Book Review


This book is the first comprehensive research guide on corpus pragmatics. It utilizes the corpus linguistic approaches to address core issues in pragmatics. Focus studies from current corpus linguistic research and practical applications of using corpora are included. A companion website with the original data for the practical assignments makes this book a user-friendly manual for both seasoned researchers in pragmatics and undergraduate and graduate students interested in corpus pragmatics research. The book has eight chapters. The first and last chapters introduce and summarize the volume. The other chapters (Chapters 2–7) discuss critical areas of corpus pragmatics research; each of these chapters starts with an introduction of the critical area, followed by one or two focus studies in corpus linguistics, and ends with a guided exercise and additional application activities. A review of each chapter in this book is included below.

Chapter 1 introduces the two parent fields of corpus pragmatics, corpus linguistics and pragmatics, and the new interdisciplinary field, corpus pragmatics. One parent field, corpus linguistics, involves quantitative research with frequencies and statistics. Although annotations are often time-consuming to complete, annotated corpora are more convenient than raw text corpora for researchers to search for more abstract linguistic patterns. The other parent field, pragmatics, concerns the use of language in communicative contexts. The key to pragmatic analysis is the interpretation of different contextual variables. Both verbal and nonverbal clues are used in pragmatic research, which is traditionally qualitative and is done through careful reading of a small sample of texts in contexts. Corpus pragmatics consists of both the quantitative nature of corpus linguistics and the qualitative nature of pragmatic analysis. In this introductory chapter, the author includes a comprehensive overview of the three fields; however, when introducing annotated corpora, it would have
been better if the author had noted the challenges associated with pragmatic annotations, such as the challenges of segmenting the text and ensuring the accuracy of the labels used in annotations (Archer, Aijmer, & Wichmann, 2012).

Chapter 2 examines the study of speech acts using corpus approaches. Indirect speech acts are ones that speakers use to communicate more than what they say verbally. Accurately interpreting indirect speech acts depends on the mutually shared background between the speakers and the hearers. Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory explains the speakers’ motivation to use indirect speech acts. The chapter’s focused study demonstrates how to conduct corpus research on the speech act expression “why don’t you” in the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English (CANCODE).

Two types of speech acts are identified through analyzing the concordance examples: a request for information (e.g., why don’t you address the envelope?) and a suggestion for action (e.g., why don’t you come with us?). A study on the collocates reveals the differences between these two speech acts. For example, when “why don’t you” functions as a suggestion, a reporting verb (e.g., said) often introduces it as part of direct speech not to threaten the addressee’s negative face. The author’s thorough discussion of the classic works on speech acts is helpful for those who need a refreshing review; his detailed interpretation of the speaker’s preference of using indirect requests based on the politeness theory provides a model for readers who seek the same type of theory-based interpretations for their own speech act corpus data. Readers also had an opportunity to apply the knowledge they learned in this chapter to a guided task that compares the use of the “why not + V” pattern in a corpus with the “why don’t you” pattern analyzed in the focus study.

Chapter 3 discusses the concept of deixis and the corresponding corpus pragmatic studies. Deixis is situational coordinates that speakers use, verbally and nonverbally, to communicate information regarding the context. Social deictics can change depending on the formality of the situation, e.g., “eat with someone at McDonald’s” vs. “dine with the monarch” (Rühlemann, 2019, p. 66). The focused study included in this chapter presents the case of the diachronic change in the usage of the modal verb “must.” Results from this study showed that across 80 years (1923–2006) of the data from the TIME magazine, the deontic usage of “must” to express obligations decreased while the epistemic use of “must” to convey limited knowledge increased (Rühlemann, 2019, p. 68). As “deontic ‘must’ is a social deictic [which] encodes a social power relationship,” Rühlemann (2019) attributes the decline of its frequency to people’s changing perceptions of acceptable social power relations (p. 68). The authentic dialogue examples presented in this chapter and the author’s detailed interpretations greatly facilitate readers’ understanding of deixis as
a context-dependent pragmatic concept. It would have been better, however, if the author had included a clear list and definitions of the different categories of deixis in this chapter, e.g., person deixis, social deixis, place (spatial) deixis, emphatic deixis, time (temporal) deixis, and discourse deixis (Archer et al., 2012).

Chapter 4 discusses pragmatic markers and the associated corpus research in this area. Rühleman (2019) explains that pragmatic markers are short navigation words that help people with effective communication. Corpus research on pragmatic markers has been extensive because pragmatic markers are “both high-frequent in and characteristic of spontaneous conversation” (Rühleman, 2019, p. 83). Research shows that the most frequent pragmatic markers include single words such as “okay,” “well,” “right,” “actually,” “like,” “so,” and “cos” and multi-word expressions such as “I (would) like,” “you see,” “I don’t know,” “and stuff,” “or something,” and “and things like that” (Rühleman, 2019, p. 83). The focused study of this chapter is on the acoustic properties of “well,” which are affected by the different functions of the word. When “well” serves as a pragmatic marker to indicate dispreferenc, restarting and quoting, it is “toneless, reduced, and short,” different from the acoustic properties of this word when it fulfills a non-pragmatic syntactic function (e.g., as an adverb or an adjective) (Rühleman, 2019, p. 98). The author’s presentation of this chapter’s content reflects the nature of corpus pragmatics research by incorporating both the corpus frequency data and qualitative functional analyses of featured pragmatic markers. Readers should also appreciate the author’s inclusion of multifunctional pragmatic markers, “well” and “BE like,” in the focus study and application tasks, as they are ubiquitous in both corpus research and daily conversation encounters.

