

The Confirmative Stance and Communicative Value of a Chinese Discourse Marker

Si Yanxin

College of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China

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Abstract: “I’m not saying that” has undergone a transformation process from a core predicate to a discourse marker. As a discourse marker, it enhances the objectivity and credibility of proposition evaluation through metalinguistic negation. However, it also implies that the speaker is making a strong commitment and needs to bear the corresponding burden of proof and explanatory responsibility. The confirmation of this discourse marker mainly relies on the sources of evidence provided in the context (witness, quotation, inference, judgment) and the commitment given cognitively by the speaker. In the process of verbal communication, it can convey a confident stance and counter-expectation or unexpected information. Moreover, it has important interpersonal effects such as building a trusting alignment, performing speech acts, and setting mental delays for the hearer.

1. Introduction

In addition to the most basic characteristics of behavioral meaning, speech act verbs in many cases can also express the speaker’s cognition, and the phenomenon of cognitive meaning developing from speech meaning is a commonality among many languages (Dong, 2003^[1]; Fang, 2003^[2]; Cao, 2010^[3]). This semantic generalization phenomenon leads to the construction of new pragmatic functions for many words related to “saying” in the dynamic process of communication. “I’m not saying that”, which was originally a negative assertion in modern Chinese, presents discourse marker features after grammaticalization and is closely associated with the categories of evidentiality and epistemic modality. Based on relevant examples from modern Chinese corpora, this article explores several key questions: (1) How did “I’m not saying that” evolve into a discourse marker? (2) How does it deliver the speaker’s cognition of the information held? (3) What are the actual discourse functions of it in speech activities?

2. The Grammatical Consequence of “I’m not saying that”: Discourse Marker

Discourse markers are functional components that play a coherent role in conversation sequences, prompt contextual coordinates for understanding sentences, and reflect the speaker’s subjectivity to a certain extent (Schiffrin, 1987^[4]; Dong, 2007^[5]; Sun & Fang, 2011^[6]).

2.1. “I’m not saying that” as a Discourse Marker

“I’m not saying that” serves as a discourse marker with the following characteristics:

1) **Syntactic independence.** It is basically located at the beginning of an utterance to open a topic, and does not form an upper grammatical unit with neighboring constituents, for example Table 1:

Table 2: Example sentence

| Example Sentence | Translation |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Yang Yin qiji de shuo: “ Bushi wo shuo , tangruo bushi ni tiantian dui Nianqi shuo wo bu kekao, Nianqi juebuhui dui wo shengchu zhezhong wuhui lai! Dao xianzai, nin hai bu xiangxin wo! Qing nin rang wo jian Nianqi, ta de piqi ganglie, bu jieshi qingchu shi buxing de.” (Qiongyao, <i>Liu Ge Meng</i>) | Yang Yin said angrily, “ I’m not saying that , if you hadn’t told Nianqi every day that I was unreliable, she would never have had such a misunderstanding about me! Until now, you still don’t believe me! Please let me see Nianqi, her temper is so strong that she can’t do anything without a clear explanation.” |

2) **Backgrounding.** The predicate nature of this structure is semantically bleached and condensed into a holistic unit of talk, which cannot constitute finite form with tense and aspect components (like the continuous, perfective, and experiential aspect markers) or the modal particle at the end of the sentence, for example Table 2:

Table 3: Example sentence

| Example Sentence | Translation |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Yueniang dao: “ Bushi wo shuo , ni zuoshi youxie sanhuangzi huoliaotui yang, you bude xie shier, gao zhege shuo yi chang, gao nage shuo yi chang, qiasi chengqiang maifu de. Renjia qiaoqiao gande shier tingtingwenwen, ni hai bu zhidao li!” (<i>The Golden Lotus</i>) | Yueniang said: “ I’m not saying that , you are a bit flustered when handling things. Whenever something doesn’t go your way, you go around telling one person after another, trying to show off. You don’t even know that people are doing things quietly and properly!” |

3) **Non-mandatory Nature.** The integrity and legitimacy of the expression is largely unaffected by omission, and there is usually a clear speech pause between the content of the proposition, which is mostly separated by commas in the written language. Try to compare Table 3:

Table 4: Example sentence (a) and (b)

| No. | Example Sentence | Translation |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (a) | Bushi wo shuo Huang xiansheng congwu buji. Huang xiansheng buda yanjiu wo zhezhong xueshuo, zhipa you rencuo le de suozai. (Xiang Kairan, <i>Liu Dong Wai Shi</i>) | I’m not saying that Mr. Huang, you are less intelligent than you should be. You are not very familiar with my doctrine, so there may be some misunderstandings. |
| (b) | Bushi wo shuo , Huang xiansheng congwu buji. Huang xiansheng buda yanjiu wo zhezhong xueshuo, zhipa you rencuo le de suozai. | I’m not saying that , Mr. Huang, you are less intelligent than you should be. You are not very familiar with my doctrine, so there may be some misunderstandings. |

In example (3a), “I’m not saying that + object clause” constitutes a judgmental compound sentence, in which “I’m not saying that” can be replaced by “It’s not me saying that” or “I didn’t mean (that)”,

emphasizing that what the speaker's true point of view (defensive) is the exact opposite of the object clause, thus negating the truth value of the proposition. At first glance, example (3b) seems to just add a mid-sentence pause, but the meaning is completely reversed (aggressive). The meaning of the structure is very close to "I didn't mean to say that", and can be deleted without affecting the understanding of the entire utterance.

