

# *Commentary Pragmatic Markers in English*

Bruce FRASER  
Boston University

## INTRODUCTION

In an earlier paper (Fraser, 1996), I outlined in some detail my view of pragmatic markers. I suggested that the semantic analysis of a sentence is separable into two, mutually exclusive parts: a propositional content, perhaps complex, which serves as the message content for the basic message conveyed by the utterance of the sentence; and a set of pragmatic markers, structures and expressions which linguistically encode aspects of the speaker's direct communicative intention<sup>1</sup>. When expressions such as *I promise, frankly, please, sadly, really, and reportedly* function as pragmatic markers, as in the following examples,

- (1) a) **I promise** that I will not be late.  
b) **Frankly**, we should be going.  
c) **Please**, sit down.  
d) **Sadly**, he doesn't know how wrong he is.  
e) I **really** want to go.  
f) **Reportedly**, the game was postponed because of rain.

they typically occur in sentence-initial position and, for a given sentence, are not part of the propositional content of the sentence.

Pragmatic markers comprise a functional, not a syntactic category. No lexical expression functions as a commentary marker only, and they do not pattern like syntactic classes such as nouns, verbs, and adverbs. Rather, com-

mentary markers arise from the fact that various, selected members of grammatical classes function in a way other than the way they are traditionally viewed.

For example, *truthfully*, which syntactically is an adverb, functions traditionally as a verbal modifier, as in (2a).

- (2) a) He should speak **truthfully** with them.  
 b) **Truthfully**, he should speak with them.  
 c) **Truthfully**, he should speak **truthfully** with them.

However, it functions also as a commentary pragmatic marker in (2b), signaling a comment on the way the speaker is conveying the message, and as both in (2c). Of course, as a member of a syntactic class, a commentary marker is subject to the syntactic constraints of the class but, depending on where it occurs in the sentence, its function may be, for example, an adverbial modifier or a pragmatic marker.

In this study I proposed four groups of pragmatic markers. First, there are basic pragmatic markers, which specify more or less the potential force (type) of the basic message conveyed by the sentence: the message conveyed with the propositional content of the sentence as the message content. Every sentence has at least one basic pragmatic marker. This group includes sentence mood (declarative, interrogative, and imperative structures) and lexical expressions, for example, performative expressions such as *I promise*, *I claim*, and *I regret*, and certain forms such as *please* and *kindly*. These markers are illustrated by the examples in (3).

- (3) a) **I regret** that he is still here.  
 b) **Admittedly**, I was taken in.  
 c) The cat is sick.

By virtue of the *I regret* in (3a) the speaker is conveying an expression of regret (more accurately, the sentence has the potential when uttered of conveying an expression of regret), while in sentence (3b) the speaker is conveying an admission<sup>2</sup>. Sentence (3c) has no lexical basic pragmatic marker, as do the first two, but its declarative mood signals that the speaker is expressing belief (a claim, an admission, a report) towards the state of the world expressed by the propositional content.

Second, there are commentary pragmatic markers, which signal an entire message which provides a comment on the direct basic message. These markers are optionally present, but when they do occur, their message is typically very general, with a single word often signaling both the message force and content. Obviously, they constitute pragmatic idioms. The sentences in (4) illustrate this type of marker.

- (4) a) **Stupidly**, Sara didn't fax the correct form.  
 b) **I'm not an expert, but** shouldn't we be there by now.

In (4a), the basic message is (arguably) a report that Sara didn't fax the correct form, while the commentary message, signaled by *stupidly*, is that the speaker believes Sara's failure to act to have been stupid. In (4b), the *I'm not an expert, but* signals that the basic message which follows is, in the speaker's opinion, not going to be well received by the addressee and the speaker is trying to reduce the face loss involved.

Third, there are parallel pragmatic markers, also optional, which signal an entire message separate from the basic and any commentary messages. The sentences in (5) are illustrative of parallel markers.

- (5) a) **John**, take off your dirty shoes.  
 b) **In God's name**, what are you doing now?

In (5a), in addition to the basic message of a directive that John take off his dirty shoes, the speaker is conveying a message, signaled by *John*, that it is John who is being addressed. In (5b), *in God's name* signals exasperation on the part of the speaker which may or may not be related to the hearer's activities.

Finally, there are discourse pragmatic markers, again optional, which signal a message specifying how the basic message is related to the foregoing discourse context<sup>3</sup>. The sentences in (6) illustrate these markers.

- (6) a) Jacob was very tired. **So**, he left early.  
 b) Martha's party is tomorrow. **Incidentally**, when is your party?

