

# A Systemic Functional Analysis on Discourse Marker—“Honest Phrases”

Linxiu Yang<sup>1</sup> & Lijun Xie<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Foreign Languages School, Shanxi University, Taiyuan, China

Correspondence: Lijun Xie, Foreign Languages School, Shanxi University, Taiyuan, China. E-mail: andrea623@163.com

Received: October 15, 2014 Accepted: November 5, 2014 Online Published: November 25, 2014

doi:10.5539/ijel.v4n6p167 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v4n6p167>

## Abstract

Discourse marker is one of the most important research topics in recent years. Many researchers from home and abroad have explored it from various perspectives, including the perspective of discourse coherence; the perspective of syntax-pragmatics; the perspective of cognitive pragmatics and the perspective of metapragmatics. At the same time researchers at home mainly make specific analysis on certain discourse markers in terms of their pragmatic function. Besides, Systemic Functional Linguistics is a branch of Functional Linguistics, being further divided into systemic grammar and functional grammar. Systemic grammar regards language as a system network or meaning potential to explain; while functional grammar intends to prove language is a social interaction manner, emphasizing the function of language. However, at present a few researchers have combined the two fields to study together. Based on the fact and the above theoretical foundation, the paper introduces discourse marker to a broader category and studies it in a new perspective. The paper selects “Honest Phrases” in two different communication interaction—daily conversation and police interrogation to analyze discourse marker—“Honest Phrases” using three metafunctions in Systemic Functional Linguistics, aiming to explore its multifunctional mechanism in discourse from perspectives of ideational metafunction, interpersonal metafunction and textual metafunction so as to make up the shortage of the former study perspectives of “Honest Phrases” and to help people understand it deeply.

**Keywords:** discourse marker, Systemic Functional Linguistics, three metafunctions, Honest Phrases

## 1. Introduction

Discourse markers appear frequently in daily conversations. “Honest Phrases” as one of the highly frequent discourse markers, attract more attention from researchers. They have investigated it from various aspects, such as pragmatics perspective and social linguistics perspective. However, the paper investigates “Honest Phrases” under the frame of Systemic Functional Linguistics, aiming to analyze its ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function respectively in two different communication interaction—daily conversation and police interrogation so as to help people understand it comprehensively and use it properly.

## 2. Discourse Marker

The term “discourse marker” was first put forward by Schiffrin (1987), regarding it as sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk. In fact, Discourse marker exists in various languages and daily life widely to indicate speakers’ language markers which devote to guiding and restricting hearers’ proper understanding. In terms of grammatical perspective, it can be regarded as an omitted subject phrase. It is an independent component in the sentence which can be removed without affecting the whole sentence meaning. In terms of syntactic perspective, it is classified as parenthesis. In terms of semantic perspective, it conveys different meanings in different situations, functioning as pause, transition and so on to form coherence and organization of discourse. In addition, it also functions as instructions and hints. In terms of usage patterns, its position is comparatively flexible. According to its positions, the usage patterns can be divided into three types: 1) parenthesis+X; 2) X1+parenthesis+X2; 3) X+ parenthesis (X represents complement).

People use discourse markers frequently in daily life. Since the ability to use discourse markers proficiently not only can promote smooth communication, but also can achieve discourse coherence. Different scholars have different understandings about discourse markers. In recent years, scholars tend to focus more on its pragmatic

function. Especially after the publication of *Cohesion in English* by Halliday and Hasan (1976) and *Discourse Markers* by Schiffrin (1987), scholars paid more attention to discourse markers and formed different research schools. In general, in the study of discourse markers, there mainly exist four different perspectives which are the perspective of discourse coherence; the perspective of syntax-pragmatics; the perspective of cognitive pragmatics and the perspective of metapragmatics. Among these perspectives, the most influential scholar is Deborah Schiffrin (1987), who combined methods of interactional linguistics with variation analysis to study discourse markers on the basis of discourse coherence and social interaction theory; Bruce Fraser (1999) studied it from pragmatic perspective; Diane Blackmore (2002) studied it under the framework of relevance theory proposed by Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995).

