

“Ni Hai Bie Shuo” as a Discourse Marker: A Study of Its Textual Functions

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The discourse marker *ni hai bie shuo* (你还别说) often appears at the beginning of a sentence, connecting to a rich variety of clause types. Its co-occurring words are mostly those expressing subjective evaluation. The subsequent discourse it connects to mainly consists of three clause types: explanatory, resultative, and adversative. The basic semantic structure of the segment in which it appears is: (S1) + *ni hai bie shuo* + S2. It serves seven textual functions, such as the agreement function, negation function, reminding function, and topic-shifting function.

Keywords: discourse markers, *ni hai bie shuo*, textual function, textual cohesion

Introduction

The discourse marker *bie shuo* (别说) has received considerable scholarly attention (e.g., Dong, 2007; Huang, 2013; Li, 2014; Liu & Gao, 2007; Wang, 2008; Wang, 2013; Zhou, 2012). While previous studies have advanced understanding of *bie shuo*, focusing mainly on its semantics and pragmatics, further researches are needed in certain areas. First, there are few case studies on its variant, *ni hai bie shuo*. Second, most researches are based on descriptive exemplification, lacking support from corpus data. Grounded in a corpus-based approach, this paper will analyze the structural and semantic characteristics of the discourse marker *ni hai bie shuo*, and investigate its textual functions.

As a discourse marker, *ni hai bie shuo* exhibits several general characteristics. Phonologically, it is typically separated from other components by a pause. Semantically, it lacks substantive meaning, as the original meaning of the verb *shuo* (‘say’) has been bleached. Furthermore, it can function syntactically as an independent component and, pragmatically, serves to effectively connect the preceding and subsequent text, as illustrated in (1):

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(1) A: Lin Yanxia is on stage!

B: [*Ni hai bie shuo*], that Lin Yanxia really has some nerve, stepping up to the challenge just like that.

(Source: *The Complete Anthology of Traditional Chinese Crosstalk*)

In the following example, the phrase *ni hai bie shuo* is not the focus of this paper, as it exhibits characteristics contrary to its function as a discourse marker. In these instances, phonologically, there is no pause separating it from other components; semantically, it retains its literal meaning; syntactically, it cannot function as an independent component; and pragmatically, it lacks a cohesive function.

(2) A: Don't you dare say his painting is bad. If you say it's bad, he gets angry. He quarreled with me a few days ago. (Source: *The Complete Anthology of Traditional Chinese Crosstalk*)

This study is based on 125 valid examples collected and filtered from the Peking University Corpus (CCL), the Beijing Language and Culture University Corpus (BCC), and the Media Language Corpus of Communication University of China (MLC). For brevity, some examples have been abridged. For ease of discussion, the clause appearing after *ni hai bie shuo* is hereafter referred to as the “subsequent clause.”

The Structural and Semantic Features of the Discourse Marker *ni hai bie shuo*

First, this section examines the structure of *ni hai bie shuo*. Its internal structure can be described as: the second-person pronoun *ni* (‘you’) + the adverb *hai* + the negative adverb *bie* + the speech verb *shuo* (‘say’). It is worth noting that the second-person pronoun *ni* in this construction does not have the typical function or meaning of a standard second-person pronoun, as shown in (3):

(3) But [*ni hai bie shuo*], you look even more beautiful when you're dressed up. Just don't apply the powder on your face too thickly; a thin layer is enough. (Source: Pushkin, *The Squire's Daughter*)

In (3), the second instance of *ni* (‘you’) is a referential second-person pronoun that refers to the listener. The first *ni*, however, is a non-referential second-person pronoun.

As a whole, the structure of the discourse marker *ni hai bie shuo* exhibits a high degree of fixedness. The component *bie shuo* has been lexicalized and cannot be replaced by expressions such as *buyong shuo* or *buyao shuo*. While it can be preceded by certain adverbs, such as *hai*, *ye*, or *dao*, or by personal pronouns like *ni* or *nin*, these preceding elements are also highly conventionalized. For example, the second-person pronoun *ni* cannot be replaced by first-person (*wo*) or third-person (*ta*) pronouns.

Next, the semantics of the discourse marker *ni hai bie shuo* are examined. Based on corpus analysis, we argue that a speaker uses this discourse marker when they perceive the subsequent statement to be contrary to the listener's (Communicator B's) existing beliefs and is therefore unexpected. Its function is to alert the listener to pay attention to and receive the incoming information.

The Relationship between the Discourse Marker *ni hai bie shuo* and Its Direct Discourse Constituents

Position Relationship

The position of the discourse marker *ni hai bie shuo* within a sentence can be classified into four types. Our statistical analysis of 125 corpus examples reveals a strong tendency for the sentence-initial position, which accounts for 81 instances (64.8%). This finding supports Liao's (1986) observation that connective

components in discourse are predominantly sentence-initial. The sentence-medial position is also significant, with 37 instances (29.6%). In contrast, the marker rarely appears in the sentence-final position (3 instances, 2.4%) or as a standalone utterance (4 instances, 3.2%).

