

## Pragmatic expressions in cross-linguistic perspective

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on some pragmatic expressions that are characteristic of informal spoken English, their possible equivalents in some other languages, and their use by EFL learners from different backgrounds. These expressions, called general extenders (e.g. *and stuff, or something*), are shown to be different from discourse markers and to exhibit variation in form, function and distribution across varieties of English, as well as in other languages. In EFL contexts, students are reported to use fewer pragmatic expressions and a smaller range of possible forms. They also tend to favor expressions more often associated with writing and formal speaking (e.g. *and so on*), include literal translation equivalents from their first language that are not used in English (e.g. *and, and, and*), or used only in restricted contexts (e.g. *or so*), and often seem not to realize that some forms may carry negative connotations (e.g. *and blah, blah, blah*). The possibility of fostering better pragmatic awareness among EFL students is discussed in terms of an explicit cross-linguistic focus on the forms and functions of pragmatic expressions.

**Keywords:** general extender (GE); vague language; pragmatic expression; EFL; pragmatic awareness.

### Introduction

In recent years we have seen a fundamental shift in interest among both language scholars and educators away from the purely formal study of linguistic structure, typically employing constructed sentences and/or written language models, with more attention now being devoted to the analysis of everyday language use in natural settings. Much of the new development in language study has been in the direction of discourse

analysis, with an explosion of work in corpus linguistics, allowing for the analysis of vast amounts of naturally occurring spoken data (as opposed to constructed sentences). In language education, there has been a large-scale transition into a variety of communicative approaches, with a much stronger emphasis on oral language skills, especially in spoken interaction. This shift has focused a lot more attention on features of the spoken language that were previously

ignored in both linguistic analysis and foreign language teaching materials. Among these features are some linguistic expressions that are primarily found in face-to-face conversational interaction. Because these expressions have no discernible semantic content and are usually optional elements in syntactic structure, they are associated, not with independent linguistic meaning, but with meaning in context and so they are generally described as pragmatic expressions.

In this paper, I will briefly describe the range of types of pragmatic expressions, including discourse markers (*Well*) and pragmatic markers (*you know*), then focus on one group of expressions called general extenders<sup>1</sup>. After looking at some English examples, such as *and stuff (like that)*, or *something (like that)*, and how they are used, I will review some studies of comparable forms in other languages and observations by other scholars on the subtle differences in their uses and the types of difficulties associated with comparing any pragmatic expressions cross-linguistically, or what we might characterize as the problem of determining pragmatic equivalence. Following that, I will review some studies from language learning, mainly involving English as a foreign language (EFL), and investigate ways in which we might be able to foster pragmatic awareness of both the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) as a prerequisite for developing pragmatic competence in that L2.

### **Pragmatic expressions**

The study of pragmatic expressions owes its development directly to the availability of recording devices that allowed researchers not only to capture everyday spoken interaction, but also to transcribe it and investigate it “on the page/screen” in ways

that were almost impossible while the data was whizzing by “in the air”. From early studies of the underlying structure of conversational interaction (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974), through investigations of social meaning and how it is signaled (Erman, 1987; Schiffrin, 1985; Schourup, 1985; Tannen, 1984), to the micro-analysis of forms of language previously unexplored (Channell, 1994; Overstreet, 2011), there has been a steady stream of new findings about the complex nature of spoken interaction and the linguistic expressions being used to hold it all together. Among those linguistic expressions are a number of forms that seemed to have no meaningful role in linguistic communication and were often viewed as “purely performance fillers” (Channell, 1994, p. 120), but which, on closer inspection, have been identified as integral elements in how spoken discourse is structured and made meaningful.

