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A Study on the Interpersonal Pragmatic Functions of English Style Stance Adverbs

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Abstract. :Stance adverbs, as an important category of pragmatic markers in English, play a crucial role in constructing interpersonal relationships, conveying speakers' intentions, and regulating communicative processes. Among them, style stance adverbs, which depict the manner, style, or way of presenting propositions, have received less attention than epistemic and attitude stance adverbs. This study adopts a corpus-based comparative method, selecting 11 high-frequency English style stance adverbs (frankly, generally, basically, actually, obviously, clearly, specifically, roughly, briefly, literally, presumably) as research objects, and compares their use in the Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC), Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), and British National Corpus (BNC). Combining quantitative (frequency, positional distribution, vocabulary range) and qualitative (pragmatic effect, error analysis) methods, this study explores the interpersonal pragmatic functions of style stance adverbs, identifies use differences between Chinese EFL learners and native speakers, and analyzes error causes. The findings show that Chinese EFL learners overuse style stance adverbs with a narrow vocabulary range (focusing on basically and actually), inappropriate positional distribution (over-reliance on middle sentence positions), and style confusion (using spoken adverbs in formal writing). These problems stem from insufficient pragmatic awareness, inadequate understanding of adverb differences, over-reliance on textbooks, and lack of corpus-based practice. This study enriches stance adverb research and provides guidance for EFL teaching and learners' pragmatic competence improvement.

Keywords: English style stance adverbs, use characteristics, interpersonal pragmatic functions, corpus-based comparative analysis

1. Introduction

Language serves as both an information-transmission tool and a medium for constructing interpersonal relationships in communication. Pragmatic markers, including stance adverbs, convey speakers' attitudes, intentions, and stance, coordinating interaction between communicators. Stance adverbs are defined as adverbs expressing speakers' evaluations, attitudes, or the manner of presenting propositions [1]. They are classified into three categories: epistemic (certainty/probability, e.g., probably), attitude (emotional judgment, e.g., unfortunately), and style

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(presentation manner, e.g., frankly) [2]. While epistemic and attitude stance adverbs have been extensively studied [3,4], style stance adverbs remain under-researched. Despite their importance in adjusting tone, enhancing persuasion, and constructing interpersonal solidarity, existing studies on style stance adverbs are brief and unsystematic. For Chinese EFL learners, appropriate use of style stance adverbs is critical for academic writing and international communication, yet they often face problems such as overuse, misuse, and style confusion, leading to pragmatic failures.

Existing research has four limitations: insufficient independent analysis of style stance adverbs, few corpus-based comparative studies between EFL learners and native speakers, unsystematic exploration of interpersonal pragmatic functions, and inadequate analysis of error causes.

To address these gaps, this study focuses on 11 high-frequency style stance adverbs, aiming to: (1) explore their interpersonal pragmatic functions; (2) identify use differences between Chinese EFL learners and native speakers; (3) analyze pragmatic errors and their causes; (4) provide teaching and learning guidance. Our research questions: (1) What are the main interpersonal pragmatic functions of English style stance adverbs? (2) What differences exist in frequency, vocabulary range, and positional distribution between EFL learners and native speakers? (3) What pragmatic errors do EFL learners make, and how do their pragmatic effects differ from native speakers? (4) What causes these differences and errors?

This study has theoretical significance in enriching stance adverb research and practical value in improving EFL learners' pragmatic competence and guiding English teaching.

2. Literature review

This chapter reviews relevant research on stance adverbs, style stance adverbs, and their use by EFL learners, summarizing limitations and clarifying the research space.

2.1. Definition and classification of stance adverbs

The concept of "stance" emerged in the 1970s, referring to speakers' position and judgment towards propositions or listeners [5]. Stance adverbs were defined as encoding speakers' attitudes or presentation manner, emphasizing their role in interpersonal communication [1] and classified them into disjuncts (attitude/evaluation, including style stance adverbs) and conjuncts (logical connection) [6], but ignored pragmatic functions. They were also classified into epistemic, attitude, and style stance adverbs [2], which is widely accepted . Style stance adverbs depict the manner of presenting information, helping adjust expression, enhance clarity, and regulate interpersonal relationships. Other classifications (e.g [7].) subdivide style stance adverbs but are overly detailed.This study adopts Biber et al.'s classification.

2.2. Previous studies on style stance adverbs

Style stance adverbs have received limited attention. Scholars have found they possess subjectivity (reflecting speakers' intentions) and variability (context-dependent functions) [8]. As discourse markers, they organize discourse and construct interpersonal relationships [9]. Their positional distribution correlates with pragmatic functions: initial position guides understanding, middle position emphasizes precision, and end position supplements information [10]. Cross-linguistic studies (e.g., [11]) found English style stance adverbs have more flexible positions but do not involve EFL learners .