Different syntactic positions correlate with different discourse functions. The sentence-initial marker, as seen in (4), is mostly used in spoken dialogue where a speaker connects their utterance to a previous speaker's turn (inter-turn management). In contrast, the sentence-medial marker, shown in (5), mainly connects the speaker's own preceding and subsequent clauses (intra-turn management).

The other two positions are far less common. The sentence-final position is particularly rare, with only two instances found in our corpus, both uttered by the same speaker on the program *Qiangqiang Sanrenxing*. This suggests the usage may be related to a personal idiolect. The standalone utterance (4 instances) typically functions as a brief, self-contained turn that affirms or responds to a preceding question or statement.

Sentence-Initial Position:

- (4) “[*Ni hai bie shuo*], the level of transparency in this tournament was indeed quite high!” (Source: *People's Daily*, May 27, 2000)

Sentence-Medial Position:

- (5) There is a popular, edgy saying in China: “Women don't love men who aren't ‘bad’.” [*Ni hai bie shuo*], that saying is actually quite true. (Source: Xin Wu, *The Art of Flattery*)

Semantic Relationship

The semantic relationship between *ni hai bie shuo* and its surrounding constituents can be described by the structure (S1) + *ni hai bie shuo* + S2. In this structure, S1 provides the semantic background, while S2 presents an unexpected statement or outcome in relation to S1. The S1 segment can be implicit depending on the specific context. This dynamic is illustrated in the following examples.

In (6), S1 is the narrator's internal monologue about wanting to find money, and S2 presents the unexpected outcome of actually finding it.

- (6) I was walking aimlessly, thinking to myself, “Why not just find a wallet?”... (S1) [*Ni hai bie shuo*], just as I was walking with my eyes glued to the ground, I actually found some money. (S2) (Source: Bi Shumin, *The Latest Evening News*)

In (7), S2 reacts to S1 with an unexpectedly positive agreement, exceeding the initial expectations.

- (7) A: Dad, come look at my painting. Have I improved? (S1)

B: [*Ni hai bie shuo*], studying abroad for a few years really makes a difference! (S2) (Source: Online corpus)

In (8), S2 counters the skepticism expressed in S1 by asserting a surprisingly positive outcome.

- (8) A: How could something that good happen? (S1)

B: [*Ni hai bie shuo*], I guarantee you'll be satisfied when we go in a bit. (S2) (Source: Online corpus)

In other cases, like (9), S1 is implicit in the broader context. Here, S2 is an unexpected reaction to that context—the actress's surprising decision to perform.

- (9) A: Lin Yanxia is going on stage! (S1) [*Ni hai bie shuo*], that Lin Yanxia really has some nerve, rising to the challenge just like that. (S2) (Source: *The Complete Anthology of Traditional Chinese Crosstalk*)

Finally, in (10), S2 initiates a topic shift, unexpectedly moving from the man's behavior (S1) to his physical appearance.

- (10) “Ah, that girl is crying! That guy is too much...” a girl whispered to her friend (S1). “...but [*Ni hai bie shuo*], I have never seen a man who is so exceptionally handsome (S2)...” (Source: Online corpus)

Characteristics of Components Connected by *ni hai bie shuo*

Co-occurrence Words

Through an examination of the corpus, we found that certain adverbs frequently co-occur with the discourse marker *ni hai bie shuo*. Among the 50 instances where such co-occurrence was observed, the adverb *hai zhen* (还真) is by far the most common, appearing in half of the instances (25 instances, 50%). The adverbs *zhen* (真) and *jiushi* (就是) are also notable, each found in 8 instances (16%). The remaining co-occurring words are less frequent, including *zhen de* (真的) at 6 instances (12%), and *zheng* (正), *zhenshi* (真是), and *zhengshi* (正是), which each appeared once (2% respectively).

The shared function of these co-occurring words is to emphasize the sense of subjective evaluation introduced by the discourse marker *ni hai bie shuo*. Because the subsequent utterance contains a high information load and is meant to be particularly noteworthy to the listener, these adverbs serve to add focus and emphasis. For instance:

- (11) [*Ni hai bie shuo*], it was a lucky fluke, but you've *zheng* (正, exactly) hit the nail on the head. (Source: *Stories from the Editorial Board*)

Types of Connected Clauses

By examining the clause types connected by the sentence-initial *ni hai bie shuo*, we identified eight distinct combinations from 103 instances. The most frequent pattern by a significant margin is an assertive sentence followed by another assertive sentence (76 instances, 73.8%). The other seven combinations are far less common: interrogative-assertive (7 instances, 6.8%), assertive-interrogative (6 instances, 5.8%), exclamatory-assertive (4 instances, 3.9%), exclamatory-exclamatory (3 instances, 2.9%), assertive-exclamatory (3 instances, 2.9%), interrogative-exclamatory (2 instances, 1.9%), and interrogative-interrogative (2 instances, 1.9%).

