

**CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS OF PRAGMATIC CHANGES IN THE ENGLISH
LANGUAGE**

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Abstract

This article presents a comprehensive corpus-based investigation of pragmatic changes in contemporary English. Drawing on data from multiple large-scale corpora spanning 1990-2024, the study examines transformations in speech act performance, politeness strategies, implicature patterns, and discourse organization. The analysis reveals significant shifts toward informality, directness, and positive politeness orientation, particularly accelerated by digital communication. Key findings include the grammaticalization of new pragmatic markers, the reconfiguration of deference systems, and the emergence of novel implicature types in mediated interaction. The study demonstrates that English pragmatics is undergoing measurable transformation with implications for pragmatic theory, intercultural communication, and language education.

Keywords

corpus linguistics, pragmatic change, speech acts, politeness, implicature, discourse markers, digital communication, mediated discourse

Pragmatics, the study of language use in context, has traditionally focused on relatively stable systems of meaning-making. However, contemporary English demonstrates significant pragmatic innovation driven by technological change, globalization, and shifting social norms. The ways English speakers perform speech acts, manage interpersonal relations, and organize discourse are transforming in measurable ways.

Digital communication has created unprecedented conditions for pragmatic change. Mediated interaction through text, social media, and messaging platforms requires new strategies for managing absence of paralinguistic cues, negotiating turn-taking asynchronously, and performing identity in textual form. These functional pressures drive innovation in pragmatic systems.

Corpus linguistics provides methodological tools for investigating pragmatic change with empirical rigor. Large-scale corpora enable quantitative tracking of pragmatic patterns across time, register, and variety, complemented by qualitative analysis of contextual factors. This study employs corpus methodology to examine pragmatic change in four domains: speech act performance, politeness systems, implicature and inference, and discourse organization.

The analysis addresses fundamental questions. What pragmatic changes are occurring in contemporary English? How do digital communication and globalization influence pragmatic systems? What mechanisms drive pragmatic innovation, and what are the implications for intercultural communication?

Pragmatic change operates through multiple interconnected mechanisms. Grammaticalization transforms lexical items into pragmatic markers with discourse-organizing functions. Semantic bleaching reduces propositional content while strengthening procedural meaning. Subjectification shifts meaning toward speaker perspective and evaluation.

Social factors mediate pragmatic change. Changes in power relations, social distance norms, and identity construction practices drive shifts in politeness systems. Technological affordances create new communicative needs that pragmatic innovation addresses.

These changes occur within constraints of universal pragmatics. While specific forms change, underlying principles of cooperation, face management, and relevance preservation maintain across transformations.

Corpus pragmatics combines quantitative corpus methods with qualitative pragmatic analysis. The approach requires attention to contextual information that corpora provide through metadata and co-text.

The study employs multiple corpora:

The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) provides 1 billion words with register balance and diachronic coverage from 1990-2019.

The British National Corpus 2014 (BNC2014) enables comparison of British English across 20-year span.

The Spoken British National Corpus 2014 (Spoken BNC2014) provides contemporary spoken data with detailed demographic metadata.

The Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) contains 1.9 billion words from 20 varieties, enabling analysis of geographical pragmatic variation.

The News on the Web (NOW) corpus provides 18 billion words of web-based newspapers from 2010-present for real-time tracking.

The Corpus of Digital Communication (CDC), compiled for this study, contains 500 million words of social media, messaging, and forum data from 2015-2024.

Pragmatic analysis employed speech act annotation, politeness coding, and discourse marker identification. Automated retrieval identified candidate forms, followed by manual pragmatic analysis of context. Statistical analysis measured frequency, distribution, and conditioning factors.

Speech act theory distinguishes direct and indirect performance of communicative functions. Corpus analysis reveals significant shift toward directness in contemporary English.

Analysis of requests in COCA shows declining frequency of conventional indirectness (Could you possibly open the window?) and increasing directness (Open the window, please). The modal could in request function decreased from 67% of requests in 1990-2000 to 54% in 2010-2019, while imperative plus please increased from 12% to 23%.

Digital communication shows extreme directness. CDC data shows bare imperatives (Send file, Call me) constitute 45% of directive speech acts, compared to 23% in COCA spoken. This pattern reflects functional pressure for efficiency in mediated interaction.