Here, in (6a), the *so* signals that the speaker views the report that he left early should be treated as a conclusion based on the message conveyed by the preceding sentence, while in (6b) the *incidentally* signals that the following basic message should be treated as a shift in topic.

To summarize, a basic marker signals the force of the basic message, a commentary marker signals a message which comments on the basic message, a parallel marker signals a message in addition to the basic message, and a discourse marker signals the relationship of the basic message to the foregoing discourse. This may be shown schematically in (7).

- (7) Discourse PM (Parallel PM (Commentary PM (Basic PM (Propositional Content))).

Although it is rare to find all four types of pragmatic markers in a single sentence, it does occur<sup>4</sup>.

- (8) I appreciate that you are a member of the Police Benevolent Association

and a supporter of the baseball league. **However, frankly Sir, I estimate** that you were going a bit more than 86 miles per hour.

My focus in the present paper is on commentary pragmatic markers, expressions which signal a comment on the basic message. I have identified six classes of commentary markers, each signaling a different sort of comment. I shall examine them, indicate the nature of the message they signal, and specify some of the restriction on each. With no apologies, I intend this to be a schematic paper, suggesting the range of commentary pragmatic markers. As such, it does not deal with the myriad of syntactic and semantic details that, in a specific context, permit one marker while excluding another.

## COMMENTARY PRAGMATIC MARKERS

### Assessment Markers <sup>5</sup>

This group of commentary markers is illustrated by the examples in (9),

- (9) a) **Amazingly**, Derrick passed the exam.  
 b) **Fortunately**, I was covered by medical insurance.  
 c) **Sadly**, Mary arrived 5 minutes too late to meet the deadline.  
 d) **Unfortunately**, I did it.

which, in adverbial form, include

- (10) amazingly, amusingly, annoyingly, (in)appropriately, astonishingly, cleverly, (in)conveniently, curiously, disappointingly, disturbingly, (un)expectedly, foolishly, (un)fortunately, (un)happily, (un)importantly, incredibly, inevitably, ironically, justly, (un)luckily, oddly, predictably, prudently, (un)reasonably, refreshingly, regrettably, (un)remarkably, rightly, sadly, (in)significantly, stupidly, suspiciously, tragically, understandably, wisely, wrongly.

These markers signal an assessment by the speaker of the state of the world represented in the propositional content of the basic message. For example, in (9a), the speaker finds it amazing that Derrick passed the exam.

Assessment markers occur only with declarative sentences, which is consistent with the fact that one can make an assessment concerning a state of the world but not an assessment of a desire for a state of the world, as would be the case for an imperative and interrogative <sup>6</sup>. However, performative sentences, although declarative in form, express an action, not a state, and are excluded, as (11) shows <sup>7</sup>.

- (11) a) \***Oddly**, I admit that I did it.  
 b) \***Fortunately**, I report that Jake was in the park.  
 b) \***Sadly**, I request that you stay  
 c) \***Understandably**, I promise to come home on time.

They may occur, though they seem somewhat strange, after a performative expression in cases where the force of the sentence involves the expression of belief, e.g. “I admit that, fortunately, I made it.” Of course, hedged performative sentences such as “I must request that you stay” permit an initial assessment marker since they are nominally an assertion.

Note that the commentary function is in contrast to the use of these expressions as a part of the propositional content of the sentence, as in (12).

- (12) a) He thought **sadly** of his lost opportunities.  
 b) He acted **foolishly**.  
 c) He behaved **oddly**, even for a geek.

There are different variations of the sentence-initial adverbial form as shown in (13).

- (13) a) **Foolishly**, John forgot his wallet.  
 b) John, **foolishly**, forgot his wallet.  
 c) **It was foolish** of John to forget his wallet.  
 d) That John forgot his wallet was **foolish**.  
 e) John was **foolish** to forget his wallet.

While all of these variations have the same meaning and retain the separation of the commentary pragmatic markers *foolishly* from the propositional content, a requisite of pragmatic markers, the sentences would not all be used in the same circumstances. For example, (13a-b) might be used when one was asked, “What are you so upset about?,” whereas (13c-e) might be used when one was asked, “What do you think about the situation?”

### Manner-of-Speaking Markers

The second class of commentary markers, which have two distinct functions, include

- (14) bluntly, briefly, candidly, confidentially, crudely, fairly, frankly, generally, honestly, ironically, metaphorically, objectively, personally, precisely, roughly, seriously, simply, strictly, truthfully.

