



Analysis of “Sure” in “The Blackwater Lightship” from the Perspective of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines how the word “*sure*” has been used in the characters’ dialogue in the Irish novel “*The Blackwater Lightship*” by Colm Tóibín. Four dialogue excerpts containing the keyword “*sure*” were identified through a targeted keyword search of the novel. The paper employs the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework by Halliday to examine “*sure*” at two levels. “*Sure*”, at the micro level is examined as both a discourse marker and a modal adjunct in the clause. It is compared with the patterns of usage in other types of English as provided by concordances of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC). At the macro level, following Halliday’s notion of “Beyond the Clause”, *sure* is discussed within short dialogue interactions, focusing on its function. “*Sure*” functions both as a clause-initial modal adjunct and as a turn-prefacing discourse marker that organizes responses in interactional contexts. These functions in the novel assist in the interactions of the characters and govern interpersonal positioning in the dialogue. The study brings out a unique characteristic of the Irish English language and its contribution to the interaction discourse in literary dialogue.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Blackwater Lightship by Colm Tóibín (1999), set in Ireland in the 1990s, provides a linguistically rich representation of human relationships through dialogue. *The Blackwater Lightship* by Colm Tóibín is a masterpiece on family relationships and the flow of personal history. The story takes place in 1990s

Ireland, portraying the emotional path of three generations of women - Helen, her mother - Lily, and grandmother Dora - who gather to look after Helen's brother Declan, who is dying from AIDS. This novel, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, is, of course, a depiction of storytelling's influence on people's lives, evident in the way it illustrates the nuances of family members torn apart by conflict. Tóibín's minimalist, evocative writing style has consistently been acclaimed as a "genuine work of art" (Chicago Tribune) by critics, making it all the more satisfying and captivating for readers to plunge deeper into the profound thoughts on love, mourning, and the curative powers of stories (Dean, 2009).

In a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) based approach, dialogic interactions in the novel can be analyzed with special attention to how apparently ordinary linguistic phenomena can be used to take sides, align (or misalign), and place others, which makes the text particularly relevant to explore the pragmatic meanings related to Irish English. This analysis does not emphasize narrative description; instead, it views the novel as a space in which aspects of Irish English are discursively created through the interaction of characters. This study analyzes the use of the word "sure" in the dialogues of the novel *BWL* from the perspective of Halliday's SFL. Systemic-functional linguistics sees language as part of the broader socio-cultural context. It aims "to look into language from the outside and specifically to interpret linguistic processes from the standpoint of the social order" (Halliday, 1978), as cited in Davies & Elder (2005).

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) suggest that explanation involves more than merely describing the structure of something. Instead, it requires demonstrating how it is connected to other elements, focusing on its pattern of systemic relationships, also known as agnation. He highlighted the importance of function within word classes, noting that the class label alone does not reveal the role an item plays within a given structure. To fully understand this role, it is necessary to consider the item's function. Functional categories, therefore, offer a way to interpret grammatical structures about the broader meaning potential of the language.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Review of the Literary Studies in *The Blackwater Lightship*

Existing scholarship on *The Blackwater Lightship* has predominantly approached the novel from thematic, psychological, and sociocultural perspectives rather than from a detailed linguistic or discourse-analytic perspective. Hendricks (1973) posits that the structural representation of a text implicitly contains elements or terms that are not explicitly manifested on its surface. He discusses the concept of narrative point of view and its influence on the reader's perception of story events. Easterlin (2017) also examines the relationship between textual form and affect, showing how linguistic choices in literary texts shape readers' emotional responses.

Some studies have extensively examined and emphasized the concrete connection between societal problems and physical illnesses in *BWL*. Yebra (2014) offers a reflective look at the life of Declan, who had to fulfill his wishes from the grave as the person handling the AIDS case of his family, and further became a unifying force for the shattered family. This ritual can be viewed as a symbolic, mental, and spiritual sacrifice, insisted on by both the family and the nation of Ireland.

Several other studies, for example, those focusing on the emotional burden associated with caregiving for individuals with HIV alongside those connecting the concepts of AIDS and environmental destruction, have become themes for researchers involved in the academic discussion of *The Blackwater Lightship*. Murphy (2020) parallels the AIDS crisis and the current environmental crisis. Matthews (2018) is another researcher who used both medical and sociocultural perspectives to explore how the bedside could serve as a symbol of a journey toward health recovery. His exploration probed into the emotional struggle caregivers caring for HIV/AIDS patients had to endure, the symbolic representation that the bedside had, and whether the illnesses were a threat to society.

Moreover, Severiche (2017) compares *The BWL* with another novel, arguing that presenting an experience of illness functions as an allegory of transience. That analysis shows the connections between private grief and the social problems depicted in the novels, underscoring their realism. That study examines the political and physical dimensions of these novels, highlighting the body as a political tool in literature. Taken together, these studies demonstrate sustained critical interest in the novel's themes, characters, and social contexts, but they largely treat language as a transparent medium rather than an object of analysis in its own right.

The perspective through the lens of feminism is also applied in the previous study of the novel to analyze the representation of women and society in the story. Kim (2022) challenged Carregal-Romero's (2012c) hypothesis by taking an opposing stance. The primary focus was on Helen, Lily's daughter, and her intent to revive an Irish model family through marriage, thereby restoring the traditional role of motherhood and reviving its lost glory amid the Celtic Tiger's growth.

