

From Transparency to Opacity: *Surely*, Intersubjectivity and English Cultural Norms

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to trace the development of *surely* from its status as an objective adverb of manner to an (inter)subjective pragmatic marker of stance. A discourse-pragmatic approach is adopted, based on Traugott and Dasher (2002). This contemplates changes in meanings and uses as arising from implicatures (or “invited inferences”) in the strategising interaction of speakers/writers and addressees/readers in communicative situations. For the latter stages of the development of *surely* a relationship is postulated between culture, grammar and discourse, to help account for the radical changes in position, meaning and use of *surely* that were accelerated in the eighteenth century. For this the concept of cultural scripts is used, within the framework of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) of Wierzbicka (2006).

1. Introduction

Among the English modal adverbs whose meanings and uses have in recent years evoked considerable debate, none is more frustrating for non-native speakers than *surely*. This is due to the processes of semantic bleaching and pragmaticalisation undergone by *surely* with the result that present-day *surely* is not what it seems. It is not a synonym of ‘I am sure ..’ or ‘it is certain that...’. Its extreme semantic opacity is at variance with its deceptively transparent form. It appears to have no incontrovertible counterpart in Spanish (Downing, 2006), while its translation ‘equivalents’ in other languages fail to pinpoint the nuances of *surely* as a pragmatic marker or even as an adverb within the field of modal certainty. While a marginal use of the Dutch *zecker* as described by Byloo *et al.* (2007) may be similar to final parenthetical

surely as in example (4d), the fact that *zecker* also translates as *certainly* belies the unique and exclusive character of British English *surely*. In a study using comparable corpora of English and Swedish, the meaning proposed by Aijmer of *surely* vs *certainly* is that of doubt or uncertainty (Aijmer, 2002). Similarly, Simon-Vandenberg classes *surely* as a modal adverb of doubt (Simon-Vandenberg, 2007; Simon-Vandenberg and Aijmer, 2007). With all due respect I challenge these claims. I shall claim instead that *surely* is a marker of self-confidence, but mitigated in recent times by reticence; this is not the same thing as doubt.¹

The aim of this paper is, then, to lay the foundations for this claim by briefly tracing the development of *surely* from its status as an objective adverb of manner to a subjective –and intersubjective– pragmatic marker of stance. I adopt a discourse–pragmatic approach, based on Traugott and Dasher (2002). According to this view, changes in meanings and uses arise from implicatures or “invited inferences” (IIN in these authors’ terminology), which are evoked as speakers’ strategies in communicative situations. For the latter stages of the development of *surely* I postulate a relationship between culture, grammar and discourse, to help account for the radical changes in position, meaning and use of *surely* that were accelerated in the eighteenth century. To this end the concept of cultural scripts is used, within the framework of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) of Wierzbicka 2006.²

2. The diachronic dimension

It is now an established fact that many pragmatic markers in English had their origins in words of propositional meaning. See for example Lewis’s (2002) study on *of course* and Traugott (1999) followed

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² Illustrations are taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd revised edition 1991, the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 5th edition 2003, and from the BNC World, using Wordsmith Tools. Data will not be presented quantitatively, but instead will be used to illustrate the meanings and uses of *surely* in the qualitative analysis.

by Schwenter and Traugott (2000) on *in fact*. Similarly, *surely* can be traced back to forms that had non-discourse functions throughout its recorded history, from the fourteenth century onwards, the development of *surely* has been essentially from more concrete and object-oriented meanings as in (1), through the more psychological, epistemic and metaphorical meanings (2), to finally its present status as an opaque, speaker-oriented indexical (3). These changes have corresponded with changes in the behavioural patterns of *surely*, which has extended its syntactic scope over time. Like most semantic changes, the coded shifts of meaning undergone by *surely* were produced by a process of accretion or “layering” (Hopper, 1991; qtd. in Traugott and Dasher, 2002: 12), by which lexemes come to be used with new meanings, while older meanings co-exist with the new ones, only gradually becoming archaic, obsolete or fossilised. This view is corroborated for *surely* by the entries in both editions of the Oxford English Dictionary here consulted. Each main meaning of *surely*, with one important exception, is attested already in the fourteenth century, as reflected in the illustrations cited here. The important exception is precisely the chief current use of *surely* as a semantically bleached indexical.

The evolution of *surely* may be viewed from at least three perspectives: first, as a move from the ideational to the interpersonal, interactional and textual; second, in terms of the subjective /objective distinction, *surely* has come to be not only subjective but, in many contexts, intersubjective; from yet a third perspective, *surely* can be situated on a scale of pragmaticalisation by which the erstwhile adverb no longer functions as an adverbial but has become a stance marker, or a modal particle used to express evaluative attitudes.

Entries in both *OEDs* provide evidence that *surely* was for centuries a propositional-level adverb which was placed in clause-internal or final position and expressed objective or object-oriented meanings regarding the manner of an action or process, as in examples (1a) to (1d).