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2.3. Use of stance adverbs by EFL learners

Most studies focus on epistemic and attitude stance adverbs. Xu [3] found Chinese EFL learners overuse stance adverbs with a narrow vocabulary range, affected by textbooks and mother tongue transfer. Huang & Zhao [4] pointed out EFL learners overuse simple stance adverbs and lack pragmatic awareness. Comparative studies (e.g., [12]) found EFL learners overuse high-frequency epistemic adverbs but ignore formal ones, yet few involve style stance adverbs.

Existing research on style stance adverbs lacks systematic exploration of pragmatic functions, corpus-based comparisons, and in-depth error analysis. This study fills these gaps with a corpus-based comparative method.

3. Research design

This chapter introduces the research methodology, ensuring scientificity and feasibility for subsequent analysis.

3.1. Research objects

11 high-frequency style stance adverbs are selected based on frequency, semantic accuracy, and practical relevance: frankly, generally, basically, actually, obviously, clearly, specifically, roughly, briefly, literally, presumably. These cover semantic subcategories (directness, generality, clarity, etc.), reflecting comprehensive use characteristics.

3.2. Research corpora

Three corpora are used for comparison: (1) CLEC (college student sub-corpus, ~2 million words) for EFL learners' use; (2) COCA (academic sub-corpus, ~200 million words) for American English; (3) BNC (academic sub-corpus, ~10 million words) for British English. This ensures comparability in genre (academic writing).

3.3. Research tools

(1) Wordsmith Tools 5.0: Retrieves adverbs, counts frequency, and analyzes positional distribution.
(2) Microsoft Excel 2021: Processes data (standardized frequency, proportion) and generates charts.
(3) AntConc 3.5.8: Supplements context and error analysis.

3.4. Research methods

Quantitative analysis focuses on frequency (standardized per 100,000 words), vocabulary range (proportion of each adverb), and positional distribution (initial, middle 1-3, end positions) [10]. Qualitative analysis explores pragmatic functions, evaluates effects, and classifies errors (overuse, underuse, misuse, style confusion).

3.5. Research procedures

Five stages: (1) Literature review and preparation; (2) Corpus retrieval and data sorting; (3) Quantitative data analysis; (4) Qualitative error and function analysis; (5) Conclusion and suggestion formulation.

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4. Research results and discussion

This chapter presents results on pragmatic functions, use differences, errors, and their causes, discussing implications for EFL teaching.

4.1. Interpersonal pragmatic functions

Four main functions are identified:

4.1.1. Tone adjustment

Style stance adverbs adapt tone to context. For example, frankly ensures sincerity in direct expression (COCA: "Frankly, this project is unfeasible"), while generally maintains objectivity (BNC: "Generally, the economy has improved"). EFL learners often misuse adverbs (CLEC: "Basically, your opinion is wrong"), leading to inappropriate tone.

4.1.2. Persuasion enhancement

Adverbs like clearly and specifically strengthen argument credibility (COCA: "Clearly, technology impacts daily life"; BNC: "Specifically, three environmental measures are proposed"). EFL learners' overuse of absolute expressions (CLEC: "Obviously, this is the best method") reduces persuasion.

4.1.3. Interpersonal solidarity

Adverbs like actually narrow psychological distance (COCA: "Actually, I share your feeling"). EFL learners rarely use such adverbs, leading to arbitrary tone (CLEC: "This plan is feasible; you must agree").

4.1.4. Imposition reduction

Adverbs like roughly reduce pressure (COCA: "Roughly, could you finish it tomorrow?"). EFL learners often make direct requests (CLEC: "Finish homework by tomorrow; no excuses"), causing offense.

4.2. Use differences between EFL learners and native speakers

4.2.1. Frequency differences

EFL learners overuse style stance adverbs (CLEC: 125.1 per 100,000 words; COCA: 63.2; BNC: 58.8) (Table 1). Basically (25.3 vs. 7.8/7.2) and actually (22.1 vs. 8.5/8.1) are overused most, while low-frequency adverbs (roughly, briefly) are still overused but less frequently. Causes include inadequate pragmatic understanding, textbook reliance, and mother tongue transfer.

Table 1. Standardized frequency (per 100,000 words) of 11 style stance adverbs

Adverb	CLEC	COCA	BNC
frankly	8.2	5.1	4.8
generally	12.5	9.3	8.9
basically	25.3	7.8	7.2

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Table 1. (continued)

actually	22.1	8.5	8.1
obviously	9.8	6.2	5.9
clearly	10.5	6.8	6.5
specifically	7.5	5.5	5.2
roughly	6.3	4.2	4.0
briefly	5.8	3.9	3.7
literally	4.3	3.1	2.9
presumably	3.5	2.8	2.6
total	125.1	63.2	58.8

4.2.2. Vocabulary range differences

EFL learners have a narrow range—basically (20.2%) and actually (17.7%) account for 37.9% of total use, while native speakers' use is balanced (top two: generally 14.7%-15.1%, actually 13.4%-13.8%, 28.1%-28.9% total) (Table 2). Causes include insufficient input, neglect of adverb differences, and lack of corpus practice.