Scholars primarily analyze the novel from the perspectives of mental health/psychology, HIV/AIDS, and socio-cultural context. This suggests that the Irish novel warrants further research. Simultaneously, very few studies have focused on differences in language use in this authentic literary work, which is rich in Irish flavor. Given that many of these interpretations rely on dialogue and interpersonal interaction, a linguistic framework such as Systemic Functional Linguistics provides tools for examining how such meanings are realized through language. The following section, therefore, reviews linguistic studies relevant to discourse markers, mood adjuncts, and Irish English.

2.2 Discourse Markers in the English Language

Research on discourse markers (DMs) provides an important theoretical foundation for examining how interpersonal meaning is constructed through dialogue, a central focus of the present analysis of "sure" in *The Blackwater Lightship*. Fraser (1999), after examining 40 conversations, was the first to propose classes of DMs that either initiated or connected various discourse segments. He provided details for each class, noting that DMs that signal a connection between the preceding sentence and the one being introduced are drawn from conjunctions, adverbials, and prepositional phrases. He stressed that the crux of DMs lies in the procedure, and their precise connotation depends on the context. The double-barreled data collection approach used by Fuller (2003) consisted of a macro- and micro-analysis. His study focused on participants, native to Southern Illinois and students at Southern Illinois University, aged 20 to 35, who engaged in and recorded conversations with close acquaintances and family members. Fuller's study showed that speaker roles and their interrelations greatly influenced the frequency of specific discourse markers such as "well,"

“oh,” and “you know.” This study highlighted that these DMs are no longer frequently used by interviewees but are used less by interviewers, who primarily served as listeners. Therefore, Fuller (2003), for example, demonstrated that the pattern of DMs’ use varies across speech contexts. This sensitivity to context is directly relevant to the present study, which examines how “sure” functions within a specific literary discourse context and how its usage differs from patterns observed in spoken and corpus-based data.

Romaine and Lange (1991) conducted an in-depth analysis of dialogue collections and compared the usage of discourse markers across several languages, including French and Bantu. The study analyzed 65 dialogues and posits that women tend to use the discourse marker “like” more frequently. They identified two key functions of “like”: on the one hand, to mark the limits of utterances, and on the other, to make the role of the speaker recognizable. Miller and Weinert (1995) elaborate on Schourup’s concept of “evincives” and draw upon data from spontaneous conversations extracted from a corpus of Scottish English discussions. They suggest that recognition of three properties is required in focus constructions within map-task dialogues and spontaneous conversations: the opposing use of the word versus its contrasting forms (e.g., non-introducing versus introducing, contrastive versus non-contrastive), and those that relate to new versus given elements. The result was that the two “Like” types differ in their functions: mostly, in discourse chaining, they act at the beginning and the end of clauses, respectively.

The study of discourse markers in English has played an important role since the 1990s. Based on the data reviewed, studies of discourse markers have primarily focused on spoken interaction, with later research increasingly employing corpus-based approaches. However, these studies have rarely examined the use of specific discourse markers within literary dialogue, nor have they systematically compared such usage with large reference corpora. In particular, there remains limited research on discourse markers associated with Irish English, such as “sure,” analyzed within a Systemic Functional Linguistics framework.

2.3 Discourse Markers in Irish English Contexts

Discourse markers, which are considered an important attribute of language and communication, particularly in Irish English, have motivated several scholars and researchers to write books and articles on this topic.

According to Schiffrin (1987), DMs include a variety of word classes. These include conjunctions (like “and,” “but,” “or”), interjections (such as “oh”), adverbs (for instance, “now,” “then”), and lexicalized phrases (e.g., “y’know,” “I mean”). According to Labov (1973), examining dialects in literature can greatly broaden understanding gained from real speech data. This is especially helpful when both are analyzed and evaluated by one another, demonstrating the value of literary data as a credible source of linguistic evidence. Features like these often contribute more to stereotypes about regional and social speech than to differences in pronunciation or grammar. Their representation in fiction can provide as much, if not more, information about a character, setting, and regional culture compared to traditionally studied dialect respellings and nonstandard grammatical usage.

Amador Moreno (2005) underscores the importance of analyzing IrE discourse markers in the novels of Patrick MacGill, namely those in *Children of the Dead End* and *The Rat Pit*. They contend that the study of DMs in Irish English might also be helpful to the investigation of this variation of English, as it has mostly focused on other linguistic aspects superimposed than the discourse markers. It could also enrich

the analysis of dialect in literature and DMs in general. However, she contends that the investigation in this area is still limited.

Clancy and Vaughan (2012c) referred to diverse linguistic tools and corpora in their research. WordSmith Tools were used comprehensively on the 1-million-word Limerick Corpus of Irish English, which provides a naturally spoken Irish-written representation. This can be regarded as a shot that is fired in the direction of the ongoing study of an Irish English multifunctional marker.

Amador-Moreno (2015) used the Wordlist Tool to explore quotative structures, including “be + like,” “go,” and “be + there” in the works of Irish author Paul Howard. Her main purpose was to return the language of contemporary Dublin English to its proper context. She mentioned that DMs present in both non-fiction and fiction storytelling offer options for advancing the narration and describing the social context in which these words are embedded. Nestor *et al.* (2012) employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods to examine the positional distribution of the discourse marker “like” in a corpus of Polish people in Ireland. Their research highlighted that, similar to other L2 studies, there is a significant degree of interspeaker variation within the group compared to L1 communities. Müller (2005) also focused on Polish and Chinese immigrants to Ireland who communicate via DMs produced interesting findings that were worth thinking over.

