mean pitch, F1, F2, and F3), followed by the classification tasks considering the 640d-phone embeddings. In comparison with the conventional acoustic properties, the model using phonetic realizations performs better in prediction of the functional *Role* and pragmatic *Meaning* of the non-lexical items. The result is consistent with our hypotheses that the phonetic realizations, embeddings via deep learning, encode certain phonological variations of non-lexical items and correlate with their discourse functions.

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