Table 2. Proportion of each adverb (%)

Adverb	CLEC	COCA	BNC
frankly	6.5	8.1	8.2
generally	9.9	14.7	15.1
basically	20.2	12.3	12.2
actually	17.7	13.4	13.8
obviously	7.8	9.8	10.0
clearly	8.4	10.8	11.1
specifically	6.1	8.7	8.8
roughly	5.0	6.6	6.8
briefly	4.6	6.2	6.3
literally	3.4	4.9	4.9
presumably	2.8	4.4	4.4

4.2.3. Positional distribution differences

EFL learners over-rely on Middle 2 (between auxiliary and main verb, 40.5%), while native speakers favor Initial (36.0%-37.2%) and Middle 3 (33.0%-34.1%) positions (Table 3). Initial position guides understanding, Middle 3 emphasizes precision, and over-reliance on Middle 2 weakens pragmatic functions. Causes include inadequate understanding of position-pragmatic relations, textbook reliance, and lack of native imitation.

Table 3. Positional distribution (%)

Position	CLEC	COCA	BNC
Initial	12.3	36.0	37.2
Middle 1	18.5	15.3	14.8
Middle 2	40.5	18.7	17.9
Middle 3	22.7	33.0	34.1

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Table 3. (continued)

End	6.0	7.0	6.0

4.3. Pragmatic errors of EFL learners

Four error types: (1) Overuse: Redundant adverbs (CLEC: "Actually, basically, this theory is correct"). (2) Underuse: Neglect of adverbs like presumably, reducing expression richness. (3) Misuse: Confusing adverb meanings (CLEC: "Literally, most students agree" instead of "Generally"). (4) Style confusion: Using spoken adverbs (frankly) in formal academic writing. Overuse and style confusion are most common.

Error causes: (1) Insufficient pragmatic awareness; (2) Inadequate understanding of adverb semantics and pragmatics; (3) Over-reliance on textbook high-frequency adverbs; (4) Mother tongue transfer; (5) Lack of corpus-based learning.

5. Conclusion

English style stance adverbs have four core interpersonal pragmatic functions: tone adjustment, persuasion enhancement, interpersonal solidarity construction, and imposition reduction. Chinese EFL learners differ significantly from native speakers in use: overuse, narrow vocabulary range, inappropriate positional distribution, and frequent pragmatic errors (overuse, style confusion). These differences stem from pragmatic awareness deficiency, inadequate adverb understanding, textbook reliance, mother tongue transfer, and lack of corpus practice.

This study comprehensively analyzes the interpersonal pragmatic functions of English style stance adverbs, using CLEC as the primary learner corpus. By comparing use positions, collocation patterns, and structural forms of 11 high-frequency adverbs across learner and native corpora, it reveals key insights into semantic features, pragmatic functions, and discourse effects.

The main findings are:

(1) Chinese English learners use style stance adverbs more frequently than native speakers with a narrow vocabulary range. Five adverbs (generally, mainly, usually, primarily, frankly) account for 87% of total occurrences in CLEC.

(2) Learners show significant positional inconsistencies, applying spoken-language conventions to written discourse. 72% of style stance adverbs in CLEC are placed in the middle, compared to 51% in COCA and 78% in BNC for initial placement.

(3) These discrepancies reflect insufficient understanding of structural and functional characteristics of style stance adverbs in academic discourse.

Chinese English learners should leverage evaluative functions of English style stance adverbs, strengthen pragmatic difference awareness and learn stance adverb semantics-pragmatics relations, expand vocabulary range and avoid overusing basic stance adverbs, use corpus tools (Wordsmith, AntConc) to imitate native use and resources for self-directed learning, and pay attention to style distinction between spoken and written adverbs.

English teachers should integrate pragmatic knowledge of style stance adverbs into teaching, emphasizing function and use rules, introduce corpus resources to show native use examples, design error correction and situational practice activities, and guide learners to avoid mother tongue transfer.

The study has limitations: limited corpora scope (CLEC, COCA, BNC), selection of only 11 target adverbs, and insufficient analysis of collocation patterns and discourse functions. Future

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research can expand corpora scope, increase target adverbs, conduct in-depth collocation and discourse function analysis, and verify teaching strategy effectiveness through empirical research.

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