2.2. Metalinguistic Negation and Its Focus of Speech

Speech act verbs involve the reflexivity of speech acts, and language components related to discourse always have a faster rate of renewal (Dong, 2003). There were a large number of cases in the history of Chinese language where speech act verbs are extended to cognitive verbs. The extension of the semantic scope makes speech act verbs accompanied by the speaker's subjective evaluation. The transition from speech to cognition is a consequence of semantic subjectification. For instance, the speech acts of "say" in "it's hard to say", "what will you say", and "I didn't mean to say that to you" can be interpreted as "evaluate", "think", and "blame" respectively.

Horn (1985)^[7] argued that there was a distinction between descriptive negation and metalinguistic negation in natural language. The former focuses on truth conditions of a sentence, the latter on the "assertability" of an utterance. Metalinguistic negation reflects the communicative strategic tendency of the speaker. To make what is said closer to the objective fact and more credible in communication, the speaker applies metalinguistic negation as an operation of self-denying of the appropriateness, and the function of metadiscourse evaluation is emphasized.

The shift of the discourse marker "I'm not saying that" from the core component to the peripheral one is a typical result of grammaticalization. In the grammaticalization process of speech act verbs, the original subject-predicate structure and the object clause were replaced implicitly, which naturally were divided into two different rhythm units, providing opportunities for the generation of pauses and gaps, and the overall structure presented a tendency towards complementizers. Accordingly, it enabled these original sentence-initial elements to naturally mark inter-sentence relationships. (Fang, 2003; Dong, 2007; Cao, 2010). The structure itself was decategorized, transforming from descriptive negation at the sentence level to metalinguistic negation at the discourse level through re-analysis, which reflects the shift in the focus of conversation from the verbal / factive world to the cognitive / subjunctive world.

3. The Factive Connection and Predication Basis of "I'm not saying that"

In addition to the procedural analysis of the evolution of discourse markers mentioned above, it is more important to determine the role of "I'm not saying that" in the process of actual communication. We will first analyze the predication basis behind it from two aspects.

3.1. Evidentiality

When making judgments, it is generally emphasized that one must be well-founded to be convincing. This point involves the category of evidentiality, that is, explaining the source of information and how to obtain it, reflecting the speaker's concern for the realistic basis of the discourse (Dong, 2003). Precisely, "I'm not saying that" needs to be used in conjunction with the evidential strategy, to show the speaker has a sufficient basis for his/her predication. Its evidence sources mainly contain the following four types:

1) Witness. The speaker has witnessed a certain scene on his/her own or had a personal experience of being there. Based on these experiences, he/she makes statements and comments on relevant facts. This type of evidence usually has high credibility because it is first-hand information obtained by the

speaker at the scene. For example Table 4:

Table 5: Example sentence

| Example Sentence | Translation |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Fengjie dao: “Qian liang nian wo zai dongfu li, qinyan jian’guo Jiaoda chi de lanzui, tang zai taitizi dixia maren, buguan shangshagnxiaxia, yi hunchangzi de hunma. Zhen danainai, bushi wo shuo , gege ren dou jiao ta yang de wufawutain de.” (<i>The Dream of Red Mansion</i>) | Sister Feng said: “ <u>Two years ago, when I was in Dongfu, I saw with my own eyes that Jiaoda was so drunk that he was lying under the steps and cursing people, regardless of whether he was going up or down. It was just a mess. Grandma Zhen, I’m not saying that,</u> everyone have been raised lawless by him.” |

2) **Quotation.** The speaker’s own observations and experiences are limited, so sometimes he/she needs to rely on other people’s narratives as sources of information to provide relatively objective evidence for his/her words. For example Table 5:

Table 6: Example sentence

| Example Sentence | Translation |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Tony Lin shuo: “Lala ni he Lisite shuo, bu yaojin, doushi tongshi, zheshier jiu guoqu le. Buguo, ni de zhuguan Zhou Liang zhende yao haohao <i>coach</i> yixia. Wo ting beijingban de ren shuo, pingshi ta jiu guan bu da, jiazi bu xiao. Lala, bushi wo shuo , ta zheyang, chizao hui gei ni he Lisite tianluan de.” (Li Ke, <i>A Story of Lala’s Promotion</i>) | Tony Lin said: “Lala, tell Liszt that it doesn’t matter, we are all colleagues, and this incident will be over. However, your director Zhou Liang really needs to be coached. <u>I heard from people in the Beijing headquarter that he’s not in a high position, but is very fond of putting on airs.</u> Lala, I’m not saying that, sooner or later he’s going to cause trouble for you and Liszt if he keeps doing so.” |

3) **Inference.** This type of evidence is a conclusion reached using logical reasoning while explaining known information or general facts. For example Table 6:

Table 7: Example sentence

| Example Sentence | Translation |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cunmin daibiao li weiyi de daxuesheng Lu Xinnan zhan le qilai: “ Bushi wo shuo , nilia youdian muguang duanqian.” Ta gei dahuo suan le yibi zhang: “Changfeng jixie jian xin changfang, dui women cun kending shi jian da haoshi, women cun xianzai you jige ren zai changli dagong, dajia ye dou kandao le, tamen de rizi guo de bi yiwang qiang duo le.” (<i>Fujian Daily</i> , April 10, 2006) | Lu Xinnan, the only college student among the village representatives, stood up: “ I’m not saying that, your ideas are a bit short-sighted.” He made a calculation for everyone: “ <u>Changfeng Machinery’s construction of a new factory will definitely be a good thing for our village, several people in our village are now working in factories, and everyone has seen that their lives are much better than before.</u> ” |

4) **Assertion.** This belongs to a generalization, assertion or estimation based on one’s own existing knowledge and experience, and does not provide logical evidence accessible to the discourse. This may either stem from the speaker has presupposed that both the interlocutors have reached some kind of tacit consensus, or because the speaker believes that the situation is already obvious enough that

the other side can quickly find the corresponding evidence by himself/herself. As a result, the speaker thinks that there is no need to attach additional explanations. For example Table 7:

Table 8: Example sentence

| Example Sentence | Translation |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A: Xinli zhenshi xiang shuai ta yiwang ge da erguang, zhenshi qiren, tai ba ziji dang huishi le ye. B: dui a, zhenshi bushi wo shuo , zhezhong ren huogai danshen! (BCC Corpora, Dialog) | A: I really want to slap him ten thousand times. It's really irritating, and he thinks a great deal of himself as well! B: That's right, I'm really not saying that , this kind of person deserves to be single! |

In general, the evidence of predication paired with “I’m not saying that” indicates that the speaker utilizes the discourse marker to make assertions only when he/she has sufficient confidence and certainty about an actual event. The factive basis is the fundamental condition for its reasoning chain, so that “bushi wo shuo + evaluation sentence” is a judgment on an event that has already occurred, or an inference or assertion based on a certain fact.

3.2. Commitment

On another level, the discourse marker “I’m not saying that” for assertion is related to the speaker’s commitment. The choice of evidentiality by the speaker is free. What really matters the most is that his/her subjective judgment and regulation of interpersonal relationships, i.e., the extent to which he/she feels the need to take responsibility for what is said when confronted with a given addressee. According to Lyons’ analysis (1977: 794–797)^[8], all utterances that assign truth-commitment to propositions expressed by oneself reflect an epistemic modality, i.e., claiming that the truth value of proposition P is well-founded and unquestionable. Based on this fact, the speaker obtains the right to assert proposition P and allow others to agree with what is said.

This marker maps two major dimensions of the speaker’s consideration in giving evaluative propositions: (1) a relatively objective basis for reality, embodied in the empirical information available for retrieval in the context; and (2) a cognitive stance on the reliability of the proposition based on the existing information and reasoning. The proportion of commitment invested in reflects the degree of concern for hearer. Enhancing the hearer’s perception is a reflection of intersubjectivity (Palmer, 2001: 8, 24^[9]; Yao & Song, 2022^[10]).

4. The Pragmatic Function of “I’m not saying that” in Verbal Communication

The pragmatic functions of the discourse marker “I’m not saying that” can be analyzed from two perspectives: the unidirectional perspective from the speaker and the bidirectional perspective from both the interlocutors.