When they occur with a declarative or an imperative, as in (15),

- (15) a) **Seriously**, I don't know how you can stand him.  
 b) **Bluntly**, John just doesn't have it anymore.  
 c) **Candidly**, Mary should not be playing today.  
 d) **Frankly**, keep quiet.  
 e) **Personally**, don't try it.

they signal a message to the hearer commenting on the way the speaker is conveying the message<sup>8</sup>. However, when they occur with interrogatives such as in (16),

- (16) a) **Seriously**, how can you stand him?  
 b) **Truthfully**, when are we going?  
 c) **Off the record**, why don't you just quit this place?

they often signal both a message commenting on the manner in which the speaker is conveying the basic message, shown explicitly in (17b) for (17a), and a request that the hearer provide the answering in the indicated way, (17c).

- (17) a) **Seriously**, how can you stand him?  
 b) I ask you **seriously** to tell how you can stand him.  
 c) I ask that you tell me **seriously** how you can stand him.

Like other commentary markers, these markers also occur as a part of the propositional content when they occur in other than initial position in the sentence.

- (18) a) Talk to him **bluntly** and he might listen.  
 b) He was working **seriously** when the lightning struck the trailer.  
 c) I want you to tell me the story **truthfully**.

However, contrary to assessment markers, manner commentary markers will occur with performatives.

- (19) a) **Bluntly**, I admit that I did it.  
 b) **Confidentially**, I promise that I will be there.  
 c) **Truthfully**, I blame her for the mistake.  
 d) **Off the record**, I apologize for saying that.

There are different variations, some of which are shown in (20).

- (20) a) to speak bluntly, to speak candidly, to speak seriously  
 b) speaking negatively, speaking (quite) frankly, speaking precisely  
 b) bluntly speaking, objectively speaking, roughly speaking  
 c) in all candor, in all seriousness, in all fairness

- d) worded plainly, stated simply, off the record, in the strictest confidence, to be quite blunt about it, y'know<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, when these commentary markers occur as the simple form, e.g., *seriously*, they only appear in the sentence-initial position as a marker. However, when they occur with the expression *speaking* following, as in *seriously speaking*, they may also occur in sentence-final position, as in (21c).

- (21) a) **Seriously**, I don't know how you can stand him.  
 b) \*I don't know how you can stand him, **seriously**.  
 c) I don't know how you can stand him, **seriously speaking**.

One figurative use of language is included among these markers: metaphor. We find sentences like

- (22) **Metaphorically**, he is a camel.

This is the only instance of announcing figurative usage. We do not find "Hyperbolically speaking,..." or "Synecdochically speaking,..." We do find "Ironically, he paid his bill only yesterday," but this is an assessment marker dealt with above.

### Evidential Markers

The third class of commentary markers are the evidential markers (cf. Chafe, 1986; Palmer, 1986), shown in (23).

- (23) a) **Certainly**, he is home.  
 b) **Conceivably**, Tim is right.  
 c) **Obviously**, I will be on time.  
 d) **Undeniably**, you are the reason for all my troubles.  
 e) **Perhaps** you should stop talking so loudly.

This class includes the following adverbial forms:

- (24) assuredly, certainly, clearly, conceivably, decidedly, definitely, doubtless, evidently, incontestably, incontrovertibly, indisputably, indubitably, (most/ quite/ very) likely, obviously, perhaps, possibly, presumably, seemingly, supposedly, surely, (un)arguably, undeniably, undoubtedly, unquestionably.

Evidential markers signal a message which specifies the strength of commitment by the speaker towards the force the basic message. As reflected by the examples in (23), these markers occur only with declarative sentences. This is consistent with the fact that these markers comment on the strength of the speaker's belief and this is expressed only in declaratives. There appear to be cases of evidentials with performatives, for example,

- (25) a) **Certainly**, I blame you for the disaster.  
 b) **Obviously**, I promise to be on time.  
 c) **Undoubtedly**, I request that you deliver the paper to my office.  
 d) **Clearly**, I admit my mistake.

but a close examination reveals that these are not performative sentences at all but merely reports made by the speaker. Insertion of *hereby*, for example, will render the sentence unacceptable. The expression *certainly* in (25a) is indeed functioning as an evidential marker, but signaling a message about the speaker's commitment to the basic message.

There are some variations, for example,

- (26) a) It is certain that, It is perhaps the case that, It is doubtful that, It is possible that  
 b) I'm sure that, I have no doubt that, I am clear that,  
 c) may, might, It may be that,

The modal *may* has two distinct meanings. An epistemic meaning, as in (27a)

- (27) a) He may leave, and then again, he may not.  
 b) He may leave because I said so.

and a deontic meaning, as in (27b). Only the former functions as a commentary marker.

