A corpus-based approach to second language pragmatic ability: The effect of task variability on epistemic stance in advanced spoken L2 English

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Corpus pragmatics

“A relative newcomer on the pragmatic and the corpus linguistic scene. For a long time pragmatics and corpus linguistics were regarded as ‘parallel but often mutually exclusive’ (Romero-Trillo, 2008, p.2)” (Aijmer & Rühlemann, 2014, p. 1)
Corpus-based pragmatics: Challenges

- Operationalising ‘pragmatics’ - finding the locus of pragmatic information; “the function cannot be retrieved itself, only surface forms ‘orbiting’ it can” (Aijmer & Rühlemann, 2014, p.9)

- Working with spoken, dialogic data – the co-construction of discourse

- Often labour-intensive (annotation for pragmatic features, e.g. speech acts)

- Issue of inter-speaker variation and L1 reference point

Inter-speaker variation in L1 use

Corpus-based pragmatics: Advantages

- Large amounts of data – robust evidence & use of sophisticated statistical techniques

- Exciting areas: emergence of pragmatic features across proficiency, evidence of acquisitional order, issue of pragmatic transfer, interaction of pragmatics and grammar

- Increasing inclusion of information about social characteristics of speakers (age, gender, speaker status) and linguistic setting (task information)

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Corpus pragmatics – two steps

**Two steps** in the corpus-based pragmatic analysis – assist us in **form-function mapping** (Aijmer & Rühlemann, 2014)

1. Surface forms (lexical words or constructions) – which have pragmatic function based on pragmatic literature
2. Surface forms & their function in the context

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Corpus-based approach to second language pragmatic ability:

The effect of task variability on epistemic stance in advanced spoken L2 English

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What is epistemic stance?

**Epistemic stance (ES)** is an important component of evaluative language; expressing un/certainty about a statement; very frequent feature of everyday language use; many forms (e.g. *I think, maybe, I’m not sure*).

Two main functions (Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Kärkkäinen 2006)
- Subjective use: positioning of the speaker (expressing opinion)
- Intersubjective use: maintaining relations between the interlocutors

Speaker: “I like graffiti it's er it's ar= I think it's art it's just a different kind of art which is not very understood by society nowadays” [Trinity Lancaster Corpus]
Why epistemic stance matters?

• **Indicator** of second language **pragmatic ability** = ability to adjust language choice/language use to a particular interactional setting, communicative aim & speaker role

• **Adjusting language** challenging even for proficient L2 speakers – L2 speakers often called ‘monostylistic’, too formal, too ‘direct’... (Hinkel 2005; Ädel 2008; Guilquin and Paquot 2008)

• We need to observe L2 users across a series of different tasks - to study **context-dependent variation** in the pragmatic features in the production of the (same) L2 speakers – are these speakers sensitive to the change of the setting?
Factors affecting stance-taking in spoken interaction

Variation in use of ESMs - frequency & type - due to

- **Interactional features**: degree of interactiveness, speaker roles (Lam 2009; Liao 2009; Huang 2011; Wei 2011; Neary-Sundquist 2013; Gablasova and Brezina 2015) – but also no effect (Fuller 2003)

- **Speaker characteristics**: L2 proficiency level (Wei 2011; Neary-Sundquist 2013)
Research questions

RQ1: What is the effect of different tasks on the **overall frequency** of EMs?

RQ2: What is the effect of different tasks on the **frequency of un/certainty** EMs?

RQ3: What is the effect of different tasks on the **type of certainty** expressed by speakers?

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Data & methods

Epistemic stance: three types studied

• Verbal expressions: *I think, I suppose, I believe*...
• Adjectival expressions: *I am certain, I’m not sure*...
• Adverbial expressions: *maybe, certainly, definitely, probably*...
**Search terms** (Holmes (1988), Biber et al. (1999), Brezina (2012))

Tool: MonoConc Pro (Barlow, 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammatical category</th>
<th>Search terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adverbial expressions</td>
<td>actually; apparently; certainly; definitely; evidently; for sure; kind of; maybe; no doubt; obviously; perhaps; possibly; predictably; probably; roughly; sort of; surely; undoubtedly; without @ doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjectival expressions</td>
<td>doubtful; impossible; improbable; likely; possible; probable; unlikely; I am @ certain; I am @ confident; I am @ convinced; I am @ sure; I'm @ certain; I'm @ confident; I'm @ convinced; I'm@ sure; I cannot @ sure; I can’t @ sure; I cannot @ certain; I can’t @ certain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal expressions</td>
<td>appear; appears; seem; seems; I @ assume; I @ believe; I @ bet; I @ doubt; I @ gather; I @ guess; I @ mean; I @ know; I @ presume; I @ reckon; I @ suppose; I @ suspect; I @ think</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Trinity Lancaster Corpus
- currently 4.1M words
- to be released in 2018