In china, the development of discourse marker is still not mature. Its representatives are the following scholars: He Ziran (1999) proposed the pragmatic conditionality of discourse markers, pointing out that discourse markers restrict the generation and understanding of discourse; Ran Yongping (2003) took discourse marker “well” as research object to analyze its pragmatic functions in communication interaction; Cao Fang (2004) discussed the pragmatic function of discourse marker “I mean” based on the framework of relevance theory to reveal the dynamism of natural language communication and prove the importance of discourse marker. According to the current researches, it can be seen most scholars emphasize more on pragmatics and social linguistics.

### 3. Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics is one of the most important theories in linguistics. It is classified into systemic grammar and functional grammar. Systemic grammar regards language as a system network or meaning potential to explain; while functional grammar intends to prove language to be a social interaction manner, emphasizing the function of language. Halliday thought language has three metafunctions---ideational function, interpersonal function, textual function, all of which together with lexicogrammar form the core of language (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999; Halliday, 2004). Next the paper will introduce the three metafunctions respectively.

#### 3.1 Ideational Function

As has discussed, language has three metafunctions, among which ideational function is further divided into experiential function and logical function. Experiential function regards language as a way to express various experience in real world. It is mainly realized by transitivity system. Transitivity system is a semantic system, aiming to classify what people see, hear and do in real world into various processes. According to Halliday (2004), transitivity system divides experience into six different processes: material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process and existential process. Material process is a process of doing. It is expressed by actional verbs and can display both concrete action and abstract behavior. Mental process is a process of sensing, which expresses perception, reaction, cognition and such activities. Relational process is a process of being, which reflects how things relate with each other. It is further divided into attributive and identifying two types. Attributive type specifies a thing having what kind of attribution. Identifying type aims to identify one's specific identity. Behavioral process is a process of behaving which refers to breathe, cough, sigh, laugh, cry and such physical activities. Verbal process is a process of saying which is used to exchange information. *Say, tell, talk, praise, boast* are frequently used verbs. Existential process is a process of existing. Frequently-used verbs are *be*, sometimes *arise, exit* and *seem*. In existential process there must be an existent.

Logical function refers to language has the function of reflecting logical semantic relations among two or more language units. It is manifested as interdependency and logical-semantic relation. Interdependency can be divided into parataxis and hypotaxis. Logical-semantic relation can also be generally classified into expansion which includes elaboration, extension, enhancement and projection which elicits another clause through one clause, and the projected content can be both locution and idea.

#### 3.2 Interpersonal Function

Interpersonal function reflects interpersonal relation, language roles and attitudes through language. It is mainly realized by mood and modality. In a sentence, mood includes subject which is acted as by nominal and finite element which is a part of verbal groups. Finite element symbolizes tense or modality such as *was* or *may*. Then other parts in the sentence are called residue, it is further divided into predicator, complement and adjunct.

The interpersonal function of modality is to express speakers' assessment of the validity of the proposition he says and personal willingness to proposal. Broadly speaking, modality includes both modalization and modulation. Modalization refers to the exchange of information; while modulation refers to the exchange of goods-&-services. When language is used to exchange information, the semantic meaning of clause is appeared

in the form of proposition which can be argued about. It can be affirmed, doubted, denied, insisted, accepted, modified and adjusted. Then the semantic meaning between yes and no of the proposition, that is, the uncertainty of the proposition belongs to the category of modalization. There are two kinds of uncertainty between yes and no: different degrees of probability (possibly, certainly) and different degrees of usuality (sometimes, usually, always), which are also known as the narrow meaning of modality. When language is used to exchange goods-&-services, the semantic meaning of clause is appeared in the form of proposal which can not be affirmed or denied. Instead, it should be obeyed or rejected. Then the semantic meaning between regulation and prohibition of the proposal belongs to the category of modulation, which consists of obligation (allowed to, supposed to) and inclination (willing to, keen to).

