

How to keep a listener's attention in Irish English

Raymond Hickey

University of Limerick

Abstract

Vernacular Irish English shows a number of strategies deriving from the literal meanings of words and expressions but used metaphorically. These involve various kinds of appeals to the listener and make use of constructions expressing directionality. The present study attempts to offer a taxonomy of these devices and seeks to characterise them as means to arouse and maintain the listener's attention. Their occurrence is largely confined to highly colloquial forms of language and for this reason are not attested widely in corpora, such as the ICE-Ireland corpus. Nonetheless, the spoken section of the southern Ireland files do provide some documentation of the vernacular structures being discussed here and thus offer support for the interpretation offered in the present study. The diachronic *Corpus of Irish English* allows one to trace the transition from a literal to a conventionalised figurative meaning for many of these structures.

Keywords: vernacular Irish English, attention maintenance, backchannelling, literal to figurative meaning, pragmatics, corpora, data analysis

1. Introduction

In conversational situations, especially those involving just two individuals, an important feature requiring particular focus on the part of the speaker is the maintenance of attention by the listener to what the former is saying. In pragmatics there has been research into gaining the attention of speakers, with the examination of so-called 'attention-grabbers' (see Aijmer, 2009 as a representative example), but not a corresponding degree of research into the means for maintaining the attention of the listener. Given the fact that there are limits to the attention span of any listener, this intrinsic aspect of all conversational situations can be expected to receive expression via

certain structures in any given language or variety.

The present paper is focussed on examining the means in vernacular Irish English for maintaining the attention of the listener. Such means as will be discussed presently are often confined to the most colloquial, hence vernacular forms of language and for that reason they are not always documented in corpora of languages or varieties which rely on more standard or supraregional forms of language. Given this fact, the data for the present paper is drawn primarily from a collection of informal recordings among families, friends and colloquially among strangers up to and including 2025. This data will be later compared to data gleaned from available corpora for Irish English, particularly the Irish component of the *International Corpus of English* and the author's own diachronic text collection *A Corpus of Irish English*.

The goal of the present paper is to document the range of means to maintain attention in conversations in vernacular Irish English by examining the attestations available and then to generalise from the individual instances to hopefully reach a broader and more unified view of how these means are organised and operate.

2. Intensifiers in Irish English

Maintaining the attention of a listener to what one is saying depends ultimately on the discourse being judged by the listener as interesting and is an essential part of the linguistically structured interaction within that discourse (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2018). One means of achieving this goal is through the use of intensifiers. It is a truism that in colloquial forms of language intensifiers are found more often than in formal language. In this respect Irish English is no different from other varieties and shows a range of degree modifiers which contribute significantly to its profile among the group of present-day varieties of English (Schweinberger, 2022). Intensifiers are intended to

‘scale upward from an assumed norm’ (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 590) in any stretch of discourse and can in principle modify lexical items in one of two directions: as amplifiers, e.g. *terribly*, *awfully*, *really*, or as downtoners, e.g. *slightly*, *barely*, *a bit*, *only*. Downtoners can serve the purpose of interest maintenance, for instance, if they contradict tacit assumptions concerning expectations in the discourse, e.g. *She only barely made her flight after that long meeting in the office*.

For intensification purposes certain items can be used in non-literal or tautological senses for hyperbole: *It was unreal, so it was*. *That’s totally not on*. Intensifiers have a certain lifespan: the more they are used the less force or ‘punch’ they have and the greater the perceived need to replace them with new ones.¹ Their demise can be staved off by marking them prosodically, like *fan"tastic* or *"awesome*, but there comes a time when they have too little force anymore and are replaced² in order to avoid the collection of intensifiers at the disposal of speakers being unduly reduced.

