

A Study on Discourse Coherence and Tone Transmission in the Discourse Markers "X-lai" — Taking "shuōlái, kànlái, xiǎnglái" as Examples

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Abstract

This study focuses on three typical discourse markers in modern Chinese—"shuōlái", "kànlái", and "xiǎnglái"—systematically revealing their discourse cohesion mechanisms and mood transmission functions through a combination of corpus analysis and pragmatics theory. Findings indicate that these markers achieve discourse coherence through frame presupposition, topic shift, and stance expression, while simultaneously fulfilling modal functions such as objective statement, subjective conjecture, and reflective evaluation. This research not only enriches the multidimensional analytical framework for Chinese discourse markers but also provides linguistic feature references for discourse analysis in natural language processing.

Keywords

Discourse markers, discourse coherence, modal transmission, presupposition mechanism, stance expression.

1. Introduction

Discourse markers, as cohesive elements in linguistic communication, play an irreplaceable role in discourse construction and information transmission. The "X-lai" class of discourse markers (e.g., "shuōlái," "kànlái," "xiǎnglái") has become a significant research topic in Chinese linguistics due to their unique grammatical forms and pragmatic functions. These markers differ from typical conjunctions and conventional modal particles, their core function lying in achieving discourse coherence through specific semantic presuppositions while simultaneously conveying the speaker's attitudinal bias. Taking "kànlái" as an example, its use often implies conclusions drawn from observation or inference, a dual function contributing to its high frequency in both spoken and written contexts. [5]

In linguistic communication, discourse coherence relies not only on lexical and syntactic cohesion but also necessitates pragmatic devices such as discourse markers to ensure the smooth transmission of information. "X-lai" markers introduce cognitive frameworks or mental presuppositions, providing listeners with contextual cues for comprehension. For instance, "shuōlái" frequently introduces summarising statements about preceding content, while "xiǎnglái" is often employed to express inferences based on deliberation. This functional characteristic renders them widely applicable in formal registers such as news commentary and academic discourse, whilst also serving to modulate tone in everyday conversation.

This study examines three representative examples—"shuōlái," "kànlái," and "xiǎnglái"—to systematically reveal their mechanisms of discourse cohesion and characteristics of intonation transmission. Through comparative analysis, we will uncover both functional commonalities and differences among similar markers, providing new theoretical reference points for research on Chinese discourse markers. The investigation focuses not only on the surface forms of these markers but also on the underlying cognitive mechanisms and communicative

functions, which holds significant importance for deepening our understanding of the organisational principles of Chinese discourse.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

Existing research on discourse markers follows two primary approaches: grammar-oriented studies emphasise their procedural significance, positing that such components do not contribute to propositional content construction but rather facilitate understanding by indicating discourse relations; pragmatics-oriented research, conversely, focuses on their interactive functions, arguing their core value lies in regulating speaker-listener relations and expressing stance and attitude. Regarding research on markers of the "X comes" type, scholars have generally noted their "retrospective" characteristic, namely achieving topic cohesion by introducing a cognitive foundation.

Within discourse coherence theory, Halliday and Hasan's cohesion theory provides a crucial analytical framework. However, cohesive devices alone struggle to account for the distinctive functions of "X-lai"-type markers. In recent years, stance expression theory has gained prominence, emphasising that speakers convey subjective attitudes and evaluations through linguistic means while articulating propositional content. This study integrates both theories to construct a three-dimensional analytical framework of "presupposition-coherence-position", aiming to reveal the integrative mechanism of such markers at the discourse level and their expressive function at the tone level.

Specifically, "presupposition" denotes the cognitive basis or observational premise introduced by the marker; "cohesion" refers to the discourse connection it achieves; and "stance" signifies the speaker's attitude conveyed. For instance, "kànlái" achieves cohesion from observation to conclusion by presupposing the observational premise (the act of "seeing"), while simultaneously conveying a stance of objective confirmation. This analytical framework facilitates the revelation of the multifunctional characteristics of "X-lai" markers, transcending the limitations of single-dimensional analysis in traditional research.

3. Research Methodology and Corpus Selection

This study employs a combined quantitative and qualitative research methodology. Corpus sources include: 1) spoken and written materials from the Peking University Corpus of Contemporary Chinese (CCL), covering genres such as news, academia, and fiction; 2) formal texts including contemporary news commentary and scholarly works; 3) transcribed recordings of natural conversations, encompassing everyday exchanges and interview programmes. A total of 1,500 valid examples containing "shuōlái," "kànlái," and "xiǎnglái" were collected. Among these, "kànlái" accounted for the highest proportion (62%), followed by "shuōlái," (25%), with "xiǎnglái" being the least frequent (13%).^[4]

The corpus annotation employed a three-tier coding system: The first tier marked discourse position (paragraph beginning/middle/end) to analyse distribution patterns; The second tier labelled connective functions (topic continuation/topic shift/summary) to reveal discourse roles; The third tier categorised modal types (objective statement/subjective conjecture/reflective evaluation) to examine stance expression. For instance, the sentence "kànlái today it's going to rain" was annotated as "mid-paragraph - topic shift - objective statement"; while "shuōlái, this issue isn't complicated either" was annotated as "paragraph-opening - summarising - objectified expression".