These manner meanings are glossed as safely (1a), securely (2), infallibly (3) and confidently (4), respectively. Evidence suggests that these coded meanings of *surely* arose by implicatures generated by speakers from a basic coded meaning glossed as ‘without risk or danger of loss or displacement’, the first recorded meaning.

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- (1a) 13... = ‘safely’. Hii thoughten .. Hee wolde hem surliche lede SirBeves;
- (1b) 1615 = ‘securely’ ‘firmly’ Your stakes would be so *surely* put ...that they breake not (Lawson);
- (1c) 1400 = ‘without failure’, ‘infallibly’ Serche it full *suery*, and se to the ende. *Destr.Troy*;
- (1d) 1912 = ‘inevitably’ These things are *slowly but surely* coming about. W.B. Selbie, *Nonconformity*.

While the three first meanings listed have become obsolete, this last meaning remains in use today, fossilised in the phrase “slowly but surely”. It applies not only to human agency, but also, nowadays, with the sense of inevitability, as for instance, in referring to climate change.

Likewise attested from LME and co-existing with the others, are the more psychological meanings, glossed as ‘confidently’, ‘assuredly’ (2a) and ‘for certain’ (2b).

- (2a) 1483 = ‘with confidence’) The bisshope..wente out ageynst the enemyes *surely* and the peple followed hym (Caxton);
- (2b) 1629 (= ‘for certain’) as if they *surely* knew their sovran lord was by (Milton).

These uses were as object-oriented as were the previous examples; that is, they were based in the external described situation and expressed the manner in which an action or cognitive state was effected by the participants in the text world. But as the confidence and certainty are ascribed to them by the writer, they are instances of what Biber et al. (1999) call ‘attributed stance’.

At the same time and by a process of accretion, a subjective epistemic use also appears to be detectable as early as the fourteenth century with desiderative-verbs such as *hope* and *trust*. When used with the 1st person singular pronoun *I* these verbs become performative in the sense that they perform the act they name. This is what occurs in (3a) of the fourteenth century with ‘*surely* I hope’, and in the sixteenth-century letter of (3b) with ‘I trowst *shonlhy*’. Modified by *surely*, these verbs are indicative of the writer’s attitude of confident expectation of

again entering the temple and of coming up to London, respectively. Such uses are subjective in that they reflect the writer's own confidence, situated within the internal discourse world of the speech situation, as opposed to the confident stance objectively attributed to the bishop in the narrative exemplified in (2a).

(3a) 13..(= 'confidently')...yet *surely* I hope, efte to trede on thy temple
E.E. Allit.

(3b) 1530 = 'confidently' I trowst *shourly* to come vp to Londone. Ellis.
Orig. Lett. Ser.

Equally subjective is the intensifier function of *surely*, attested from Late ME and glossed in the *OED* as 'truly, verily, undoubtedly, indeed'. As illustrated in (3c), the speaker's confidence pertains, not to the world talked about but to the speaker's perspective in the world of the speech event, albeit in a play:

(3c) 1599 Ile pay't as valorously as I may, that sal I *surely* do.. Shakes.
Henry V. III.ii.126.

So far in this overview, we see *surely* occurring in medial position and modifying a tensed verb or a participle. It is only in the early eighteenth century that a more cataclysmic change occurs. From the evidence provided by the *OED*, *surely* on occasions dissociates itself from its previous internal position and moves to the beginning of the clause, where it is re-analysed as a sentence adverbial and acquires scope over the sentence, as in (4a).

(4a) 1712 *Surely* never did such a Philosophic soul inhabit such a beauteous Form! Steele, *Spectator*, n° 302, 7.

This declarative sentence of Steele's has the rhetorical force of an exclamation, an interpretation confirmed by the punctuation. The core meaning of confidence is still seen to be overt, expressing the speaker's own subjective and confident belief. But by the early 1830s an even more radical change had also taken place in both initial and clause-internal *surely*. As illustrated in (4b), *surely* can by that time be used to convert a declarative statement into a leading question, that is, one that

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expects a positive answer, when positive, or a negative answer, when negative. This is a marked meaning (Downing, 2001; Downing, 2006).

(4b) 1732 You will not *surely* deny the conclusion, when you admit the premises? Berkeley, *Alciphbr.*

Surely here is intersubjective and opaque. It indexes, rather than encodes, confidence based on status or superior knowledge on the part of the speaker and has the effect of pressing the interlocutor to give assent. These two features make up the main characterisation of *surely* today. We can conclude therefore that, as illustrated in (4b) and (4c), *surely* loosened its ties, as regards both position and meaning, with the propositional content of the clause, to index covertly the speaker's own beliefs, attitudes and rhetorical goals. *Surely* in (4c) has here become detached from the statement, stands in absolute position and functions as a stance marker, syntactically a disjunct, strongly in initial position (4c) more weakly when final and parenthetical (4d)

(4c) 1794 '*Surely*, Annette', said Emily, starting, 'I heard a noise: listen' Mrs. Radcliffe. *Myst. Udolpho* xxxiii.