4.1. Expressing a Stance of Confirmation

The strong confirmative nature “I’m not saying that” is manifested in the explicit emphasis on the Quality Maxim of the Conversational Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975^[11]), which shows the speaker’s attitude of confidence about what he/she says. This marker helps to highlight the speaker’s sense of responsibility for the commitment of utterances, thereby shaping a sincere image of communication. For example Table 8:

Table 9: Example sentence

| Example Sentence | Translation |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A: Women xuexiao shitang de naihuangbao shi wo meiri bibeizao can. B: (Yong shou bihua daxiao) Shi zheme da de ma? A: Xiaolongbao name da. B: Bushi wo shuo , wo yi kou neng chisha! (BCC Corpora, Dialog) | A: The custard buns in our school cafeteria are my daily must-have breakfast. B: (gesturing the size with his hand) Are they that big? A: The same size as small steamed buns. B: I'm not saying that , I can eat three in one bite! |

There are two main ways to express affirmative judgments in Chinese definite propositions: one is to rely on mood, and the other is to use function words with confirmative meanings. Although “I’m not saying that” has been grammaticalized into a discourse marker, it still retains some of its original categorization features and can co-occur with adverbs or modal particles that strengthen a certain stance. For example Table 9:

Table 10: Example sentence

| Example Sentence | Translation |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Yo, gulaoye xie zhe ba! Ke bushi wo shuo na , haohao de yi ge gu'niang, buyao zhege yangzi. (<i>Xiao Wu Yi</i>) | <i>Phew</i> , you can take a rest! I'm exactly not saying that (nah) , we're done with this marriage, but you have to leave something behind. |

4.2. Seeking Communicative Sense of Identity

“I’m not saying that” can establish or maintain a relationship of mutual trust between the interlocutors: while enhancing the sufficiently commitment of the utterance with a sincere gesture, it also guides the hearer to understand the stance based on relevant factive evidence, and conveys the communicative intention of seeking identity. Different languages adopted different strategies in the process of intersubjectification, in Chinese, the form of drawing the other’s attention and seeking identity is more commonly used. For example Table 10:

Table 11: Example sentence

| Example Sentence | Translation |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gou Tuchang gantan de dao: “ bushi wo shuo , laoda, ni de fuhe ye tai zhong le...” Hu le kou qi, Zi Qianhao dandan de dao: “xiguan zhihou, ye jiu bu jue de le.” (Liu Canyon, <i>Long Tou Lao Da</i>) | Gou Tuchang sighed: “ I'm not saying that , boss, your load is too heavy...” After exhaling, Zi Qianhao said lightly: “After getting used to it, I don't feel it anymore...” |

From another angle, when there is divergence between the two parties, or the other party has cognitive bias, “I’m not saying that” can give the speaker an opportunity to temporarily escape from the subjective position and express his/her opinion or suggestion from a relatively objective position, thus making criticism seem less hurtful. For example Table 11:

Essentially, these two angles are inherently consistent. This is because the ultimate goals of speech acts such as persuasion and consolation are to gain the other party’s understanding and approval (Cao, 2010). They all materialize into the establishment or maintenance of mutual trust alignment.

Table 12: Example sentence

| Example Sentence | Translation |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Xiaohong dao: “ bushi wo shuo , ni zhege ren xiang xiaohaizi yiyang, yidianer shi nao de renren dou zhidao, zhenshi fanbuzhao.” (Zhang Henshui, <i>An Unofficial History of Chuming</i>) | Xiaohong said: “ I’m not saying that , you are like a child. It’s really unnecessary to make a big fuss over every little thing.” |

4.3. Setting Mental Delays

There is another counterpart to the previously mentioned counter-expectation or unexpected information in verbal interaction. When we shift our perspective to the hearer’s side, we can observe a special function: the speaker subjectively believes that his/her evaluation may be surprising and unfriendly for the hearer, and thus intentionally leaves some buffer space. Delaying negative evaluation offers the hearer more time to prepare for it mentally. For example Table 12:

Table 13: Example sentence

| Example Sentence | Translation |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A: Nimen de zhege yifu bushi wo shuo ... | A: Your dresses are... I’m not saying that ... |
| B: Suoyi wo dou mei chuan guo a, natian shi gongsi zuzhi huodong bixu dei chuan. (BCC Corpora, Dialog) | B: So I didn’t even wear it (<i>ah</i>). It was a company event that day and I had to wear it. |

It is often associated with negative evaluations, thereby absorbing the negative tendency of the context, indicating that the subsequent or implicit content may threaten the hearer’s face and reflect interactive subjectivity.

5. Conclusion

This article investigates the discourse marker “I’m not saying that” in modern Chinese and finds that its subsequent sentences are often strong confirmation about the evaluation objective and related facts. By denying the appropriateness of what is said and the way it is said, it provides a buffer zone, conveying the speaker’s sense of legitimacy to evaluate beyond the limitations of his/her own position, and seeking common identity and alignment of the same event. The driving mechanism behind this expression mode comes from the evidentiality of information and commitment of the speaker. The communicative value of the discourse marker is reflected in two perspectives: information transmission and interpersonal interaction. It is not only a communicative strategy that demonstrates the confidence of an utterance, but also provides an adjustment strategy for the coordination and integration of the positions and viewpoints of both interlocutors. It is an important way to construct and maintain a positive alignment between them.

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