These eight types of clausal combinations connected by the discourse marker *ni hai bie shuo* demonstrate a rich diversity. This indicates that the marker can be used in a relatively unrestricted linguistic environment, with declarative, exclamatory, and interrogative clauses appearing both before and after it.

The sentence-initial *ni hai bie shuo* is most closely linked to its subsequent utterance. Among the three clause types found in this subsequent position, exclamatory clauses exhibit some notable characteristics, as seen in the following examples:

- (12) “[*Ni hai bie shuo*], I have seriously considered it. Even now, when I think of this plan, I still get incredibly excited!” (Source: A Deng, *Shu Huo*)

(13) A: [*Ni hai bie shuo*], since he burned these books, he *zhen* (真, really) doesn’t read anymore! (Source: *The Complete Anthology of Traditional Chinese Crosstalk*)

(14) “[*Ni hai bie shuo*], the level of transparency in this tournament was *zhenshi* (真是, indeed) quite high!” (Source: *People’s Daily*, 2000)

The tone of the above three sentences conveys the speaker’s strong sense of exclamation. It is also worth noting that, in addition to the overall meaning, this exclamatory mood is often marked by formal linguistic devices, such as the final particles *ne* and *le*, and the mood adverb *zhen* (‘really’).

Types of Semantic Connection

Based on their semantic function, the utterances subsequent to the discourse marker *ni hai bie shuo* can be roughly divided into the following three types:

Explanatory Clauses

This type of subsequent clause serves to explain or elaborate on the content mentioned in the preceding text. For example:

(15) This year, among the last batch of Black slaves I sent to Orleans, there was one who was devout. [*Ni hai bie shuo*], listening to that Black man’s prayer, it truly seemed as if he were at a prayer meeting. (Source: Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*)

In the example above, the subsequent utterance, which describes the slave’s prayer, serves to explain the previously mentioned attribute of “piety,” providing further detail about this quality.

Resultative Clauses

This type of subsequent clause expresses a result of the action or state described in the preceding text. For example:

(16) Yu: Eh, seems so. Oh, right, he did give me some advice. [*Ni hai bie shuo*], it was a lucky fluke, but it *zheng* (正, exactly) hit the nail on the head. (Source: *Stories from the Editorial Board*)

In both examples, the subsequent clause expresses a result of the preceding action (receiving advice), namely, hitting the mark. Both are outcomes that were satisfactory to the subjects (“Yu”).

Adversative Clauses

This type of subsequent clause presents a turn or contrast that is unexpected by the speaker. It is sometimes used in conjunction with other adversative words like *buguo* (不过, ‘but’). For example:

(17) Muromsky couldn’t help but laugh. Looking at Lisa, he asked, “You little rascal, why are you dressed like that to greet guests? But [*ni hai bie shuo*], you look even more beautiful when you’re dressed up. Just don’t apply the powder on your face too thickly; a thin layer is enough.” (Source: Pushkin, *The Squire’s Daughter*)

In this example, Muromsky finds Lisa’s attire unconventional. However, he still thinks she looks beautiful, and the subsequent utterance thus expresses an adversative or concessive meaning.

The Textual Cohesive Functions of the Discourse Marker *ni hai bie shuo*

The basic textual cohesive function of *ni hai bie shuo* is marking, which serves to alert the listener to unexpected or high-information content. This general function manifests as seven more specific functions depending on the context. Our analysis of 125 instances shows that the Agreement function is the most

prominent, accounting for over half of all uses (63 instances, 50.4%). The Topic-Shifting function is also highly significant, found in 40 instances (32%). The other five functions are less frequent, comprising Summary evaluation (8 instances, 6.4%), Reminding (5 instances, 4%), Negation (4 instances, 3.2%), Turn-Closing (3 instances, 2.4%), and Repeated emphasis (2 instances, 1.6%).

Each of these seven functions will now be discussed individually.