Intensifiers vary depending on a range of parameters and their use is generally socially and generationally stratified (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte, 2008). Other factors, which play a role here, are level of education, gender and age, though these are by no means absolute predictors of the degree of intensifier occurrence. More important is the particular discourse setting (Gumperz, 1982). Where this is colloquial, in a domestic and/or familiar context, then informal intensifiers are most likely to be found.

For language use in all varieties, vernacularity is a cline on which speakers can move up or down depending on discourse setting. For the following discussion, settings of maximum vernacularity are assumed to contain the most characteristic intensifiers of Irish English. Here one can see that their high occurrence coincides with specifically

¹ See the detailed discussion of this ‘waning of forms’ in Schweinberger (2021).

² Some intensifiers may not in fact be lexical elements in a language, e.g. *hey* or *wow*, again as an expression of surprise and are normally classified as interjections.

Irish lexis (Hickey, 2025b), see *craic* in (1b) and *eejit* in (1e) as examples.³

- (1) a. We had **fierce** weather last week.
- b. The *craic* was **massive/mighty**, I'm telling ya.
- c. He plays a **wicked** game, so he does.
- d. The going was **savage**, believe me.
- e. I'm **pure** robbed with that *eejit*.
- f. I'm **destroyed** with the digging.
- g. The noise was **brutal** in that disco.
- h. The night out was **lethal**, so it was.

Using amplifying intensifiers⁴ adds emphasis to statements and is intended to capture and maintain the attention of a listener or listeners to the ongoing discourse and maintain this attention, especially in situations of reporting as seen in (1) above. Apart from some formal contexts, one must continuously work at making what one is reporting sound interesting to those who are listening. A common way to achieve this in Irish English, is via certain phrases which appear on the surface to be exhortations to the listener, or indeed commands issued to the listener by the speaker.

There are various possibilities of adding intensity to one's talk and employing positive degree modifiers is just one of them, as seen in (1). The discourse-pragmatic structures⁵ examined here all serve the function of amplifying the discourse, whether during the performance of a speaker or in backchannelling, supportive "noise" offered to the speaker by a listener.

³ For a discussion of the historical development of intensifiers in Irish English, see Schweinberger (2021).

⁴ The instances of intensifiers discussed in this study are what have been denoted as 'maximisers', e.g. *utterly*, which add as much emphasis to a stretch of discourse as possible. These are distinct from less forceful forms, sometimes labelled 'boosters', e.g. *very* (see Claridge et al., 2024, p. 40).

⁵ In the current paper the phrases being discussed are referred to as 'discourse-pragmatic structures', rather than 'discourse-pragmatic markers', a term used for single words with a pragmatic function in discourse, such as *grand, now, there, anyway, sure* in Irish English, and one which the present author has used in the past (Hickey 2020, 2024a, 2025a). The alternative label 'discourse-pragmatic devices', used occasionally by other scholars (see Furkó, 2020 for example), was disfavoured by the reviewers for the present paper, although 'device' would suitably stress the function of such structures, i.e. a means to achieve an end, here the maintenance of attention between speaker and listener in a conversational setting. For more information on this issue, see the discussion in Amador-Moreno (2024, p. 426-427) and references such as Schourup (1999), Beeching (2016) and Briton (2017).

Expressions in colloquial language are commonly used in non-literal, metaphorical senses given that they have been set by conventions for certain pragmatic effects as shown in the following examples, which mostly involve metaphorical uses of the word ‘head’. (2).

- (2) a. They were **giving out hell** about the price of drink.
b. I must have been **out of me head** last night.
c. The boss was **wrecking me head** all day.
d. She **ate the head off me** when I got home.

3. A brief taxonomy of discourse-pragmatic structures

Words and phrases, which add a pragmatic element to utterances, generally rely on the non-literal, figurative meanings of expressions – conventionalised formulae – which can often be presentational in tone (3a). These formulae show speakers adopting a certain stance and involve frequent appeals to listeners to share this (Kiesling, 2022, p. 409), often by referring to knowledge common to both parties in a conversation as in (3b).

