

# The Particle is the Message: The Influence of Discourse Particles on Textual Meaning

Michael Walrod

Trinity Western University

In two recent discourse workshops in the Philippines, I worked with speakers of eight northern dialects to discover their inventories of discourse particles. We also worked to categorize these particles and to identify the function or role they had in influencing or determining the emergent meaning of the texts. Some of the functions of these particles were to maximize (emphasize, intensify), to minimize (mitigate, qualify), to refute (disprove, discredit) or to hedge (be tentative; Hartnett 2004). Many examples from Philippine languages will be provided.

This paper explores the phenomenon of the enormous functional load of particles. Discourse particles, and some adverbs and interjections, often have a sphere of influence that is much larger than the immediate context of the verb they modify, or the clause in which they occur.

The issue of the "sphere of influence" of discourse particles may be examined in the light of a "semantic prosody" theory. The notion of "prosody" has a long history within the study of phonological phenomena, in particular, those that have a span greater than the segment or even the syllable. More recently, phonological prosody has been examined in relation to discourse structure. But whereas "most empirical work examining prosodic signaling of discourse structure has focused on the use of acoustic cues to identify boundaries of discourse units" (Mushin et al, 2003), we propose to show that discourse particles can also be viewed as cues or signals of discourse structure, and analyzed with reference to position and function within the text. Analyzing from this perspective shows that the particles exert a disproportionate influence on the emergent meaning of the text. We will demonstrate the critical importance of the discourse particles for linguistic discourse analysis, for translation, for interpretation, and for effective communication.

## REFERENCES

- Friesen, Dianne. 2004. A profile and discourse analysis of two Moloko short stories. Ms.
- Hartnett, Carolyn G. 2004. How does science express uncertainty. In *LACUS Forum XXX*.
- Mushin, Ilana, Lesley Stirling, Janet Fletcher, and Roger Wales. 2003. Discourse structure, grounding, and prosody in task-oriented dialogue. In *Discourse Processes* 35(1).
- Rhee, Seongha. 2004. From discourse to grammar: Grammaticalization and lexicalization of rhetorical questions in Korean. In *LACUS Forum XXX*.