Diskin (2017) also conducted a study on “like” as a discourse-pragmatic marker among newly immigrated native Polish and Chinese speakers in Dublin, Ireland. Diskin’s analysis showed that the use of “like” among non-native speakers became similar to the usage of native speakers after living in Ireland for three years. Kallen (2006) addresses the use of particular expressions, such as “Faith,” “Arrah,” “At all at all,” “Yerra,” and “Ould/oul Sure,” within the context of the ICE for Ireland. They argue that some historical representations of Irish English are based predominantly on the English lexicon. Such linguistic depictions are very close to other varieties of English; nevertheless, they have been branded as unique Irish English.

McCafferty and Amador-Moreno (2019) also conducted an extensive survey of historical literature on IrE and presented a diachronic analysis of the DM “sure,” utilizing data from the Corpus of Irish English Correspondence. According to her study, the DM “sure” has been a distinctive aspect of Irish English for several centuries. The evidence drawn from the CORIECOR emphasizes notable differences in the use of the DM “sure” between IrE and other linguistic varieties. As of her writing in January 2018, CORIECOR contained 1,347 instances of “sure,” among which only 64 (5%) were used as DMs.

Nicora (2022) introduces the Corpus of Irish English Speech, a platform developed with several objectives: to compile recordings of spoken Irish English across contemporary Ireland under a unified protocol to ensure comparability across datasets; and to establish an initial phonological inventory for each variety of Irish English examined. The IES corpus addresses a research gap in the study of Irish English prosody. It aims to provide a more comprehensive overview of the prosodic features of Irish English varieties spoken in present-day Ireland.

Although a wealth of literary studies focuses on Irish novels, including those penned by Colm Tóibín, it is surprising that comprehensive studies specifically targeting *The BWL* are remarkably few and far between, particularly from both literary and linguistic viewpoints. Many scholars are more concerned with

DMs in English-language varieties, as corpus-based analysis of Irish English often serves as the backbone of their research. That said, the field narrows considerably when it comes to scholarly research focused specifically on Irish novels. It shows that DMs in Irish literature have primarily focused on works by authors such as Patrick Mac Gill and Paul Howard, leaving a significant gap in the study of other significant works of Irish literature.

Moreno (2005) proposes that DMs in the works of contemporary authors such as Roddy Doyle or Brian Friel could offer valuable insights into their significance in literary contexts. Such an analysis could also be a practical approach to understanding the reliability of literary sources when analyzing spoken speech. From a stylistic perspective, the use of frequent phrases and their collocates in fictional discourse is considered significant. In this context, she argued that such usage contributes to the narrative's meaning, which is constructed as spontaneous discourse. Taniguchi, in his 1956 study, advanced the interesting argument that the word "sure," as a dialectal phenomenon, can be viewed and interpreted as an adverbial counterpart of "surely." The spectacular phenomenon that allows one to bypass the appropriate adverbial form "surely" by adding the adjectival form "sure" instead is not the only prevalent occurrence in the whole language.

As it was, Quirk (1972), in their seminal work, noted that "surely" is captured by the term "attitudinal disjunct." In grammar, it is commonly used at the start of a sentence. This rhetorical system aims to secure assent from the person being addressed, either in person or from several of them. This is a linguistic tool that involves the audience in the expression and conveys the idea; therefore, within education, it is an effective communication tool. An Irish English feature is "utterance-initial sure" as discussed by Large (1937). In his work, he provides examples such as: "Sure, only for this same Dick, I'd never get Mary Finigan for a wife" and "Sure, it knocked every idea of a message out of my head". This very particular usage of the "sure" at the start of sentences is one of the features of divergence of Irish English, according to Large's statement.

This rich work aligns with the literature and linguistics, showing not only how the numerous linguistic elements within literature should be studied mindfully, but also the extent to which they are significant. Specifically, researchers can uncover crucial aspects of linguistic manifestations in literary fiction by attending to the linguistic features of fictional discourse. While previous research has extensively explored discourse markers in English more generally, there remains a clear gap in the systematic examination of the word "sure" in Irish English, particularly in literary dialogue. Existing studies tend to focus on more widely researched varieties, such as American or British English, and often rely on conversational data or isolated examples rather than on sustained textual analysis.

Moreover, prior work has rarely combined SFL with large reference corpora to test whether the functions attributed to sure in Irish English are attested—or absent—in other English varieties. In particular, there is limited research that compares the interpersonal and discourse functions of sure in Irish literary texts with usage patterns observed in corpora such as COCA or the BNC. The current research will fill this gap by using an SFL-based examination of sure in an Irish novel and comparing such results with corpus data of other English varieties in a systematic way, thus providing a linguistically-grounded view of how Irish English is stylistically and interpersonally produced in literature. The given approach not only enriches

our knowledge of Irish English but also demonstrates how corpus-infused SFL analysis can enhance the study of literary linguistics.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The primary data for this study are drawn from Colm Tóibín's novel *The Blackwater Lightship*. Tóibín (1999). Searching the novel with the keyword "sure" found 64 instances throughout the novel. This rate indicates that "sure" is a recurring element in the novel's dialogue and warrants closer linguistic examination. However, the present study does not aim to provide an exhaustive analysis of all occurrences. This study adopts a purposive qualitative sampling approach. From the 64 occurrences of "sure" in the novel, four dialogue extracts were selected for detailed analysis. These extracts were chosen because they contain interactionally salient uses of "sure" relevant to the study's focus on interpersonal meaning and clause-level realization in spoken dialogue. The selection criteria were as follows:

- "Sure" occurs within spoken dialogue rather than narrative prose.
- The token appears in turn-taking contexts, such as question-answer sequences or confirmation-seeking exchanges.
- The usage allows for functional comparison with Standard English.
- The extract provides sufficient surrounding context to interpret interpersonal and discourse-level functions.