- (3) a. *Now there you are.*⁶ *There you have it.* (WER, F80+)⁷
b. *Well, you know yourself the way it is.* (WER, F80+)

In such vernacular contexts further structures can be found which enhance an exchange, often binding both speaker and listener(s) to a platform of common knowledge on a particular subject. The following sections now offer a brief taxonomy of such structures.

3.1. Directionality in discourse

Motion towards the speaker To initiate a discourse, or take a turn in an existing one (Clancy & McCarthy, 2014), the phrase *come here* is found, often reduced phonetically

⁶ On this presentational use of *now*, see Clancy and Vaughan (2012). On the specifically Irish use of *there*, see Clancy, Amador-Moreno and Vaughan (2023).

⁷ The abbreviations use in the data citations in this study are as follows: W=Waterford, L=Limerick, K=Kilkenny, D=Dublin, C=Carlow; ER = EnglishRecordings; M=male; F=female. The number followed by a plus sign is a rough indication of speaker age, e.g. ‘WER M60+’= Waterford male speaker, over 60 years.

to [kmi:r] or [mi:r] (voiceless nasal). It may be followed by a prepositional phrase referring to the speaker as in (4).

- (4) *Come here to me, how much is that car going to cost?* (WER, M70+)

Motion away from the speaker As a sign of incredulity an apparent command, *go away*, to move away from the speaker can be used (5). Note that this, and other directionality discourse-pragmatic structures are regularly preceded by the interjection *ah/oh*.

- (5) *Ah go away, you're not going to jump off that rock, are ya?* (WER, F50+)

When co-occurring with the addition of *outta tha'* (= 'out of that') the expression is used for disbelief (6a) or to amicably reject the position of the listener (6b).

- (6) a. *Go away outta that, who said he'd marry her?* (WER, M30+)
b. *Ah go away outta that, you'll have another bit of ice-cream, won't you?* (KER, F65+)

Call to continue Availing of the same verb *go*, but this time with the preposition *on*, a gentle request to the listener to comply with the wish of the speaker can be issued (7).

- (7) *Ah go on, you'll have another one before you leave.* (KER, F65+)

Call to halt Certainly one of the most common items of vernacular discourse in which partners are exchanging views and information is *stop*, invariably preceded by the interjection *ah/oh* (8a, b).

- (8) a. *Ah stop, you can't be serious.* (WER, F65+)
b. *Oh stop, it's all apps and mobiles nowadays.* (WER, M50+)

There is a degree of overlapping with these discourse-pragmatic structures with a choice

for speakers between *go on* and *stop* to indicate incredulity or disbelief (9a, b).

- (9) a. *Ah go on, you can't be serious.* (WER, F60+)
b. *Ah stop, it's all a farce, it is.* (WER, F80+)

3.2. Appeals in discourse

Appeals to the listener are common as a means of highlighting some aspect of a discourse or as a means of demanding that the listener concentrate (10a, b). In (10a) one can see also see a typical phonetic reduction, here of [li:v] > [lɛ:] (with the lack of /ɛ:/ raising to /i:/ and the deletion of final /v/).

- (10) a. *Oh le' (= 'leave') me alone, will ya.* (WER, M70+)
b. *Listen, I'll be off now.* (WER, M60+)

The non-literal, conventionalised meaning of these discourse-pragmatic structures is again evident in cases where there is an apparent appeal to terminate the discourse (11a, b).

- (11) a. *Ah listen, don't talk to me.* (WER, M55+)
b. *Don't talk to me about that stone mason.* (WER, F70+)

3.3. Self-reflection in discourse

In certain discourse situations speakers may engage in reflection on their own behaviour. These situations can involve irony, self-debunking or momentary dissociation of the narrator and are often introduced by *and* followed by a verb of cognition or expression (12a-d).