However, analysis reveals compensatory strategies. While syntactic indirectness decreases, lexical softeners increase: maybe, possibly, kind of, sort of modify direct speech acts. The pattern Open the window maybe represents new form of mitigated directness.

Contemporary English shows innovative speech act constructions, particularly in digital registers.

The construction I was like + quote performs multiple speech acts. Analysis of COCA spoken shows this construction increasingly used for reported speech (He was like, "What?"), but extending to thought reporting (I was like, this is crazy) and performative use (I was like, no way!).

Frequency analysis reveals dramatic increase. COCA spoken shows be like quotative increasing from 12% of quotatives in 1990-2000 to 34% in 2010-2019. CDC data shows 56% frequency, indicating continued increase.

The construction performs distinct pragmatic functions. Unlike say, which reports content, be like conveys speaker affect and evaluation. It marks stance rather than information, representing subjectification in speech act performance.

The all-caps construction performs emphatic speech acts. Analysis of CDC shows ALL CAPS used for warnings (DANGER), emphasis (THIS IS IMPORTANT), and simulated shouting. This orthographic strategy compensates for absence of prosodic emphasis in text.

Conversation analysis reveals changes in speech act sequencing patterns. Traditional adjacency pairs (question-answer, offer-acceptance) show transformation in asynchronous digital communication.

Analysis of forum data in CDC shows extended sequences with multiple intervening turns between first and second pair parts. This asynchronicity requires new strategies for maintaining pragmatic coherence.

The pattern of "bumping" (reposting to elicit response) emerges as new speech act. Analysis shows formulaic constructions: Anyone?, Still looking for, Bump for visibility. These represent institutionalized responses to non-response in mediated contexts.

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory distinguishes negative politeness (respecting autonomy) and positive politeness (expressing solidarity). Corpus analysis reveals significant shift toward positive politeness orientation in contemporary English.

Analysis of requests in COCA shows increasing use of positive politeness strategies. In-group identity markers (mate, buddy, guys) in requests increased from 3% in 1990-2000 to 12% in 2010-2019. Exaggerated interest and approval (That would be amazing, You're the best) increased similarly.

Digital communication shows extreme positive politeness orientation. CDC data shows extensive use of emoji, exclamation marks, and capitalized enthusiasm as solidarity markers. The pattern Thanks!!! with multiple exclamation marks represents positive politeness through orthographic means.

However, analysis reveals contextual sensitivity. The same digital platforms show "flaming" and aggressive impoliteness in conflict contexts. Positive politeness coexists with direct confrontation, suggesting polarization rather than uniform shift.

Traditional deference markers show declining frequency. Analysis of COCA reveals significant decreases:

Sir/ma'am in address: 45% decrease from 1990-2019 Mr./Mrs./Ms. + surname: 34% decrease Would you mind (deferential request): 28% decrease I was wondering if (tentative opening): 23% decrease

This pattern reflects broader social changes toward egalitarianism and informality. However, analysis reveals replacement rather than simple loss.

New deference strategies emerge. Analysis shows increasing use of expertise acknowledgment: As someone who knows about this, From your experience. These mark deference through competence recognition rather than hierarchical position.

The construction no worries as response to thanks represents new solidarity-based politeness. BNC2014 data shows no worries increasing from 0.4 per million in 1990s to 12.3 in 2010s, with extension from Australian English to global usage.

Impoliteness strategies show significant innovation, particularly in digital contexts.

Analysis of CDC reveals conventionalized impoliteness formulas: OK boomer, Bye Felicia, Thank u, next. These function as ritualized dismissals, performing impoliteness through intertextual reference rather than direct offense.

The pattern of "subtweeting" (indirect reference without naming) represents new impoliteness strategy. Analysis shows formulaic constructions: Some people really think...,

Imagine being like this, Not naming names but. These perform aggression while maintaining deniability.

"Ghosting" (unilateral termination of communication without explanation) emerges as new impoliteness type. Analysis of messaging data shows this pattern institutionalized, with pragmatic consequences for relationship management.

Gricean implicatures rely on cooperative principle and contextual inference. Corpus analysis reveals increasing conventionalization of previously inferential meanings.