Some of the expressions that were treated as simply meaningless interjections are actually structuring devices within spoken interaction. Forms such as *Oh*, *Right*, *Now*, *So*, and *Well*, used at the beginning of a speaker’s turn, are now recognized as discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987, Schourup, 1999), each one signaling subtle aspects of how the speaker is marking the sequential connection between a previous turn and what is about to be said. Other pragmatic expressions have been identified that can function in initial, medial or final position, with different influences on the interpretation of speaker’s meaning. These are more generally known as pragmatic markers and include *you know*, *you see*, *I mean* and *I think*, which developed from subject plus lexical verb combinations into parenthetical adjuncts and finally into fixed phrases that are used idiomatically (Aijmer & Simon-Vandenbergen, 2011; Brinton,

1996). The range of different functions that these pragmatic markers can fulfill in the contemporary spoken language has only recently been revealed. As a brief illustration, consider these three different functions of *you know*, as detailed in Erman (2001). It can function as a text-organizing device, used when introducing a supporting example, as in (1), an interactive device, when making a comprehension check, as in (2), and a hedging device on the assumed accuracy of reported information, as in (3).

(1) they did it in a completely, slapstick farce way, **you know**, the the men who were dressed up supposed to be women

(2) A: you've got to use one of them cap things, not a swimming cap

B: Steam cap?

A: Yeah, well, **you know**, them white ones, have you seen the plastic ones yeah?

(3) She said you're, you're nice, you're pretty, **you know**, whatever

The historical development of these pragmatic expressions has revealed a regular pathway of change through a number of processes similar to grammaticalization whereby phrases containing lexical items such as the main verbs *know* and *think* lose their propositional content and become indicators of how speakers are presenting themselves and their attitude to the message and/or the addressee within face-to-face interaction. As many of these newly revealed functions are tied to issues of politeness, cooperation, social solidarity, attitudes, and evaluations, rather than marking grammatical functions, this process is now also discussed in terms of pragmaticalization (Overstreet & Yule, forthcoming). In addition to these types of markers, which are syntactically

disconnected from the utterances in which they appear, there is another group of pragmatic expressions that are typically attached to the end of phrases, clauses and utterances. Among these are general extenders such as *and stuff (like that)* and *or something (like that)*, which will be the main focus of the rest of this study.

### General extenders

General extenders have been the subject of a fairly large number of studies in different varieties of English, most of which are reviewed in Pallacios Martínez (2011)<sup>2</sup>. They can be divided into two types: adjunctive forms, beginning with *and*, as in (4), and disjunctive forms, beginning with *or*, as in (5), both examples from the Canadian English data of Tagliamonte and Denis (2010, p. 337).

(4) So it was- it was pretty general, you know, nice and quiet, never a lot of noise, **and stuff like that**

(5) it was in- when- oh I think it was like, grade seven **or something**

The disjunctive form *or something* is the most frequently used version across different varieties of English. It often functions as a hedge on the accuracy of what is being said, as illustrated in (5), and is quickly learned by EFL students, allowing them to mark some part of what they are saying as "possibly not exactly correct" in the same way as native speakers (NS) do it. In contrast, their use of adjunctive general extenders to express "there is more, but I don't need to say it" can vary much more, and often in ways that don't match typical NS usage. In the following discussion, I will focus more on the use of adjunctive general extenders and offer, in Table 1, a list of the four most frequent forms found in detailed

studies of Canadian English (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2010), British English (Pichler & Levey, 2011) and American English (Overstreet & Yule, 1997).

**Table 1: Most frequent adjunctive general extenders in three varieties of English**

Canada	UK	USA
and stuff	and that	and stuff
and stuff like that	and stuff	and everything
and everything	and everything	and blah blah blah
and things like that	and things	and all that stuff

In Table 1, the proliferation of the American English form *and stuff (like that)* is clear, supplanting *and things (like that)* in Toronto, according to Tagliamonte (2011, p. 258), and gradually becoming more frequent among younger middle class speakers of British English, according to Cheshire (2007, p. 187), who also notes that the British form *and that* is associated more with working class speech, especially among male speakers. The expression *and everything* (without the modifier *like that*) has increased in frequency in all varieties, possibly due to a new use as an intensifier (Overstreet & Yule, 2002). The form *and blah, blah, blah* is used in American English to indicate that more could be said, but it has a downgrading function, implying that the “more” is of little value (Overstreet, 1999, p. 146). This form is not included in the lengthy lists of forms in the reports describing Canadian and British English.