- (12) a. *And there's me thinking, no way is this going to work.* (CER, F40+)
b. *I know, I know. And here I am wondering, is this rain even going to stop?* (WER, M60+)
c. *And I'm there saying to myself, what's the point in paying so much*

money for a heap of metal which will just rust under your behind?
(LER, M70+)

- d. *And there's me going, what the feck is the point of all this?* (WER, F70+)

3.4. Backchannelling

Backchannelling is a vocal activity which listeners engage in with the goal of assuring the speaker of their attention and so help to maintain a conversation, once initiated. Thus backchanneling devices are the listener's equivalent to the attention maintaining devices of the speaker.

Peters and Wong (2014, p. 408) point out that, traditionally, backchannels are monosyllabic 'vocal noises' uttered by a listener in a conversation. Echoing findings by other researchers, e.g. Gardner (2001), Tottie (1991), McCarthy (2002), O'Keeffe and Adolphs (2008), they state that backchannels are typically polysemous and polyfunctional. They furthermore emphasise (2014, p. 425) that for monosyllabic backchannels, like *yeah*, there is also durational variation which can signal the listeners attitude to the turn the speaker is engaged in. This timing aspect of backchannels can be significant in the listener's role regarding 'sustaining conversation (turn maintenance) as well as managing conversational exchange (turn change)' (2014, p. 426). These can be 'turn-internal' and are of a generally supportive nature. But they can also signal the desire of the listener to take the floor or at least force the speaker to take a turn in their speech or indeed to close the exchange. In an earlier study, Wong and Peters (2007, p. 479-481) emphasise that backchannelling varies among varieties of English and is as revealing of a particular variety as is its pragmatics (Hickey 2007, 2015; Schneider & Barron, 2008).

Some of the discourse-pragmatic structures being discussed here can be found as backchannels. However, not all are potential candidates for this function. Those which

are employed to effect a turn in the conversation, such as *listen* or *come here*, are excluded from backchannelling. For the remaining structures there is another limitation, which applies to backchannels in general, they must be short (McCarthy, 2002) so as not to be interpreted as an interruption by the speaker. This essentially leaves three of the current discourse-pragmatic structures as possible backchannels: (i) *Ah go away*, (ii) *Ah go on* and (iii) *Ah stop*.

4. Attention gaining / maintaining structures in ICE-Ireland

To bolster the claims about discourse-pragmatic structures, made in section 3 above, the Irish component of the International Corpus of English, ICE-Ireland (Kallen & Kirk, 2008), was consulted. This corpus is divided into two major parts, one with data from Northern Ireland and the other with data from the Republic of Ireland. The parts are furthermore subdivided according to data type. In order to reach the sections with maximally vernacular speech from English in the Republic of Ireland, the transcribed spoken section of the southern part of ICE-Ireland was examined.

4.1. Directional discourse-pragmatic structures

4.1.1. *Come here*

As discussed above, movement towards the speaker is the literal meaning of the current item. However, this can be interpreted figuratively, in ICE-Ireland as elsewhere, as a demand of the listener that they pay particular attention and/or comply to a request expressed by the speaker (13a-f).

- (13) a. <#> <[> ***Come here*** what did you say </[> </}> <#>
 S1A-081 Croke Park.txt (ICE_Ireland, Southern Texts, spoken section)
- b. <#> Why <#> What used you be saying to them<S1A-087\$B> <#>
 Hey rubber lips <#> ***Come here*** <&> laughter </&> <#>

S1A-087 Line dancing.txt (ICE_Ireland, Southern Texts, spoken section)

- c. <#> Well **come here** <#> I texted you during the week there <.,><S1A-098\$B> <#>

S1A-098 Bad weather.txt (ICE_Ireland, Southern Texts, spoken section)

- d. <#> So **come here** listen </[2> <#> I 'm getting Friday <.,> Friday the first of November <.> Ha </.> the night day after Halloween night off<S1A-098\$A> <#>

S1A-098 Bad weather.txt (ICE_Ireland, Southern Texts, spoken section)