✓ **GESE** by Trinity College London

✓ **1,900** L2 users

✓ **Age range**: 8 to 72

✓ **Three** main proficiency levels (B1, B2, C1/C2)

✓ **Two-four** different speaking tasks

✓ **Twelve** different L1 and cultural backgrounds
## TLC: Advanced sub-corpus

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L2 speakers</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tokens (whole subset)</td>
<td>521,199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2 speech: tokens</td>
<td>313,752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countries of origin</td>
<td>China, India, Italy, Mexico, Sri Lanka, Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency level</td>
<td>CEFR: C1 or C2; Trinity: Grades 10-12 (Pass+)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Speaking tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Topic familiarity</th>
<th>Interlocutor roles</th>
<th>Interactiveness</th>
<th>Formality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>pre-selected topic</td>
<td>candidate-led</td>
<td>monologic</td>
<td>(semi-)formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>pre-selected topic</td>
<td>jointly-led</td>
<td>dialogic</td>
<td>semi-formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive task</td>
<td>general topic</td>
<td>candidate-led</td>
<td>dialogic</td>
<td>semi-formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>general topic</td>
<td>jointly-led</td>
<td>dialogic</td>
<td>semi-formal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Examiners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>86,549</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>61,913</td>
<td>43,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive task</td>
<td>50,093</td>
<td>41,314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>90,382</td>
<td>56,720</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
L2 Speaker: Age: 49; Gender: female; Location: India; Grade: 10

C: erm my topic for presentation today is the social conditioning I will first of all speak a bit about definition of what social conditioning means and secondly I'm going to speak about the pros and the cons of social conditioning and what I believe erm are the risks and benefits

E: mm

C: and finally I will conclude with my opinion and observation of how we can tackle social conditioning and how <1.26> relate erm social conditioning is natural behaviour or phenomenon which has been handed down through centuries of tradition and erm certain progressive changes through generations er now social conditioning infor= er reflects in human behaviour it's said that a child up to the age of three er i-in that child right brain is dominant so the child has natural adjustment to the world around him or her but after the age of three the left brain er takes
E: okay well thank you very much that was interesting yes interesting I'm a bit surprised that you chose Roosevelt as an example of a planned economy <.> erm because I associate planned economies with er Russia and China in the period
C: yeah
E: nineteen forty nine to nineteen seventy five you know
C: yeah I I also think so however I think that what China's done with planned economy is not really good it is not good enough to be a positive example
E: mm
C: and Roosevelt he used planned economy he made a great success with planned economy
E: mm
C: and China is not as great but it's er unique and special as well
E: sure but er Roosevelt never nationalised any industries did he he didn't take over Ford and General Electric and er
RQ1: What is the effect of different tasks on the overall frequency of EMs?
**RQ1: Results**

Repeated measures ANOVA: main effect for task type \[F(2.8, 367.9)=114.122, p<.001, \text{partial}\ \eta^2=.466\].

**Difference between tasks?**

**YES** (p<.001)
RQ1: Results

Post-hoc Bonferroni:
• difference between presentation and every other task (all p<.001)
• between the interactive task and the discussion (p<.05).

RQ1: Possible explanations
C: er <.> another <.> another argument <.> against er this kind of food is the there are different points of view depending on the countries for example United States is very for GM and <.> is no is <unclear=for long time> to <.> the consumers if the food have <.> er have made with GM er products or not but in Europe er there is a lot er because European people are more concerned about this kind of <.> of arguments and if they have more than one per cent of of content in GM products they have to <.> warn <.> they have to have <.> er another concern is that with this kind of crops <.> er we are <unclear=not seeing> biodiversity <.> er so that means er less <.> erm <.> less variety in the world <.> less capacity to to find new things so but in conclusion <.> er I am for genetic modified foods because I think they are an answer to some problems that our society have
E: but do people really think about the next generation or do they tend to think about just their own generation? cos I think certainly in the UK no one worries about what's going to happen to their grandchildren their great grandchildren they want to know what's happening now to themselves
C: no I think that people er who have children they care about them
E: mm
C: and they wo-worry about the situation because of their children
E: uhu
C: I think I think so
E: right yes yeah I think in the UK [...]

Conversation: highly interactive
RQ2: What is the effect of different tasks on the frequency of un/certainty EMs?