In these four dialogue extracts, four focal instances of "sure" are analyzed. These examples serve as illustrative cases in the analysis of the multifunctional role of "sure" in the Irish English literary conversation. The findings are intended to demonstrate functional patterns rather than to support statistical generalization across the novel or Irish English more broadly.

3.1 Micro-level Analysis (clause-level)

The analysis is based on SFL, which relies primarily on the model of clause grammar and interpersonal meaning. At the micro level, "sure" is examined within individual clauses from two complementary perspectives:

- as a modal (mood) adjunct in the Mood system, with attention to its position, scope, and polar interaction;
- As a discourse marker, it serves a pragmatic purpose, showing a position, seeking confirmation, or highlighting assumptions.

Clause-level analysis examines how "sure" contributes to interpersonal meaning within specific utterances and how these functions compare with those attested in other English varieties.

3.2 Macro-level Analysis (interactional level: beyond the clause)

At the macro level, the study draws on Halliday's notion of "Beyond the Clause," operationalized here in interactional rather than narrative-wide terms. Macro analysis focuses on how "sure" functions across adjacent turns in short dialogue exchanges, particularly in confirmation-seeking sequences and response turns. Rather than analyzing coherence across the entire narrative, the macro perspective examines how sure contributes to:

- interpersonal alignment between speakers,
- the negotiation of shared assumptions,
- The smooth progression of conversational exchanges within the selected dialogues.

This layer of analysis makes connections between clause-level meanings and interactional functions observable on a turn-to-turn basis, but it is grounded in the actual discourse situation.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Corpus Comparison Procedure

Comparative data on the Irish English usage of “sure” were taken from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC). (Davies, 2004-) (Davies, 2008-) Corpus searches were conducted in 2024 using the standard online interfaces of each corpus.

No genre restrictions were applied at the initial search stage. However, concordance lines from spoken, fictional, and dialogue-rich registers were prioritized during the qualitative examination to approximate conversational contexts. For analytical consistency, “sure” was coded according to the following criteria:

- Modal/Mood Adjunct: “sure” modifies the clause as a whole, scopes over the proposition, and contributes to interpersonal meaning (e.g., confirmation, assumption, stance).
- Discourse Marker: “sure” functions pragmatically to manage interaction, such as signaling agreement, emphasis, or confirmation-seeking.

In cases where sure simultaneously fulfills both roles, it is treated as bi-functional, provided that both grammatical and pragmatic criteria are satisfied.

4.2 Contextualizing “Sure” in *The Blackwater Lightship*

Today, Cambridge Dictionary defines the term “sure” as an adjective that can be either “certain” or “without any doubt” when being used. It conveys inner assurance and firmness in knowledge, and it is often used when one is certain of a fact or event. (Cambridge University Press, 2005). For instance, if someone asks, “What’s wrong with him?” and you say, “I’m not really sure,” it means you’re not completely certain about what’s going on. The word “sure” has different uses in English. This is just one of many applications of this flexible term in English language communication. “Sure” can be combined or collocated with various prepositions to convey different meanings. Three prepositions paired with “sure” are “for”, “of”, and “about”. When “sure” is used with “for” as in “for sure”, that means “something is definitely true.” This expression is usually what someone says to affirm one’s level of knowledge and skills. Take, for instance, “She’s become much surer of herself since she started her job” to imply that someone has a better grasp of her role and associated skills at the workplace. Similarly, when someone says, “He admitted that he wasn’t completely sure of his facts,” it means he was not entirely confident in the accuracy of the information he had. Finally, when “sure” is combined with the word “about” in “not entirely sure about”, it shows a lack of confidence and uncertainty about this issue. Such can be seen through the following sentence, “We’ve only recently hired Henry, and we’re not entirely sure about him yet”, which is a clear demonstration that there is some uncertainty about the newly hired individual.

Instructional expressions frequently contain “be sure,” “make sure,” and a phrase that expresses causation, like the word “that.” We would certainly know some of the phrases used in these kinds of

sentences, for example, “be sure to” and “make sure (that)”. The phrases “be sure to” and “make sure (that)” are undoubtedly examples of this type of calques. “Be sure to” and “make sure (that)” will be seen along with other similar phrases in this category. Calls to action mostly involve persuasively asking someone to do something or clarifying a particular result.