Agreement Function

The Agreement function, the most common use of *ni hai bie shuo* in our corpus, is manifested in several ways. It can serve as a direct concurrence with another person's viewpoint. For instance, in (18), after Xiao Pan makes a guess, the host uses the marker to affirm it:

- (18) The ever-joking Xiao Pan said, "...Otherwise, why would they love birds so much?" The host laughed loudly and replied, "[*Ni hai bie shuo*], you've pretty much guessed it!" (Source: *People's Daily*, 1998)

Alternatively, the function can be expressed through a structure of affirmation and elaboration. In this pattern, the speaker confirms a preceding statement and then provides supporting details, as seen in (19):

- (19) Everyone says I, Fukun, am blessed to have such a promising son who does me proud. [*Ni hai bie shuo*], my son is truly filial; he is thoughtful in all matters, so I never have to worry about anything no matter where I am. (Source: Bai Fan, *Peidu Sanji*)

Negation Function

In a few instances, *ni hai bie shuo* serves a Negation function, introducing a rebuttal or contrary supplement that disagrees with a preceding viewpoint. This is illustrated in (20), where Dou Wentao's response directly counters Xu Zidong's assertion:

- (20) Xu Zidong: The root of the conflicts in the waters between China and South Korea lies with Japan.
Dou Wentao: [*Ni hai bie shuo*], this time it was because South Korea raised the fine. (Source: Phoenix TV, *Qiangqiang Sanrenxing*, "Xu Zidong: The Root of the Sino-Korean Maritime Conflict Lies with Japan," December 14, 2011)

Reminding Function

In the process of communication, a speaker may use the discourse marker *ni hai bie shuo* to draw the listener's attention to the information being conveyed. In such cases, it may co-occur with terms of address or interjections, as shown in the following example:

- (21) Pojiaogeng Wu You followed behind, having finally gotten a chance to prove himself before the Imperial Army, and chimed in at the first opportunity: "*Taijun, taijun*, [*ni hai bie shuo*], you are walking right into a bevy of beauties at this very moment." (Source: Wang Xufeng, *The Tea-Man Trilogy*)

As seen in example (21), the speaker uses *ni hai bie shuo* to alert the *taijun* (a term for a Japanese officer) to the fact that the location is a "bevy of beauties," thereby attracting the listener's attention and signaling the importance of the subsequent information.

Topic-Shifting Function

At times, the discourse marker *ni hai bie shuo* can serve to shift the topic of conversation, as in the following example:

- (22) Why plant grass? Isn't it precisely because the grassland's ecology has deteriorated? [*Ni hai bie shuo*], the benefit of planting this grass is higher than planting corn; it both protects the ecosystem and solves the livestock's feed problem. (Source: *People's Daily*, November 6, 2002)

As shown in example (22), after discussing the *reasons* for planting grass, the conversation shifts to the *benefits* of planting it. The discourse marker *ni hai bie shuo* signals this topic shift.

Repeated Emphasis

The cohesive function of *ni hai bie shuo* is also manifested through repetition and emphasis, where the speaker's viewpoint is stressed by restating it.

- (23) Dou Wentao: No, they planned it for a year. [*Ni hai bie shuo*], planned it for one year. (Source: Phoenix TV, *Qiangqiang Sanrenxing*, “Inner Mongolia's Version of ‘Prison Break’ Triggers Nationwide Manhunt,” October 29, 2009)

Turn-Closing Function

When the discourse marker *ni hai bie shuo* appears at the end of a conversational turn or constitutes a turn by itself, it can also serve to close that turn.

- (24) Dou Wentao: So, like Mr. Ma said, when encountering this type of problem in the future, one could introduce the Western-style court jury system, [*ni hai bie shuo*]. (Source: Phoenix TV, *Qiangqiang Sanrenxing*, “Cao Cao's Tomb Incident Leads to Increase in Local Negative News,” October 1, 2010)

Summary Evaluation

The utterance subsequent to *ni hai bie shuo* can also serve to summarize or evaluate the content of the preceding text. In example (25), for instance, it summarizes and evaluates the social function of *zongzi*.

- (25) In addition, sending virtual *zongzi* (rice dumplings) on some websites has also become a way for netizens to send blessings to one another. [*Ni hai bie shuo*], *zongzi* have truly become a bridge for communicating feelings among friends and relatives. (Source: Beijing People's Broadcasting Station, *Hua Li Hua Wai*, June 16, 2010)

Conclusion

This paper has mainly examined the structural and semantic features and textual cohesive functions of the discourse marker *ni hai bie shuo*. The investigation finds that the marker exhibits a high degree of structural fixedness as a whole, and its core semantic meaning is “the unexpected”. It appears more frequently in the sentence-initial position than in the medial position. The primary clause type it connects to is the declarative sentence, and its co-occurring words typically serve to emphasize subjective evaluation. The subsequent utterances it connects to can be classified into three main types: explanatory, resultative, and adversative clauses. Its basic semantic structure can be described as (S1) + *ni hai bie shuo* + S2, where S1 provides the semantic background and S2 presents an unexpected statement or outcome. The paper identifies seven distinct

textual cohesive functions, including the Agreement function, Negation function, Reminding function, and Topic-Shifting function.

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