Certainty
• certainly, definitely, for sure, no doubt, obviously, surely

Uncertainty
• maybe, perhaps, possibly, probably
RQ2: Results

**UNCERTAINTY**
Overall effect: $p<.000$
Post-hoc – each task differed from each other

**CERTAINTY:**
Overall effect: $p<.01$,
Post-hoc: DISC from PRES & INT

![Bar chart showing the proportion of all AEMs in percent for different tasks: PRES, DISC, INT, CONV. The bars are color-coded with black for Certainty and gray for Tentativeness.]
RQ2: Possible explanations

Uncertainty/certainty AEMs related to **politeness strategy** - candidates in the position of less power than examiners

**Typical case of uncertainty: ‘Hedged opinion’ (Precht, 2003)**

E: yeah but I know people bought the new Ipad and they had a lot of teething problems with it

C: yeah but **I think maybe you should actually** buy a laptop and just a basic phone basic things
RQ3: What is the effect of different tasks on the type of certainty expressed by speakers?
Zooming in on two interactive tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Discussion</th>
<th>Interactive task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of interaction</strong></td>
<td>Dialogic</td>
<td>Dialogic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formality</strong></td>
<td>Semi-formal</td>
<td>Semi-formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic knowledge: candidates</strong></td>
<td>Expert</td>
<td>Information-seeker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic knowledge: examiners</strong></td>
<td>Some knowledge</td>
<td>Primary knower</td>
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Coding categories: adverbial expressions of certainty

Grounded analysis & previous literature (e.g. Kärkkäinen, 2006; Simon-Vandenbergen and Aijmer, 2007; Mortensen, 2012)

1. Subjective use
2. Intersubjective use
3. Other
1. **Subjective use:** AEMs indicate primarily the speaker’s positioning towards the statement in terms of (un)certainty

**EXAMPLE: TEACHING REFORM (Expertise)**

E: [...] and I guess I want to ask you a very simple question
C: yes
E: how effective has it been changing the paradigm?
C: well the situation is that there are a lot of aspects there are a lot of things that we should consider because obviously we may find a lot of resistance to change
E: mm
C: we may see well not only in the students but as professors as teachers <unclear> definitely there's a great side that we might be very afraid of of changing our methods and and beliefs because [...]
2. **Intersubjective use:** AEMs explicitly used to negotiate the speaker’s position with respect to the other interlocutor; to react to the other speaker

**EXAMPLE: Traditional family**

E: yeah okay but how far would you say? cos it it strikes me that the changing nature of the labour market you know with more women working everybody working longer hours [...] is directly impacting on the role of the family

C: yeah

E: the traditional role

C: it *certainly* is you know I I come from a family in which my er it's a single parent my father [...]
3. Other
Unclear, repetitions, rephrasing, contradictory AEMs used, abandoned utterances

EXAMPLE: SPORTS BRANDS
C: I'm trying to tell you that Adidas has played a m-major role in our history erm
E: right
C: that's and er you erm and f= of course you I'm su=
E: okay
C: I'm sure that you have seen it in Olympics of <unclear> British
RQ3: Types of certainty in two tasks

What we learned: summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EFFECT OF DIFFERENT TASKS ON....</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ1:</strong> Frequency of EMs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes:</strong> degree of interactiveness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ2:</strong> Frequency of different types of EMs</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Yes:</strong> certainty/uncertainty &amp; politeness</td>
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<td><strong>RQ3:</strong> Type of certainty expressed</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes:</strong> speaker role (expert/knowledge-seeker)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## What we learned: summary

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>EFFECT OF DIFFERENT TASKS ON</th>
<th>TYPE OF EVIDENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ1: Frequency of EMs</strong></td>
<td>Word forms based on previous pragmatic research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes: degree of interactivity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ2: Frequency of different types of EMs</strong></td>
<td>Word forms using semantic/pragmatic information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes: certainty/uncertainty &amp; politeness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ3: Type of certainty expressed</strong></td>
<td>Word forms &amp; their use in context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes: speaker role (expert/knowledge-seeker)</td>
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</table>
What we learned: Implications for second language pragmatic ability

1. Stance-taking patterns were affected by the context/task in which the candidates/L2 speakers produced language

2. L2 speakers showed sensitivity to the contextual requirement & ability to adjust their production

3. Implications for language testing and the construct definition: There is no one ‘L2 speech’? Basis for constructing tests of spoken language ability – taking pragmatic competence into account
What we learned: where to look next

1. The effect of further **speaker variables** (age and proficiency) – clear trends emerging

2. Looking at **interaction of grammatical and pragmatic knowledge** (whether the available lexical and grammatical resources used to communicate pragmatic meaning)

3. The effect of **linguistic and cultural** background
Thank you!

REFERENCES