“Sure” can also mean “certainly” when expressing the same meaning. Likewise, in response to the question “Would you like to come swimming with us?” the answer can be “Sure.” Such a reply will help break the ice. The student might reply to the question “Will you help me with this?” “Sure, I will.” Generally, in speech, the word “sure” can mean “agreed” and “definitely” or “of course” at the beginning of a sentence. When it is used at the start of the sentence, the subject usually goes before the helping verb, and there is a comma after it.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) explain that “the system, as we have said, is the potential that lies behind the text. But ‘text’ is a complex notion. In the form in which we typically receive it, as spoken and written discourse, a text is the product of two processes combined: instantiation and realization. The defining criterion is instantiation: text as instance. But realization comes in because what becomes accessible to us is the text as realized in sound or writing.” In terms of the clause structure, he points out that the significance of any functional label lies in its relationship to the other functions with which it is structurally associated. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p.82), the word “Sure” belongs to the modal adjunct. And, the adverbial group serves as an Adjunct in the modal structure of the clause — either a circumstantial Adjunct or a modal Adjunct (mood or comment). The adverbial group has an adverb as its Head, which may or may not be accompanied by modifying elements.

“Sure” as another word class is the attributive adjective which reflects the cognition as the proposition of the clause. There are attributive clauses where the Carrier is realized by a nominal group denoting a person and the Attribute is a nominal group with an embedded fact clause, either ‘possessive’ with a noun as Head (e.g. idea, notion, inkling [[that . . .]]) or ‘intensive’ with an adjective as Head of the nominal group (e.g. sure, certain, aware, cognizant, oblivious (of the fact) [[that ...]]); for example: “However, I am not sure [[that what probabilists and what physicists mean here by “fields are quite synonymous]]” (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, p. 474).

In the next section, a focused analysis of the use of “sure” in four selected dialogue excerpts from the Irish novel *The Blackwater Lightship is presented*. Although “sure” occurs 64 times throughout the novel, the analysis focuses on representative passages to examine its interpersonal and discourse functions in context.

5. RESULTS

Dialogue 1:

When Larry came back from Declan's bedroom Paul told him what had happened.

'I got one of those plates as part of a dinner service as a wedding present, nearly sixty years ago,' Mrs Devereux said.

'They're a bad business, cats,' Larry said.

'We'll drown them if we find them.' 'A little pup, that's the best description of you all day,' Mrs Devereux said.

'Sure you couldn't have two cats up on a dresser like that,' Larry said.

(Toibin, 1999; Chapter 7)

5.1 Analysis of the "Sure" in dialogue 1 from the Perspective of Halliday's SFL

(1) Clause-level (Micro) Analysis: Mood Structure

Sure | you | couldn't | have | two cats up on a dresser like that

Interpersonal Theme / Modal Adjunct | Subject | Finite | Predicator | Complement

"Sure" in this clause is clause-initial; it comes before the Subject (you), meaning that "sure" is an interpersonal Theme and serves in the Mood system rather than adding to the experiential meaning. Being a modal adjunct, sure scopes the whole proposition (you could not have two cats up on a dresser like that), and presents it as a presumed or unquestioned evaluation. The negative polarity and modal meaning are coded by the Finite (couldn't) and put the situation as something impossible or very improbable. "Sure" does not alter polarity or modality as such; rather, it alters the attitude of the speaker to the proposal by giving it the form of shared knowledge or common sense. Sure, in this respect, is equivalent to the adverb surely, but sure also focuses on the improbability of the situation, rather than bringing new information on board.

(2) Interactional (Macro) Analysis: Beyond the Clause

At the interactional level, sure contributes to the management of interpersonal relations within the dialogue. Presenting the proposition as taken for granted *sure* reduces the confrontational force of the negative assessment and supports a tone of conversational alignment. This aligns with the humorous and lightly confrontational nature of the exchange, which combines teasing, exaggeration, and shared assumptions about the situation. Within the local dialogue sequence, *sure* helps guide the listener through a process of acknowledgment before rejection: the speaker frames the claim as mutually understood before asserting impossibility. In this way, *sure* supports the coherence and flow of the interaction across turns, cushioning potential conflict while maintaining the speaker's stance.

"Sure" also helps manage interpersonal relations at the interactional level of dialogue. By stating the suggestion like it is a given, *sure* lessens the confrontational intensity of the adverse judgment and concurs a tone of conversational correspondence. This is in line with the comical and slightly confrontational tone of the interaction that is characterized by teasing, exaggeration, and collective assumptions regarding the situation. In the local dialogue, *sure* helps direct the listener towards some acknowledgment process and

then assert impossibility: the speaker forms the statement as something that they both comprehend before making the assertion. By doing so, the coherence and flow of the interaction between turns is supported by *sure*, which cushions the possible conflict without compromising on the role of the speaker.

(3) *Comparison of the Function of “Sure” in Dialogue 1 across Different Varieties of English*

To contextualize this usage, the word “*sure*” was examined in the COCA and the BNC. Searches for strings such as “*sure you could*” and “*sure you couldn’t*” were conducted to identify comparable constructions.

In COCA, the string “*sure you couldn’t*” appears 18 times (Davies, 2008–). But there is no equivalent function of *sure* as an adjunct mood followed by a negative hypothetical conditional clause that discusses an improbable or impossible scenario __ similar to the usage of *sure* in the dialogue above. One concordance entry, “*Sure you couldn’t*,” as the adjunct mood, is used for the interrogative type.

“Hey, sorry the pro shop didn’t have one of these in your size. Sure, you couldn’t fit into a medium? Not since I was 11. You’re up. Why don’t you hit first, huh? You really wanna do this? Yeah. We’re tough.”

In COCA concordances, *sure* typically functions to acknowledge a hypothetically possible action, often followed by advice, contrast, or redirection. For example:

“*Sure, you could go* to the subdomain search.yahoo.com, but very few people knew that, so more people ended up using the simpler homepage of Google.”