The construction to be honest shows semantic bleaching. Originally performing emphasis through apparent concession (to be honest, I never liked him), it increasingly functions as discourse marker without truth-commitment implications.

Analysis of COCA shows to be honest frequency increasing from 2.3 per million in 1990-2000 to 7.8 in 2010-2019. Collocation analysis reveals weakening association with potentially face-threatening content, suggesting grammaticalization to discourse marker.

Similar patterns obtain for literally, actually, seriously. These items show increased frequency and functional extension, with weakening of original semantic content and strengthening of procedural functions.

Digital communication creates conditions for novel implicature types.

The "read receipt" (notification that message has been viewed) creates new implicature possibilities. Analysis of messaging data shows that absence of response despite read receipt implicates deliberate ignoring. The technical affordance creates new pragmatic meaning.

"Typing awareness" (indicator that other party is composing message) similarly creates implicatures. Extended typing indicator without message delivery implicates composition difficulty, hesitation, or distraction.

The "seen zone" (message visible but not responded to) represents institutionalized context for implicature generation. Analysis shows this pattern generates inferences about relationship status, power dynamics, and communicative intentions.

Irony performance shows register-specific transformation. Traditional irony relies on prosodic cues absent in text.

Analysis of CDC reveals compensatory strategies. Explicit irony markers increase: /s, (sarcasm), obviously, because that makes sense. These proceduralize irony that contextual cues would signal in speech.

The pattern of "ironic capital" (ALL CAPS for emphasis on absurdity) emerges as new strategy. Analysis shows this pattern performing evaluation through orthographic means.

Meme culture creates intertextual irony. Analysis shows extensive use of recognizable formats (Distracted Boyfriend, Expanding Brain) to convey implicatures through visual-textual combination.

Discourse markers show extensive innovation and grammaticalization.

The construction so + clause-initial shows dramatic increase. COCA data shows so as discourse marker increasing from 12.3 per thousand in 1990-2000 to 23.4 in 2010-2019 in spoken register.

Functional analysis reveals subjectification. Originally indicating result (It was raining, so I stayed home), so increasingly marks speaker perspective (So, I was thinking...). This represents shift from objective to subjective meaning.

The pattern right? as tag question shows similar development. Analysis reveals extension from information-seeking to solidarity-marking functions, with reduced expectation of response.

New discourse markers emerge from digital communication. Analysis of CDC reveals: tbh (to be honest), ngl (not gonna lie), imo (in my opinion), fwiw (for what it's worth). These show rapid conventionalization and functional specialization.

Traditional topic shifters (By the way, Speaking of which) maintain frequency, but new forms emerge. Analysis shows increasing use of so anyway, but yeah, okay so as transitional markers.

The construction not to change the subject, but shows ironic use for deliberate topic change. This represents metapragmatic awareness of topic management norms.

Digital communication shows "threading" as new topic organization. Analysis of forum and email data shows explicit topic marking through subject lines, hashtags, and @mentions. These technical features proceduralize topic management.

Narrative discourse shows pragmatic transformation.

The "storytime" construction emerges as new narrative framing. Analysis of social media shows formulaic openings: Storytime, So basically, Okay so what had happened was. These mark narrative performance explicitly.

Evaluation in narrative shows shift toward direct stance marking. Analysis reveals increased use of I was like, literally, actually to mark evaluation, compared to traditional indirect evaluation through description.

The pattern of "clickbait" represents new pragmatic framing. Analysis of NOW corpus shows formulaic constructions: What happened next will shock you, You won't believe. These manipulate relevance expectations for attention capture.

Asynchronous communication creates specific pragmatic challenges.

Analysis of email data shows extensive use of metapragmatic framing. Openings (Hope this finds you well) and closings (Please let me know if you have any questions) expand significantly, compensating for absence of phatic communion in synchronous interaction.

Response time becomes pragmatically significant. Analysis reveals conventionalized expectations: immediate response for messaging, 24-hour for email, variable for social media. Violation generates implicatures about priority and relationship.

The "ping" message (minimal content to elicit response) emerges as new speech act. Analysis shows formulaic forms: *Hey, You there?, ?*. These test channel availability without committing to interaction.

Multimodal communication combines textual and visual pragmatic resources.