Statistical analysis reveals significant differences in the discourse positions of the three types of markers: "kànlái" predominantly introduces conclusions mid-paragraph, "shuōlái," frequently summarises preceding content at paragraph openings, while "xiǎnglái" tends to

express reflection at paragraph closings. Regarding cohesive functions, "kànlái" primarily serves topic shifts (78%), "shuōlái," summarisation and synthesis (65%), and "xiǎnglái" topic continuation (52%). These data provide quantitative support for subsequent functional analysis. [3]

4. Discourse Cohesion Mechanisms of "X-lai"

The discourse cohesion functions of these three markers exhibit significant differences, with their mechanisms categorised into three types: frame presupposition, evidence introduction, and mental presupposition. "Shuōlái," primarily achieves cohesion through the "frame presupposition" mechanism. For instance, when discussing a particular viewpoint, using "shuōlái," connects the current statement to the thematic framework previously discussed. This mechanism is particularly prevalent in academic discourse and news commentary, serving to enhance argumentative coherence and facilitate comprehension of complex viewpoints. [2]

"kànlái" relies on the "evidence introduction" mechanism, where the speaker uses this marker to indicate that subsequent content is an inference based on observation or fact, thereby facilitating the transition from premise to conclusion. For instance, when describing weather changes, stating "kànlái it looks like rain" presupposes the act of observation through the verb "kàn" (to see), lending greater credibility to the conclusion. This mechanism predominates in colloquial dialogue and investigative reports, reflecting its function as a cognitive mediator that assists listeners in constructing contextual understanding.

The coherence mechanism of xiǎnglái is particularly distinctive, externalising the speaker's subjective thought process through "mental presupposition". For instance, employing xiǎnglái when expressing conjecture acknowledges uncertainty while providing psychological grounding for subsequent viewpoints. This mechanism is particularly prominent in diary-style texts and private correspondence, reflecting its role as a metacognitive marker. By displaying their thought trajectory through "xiǎnglái", speakers enable listeners to follow their cognitive process, enhancing interactivity. [1]

Though each of the three marker types emphasises distinct aspects, they all achieve discourse cohesion through presupposition. The distinction lies in their respective presuppositions: "shuōlái" presupposes a discursive framework, "kànlái" presupposes observational grounds, and "xiǎnglái" presupposes a thought process. This differentiation determines their distributional patterns within discourse: framework presupposition suits summarising statements, evidence introduction suits conclusive expressions, and mental presupposition suits process-oriented descriptions.

5. The Modal Function of "Xlai"

The function of conveying tone is closely linked to discourse coherence mechanisms, with three types of markers corresponding to distinct tonal categories. "Shuōlái," primarily serves an "objectifying" function at the tonal level, mitigating subjective bias by situating personal views within a universal framework, thereby enhancing the credibility of discourse. For instance, employing "shuōlái" in policy interpretations allows specific measures to be framed as manifestations of universal principles, lending greater authority to the argument.

The modal function of "kànlái" exhibits duality: it conveys neutrality when stating facts (e.g., "kànlái the weather is about to change"), while implying affirmation when expressing judgements (e.g., "kànlái this proposal is feasible"). This flexibility makes it the most frequently employed tool for conveying stance, capable of transmitting objective information while simultaneously expressing subjective evaluation. Through "kànlái," the speaker skilfully

balances objectivity and subjectivity, ensuring the expression remains rigorous while carrying personal perspective.

The modal function of "xiǎnglái" is most pronounced, conveying hesitation, reflection, or self-correction by presupposing a thought process. For instance, using "xiǎnglái" when acknowledging mistakes transforms criticism into a process of self-reflection, thereby mitigating confrontational feelings. This function plays a crucial role in emotional regulation during interpersonal interactions, making communication more approachable. By employing "xiǎnglái," speakers demonstrate openness to consideration, inviting listeners into the dialogue and enhancing interactivity.

The tonal functional differences among these three markers reflect distinct pragmatic strategies: "shuōlái" enhances persuasiveness through objectification, "kànlái" balances information delivery and stance expression via neutral-confirmation, while "xiǎnglái" promotes interaction through reflection. The selection of these strategies depends on communicative aims and contextual demands, demonstrating Chinese speakers' high pragmatic flexibility.

6. Conclusions and Prospects

This study reveals systematic features of "X-lai" discourse markers in promoting discourse coherence and conveying tone: functionally, "shuōlái" reinforces logical frameworks, "kànlái" establishes cognitive foundations, and "xiǎnglái" externalises mental processes; tonally, they respectively correspond to objectification, confirmation, and reflection. These findings not only enrich theoretical research on Chinese discourse markers but also provide a linguistic feature set for discourse analysis in natural language processing.

Specifically, this study contributes by: 1) establishing a three-dimensional analytical framework of "presupposition-cohesion-stance" to reveal the multifunctional nature of "X-lai" markers; 2) Quantitatively analysing the distributional patterns of the three marker types across discourse position, connective mode, and modal category; 3) Elucidating pragmatic strategy differences and communicative functions among distinct markers. These findings offer practical guidance for Chinese language teaching and natural language processing.

Future research may further explore the following issues: 1) Usage variations of the three types of markers across different registers, such as variant forms of "X-lai"-type markers in internet language; 2) Functional correspondences of "X-lai" markers in dialectal contexts, comparing usage patterns across northern and southern dialects; 3) Cross-linguistic functional correspondences of analogous markers, examining commonalities and differences in discourse marker usage between Chinese and other languages. Through multidimensional empirical research, it is anticipated that a more comprehensive functional model of Chinese discourse markers can be constructed, thereby advancing related studies.

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