“*Sure, you could go* to the store and spend your CD dollars on yet another lame alterna-kit band, but don’t.”

In the first concordance, *Sure* functions to acknowledge a possible action (going to the subdomain ‘search.yahoo.com’) as a given or easily accepted idea as a concessive mood adjunct. It acknowledges the feasibility of an action but leads to advice or a suggestion against it.

For other queries with the pronouns (*Sure* he/she/they/I), *sure* predominantly functions as the adjectives either in attributive personal clauses such as

“Emily was *sure* she couldn’t have heard correctly.”

or as the fixed expression

“*Are you sure you couldn’t* move over an inch or two?”

No instances were identified in either COCA or BNC where *sure* functions as a clause-initial modal adjunct preceding a negative declarative clause to present an assessment as assumed shared knowledge in the way observed in the Irish English dialogue. This contrast suggests that the usage in *The Blackwater Lightship* reflects a variety-specific pragmatic pattern rather than a general feature of Standard English.

Dialogue 2:

‘How long are we staying here?’ Cathal asked.

‘Just today.’

‘We’re not sleeping here, *sure we’re not?*’

‘No, we’re driving back later.’

The boys stood there, downcast and subdued.

‘Manus, I’ll give you a piggy-back if you come down now,’ Hugh said.

‘No, I want to sit on your shoulders.’

‘All right.’ ‘And I’m not swimming if it’s cold,’ Manus said.

Cathal shook his head at Helen, signaling that he did not want to go down the cliff. (Toibin, 1999; Chapter 5)

5.2 Analysis of the “Sure” in dialogue 2 from the Perspective of Halliday’s SFL

(4) Clause-level (Micro) Analysis: Mood Structure

We | ’re | not sleeping | here, sure | we | ’re | not?

Subject | Finite | Predicator | Adjunct, Interpersonal Theme / Modal

Adjunct | Subject | Finite | Polarity

The clause is achieved in the form of a declarative-confirmation-seeking tag. “Sure” appears in the second part in clause initial position, coming before the Subject (we), meaning that it is used as an interpersonal Theme and a modal adjunct in the Mood system. Instead of putting in the experiential content, sure scopes over the proposition (we are not), putting it in the form of an assumed or anticipated state of affairs.

Sure, in this case, it serves to indicate the speaker's epistemic position: Cathal assumes that the proposition is already probable or presumed and wants it confirmed by the interlocutor. The encoded modal meaning is not conveyed by polarity or modality, which is already conveyed by the negative Finite (are not), but by the interpersonal framing which sure offers. This contrasts with normal English tag questions, in which polarity reversal and auxiliary repetition are usually used to elicit confirmation.

(5) Interactional (Macro) Analysis: Beyond the Clause

“Sure” also comes into play at the interactional level, regulating the interchange between speakers. The utterance is not an argument or a refutation of previous knowledge rather, it is a sort of verification strategy, which calls on confirmation but preserves compatibility. “Sure” is used by the speaker to indicate a desire of the other person to agree with him and to reduce the possible face threat of challenging the previous answer. In the conversation, sure assists preserve interpersonal coherence as the initial assertive (We’re not sleeping here) is attached to the follow-up attempt to get confirmation. This helps in developing understanding with each other and aiding in the seamless flow of the interaction, especially in a situation where the speaker is dealing with expectation of other people regarding the length of time the stay would take.

(6) Comparison of the function of “Sure” in dialogue 2 across different varieties of English

To examine whether comparable structures occur in other English varieties, searches were conducted in COCA and the BNC using strings such as “sure we”, “sure we are not”, “sure we aren’t” and “sure we”. In COCA, 18 instances of this string “Sure we aren’t” were identified. However, manual inspection of the concordance lines indicates that sure in these cases, it typically functions as an adjective

“Oh Allison, are you *sure we aren’t* related?”

or as part of the fixed expression, make sure, rather than as a modal adjunct in a tag-like confirmation-seeking construction.

“No worries, boys. The big chief here, he’s just making sure we aren’t taking out anything that matters to the natives.”

No instances were found in either COCA or the BNC in which sure functions as a clause-initial modal adjunct introducing a negative confirmation-seeking tag, comparable to its usage in Dialogue 2. Standard English confirmation-seeking is typically realized through auxiliary-based tag questions, rather than through the repetition of the clause with sure as an interpersonal marker.

“He’s giving her the teapot, isn’t he?” Halliday (2004:109)

The absence of structurally and functionally equivalent examples in the corpora suggests that the usage observed in *The Blackwater Lightship* reflects a distinctive feature of Irish English interactional practice, as represented in literary dialogue.

Dialogue 3:

‘Did you hear about Kitty Walsh from The Ballagh and her poor mother hardly cold?’ Madge asked. She spoke quickly, breathlessly.

‘There should be a law, you know,’ Essie said. They were both excited at what they had just witnessed.

‘There is a law,’ Madge said, ‘but it’s the guards, they won’t stop her.’

‘*Sure* she’s too blind to see them. She wouldn’t stop for them,’ Essie said. ‘And now Dora is driving.’