- e. <#> And **come here** to me uhm <.,> has <.,> is it just yours that 's being held up or is all of that area not through<S1A-053\$C>

S1A-053 Student grants 1.txt (ICE_Ireland, Southern Texts, spoken section)

- f. <#> And **come here** does uhm Pete know about Jim and the whole thing<S1A-076\$A>

S1A-049 Boyfriends 1.txt (ICE_Ireland, Southern Texts, spoken section)

4.1.2. Go away / go on

This item has a literal meaning of movement away from the speaker (see 3.1 above) with a figurative meaning of incredulity or a rejection of a speech act from an interlocutor. The portion of ICE-Ireland examined here has one particular instance of this usage, shown in (14a). All other instances in the southern spoken texts of ICE-Ireland were appeals to the speaker to continue the discourse (14b).

- (14) a. she stops him anyway and he says <.,> ah **go away** <#> Oh would you **go away** from bothering me from bothering me you know <#>

S1A-064 O'Connell Street.txt (ICE_Ireland, Southern Texts, spoken section)

- b. <#> Do you get on well with your parents<S1A-048\$B> <#> <[> Okay **go on** </[> </[><S1A-048\$B> <#> Uhm I usen't to <#> I used to always get on well with my <{1> <[1> Mam </[1>

S1A-048 Studying 1.txt (ICE_Ireland, Southern Texts, spoken section)

4.2. Appeals to termination

4.2.1. *Oh stop*

The call to stop (see section 3.1 above) is used to signal agreement of the speaker with the stance of the listener or to generally highlight the content of an utterance and move the narrative forward. A few such instances are attested in ICE-Ireland (15a, b).

- (15) a. <[> Dead again </[> </{> <&> laughter </&> <#> And am ***oh stop*** so we had great oul day there<S1A-049\$B> <#>
S1A-049 Boyfriends 1.txt (ICE_Ireland, Southern Texts, spoken section)
- b. <#> What about your black dress that you had years ago<S1A-063\$A> <#> ***Oh stop*** <#> I I think one leg 'd fit into it now <&> laughter
S1A-063 Shoes.txt (ICE_Ireland, Southern Texts, spoken section)

4.3. Expressions of resignation

4.3.1 *Look it*

The expression *look it* has a long history in English in which its meaning was basically literal. However, in Irish English (as in other varieties, see Brinton, 2001) it developed a figurative meaning and is found as a pragmatic marker at the beginning of an utterance (Hickey, 2024a), often co-occurring with *well* (see 17a, b below) or with *but, but sure*. The latter two augment the element of resignation expressed by *look it*, e.g. *But sure look it, it can't be helped* (KER, F65+). As with other markers, there is obligatory phonetic reduction of the leading words: *but sure* [bʌfə] *look it*.⁸

- (17) a. <#> Well ***look it*** <,> I <,> I couldn't stop laughing <&> laughter </&> I<S1A-055\$E> <#>

⁸ This process has been labelled “chunking” (see Traugott, 2022, p. 27) where the phonetic reduction can lead to a kind of univerbation, i.e. where the formerly independent elements must occur together for a given pragmatic effect.

- b. <#> Well **look it** <,> well wasn't wasn't he lucky says she <&> laughter </&> <#>
S1A-055 Hospitals.txt (ICE_Ireland, Southern Texts, spoken section)
- c. <#> **Look it** 's not our fault that the chair got stuck in the floor<S1A-081\$C> <#>
S1A-081 Croke Park.txt (ICE_Ireland, Southern Texts, spoken section)
- d. (#) What do you think of this one <,> **look it** <#> Like as a ring now <unclear> 5 sylls </unclear><S1A-089\$A> <#>
S1A-089 American men.txt (ICE_Ireland, Southern Texts, spoken section)

5. The diachrony of discourse-pragmatic structures

A synchronic consideration of discourse-pragmatic structures in Irish English naturally involves the question of when such structures arose in the history of the variety. For all these structures one can recognise a diachronic transition from a literal to a figurative meaning (see the relevant discussion in Amador-Moreno, 2024, pp. 428-430). In order to determine when this transition apparently took place, *A Corpus of Irish English* was consulted.⁹

5.1. Directionality

Of all discourse-pragmatic structures it is those which derive from literal meanings of movement, to or from the speaker, which appear first with figurative meanings in the textual record of Irish English.