### 3.3 Textual Function

Textual function integrates ideational meaning with interpersonal meaning into discourse. Here text is a semantic concept, neither a unit above sentence nor a paragraph. Textual function is realized by three manners---theme structure, information structure and cohesion. Theme can be divided into simple theme that only contains ideational element, and multiple theme that may contain ideational element, interpersonal element and textual element at the same time. Theme is always placed at the beginning of a sentence. Information structure contains many information units that are formed by new information and given information. Generally speaking, given information appears prior to new information. The last realization is cohesion. According to Halliday (2004), cohesion includes both grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. Grammatical cohesion is further divided into reference, ellipsis, substitution and conjunction; lexical cohesion contains repetition, synonymy/antonymy, hyponymy/meronymy and collocation.

What we have discussed above is the theoretical frame of the paper, and at present there are a few researchers who combine “Honest Phrases” and Systemic Functional Linguistics together to study its discourse effect. Based on the fact we will have a multifunctional analysis about discourse marker-“HPs” from the new perspective.

## 4. Multifunctional analysis of “HPs”

“HPs” is short for Honesty Phrases, referring to phrases relating with honesty in English such as *to be honest*, *quite honestly*, *honest to God*, *I’ll be honest with you*, *honestly* and so on.

Also, in terms of grammatical perspective, “HPs” can also be regarded as an omitted subject phrase. It is an independent component in the sentence, which can be removed without affecting the integrity of the whole sentence meaning. In terms of syntactic perspective, it is referred to as parenthesis. From semantic perspective, its original meaning is “according to the actual situation”, which may represent the true fact. However, in real daily communication, hearers won’t understand speakers’ intension according to its literal meaning, believing what speakers say after the “HPs” is true. In fact, speakers also don’t focus on its literal meaning when using it. As a result, the true meaning of discourse marker “HPs” gradually weakens in communication.

### 4.1 “Honest Phrases” in Daily Conversation

In Systemic Functional Linguistics, there is an assumption on the three metafunctions that every sentence can be analyzed in terms of the three metafunctions. For example, in the sentence “But I see it”. In terms of ideational function, on experiential function, it is a mental process, and there are two participants, one is senser-“I”, the other is phenomenon-“it”; on logical function, “but” conveys the relation of transition. In terms of interpersonal function, the sentence affords information and it is a declarative sentence. In terms of textual function, the sentence contains multiple theme which is formed by textual theme-“but” and ideational theme-“I”. In addition, cohesion includes conjunction-“but” and reference-“it”. It can be seen the three metafunctions together form meaning and they closely relate with each other. Next, we will analyze discourse marker-“HPs” in terms of the three metafunctions in detail.

(1) A: I need to relax, can we go to see a movie tomorrow?

B: *Honestly* tomorrow I am busy.

In Example (1), in terms of ideational function, it is a relational process, and there are two participants-carrier and attribute. Discourse marker “*honestly*” is used to continue dialogue in terms of logical function, through which the dialogue proceeds naturally. In terms of textual function, “*honestly*” is not participant, process nor circumstance. Therefore, it can not act as theme alone, it has to combine with circumstantial element conveying time-“*tomorrow*” to constitute multiple theme, among which “*honestly*” is textual theme, “*tomorrow*” is ideational theme. In terms of interpersonal function, the sentence offers information corresponding to the former question. Besides, discourse marker “*honestly*” is used to frame dispreferred answer and “*honestly*” acts as euphemism. See Table1:

Table 1. Theme structure of Example (1)

Honestly	tomorrow	I	am	busy.
textual theme	ideational theme	(carrier)		(attribute)
(conjunction)	(circumstantial element)		rheme	
Multiple theme				

(2) A: Do you know which team won the match finally?

B: Oh, I don't know, *honestly* I don't care at all.

In Example (2), first of all there exists a mental process in the sentence—“*honestly I don't care at all*”. Interdependency relation between two clauses in B is hypotaxis, and its logical-semantic relation is expansion. On the one hand, the latter clause subordinates to the former; on the other hand, the latter clause extends the former, enhancing the meaning of the former. Here, discourse marker “*honestly*” has two functions, one is to elicit a clause expressing reason; the other is to connect two meaningful units so as to distinguish major and minor clause.