(Toibin, 1999; Chapter 8)

5.3 Analysis of the “Sure” in dialogue 3 from the perspective of Halliday’s SFL

(1) Clause-level (Micro) Analysis: Mood Structure

Sure | she | ’s | too blind | to see them

Interpersonal Theme / Modal Adjunct | Subject | Finite | Complement | Adjunct

The *sure* here appears in the clause-initial position, and comes before the Subject (she), which means that it is an interpersonal Theme and does not belong to the experiential content of the clause. It does not

alter the adjective blind or the process see but it scopes out the entire proposition. This modal positioning helps it to be analyzed as a modal adjunct that denotes the epistemic position of the speaker. In contrast to a concessive structure, no counter-expectation or reversal is encoded in the structure. Rather, *sure*, is a meaning similar to *surely* or *obviously*, which puts forward the proposition as obvious or highly justified on the part of the speaker.

(2) Interactional (Macro) Analysis: Beyond the Clause

“*Sure*” is also used at the discourse interaction level as an affirmative response to what Madge has already said about the guards (it is the guards, they will not prevent her). Essie's sentence does not simply carry on with the conversation, but a justification is provided to support and strengthen the previous statement (she is too blind to see them). This is a significant dual role, as on the one hand *sure* may be structurally a modal adjunct in the clause, on the other, interactionally, it indicates convergence and mutual assessment between speakers. “*Sure*” provides a structure of the utterance as cooperative, not confrontational, and contributes to the enhancement of the interpersonal solidarity and to the introduction of the evaluation as generally accepted knowledge, not as a subjective judgment. The second clause (“She wouldn’t stop for them”) reinforces this stance by restating the proposition in modalized form, creating cohesion between certainty (*sure*) and predicted behaviour (wouldn’t).

Even though it is possible to paraphrase *sure* here as “*surely*” in Standard English, the usage of *sure* as a clause-initial marker of certainty and agreement, independent of a conjunction, is a feature of Irish English speech. Instead of being fundamentally bound as syntactically concessive or syntactically contrastive, *sure* is a versatile marker of stance that moves response, evaluation, and explanation in a single turn. This is in contrast to Standard English applications of *surely* which generally serve as modal adverbs within the clause and not as interpersonal Themes with discourse-organizing functions.

(3) Comparison of the Function of “*Sure*” in Dialogue 3 across Different Varieties of English

Searches in COCA and BNC for strings such as “*Sure she is*” do not yield functionally equivalent examples. In COCA, 256 instances of the string “*Sure she is*” were identified. However, manual inspection of the concordance lines indicates that *sure* in these cases, it typically functions as an adjective in projecting clauses

“We’re proud of her. I’m *sure* she is a good person.”

or within fixed expressions such as *make sure*

“*Make sure* she is not eavesdropping on us.”

No concordance lines were found in which *sure* functions as a clause-initial interpersonal Theme expressing epistemic certainty and alignment in a declarative clause, as seen in Dialogue 3. In 13 entries of “*surely she is*” searched in COCA, this meaning is more typically realized through *surely*, as in:

“*Surely she is* in need of some masculine companionship.”

“*Surely she is* wrong.”

The contrast suggests that while the semantic meaning of certainty is shared across varieties, the syntactic realization and discourse function of *sure* in this dialogue reflect a variety-specific pattern consistent with Irish English usage.

Dialogue 4:

‘Did you let Granny know he was very sick a good length before that?’

‘Well, she knew he was sick.’

‘I mean that he was dying.’

‘*Sure* I didn't know myself.

I suppose I would have let her know the day I knew, or the day after.’

(Toibin, 1999; Chapter 8)

5.4 Analysis of the “Sure” in Dialogue 4 from the Perspective of Halliday’s SFL

(1) Clause-level (Micro) Analysis: Mood Structure

Sure | I | didn’t | know | myself

Interpersonal Theme / Modal Adjunct | Subject | Finite (negative) | Predicator | Complement

In this case, *sure* comes clause-initially, preceding the Subject and Finite, indicating that it is an interpersonal Theme as a modal adjunct. It is scoped throughout the proposition rather than changing the known process. The Finite does not have negative polarity, whereas *sure* means that the speaker has an epistemic opinion about that negative proposition. Most importantly, *sure* does not represent a code of certainty of the occurrence (knowing), but certainty of the incomprehension of the speaker. In the context of SFL, a modal adjunct supports the speaker in commitment of the truth value of the negative clause (I didn’t know), rather than commitment of knowledge itself.

(2) Interactional (Macro) Analysis: beyond the clause

“*Sure*” in this exchange is a turn-initial response-prefacing discourse marker, which controls the interpersonal stance and discourse organization. The response that Helen gives is a response to a question that has an underlying moral urgency- whether or not she had not told Granny that the man was dying. This implied evaluation and the framing of her response as an explanation rather than a denial was done using *sure* signals that the speaker was orienting to this. At the interpersonal level, *sure* implies an epistemic disclaimer: “*Sure* I did not know myself”. Instead of the responsibility being reduced by evasion, the marker emphasizes the speaker's lack of knowledge as authentic and incontrovertible. The clause places ignorance as the main defense and therefore safeguards the moral uprightness of the speaker without necessarily criticizing the implication of the questioner. This is in line with the Irish English use of *sure* as a tool in the limitation of honest knowledge when it comes to situations of sensitivity or possible fault.