Come here As a request for particular attention, it is perhaps significant that the earlier occurrence of this pragmatic usage is to be found in a drama by Dion Boucicault (1820-1890), who showed particularly sensitivity to the use of Irish English in his plays (Hickey, 2024b). The structure is further attested in the works of James Joyce and in those of recent novelists like Roddy Doyle.

⁹ Originally published in Hickey (2003), this corpus has since been expanded and is now available at [http://www.raymondhickey.com/index_\(RH\).html](http://www.raymondhickey.com/index_(RH).html). For further work on the use of literary texts for corpus analysis, see Amador-Moreno and Terrazas-Calero (2017) and (2022).

- (18) a. FATHER DOLAN (to Conn) Come here. Will you reform?
CONN I don't know what that is, but I will!
(Boucicault, *The Shaughraun*, 1875)

Come here till I tell you.
Come here till I stiffen it for you.
(Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1922)

Come here till I ride yeh, yeh lovely young fella, yeh.
Come here, you, bollox. There's only one E in Heroin.
Who said tha'? - Come here, you.
(Doyle, *The Commitments*, 1987)

Toby Toby! Come here, old chap!
Come here, lads, till I show yis somethin'.
(Doyle, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, 1993)

Go away The literal meaning of 'leave' for this expression seems to have been expanded metaphorically to cover expressions of surprise or incredulity by the late nineteenth century, as evidenced by attestations in the major novel of James Joyce who acquired English in the 1880s and 1890s in Ireland.

- (19) Go away! Isn't that grand for her?
O go away! she said. You're very simple, I don't think.
(Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1922)

Go on As an encouragement to continue, *go on* can already be found in the mid-nineteenth century in the plays of Dion Boucicault and is later amply attested in the prose works of James Joyce.

- (20) a. SHEELAH You thrimble, and can't spake straight to me. Oh! Danny, what is it, avick?
DANNY Go on now, an' stop yer keenin'.
(Boucicault, *The Colleen Bawn*, 1860)
- b. O, go on, Wells, all said. You might tell us. We won't let it out.
Go on, Stevie, I have a hard head, you tell me.
Go on, Temple, said a stout ruddy student near him. I'll stand you a

pint after.

(Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1916)

- c. *Go on*, pressed Lenehan. There's no-one. He never heard.
Go on, blast you! Ben Dollard growled. Get it out in bits.
Go on. Make a stump speech out of it.
O *go on*! Give us some parleyvoo.
(Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1922)

Look it Despite its ubiquity and enregistered nature (Agha, 2003, 2007) in present-day Irish English, the diachronic record does not reveal any instances of *look it* before the mid-twentieth century.

- (21) a. Oh, *look it*, she said. That's brilliant.
Oh *look it*! said Bernie. -He's after burstin' one of his plukes.
(Doyle, *The Commitments*, 1987)
- b. *Look it*. I wouldn't have done it if it had been any of the others.
(Doyle, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, 1993)

Don't be talking The use of this negative imperative to stress the relevance of some information to the current discourse reaches back at least a century in Irish English as documented in Joyce's *Ulysses*.

- (22) O, *don't be talking*! she said. He's a caution to rattlesnakes.
Ah! Ow! *Don't be talking*! I was blue mouldy for the want of that pint.
(Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1922)

Ah stop. Finally, it seems that the appeal to halt the discourse via *Ah stop* is of recent occurrence. There are no instances from the texts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in *A Corpus of Irish English*. However, the figurative use is found in vernacular prose of the late twentieth century as show in (23).