Because general extenders are placed after the items they modify, they are often found at the end of clauses and hence of utterances in English. This tendency is sometimes overstated, as in definitions that describe them as “sentence-final” (Tagliamonte, 2011, p. 258). While general extenders are frequently attached to objects, that does not necessarily place them at the end of utterances, or even clauses, as shown in the use of *and everything* in (6), nor does it rule out the possibility of attaching to the subject, as *or something* does in the same example, from Aijmer (2002, p. 245).

(6) I got my coat **and everything** caught under me and a young postman **or something** got up and I thought ooh this is grand

When we look at other languages, we see general extenders in quite a wide range of clause-internal positions. As described in Overstreet (2005, p. 1849), there are several structures in German that require a main verb or the past participle of a verb to be at the end of the clause, hence regularly positioning the general extender inside the clause, as in (7).

(7) Ich hab’ nun jetzt erstmal meine ganzen Pflanzen da in die Erde gebracht und – und – sehr viel Tulpen und Krokusse **und so was** gesteckt

[I’ve just got all my plants there in the ground and – and – lots of tulips and crocuses and so on put in]

In Persian, with its basic SOV structure, general extenders can readily attach to a subject (8) or an object (9) in clause-internal positions, as in these examples from Parvaresh, Tavangar, Eslami Rasekh and Izadi (2012, pp. 270-276).

(8) gæzâ væ inâ âli bud!

(the food and stuff was great!)

(9) je mântoji, jâ ċizi mixâm bærdâræm

(I want to an overcoat or something buy)

In connection with the syntactic position of general extenders, Parvaresh et al. (2012) point out that none of their advanced EFL students tried to use the Persian structure in (9) in their English. Though they did transfer some general extender types, to be discussed later, they didn't transfer Persian syntax. This would seem to support the observation (cf. Bouton, 1994) that structures involving pragmatic expressions may be harder to acquire than grammatical structures in an L2.

### Pragmatic expressions in EFL studies

When we employ a cross-linguistic perspective to investigate pragmatic expressions in the use of a foreign language, we find a number of different explanations offered for the patterns perceived. The most general finding from this area of research is that non-native speakers (NNS), even those at an advanced level, typically use a more limited number, as well as a more limited range of pragmatic expressions than native speakers (NS). While I will focus mainly on studies in EFL situations in this discussion, similar findings have been reported from investigations where other languages are the target. For example, in Dippold's (2008) study of the use of hedges in argumentative discourse by advanced level British students speaking German, the NNS used relatively few hedges in comparison with the frequent use by a comparable NS group. If NNS groups are not using the types of pragmatic expressions normally found in NS performance, is there a simple way to demonstrate their uses, and might there be a way to help build awareness of these forms and their functions within EFL studies?

The first and most obvious explanation for the absence of L2 pragmatic expressions is that the NNS don't need them in most situations where they use English. Often this follows from the nature of the discourse and/or the participants and may be indicative of the way in which new varieties of English evolve, as when it is used as a lingua franca in interactions between NNS. When speakers of two different languages use English as their medium of communication, there seems to be a very general absence of the types of pragmatic expressions typically found when native speakers interact. As Murray (2012) has noted with regard to spoken exchanges involving English as a lingua franca, "discourse markers and particles appear to be relatively scarce" (2012, p. 321). It may be that such encounters are treated as more "transactional" by the participants, that is, more concerned with communicating referential meaning, "factual or propositional information" (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 2), and that expressions more associated with social meaning in "interactive" encounters are not included when personal relationships between speakers are not a primary issue. This type of situation may have more in common with written English discourse, which brings us to another explanation of the patterns observed in NNS use of pragmatic expressions.

In a study comparing the use of English general extenders in the speech of two groups of university students, one consisting of French L1, advanced level NNS and the other a NS group at a British university, De Cock (2004) found a highly systematic and quite revealing pattern of usage. As shown in Table 2, adapted from De Cock (2004, p. 237), there is a divergence in preferred forms of adjunctive general extenders, with

the NNS group mostly relying on the expressions *and so on, etcetera*, whereas the forms *and things (like that)*, *and everything*, *and stuff (like that)* were favored by the NS group. This split exactly parallels the difference in distribution Overstreet and Yule (1997) discovered between formal and informal spoken language use. Formal expressions such as *and so on* are more common in academic English, both spoken and written (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999; Simpson, 2004), which may have been the primary input source for these NNS students. One might speculate that it is the inclusion of such formal expressions in their interactive spoken language that accounts for the impression that some advanced EFL speakers “may sound rather bookish and pedantic” (Channell, 1994, p. 21).