(3) A: The work is done. *Honestly*, if Tom doesn't help me, I will not finish it so quickly.

In terms of grammatical structure, Example (3) is composed of two sentences. One is a simple clause; the other is a compound clause. The function of discourse marker “*honestly*” is to connect two clauses, which is similar to Example (1). What is different is that “*honestly*” in Example (1) connects two different turns between A and B, whereas “*honestly*” in Example (3) connects two sequential clauses said by A. In terms of ideational function, the logical function of “*honestly*” is enhancement. “*Honestly*” elicits new information that why the speaker does his work so quickly. In terms of interpersonal function, “*honestly*” offers new information and is used to express speaker's attitude towards the information he offers---it is out of honesty. In terms of textual function, it also acts as one of the components of multiple theme. Look at Table2:

Table 2. Theme structure of Example (3)

Honestly	if Tom didn't help me	I will not finish it so quickly
textual theme	ideational theme	
(conjunction)	(circumstantial element)	rheme
Multiple theme		

But here ideational theme is a clausal theme which is also a theme structure and can be further classified as Table 3.

Table 3. Specific theme structure of Example (3)

Honestly	if	Tom	didn't help me	I will not finish it so quickly
	textual theme	ideational theme	rheme	
	(conjunction)	(circumstantial element)		
Multiple theme				
textual theme	ideational theme			
(conjunction)	(circumstantial element)			rheme
Multiple theme				

From Table3, it can be seen theme in compound clause is comparatively complex. So far, we have analyzed 3 examples in which discourse marker “HPs” all conveys different metafunctions, promoting conversations to keep on successfully and naturally. And it is notable that the above three examples all belong to daily conversation. However, we have to admit “HPs” unavoidably appear in another special social

interaction—police interrogation.

#### 4.2 “Honest Phrases” in Police Interrogation

Police interrogation refers to the process that the police inquire of the criminal about the facts of a case. Generally, the police put forward questions and the criminal respond, in which “HPs” usually occur. For example:

(4) P: Do you know who came into the room to fetch the wallet?

C: I don’t know.

P: Tell me then you may be free.

C: I couldn’t tell you. *Honest to God* I really don’t know.

In this Example, “*Honest to God*” draws forth a mental process, which can be seen as an explanation of the former sentence. Thus, from logical function, it expresses the logic-semantic relation of extension; that is, it adds new information to the former sentence. Besides, according to Systemic Functional Linguistics, it also can’t act as circumstance. Therefore, in terms of textual function it also can’t serve as theme alone. But it is used to connect two clauses so as to achieve coherence. Last in terms of interpersonal function, again the sentence offers information. At the same time the criminal adopts “*Honest to God*” to soften his tone in case of offending the police; or to a certain extent, it is a cushion of the former firm tone. Also it presupposes a dispreferred answer.

(5) P: H’d you been drinking on Saturday?

C: *To tell you the truth* I really can’t remember, I might have had a couple of cans if I was.

P: Who did you drink with?

Here “*to tell you the truth*” appears at the beginning of the sentence. Seen the discourse marker “*to be honest with you*” from logical function in ideational metafunction, it plays the role of continuing the discourse. Through the use of discourse marker, the criminal responds to the question of the police. And it is notable that here “HPs” also elicits a mental process. From interpersonal metafunction, it performs the speech function of offering new information. In terms of textual metafunction, also “*to tell you the truth*” can’t act as theme alone. Therefore it combines with its complement—“*I really can’t remember*” together constituting multiple theme, in which “*to tell you the truth*” is textual theme and “*I really can’t remember*” is ideational theme. As shown in the following table:

Table 4. Theme structure of Example (5)

To tell you the truth	I really can’t remember	I might have had a couple of cans if I was
textual theme	ideational theme	
(conjunction)	(circumstance)	rtheme
Multiple theme		

(6) P: I’m asking you, did you see them go into the bathroom?