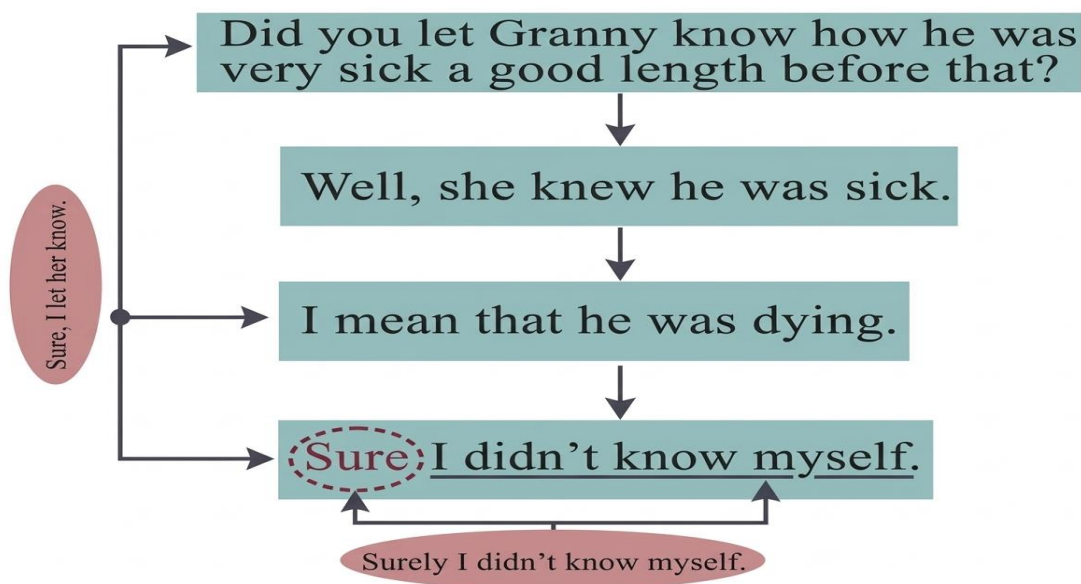


Figure 1: The Bi-function of “Sure” in Irish English

Source: (Compiled by the author, 2025)

While *sure* occurs in other varieties of English, its frequent use in Irish English to preface negative declarative clauses expressing epistemic limitation (e.g. *didn't know myself*) is particularly salient. Here, *sure* simultaneously organizes the turn and encodes stance, supporting the paper's broader claim that *sure* in Irish English is bi-functional, operating both as a discourse-organizing marker and as a resource for construing epistemic positioning in morally delicate contexts.

(3) Comparison of the function of “Sure” in dialogue 4 across different varieties of English

In COCA, 279 entries of this string “*Sure she is*” were identified. However, none of these entries appeared at the beginning of a negative declarative statement. “*Sure*” is used in its usual function as an adjective in an attributive personal clause, such as

“*I was sure I didn't want to know.*”

Among the 25 entries of the full clause, “*I didn't know myself,*” there is no occurrence of “*sure*” at the beginning of those concordances. In standard English, the use of *sure* at the beginning is typically found in its adverbial form, “*Surely*” for the similar content in the novel by identifying all entries of “*Surely I didn't*” in COCA (Davies, 2008-). For instance:

“*Surely I didn't flail for so long, work so hard,*”

“*Surely I didn't marry Kenny, so I wouldn't have to work.*”

This contrast suggests that while the semantic meaning (certainty about lack of knowledge) is shared, Irish English favors *sure* as an interpersonal Theme and discourse-prefacing device, rather than relying on adverbial *surely*.

6. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the word *sure* in *The Blackwater Lightship* assumes interpersonal and discourse-related roles in character dialogue. Rather than examining *sure* as a feature of spontaneous spoken interaction, this study has focused on its function within literary dialogue, where its placement and distribution are authorially motivated. In this context, *sure* operates primarily as a modal element within the clause, contributing to the interpersonal meaning negotiated between characters.

The microanalysis demonstrates that *sure* in Irish English differs from its use in more standardized varieties of English. In the selected dialogue excerpts, *sure* functions both as a clause-initial modal adjunct—encoding the speaker’s epistemic stance—and as a turn-prefacing discourse marker that organizes responses in interactionally sensitive contexts. This dual functionality becomes visible only when clause structure and surrounding discourse are analyzed together, consistent with discourse-analytic approaches that integrate form and function (Schiffrin, 1994; Roy, 2000, cited in Arum, 2014). While structural analysis identifies the position and grammatical role of *sure*, functional analysis reveals how it manages interpersonal alignment, explanation, and epistemic limitation within dialogue.

In addition, the comparative reference to COCA highlights that clause-initial *sure* followed by negative declarative clauses expressing lack of knowledge (e.g. *Sure I didn’t know myself*) is uncommon in standard English. This contrast reinforces the observation that *sure* in Irish English frequently introduces explanations or morally delicate responses rather than simple affirmation. Although the dialogues are fictional, they represent stylized language choices made by an Irish author and thus offer insight into culturally recognizable interactional patterns within Irish English literary discourse.

Rather than claiming that *sure* functions as a unifying narrative mechanism across the entire novel, this study shows that its localized use contributes to characterization and interpersonal positioning in specific interactional moments. Through these instances, *sure* helps convey speakers’ epistemic positions, social relations, and emotional orientations, thereby enriching the realism and stylistic texture of the dialogue.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

This study is limited to a small set of dialogue excerpts and does not claim to represent Irish society as a whole. Future research may expand the dataset by examining a broader range of Irish literary texts or by conducting synchronic and diachronic analyses of *sure* across different authors and periods. Further work within literary stylistics and sociolinguistics could also explore how discourse markers such as *sure* contribute to narrative voice, character construction, and culturally specific interactional norms in Irish English.

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