**Table 2: Distribution of some adjunctive general extenders (adapted from De Cock, 2004)**

	NNS	NS
<i>and so on</i>	33	2
<i>etcetera</i>	24	2
<i>and things like that</i>	18	52
<i>and things</i>	1	52
<i>and everything</i>	3	45
<i>and stuff</i>	0	34
<i>and stuff like that</i>	0	17

Reviewing the results in Table 2, we might suspect that these NNS university students have learned some English expressions to serve the general extender function that will inevitably make their speech sound more formal than NS usage and contribute to “the impression of detachment and formality they may well give in informal situations” (De

Cock, 2004, p. 236). We should note that French has a wide range of general extenders, described in some detail by Dubois (1992) as “extension particles”, with different forms available for different functions, both formal and informal, but the students in De Cock’s (2004) study had obviously not carried their L1 pragmatic knowledge of general extenders over into their understanding of how English expressions are used with comparable functions. As a result, in De Cock’s report, “the findings suggest that the learners are lacking in routinized ways of interacting and building rapport with their interlocutors” (2004, p. 243).

A similar conclusion was reached by Otu and Zeyreck (2008) in their study of Turkish learners of English when they investigated how these NNS performed requests in English. They found that the students themselves had a sense of their unfamiliarity with NS norms for performing the speech acts appropriately. The researchers noted that “most of these students refer to this situation as knowing textbook English only, and being totally blind of the rest of the picture” (2008, p. 265).

Yet another explanation, and hardly a surprising one, is emerging from other recent studies that find pragmatic expressions in NNS English that seem to be derived from the L1. Eslami Rasekh and Noora (2008) noted that “even highly proficient learners often rely on their L1 strategies or conventions of form” (2008, p. 321) when they investigated request strategies by Persian learners of English. In another study of Persian learners and their use of general extenders, Parvaresh et al. (2012) came to the conclusion that “first language norms influence the use of general extenders by non-native speakers” (2012, p.

261). To take a specific case, both German (und, und, und) and Persian (væ, væ, væ) make use of a structure that is a possible combination in English (and, and, and), but one that is not typically found in everyday uses of English. Despite the fact that the expression is unlikely to be part of any NS input, it is found in the English speech of Persian NNS, as in (10), from Parvaresh et al. (2012, p. 266).

(10) I have to study, I mean, memorize things **and and and**

Other structures, such as *and this and that*, which are very occasionally recorded in English NS data (see Tagliamonte & Denis, 2010, p. 363), may be used more frequently by a NNS group when a parallel structure exists in the L1. Example (11) is from Persian NNS data and is described as an example of transfer from Persian (væ in, væ un).

(11) A: No! I really love to be there  
E: I love to be there **and this and that**

According to Parvaresh et al. (2012, p. 275), this particular form is not a signal that communicates the basic adjunctive general extender meaning of “there is more”, but has a particular interpersonal meaning and is used by speakers in response to a comment by another speaker. The comment is usually repeated before the general extender, which signals that the comment is being treated as “offensive” in some way. In this case, it is important to recognize that, although structurally identical forms may exist in two languages, they cannot be treated as translation equivalents because their functions are so different. The closest form in American English with a comparable function, though not an obvious lexical equivalent, might be (*or whatever*). In

Kleiner’s (1998) analysis, the general extender (*or whatever*) can be used to mark preceding material as “other-authored” and to express “the speaker’s disaffiliation with or opposition to that material” (1998, p. 602). Although this usage may have a function similar to that conveyed by the Persian expression in particular contexts, there will almost certainly be socio-cultural implications tied to negative commentary and its effect on the participation framework that are likely to differ cross-culturally. Realizing this, we should always be careful about assuming pragmatic equivalence cross-linguistically, even when we think we can identify a form (lexically or structurally similar or not) that seems to have a parallel function. As Koutlaki (2002) has pointed out, in a comparison of the pragmatics of some English and Persian speech acts, what seems face-threatening in the act of making an offer in one culture may actually be considered face-enhancing in another. However, if we can find forms with parallel functions, which are used with comparable frequency in similar situations, then we may be able to advise students about what are, and are not, good translation equivalents (though not necessarily perfect pragmatic equivalents).