Chapter 5 presents the concept of evaluation of corpus linguistics. Evaluation is “the expression, overt or covert, implicit or explicit, verbal or nonverbal, of the speaker’s stance” (Rühleman, 2019, p. 110). Thus, evaluation expressions are also referred to as stance markers (Bibler et al., 1999). Stance markers are frequently used in storytelling as a way of persuasion. The author includes a focused study on evaluative prosody (also called semantic prosody or discourse prosody) in this chapter. Evaluative prosody in collocation means that the keyword and its collocate share the same positive or negative evaluative polarity (Partington, 2015). For example, the concordance examples from the British National Corpus (BNC) showed that the phrasal verb “set in” is followed by unpleasant things or events, such as “war years,” “skiddy weather,” “panic,” “shock” and “depression” (Rühleman, 2019, p. 121). Researching evaluative prosody is difficult as it is “often hidden to the naked eye” (Rühleman, 2019, p. 124). The author sets another good example when presenting the content
of this chapter following the corpus pragmatics research approach. The frequency data on collocates of the targeted phrasal verbs, combined with the qualitative analyses of the meanings of these collocates, aid a comprehensive understanding of the concept of evaluative prosody and how it works in authentic language contexts.

Chapter 6 analyzes turn-taking features in social interaction via corpus and conversational analysis. Turning-taking is a universal behavior in conversation. Rühlemann (2019) estimates that a typical speaker of the English language takes about 1,200 turns and speaks about 13,000 words per day. The focused study included in this chapter is on the adjacency relationship in the corpus. The term “adjacency pair” is used by conversational analysts to “refer to coupled turns where the first part of the pair predicts what will [happen] in the next part.” Typical adjacency pairs are “greeting-greeting, offers/invitation-acceptance/rejection, and question-answer” (Archer et al., 2012, p. 67). In conversational structure, speakers have preferences regarding the type of response included in the second pair of an adjacency pair. For example, the preferred reaction to request is granting, and dispreferred response is denying (Archer et al., 2012). Rühlemann (2019) studied the conversational structures in storytelling and discovered that storytellings “are preference-organized” with “the preferred response [as the] one that mirrors the teller’s stance towards the events” and such “stance convergence” is realized via “backchannels” (p. 153). Again, the detailed discussions and corpus examples in this chapter facilitate readers’ understanding of conversational structure in the English language.

Chapter 7 explores the area of multimodality in corpus research. Rühlemann (2019) states that a multimodal corpus is a “system in which the verbal, the vocal, and the kinetic modalities are integrated into a unified whole” (p. 176). Although multimodal corpus linguistics is a relatively new area of study, it is an important area in linguistics as “human (linguistic) communication is basically multimodal” (Allwood, 2008, p. 223). The focused study of this chapter investigates multimodality in storytelling. Gaze is a “key resource for next-speaker selection” in storytelling (Rühlemann, 2019, p. 180). For example, a speaker turned away his gaze from the interlocutor to keep the floor and fixed his gaze on the interlocutor to elicit help when searching for a word (Allwood, 2008). “Alternating gaze” and “a heightened use of vocal and bodily resources” are shown to be critical resources that storytellers use to guide the audience to the climax of the stories (Rühlemann, 2019, p. 188). This chapter addresses an important yet less researched area in corpus pragmatics by bringing the analyses of different language modalities together on specific pragmatic features.
Chapter 8 concludes the whole book. It reiterates the book’s primary goals of introducing readers to the key areas and sample works of corpus pragmatics research and offering application tasks for readers to conduct their corpus-pragmatic research projects. The author also emphasized that the five core areas introduced in this book (i.e., speech acts, deixis, pragmatic markers, evaluation, conversational structure, and multimodality) are deeply interconnected. Future research directions are also provided in this concluding chapter. For example, “the annotation of speech acts in a multimodal corpus” is a promising direction because many speech functions can be performed nonverbally and verbally (Rühlemann, 2019, p. 199). Despite the challenges of doing corpus pragmatic research in multimodality, the author still views this area as a significant gap to fill in future research. This research helps us understand the multimodal nature of conversational interactions.

This volume is a good resource and practice book for researchers and students interested in conducting corpus research on pragmatics. Those looking to explore a new interdisciplinary research area should benefit from learning the author’s introductions to the corpus approaches on the core issues in pragmatics, examining the focus tasks, and practicing the application tasks.

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References