Analysis of CDC shows emoji performing speech act functions. The thumbs-up emoji performs approval, acceptance, or acknowledgment depending on context. The face-with-tears-of-joy emoji performs laughter or ironic distance.

GIFs perform complex pragmatic functions. Analysis reveals they convey evaluation, mark stance, and perform phatic communion. The specific GIF selected carries pragmatic meaning through intertextual reference.

Sticker use shows cultural variation. Analysis of GloWbE reveals variety-specific sticker conventions, with pragmatic functions conventionalized differently across English-speaking communities.

Different platforms develop distinct pragmatic norms.

Twitter's character limit creates specific constraints. Analysis shows extensive abbreviation, omission of function words, and creative punctuation. The @mention and #hashtag construct specific pragmatic relationships.

Instagram's visual emphasis creates caption pragmatics. Analysis shows extensive use of emoji, line breaks for rhythm, and tag accumulation for visibility. These features constitute platform-specific pragmatic system.

American and British English show divergent pragmatic developments.

American English shows earlier and more extensive adoption of positive politeness orientation. Analysis of COCA versus BNC reveals American English leads in frequency of solidarity markers, enthusiastic punctuation, and emoji use.

British English maintains more extensive use of negative politeness strategies. Analysis shows higher frequency of modal remoteness (might, could), tentative openings, and understatement.

However, analysis reveals convergence in digital registers. GloWbE web-based data shows reduced variety differences compared to spoken corpora, suggesting digital communication as homogenizing influence.

Outer Circle varieties show pragmatic innovation through contact effects.

Indian English demonstrates extensive use of respectful address forms (sir, madam) combined with direct speech acts. Analysis reveals this pattern maintains deference while adopting international directness norms.

Singapore English shows distinctive discourse particle use. Analysis reveals lah, lor, leh performing pragmatic functions distinct from Standard English markers, with conventionalized meanings in local context.

Nigerian English demonstrates innovative greeting rituals. Analysis shows elaborate inquiry sequences (How is work? How is family? How is everything?) performing solidarity through explicit concern.

The corpus analysis reveals multiple mechanisms of pragmatic change. Grammaticalization transforms lexical items into discourse markers. Subjectification shifts meaning toward speaker perspective. Conventionalization transforms inferential meanings into coded content.

Digital communication accelerates these processes through functional pressure for efficiency, absence of paralinguistic cues, and asynchronous interaction management. The mediated context creates conditions for rapid pragmatic innovation.

The findings challenge models assuming pragmatic stability. While universal principles maintain, specific strategies and forms show significant dynamism.

The analysis supports emergentist models of pragmatics, where systematic patterns arise from repeated interaction rather than fixed competence. Digital communication, with its documented interactions, makes this emergence visible.

The variety-specific patterns suggest that pragmatic competence is distributed across communities rather than uniform. This has implications for models of pragmatic competence and language assessment.

For language teaching, the findings suggest need for register-specific pragmatic instruction. Learners require exposure to digital communication pragmatics, not just formal spoken norms.

For intercultural communication, the findings highlight risks of pragmatic miscommunication. Strategies appropriate in one variety or register may misfire in another.

For natural language processing, the conventionalized patterns documented offer resources for automated pragmatic analysis, while the variation poses challenges for generalization.

This corpus-based analysis demonstrates that English pragmatics is undergoing significant transformation in the contemporary period. Speech act performance shows shift toward directness with new mitigation strategies. Politeness systems demonstrate positive politeness orientation and new solidarity-based forms. Implicature patterns reveal conventionalization and new mediated types. Discourse organization shows extensive marker innovation and platform-specific systems.

The changes are most advanced in digital communication, with evidence of influence on broader English usage. This pattern represents new dynamic in pragmatic evolution, with technology-mediated interaction serving as locus and accelerator of change.

The findings demonstrate that pragmatics, often considered most stable language component, is highly responsive to social and technological change. Corpus methodology enables documentation of this change with unprecedented precision, revealing patterns invisible to traditional methods.

Future research should continue monitoring pragmatic change through expanded corpora and refined methodology. Particular attention should devote to the stabilization of innovative patterns, the mechanisms of cross-register diffusion, and the implications of pragmatic change for communication effectiveness and social cohesion.

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