There is a subtle trap waiting for EFL learners because of the existence of what appear to be cognate expressions, such as German *oder so* and English *or so*. They look like they would be direct translation equivalents. However, the German expression (*oder so*) was, by a wide margin, the most common disjunctive general extender in Terraschke’s (2007a) German NS data, while the English expression (*or so*) was used only once in her New Zealand English NS data. Given this substantial difference, we might suspect that the similarity in form disguises a difference in

function and, indeed, we find that the English form is highly restricted in its collocations, accompanying only numbers and time expressions. The German expression is not subject to such narrow restrictions and its wide range of functions seems to be readily transferred, as in NNS English examples such as (12), from Terraschke (2007a, p. 94), where the speaker is comparing two towns and uses the English expression in a way not found among English speakers.

(12) But well I'm, yeah, I believe that there's more to do **or so**

It is worth noting that, in this and many similar cases, there is no indication that any form of miscommunication took place and hence no feedback is provided to the student that an inappropriate pragmatic expression is being used.

### **Fostering pragmatic awareness**

A further explanation, and one that may provide the best reason from a processing point of view, is that the NNS have no idea that there are pragmatic expressions in language use. This doesn't mean, of course, that they don't use pragmatic expressions such as general extenders in their L1, but that they are completely unaware that they do so. As Overstreet (2000) reported from her research in the 1990s, NS of American English, including English language teachers and professors of linguistics, not only appeared to be unaware of the existence of general extenders in their L1, but even after being made aware of them, claimed that they personally didn't use such forms in their speech (despite empirical evidence to the contrary). One possible reason for this, as Dines (1980) noted among speakers of Australian English, is that some general extenders are viewed as "stigmatized" in

some way and hence likely to be considered inappropriate in the speech of educated individuals. While a negative stylistic perspective may indeed exist, it is perhaps comparable to opinions on split infinitives and ending sentences with prepositions in English (cf. Yule, 2010, p. 85), forms that may be condemned by prescriptivist commentators, but are in widespread use among all segments of the population. General extenders are similarly used in spoken interaction by virtually everyone and, while some individuals may be more frequent users of particular forms than others, familiarity with the forms and functions of general extenders is part of adult NS pragmatic competence.

We cannot assume that L2 pragmatic competence will develop by itself since it is socio-culturally acquired and unlikely to be part of any innate language acquisition device. It is only through studies at the metapragmatic level that we have become aware of the phenomenon (cf. Overstreet, 2010). Consequently, given the socio-cultural limitations inherent in many EFL learning contexts, there may be a need for a more proactive approach to developing L2 pragmatic awareness. Schmidt (1993) has argued that "noticing" has to take place in order for pragmatic information to be processed, at least in short term memory. Indeed, as a number of studies have shown, we can increase pragmatic awareness so that L2 learners have an opportunity to develop their own competence in the use of pragmatic expressions. Kasper and Schmidt (1996) and House (1996) provide examples and reviews of studies where pragmatic awareness was developed in different L2 contexts. In a similar vein, LoCastro (1997) described how L2 pragmatic fluency was improved in spoken English and Wishnoff (2000) presented strong evidence that



raising L2 students' awareness of hedges in English academic writing resulted in substantial improvement in their ability to use those hedges appropriately in their own L2 writing.

At a more fundamental level, especially in EFL contexts, as Eslami-Rasekh (2005) has argued, it may be more effective to begin by raising students' awareness of pragmatic expressions in their L1 and encouraging a comparison between L1 and L2 forms to develop familiarity with similarities and differences. The data provided by Parvaresh et al. (2012) offers an opportunity to see how one type of comparison might be presented. In Table 3, the most frequently used Persian L1 adjunctive general extenders are listed alongside the most frequent English L2 forms produced by Persian EFL students.