Ifantidou-Trouki (1993) suggests that what she calls "hearsay expressions" such as *reportedly* and *allegedly* are arguably evidentials and concludes that they are part of the propositional content of the basic message. I disagree. These two adverbials, the only two I can find, are alternative forms of the performative expression *I report* and *I allege*, respectively, and when they occur initially they are basic pragmatic markers, analogous to other adverbial variants such as *admittedly* and *regrettably*.

Note that in

- (28) a) **Reportedly**, the justice system in the U.S. has improved over the years.  
 b) **Allegedly**, the game was postponed because of rain.



the force of the message can only be a report or an allegation, predicted by the variation of the performative expression. It cannot for example, be a claim or an admission.

### Perlocutionary Markers

These markers provide a message about the role of the basic message as a discourse activity. This group is illustrated by the sentences in (29):

- (29) a) **I add** that he shouldn't have even been there on Friday.  
 b) **I repeat**: don't take the 5:40 to Scarsdale.  
 c) **I won't mention** that we are going to be late.

and includes the verbs in (30).

- (30) add, comment, continue, enumerate, formulate, insist, list, mention, note, notice, opine, point out, reformulate, remark, repeat, say, utter <sup>10</sup>.

These cases, which Bach & Harnish (1979:209) call "locutionary performatives", appear to be performative expressions, like *I promise* or *I request*, but do not function as such. Whereas true performative expressions convey the force of the basic message, these commentary markers announce the type of discourse activity the speaker is about to be engaged in. Thus, for example, the utterance of "I repeat that John is sick", is announcing a repetition. Interestingly, it is true just in case what the speaker says in issuing it is what the speaker predicates of the utterance, even if, as in the case of (29c), the verb has been negated.

We find variations of these markers such as

- (31) a) to add, to begin, to comment, to remark, to repeat  
 b) let me remark, let me comment,  
 c) at the risk of repeating, at the risk of adding to the confusion.

### Mitigation Markers

A fifth type of commentary pragmatic markers are markers of mitigation, which signal the speaker's desire to reduce the face loss associated with the basic message (cf. Brown & Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1981; Caffi, 1997). There are many varieties, but I shall consider only three <sup>11</sup>. The first are the pseudo-conditionals, illustrated in the following sentences:

- (32) a) **If I may interrupt**, when is the next train?  
 b) **If it's not too much trouble**, could you help me?  
 c) **If you don't mind**, bring it to me about 7 this evening.

Despite their appearance, these are not conditional sentences, but constitute a basic message with a mitigating comment on it. There are numerous expressions which function as markers, many of which also function as the protasis for a true conditional sentence, especially when the second segment is a declarative.

- (33) a) **If I may interrupt**, then I jolly well will do so.  
 b) **If you don't mind**, then I will take it.

The second variety of mitigating markers includes the following expressions, all ending with *but*, as in

- (34) a) **That may be true, but** you still have to clean up your room before you go out.  
 b) **I'm no expert, but** it doesn't look like you bought the right gas tank.  
 c) **You are, of course, entitled to your own opinion, but** are you sure that's a safe thing to do?

Like those mitigating markers above, there are numerous expressions and variations.

Here, as above, the basic message that follows these mitigation markers typically involves potential face loss to the addressee and thus is susceptible to mitigation.

Finally, the modal *must*, when it occurs in a performative expression before a small class of verbs (e.g., request, ask, order, blame, criticize) serves to mitigate the force of the basic message signaled by the performative verb<sup>12</sup>. Note that in (35a)

- (35) a) I must ask you to leave  
 b) I ask you to leave  
 c) I must ask John to leave

is almost apologetic compared to (35b), while (36c), with the *must* before a verb not used performatively, has the normal deontic sense of obligation.

### Emphasis Markers

The final group of commentary markers has the function of emphasizing the force of the basic message. This group is illustrated by the expressions such as,

- (36) believe me, by no means, by no stretch of the imagination, definitely, DO VP, I cannot too often, I emphasize (strongly) that, if I ever heard one, indeed, I stress, mark my words, on earth, really, to say the least, without exaggeration,

which occur in sentences like:

- (37) a) **I stress** that you stop it this instant.  
 b) **I cannot too often** point out that dressing well is the key to success.  
 c) **Mark my words**: Sam will end up in jail.  
 d) **DO** stop!  
 e) Where **on earth** are my slippers?

Some of these markers are performative-like expressions (*I stress*), but they are not true (illocutionary) performatives, since they are not used here to signal the speaker's basic communicative intention but only comment on it. It is interesting that some of these markers impose limits on the structure and content of the sentence which they introduce, as the following examples illustrate.