C: I didn’t see.

P: You’d better think carefully.

C: I can’t remember because at that time I was smoking around the corner *honest to God*.

In this Example “*honest to God*” appears at the end of the whole sentence. From experiential function in ideational function, there exist two processes—a mental process with mental verb “*remember*” and a material process with actional verb “*smoke*”. And the relation between the two processes is hypotaxis. What’s more, the logical-semantic relation between them is enhancement, the latter part elaborating the specific reason for not knowing. From interpersonal function, here “*honest to God*” acts as comment adjunct in residue to express the criminal’s attitude to the information he offers, indicating what he said is based on the foundation of honesty. In terms of textual function, “*honest to God*” together with the latter part “*because at that time I was smoking around the corner*” constitutes rtheme to further explain the theme—why the criminal can’t remember. As shown in the following table:

Table 5. Theme structure of Example (6)

I can't remember	because at that time I was smoking around the corner <i>honest to God</i> .
Theme	rHEME

Till now we have discussed the “HPs” in two different social interaction—daily conversation and police interrogation. From these examples we note that in daily conversation the complement is optional, which can be relational process, behavioral process or mental process. However in police interrogation the complement is always the mental process. This is because of the different characteristics of two social interaction—daily conversation pays more attention to facts; while police interrogation focuses on the process of memorizing. In spite of the difference, it can be seen “HPs” plays the similar function regardless of their discourse characteristics. From ideational metafunction, it mainly works as logical function to indicate semantic relations with the former or the latter complement; from interpersonal metafunction, it offers new information with declarative sentence together with the so-called pragmatic function; from textual metafunction, based on the fact that “HPs” don't belong to any circumstance, generally it can't act as theme alone. However, it usually contributes to discourse coherence. On the whole, the three metafunctions do not exist all alone. On the contrary, they twist closely together to form an integral part to express meaning powerfully.

### 5. Conclusion

According to the above discussion it is notable that only to pay attention to pragmatic function is not sufficient to understand discourse marker “HPs” roundly. Therefore, the paper analyzes discourse marker from a comparatively new perspective-Systemic Functional Linguistics, using its three metafunctions-ideational metafunction, interpersonal metafunction and textual metafunction to analyze “Honest Phrases” in two different communication interaction to find out its multifunctional mechanism. Not only does the paper introduce discourse marker “HPs” into a new aspect, but also it indicates the characteristics of Systemic Functional Linguistics and multifunction of discourse marker-“HPs” so as to help people comprehend it better.

### References

- Blakemore, D. (2002). *Relevance and Linguistics Meaning: The Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse Markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511486456>
- Cao, F. (2004). Pragmatic Function of Discourse Marker “I Mean”. *Journal of Jinzhou Normal University*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1672-8254.2004.01.024>
- Edwards, D. (2006). “To Be Honest”: Sequential Uses of Honesty Phrases in Talk-in-Interaction. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*.
- Fraser, B. (1999). What are Discourse Markers?. *Journal of Pragmatics*. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(98\)00101-5](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(98)00101-5)
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. (1999). *Construing Experience through Meaning: A Language-based Approach to Cognition*. London and New York: Cassell.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. (2004). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Arnold.
- Han, G. L. (2008). *Discourse Marker: Bilateral Optimization*. Nanjing: Southeast University Press.
- He, Z. R., & Ran, Y. P. (1999). Pragmatic Conditionality of Discourse Connectives. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*.
- Hu, Z. L. (2008). *Introduction of Systemic Functional Linguistics*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Ma, N. N. (2009). Functional Analysis of Discourse Marker “To be Honest”. *Modern Chinese*.
- Ran, Y. P. (2003). A Pragmatic Account of the Discourse Marker WELL. *Journal of Foreign Languages*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1004-5139.2003.03.009>
- Schiffirin, D. (1987). *Discourse Markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511611841>
- Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1986/1995). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Zhu, Y. S., & Yan, S. Q. (2001). *Reflections on Systemic Functional Linguistics*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

### **Copyrights**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).