**Table 3: Most frequent general extenders used by Persian NS in their L1 and as NNS in their L2 English (adapted from Parvaresh et al., 2012, pp. 264-265)**

L1 forms	L2 forms
væ inâ (and stuff)	and blah blah blah
væ æz in hærf hâ (and of such talks)	and so on
væ in čiz hâ (and such things)	and everything
væ nemidunæm æz in hærf hâ (and I don't know of such talks)	and other things

The English L2 forms listed in Table 3 are clearly not the same as the English L1 forms

listed earlier in Table 1. These students seem to be using *and everything* with a similar frequency to the NS in Table 1, but they are using the more formal expression *and so on* with greater frequency, more like the other NNS in Table 2. The expression *and other things* is not an impossible form in English, but is extremely rare, so that it will inevitably sound like an interlanguage form, typical of neither the L1 nor the L2. These students could be advised to omit the word *other* in this expression to give it a more target-like form.

The most intriguing L2 form and the most frequent is *and blah, blah, blah*. In other recent studies of the use of general extenders by NNS (e.g. Fernandez & Yuldashev, 2011), this expression is not recorded at all. There are no examples reported in recent British English studies (e.g. Levey, 2012, Pichler & Levey, 2011). As noted earlier, this form is certainly used by NS of American English, but in a quite restricted way, with almost a pejorative meaning. It is not clear if any of the Persian L1 forms in Table 3 have similar negative implications, but two of the most frequent items have forms referring to "talks". They are not just signaling "there is more", as with most forms in Table 1. It is possible that the focus of high frequency Persian general extenders on "there is more talk (about something)" has an influence on which English general extender these students have chosen as the best pragmatic equivalent. To help students understand the effect of this choice, we might present the examples from Table 1 alongside the forms in Table 3 as a way of letting the students see for themselves that their solution to the pragmatic equivalence problem may be infelicitous on some occasions and has the potential for miscommunication if, when using *and blah, blah, blah*, the speaker doesn't actually want

to act as if all further information is being downgraded.

### Conclusion

I have suggested that it is possible to increase students' pragmatic awareness by drawing attention to how pragmatic expressions such as general extenders are used in both the L1 and L2. This approach would seem to be justified because of reports that learners often adopt inappropriate, or pragmatically non-equivalent forms, either because of misperception of the typical functions of L2 forms or because of influence from L1 forms.

In order for this approach to work, however, we need to pay more attention to the ways in which pragmatic expressions are used in both the L1 and L2 of particular groups of learners, so that we have reliable information on which to base our materials. There are many signs that this goal can be accomplished, as increasing numbers of studies, particularly corpus-based investigations, reveal patterns of language use in spoken interaction that were previously unnoticed. I have proposed that general extenders represent a distinct and easily identifiable group of pragmatic expressions that lend themselves to cross-linguistic comparison and potentially allow us to tease apart the subtle differences that make cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies not only challenging, but intellectually rewarding, and ultimately beneficial for the development of better understanding and greater tolerance among people.

### Notes

1 The label "general extender", from Overstreet and Yule (1997), has become the most widely used technical term for this

range of forms. Among other labels that may be encountered are "set-marking tags" (Dines, 1980), "utterance-final tags" (Aijmer, 1985), "list completers" (Jefferson, 1990), "vague category identifiers" (Chanel, 1994) and "coordination tags" (Biber et al., 1999).

2 There have also been studies of general extenders in languages other than English, such as Brazilian Portuguese (Roth-Gordon, 2007), French (Dubois, 1992), German (Overstreet, 2005), Lithuanian (Ruzaitė, 2010), Persian (Parvaresh et al., 2012), Spanish (Cortés Rodríguez, 2006) and Swedish (Norrby & Winter, 2002). Their use has also been studied among different groups of learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) whose first language is French (DeCock, 2004), German (Terraschke, 2007a, b, 2010; Terraschke & Holmes, 2007), Norwegian (Hasselgren, 2002), Persian (Parvaresh et al., 2012) and Swedish (Aijmer, 2004).

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