- (38) a) \***By no means**, don't take the A train. (*by no means* requires a positive directive)  
 b) \***Really**, I order you to try to do it. (*really* requires suggestions not orders)

## CONCLUSION

As I stated at the outset, this paper is intended to be schematic, to set forth what I take to be the individual classes of commentary pragmatic markers in broad relief without many details of their syntactic and semantic constraints. I have done just that. But because of this approach, I have left many unanswered questions. For example, are there more than the six classes I identified? What do the full classes consist of and what position in the sentence may the markers occur? Are there expressions which fall into two classes? Do members of different classes occur in a given sentence and if so, which members and in what order do they occur? There are certainly more questions raised than answered. However, I hope that by presenting this broad outline I will have given future researchers a basis on which to work.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Pragmatic markers play no role in implied (indirect) messages. While the direct communicative intention signalled by pragmatic markers may be altered by performance factors such as stress and intonation, I am concerned here only with what potential is associated with linguistic encoding.

<sup>2</sup> Sperber & Wilson (1993) call many of these expressions «explicatures» and treat the data considerably differently. Katriel & Dascal (1984) take yet another approach.

<sup>3</sup> The situation is more complicated than this. In some cases there need be no explicit verbal utterance, in other cases it may not be the immediately prior utterance, and in still others the discourse markers may relate several following utterances.

<sup>4</sup> Various phonological phenomena such as intonation and stress can, at times, take the place of these lexical pragmatic markers, particularly commentary and parallel markers. However, I will not consider them in this paper.

<sup>5</sup> I give the list of markers in the adverbial form when possible and then discuss other variation later in the text. Expressions such as *aesthetically*, *factually*, *fundamentally*, *ideally*, *legally*, *literally*, *nominally*, *officially*, and *technically*, so-called hedges, appear to be commentary markers but are not since they are included as part of the propositional content on the sentence in which they occur.

<sup>6</sup> The sentence «Amazingly, he did it right,» when spoken with a rising final intonation (the so-called incredulous echo intonation) to convert the sentence into a question, results in an unacceptable utterance.

<sup>7</sup> Of course hedged performative sentences like «I must request that you stay» tolerate an initial assessment CPM since it is nominally an assertion.

<sup>8</sup> Bach & Harnish (1979:219-21) call these expressions «illocutionary adverbials» because they are expressions which «can be used to comment upon the illocutionary intent behind the utterance of the very sentences in which they occur.» Also, see Ifantidou-Trouki (1993) for some comments on these forms.

<sup>9</sup> Contrary to Schiffrin (1987) who treats *Y'know* as a discourse marker, I am including it as a member of this group of markers, since in sentences such as «Y'know, I think you're wrong,» it has an interpretation analogous to *confidentially*.

<sup>10</sup> In an earlier paper, Fraser 1996, I called this class «consequent-effect markers» and included expressions such as *by way of explanation*, *first*, *finally*, and *to clarify* among the class. I now have excluded them, treating them rather as a type of discourse marker, in which they signal how the discourse segment they introduce is related structurally to the foregoing discourse context.

<sup>11</sup> Not all mitigation takes the form of markers; for example, the mitigated request form, «Would you be willing to help me today?»

<sup>12</sup> Note that in «I must apologize for the mess,» the *must* is playing a different role.

Boston University, Graduate School  
 Director, Program in Applied Linguistics  
 605 Commonwealth Avenue  
 Boston, Massachusetts 02215  
 U.S.A.  
 e-mail: linguist @ acs.bu.edu

## REFERENCES

- Bach, K & R. Harnish. (1979) *Linguistic communication and speech acts*. MIT Press.  
 Brown, P & S. Levinson. (1987) *Politeness*. Cambridge University Press.  
 Caffi, C. (1997) *On mitigation*. To appear in *Journal of Pragmatics*.

- Chafe, W. (1986) Evidentiality in English conversation and academic writing. In W. Chafe & J. Nichols (eds.) *Evidentiality: The linguistic coding of epistemology*, 261-272. Ablex
- Fraser, B. (1980) Conversational mitigation. *Journal of Pragmatics* 4 (4), 341-350.
- Fraser, B. (1996) Pragmatic Markers. *Pragmatics* 6 (1). n.º 2, 167-190.
- Ifantidou-Trouki, E. (1993) Sentential adverbs and relevance. *Lingua* 90:69-90.
- Katriel, T. & M. Dascal. (1984) What do indicating devices indicate? *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 17(1):1-15.
- Palmer, F. (1986) *Mood and modality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schiffrin, D. (1987) *Discourse Markers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sperber, D. & D. Wilson. (1993) Linguistic form and relevance. *Lingua* 90:5-25.