- (23) Are yis ready? *Ah stop*, Jimmy.
Well, I've been busy for the last couple o' nights.
(Doyle, *The Commitments*, 1987)

6. Discussion

The pragmatics of Irish English, like other varieties and languages, is characterised by a range of figurative uses.¹⁰ The non-literal uses of temporal and locative elements are well attested for Irish English, e.g. *now* (Clancy & Vaughan, 2012) and *there* (Clancy et al., 2023), respectively. The set of elements, which form the subject of the present paper, nearly all share one key element, that of space. Recall that any (spoken) conversation between interlocutors takes place in a shared physical space which determines the dynamics of the discourse on a figurative level; thus it is hardly surprising that phrases with literal meanings would be co-opted into service with figurative pragmatic meanings. The focus on the spatial dimension of spoken exchanges may well account for the frequency of the verb *look* (or the phrase *lookit*, Hickey, 2024a) over that of *listen*, as the former verb invites the listener to engage in a spatial act, that of visual observation.¹¹

In addition to the aspect of space, many of the phrases evince a constrative, polar usage (see Table 1), i.e. one finds *come here* along with *go away*; *go on* beside *ah stop* or *don't be talking*.

¹⁰ There are also extensions of already present elements, e.g. the use of *like* for focussing purposes in Irish English, see Schweinberger (2013, 2015, 2020).

¹¹ Romero-Trillo (1997, pp. 219-200) noted in his corpus investigation of English and Spanish pragmatic structures aimed at gaining attention that the verbs of visual and not audio perception were by far the most common, i.e. English *look* and Spanish *mira*. This preference of *look* over *listen* in English would strengthen the view that the act of reaching and maintaining attention is rooted in spatial considerations and hence uses language elements which share a central spatial component.

TABLE 1

Polar discourse structures with their literal meanings

Item	Literal meaning
<i>come here</i>	direction towards
<i>go away</i>	direction away
<i>go on</i>	appeal to continue
<i>ah stop</i>	appeal to terminate
<i>don't be talking</i>	appeal to terminate

The use of polarity structures, like that of intensifiers (see section 2 above) serves the purpose of maintaining interest in what the speaker is saying as they embody opposing meanings, which act positively on cognitive processing on the part of the listener, who is confronted with structures which are contradictory on a semantic level but which trigger attentiveness on a pragmatic level.

7. Conclusion

The discourse-pragmatic structures discussed in this article can be interpreted as various but related means of capturing and maintaining the attention and interest of listeners. They may appear to suggest a termination of the discourse (see Table 1) but in fact function as a means of highlighting the assumed importance of what is being reported and thus function as a means of keeping the listener connected to the topic at hand. Equally, many of them can be used for backchannelling purposes to assure the speaker that the hearer is listening attentively.

These structures are characteristic of highly vernacular forms of Irish English, especially in the Republic of Ireland. For this reason there is only moderate documentation of them in data of supraregional Irish English such as ICE-Ireland,

which followed the goal of this corpus project, namely to document largely standard varieties of English. Nor are such forms found in lexicographical works on Irish English (see Dolan 2012 and Share 2008 as typical examples). In Irish literature in English, notably in twentieth-century works containing colloquial narrative (Amador-Moreno & Terrazas-Calero 2017), certain occurrences can be found (see section 5.1). Going on the attestations in Joyce's *Ulysses* it can be claimed that probably only the following three structures existed in vernacular Irish English in the late nineteenth century (24), but not further back beyond that.

- (24) a. *Come here* b. *Go on* c. *Don't be talking*

At greater time depth all instances of the discourse-pragmatic structures examined here have literal meanings, i.e. before the transition to conventionalised figurative meanings had occurred which characterises colloquial informal usage in present-day vernacular Irish English.

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