(4d) 1832 'Twelve! It cannot be so much *surely*. Hr. Martineau *Elia of Gar.* li.1 First cit. of *surely* in final position.

The three most important new positional and rhetorical developments of *surely* are, according to these data, attested as first occurring in the eighteenth century. The final, parenthetical, position occurs in the nineteenth century.

Figure 1 represents the time-span of the various meanings, categories and functions of *surely*:

Figure 1. The syntactic, semantic and rhetorical development of *surely*

meaning	Cat/function	1300	1400	1500	1600	1700	1800	1900
'safely'	prop adv manner	_____						
'infallibly'	prop adv manner	_____ (fossilised) _____						
'securely'	prop adv manner	_____						
'with confidence'	prop adv manner	_____						
'for certain', 'undoubtedly'	confidently intensifier	epistemic adv		_____				
'confidently'	epistemic	_____						
'as must be the case'	reanalysis as initial sentence adv	_____						

stance marker	with force of question	_____
stance marker	disjunct (initial)	_____
stance marker	disjunct (final)	_____

3. *Surely* today

Once occupying its new positions *surely* has become dissociated from the overt expression of assurance. It has become pragmaticalised and opaque, to index a meaning something like “as may be confidently supposed, as must be the case” (*OED*). This is based on the speaker’s strong belief in the statement qualified, on the basis of experience, probability or right, especially in the face of imaginary or possible dissent, (*Shorter OED*, 2002) but without absolute proof (1991). The indexed meaning appropriate to each context is recovered procedurally, through inference, by the hearer or reader. Furthermore, *surely* has become not only subjective but intersubjective. The speaker/writer adopts different stances towards both the content and the addressee (Downing, 2001), while aware of the addressee/reader as a participant in the speech event whose face needs are to be met or at least strategised in the interest of the speaker’s own face needs. In this respect *surely* serves as an advance warning (Traugott and Dasher, 2002) for hearers that a marked situation is upcoming.

At the same time, clause-internal *surely* frequently represents a continuation of the epistemic psychological meaning and is less bleached. It is both procedural, inviting assent, and rather more transparently modal than when *surely* occupies initial and final positions. Its semantic content, I suggest, is that of high probability, which may be glossed as ‘almost certainly’. The following concordances from the BNC and on instance from my own data illustrate these features:

- (5a) Does the child regard mind and reality as existing in a state of perfect correspondence? By no means. That’s *surely* putting it too high. BNC
- (5b) Once evolution had discovered successful ways of constructing organisms it would *surely* have used those same mechanisms again and again. BNC
- (5c) These are the names I can offer you and there are *surely* others that I can’t recall. (own data)

The initial-final uses are totally bleached and are totally procedural. This suggests that the distinctions between these and the clause internal are not discrete but rather a matter of degree.

4. Anglo cultural scripts and their relevance to *surely*

The question arises of why English needed these particular uses of *surely*, and indeed so many adverbs expressing degrees of modal certainty. One answer may lie in English cultural norms expressed by Wierzbicka in her theory of cultural scripts (2006). Rather than by assigning labels from outside, such as ‘individualism’ or ‘rationalism’, the scripts are intended to identify norms and values that are unique to a given human group and tradition, in this case Anglo English. They are formulated in the simple words and basic grammatical patterns of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM): basic semantic primes such as *I, you, someone, something, people, good, bad, can, say, want, think, know, do* and a smallish number more. The primes are used to formulate the cultural scripts.

One basic Anglo cultural script is that of personal autonomy, of which an important sub-script is the ‘anti-compelling script’ (24), expressed as follows:

[people think like this]
when I want someone to do something
I can’t say to this person: “you have to do it
because I want you to do it”

Another of Wiersbicka’s cultural scripts that has specific relevance today is based on the Anglo ideal of accuracy and the practice of understatement. The Anglo English cult norm ‘it is not good to exaggerate’ is claimed to be related to the scientific revolution and to the intellectual climate that prevailed as a result of the English Enlightenment. The language of science became the model of ‘good speech’ among the educated: it should be rational, dispassionate, factually based, precise and accurate (30). But while the ideal might be that of saying neither more nor less than one intends to say (echoed

centuries later by Grice's Maxims of Quantity and Manner), in practice it was more important not to say too much, not to exaggerate, not to say more than one could be responsible for. For many English speakers this ideal is in principle equally current today. Levinson (1995) rephrases these Maxims as heuristics: "Make your contribution as informative as required, and imply no more thereby" (Quantity) and "Avoid prolixity" for Manner. Both might be suitable in scientific treatises but hardly in conversation, where tact is more important than strict accuracy. The Relevance heuristic favours implicature: "Say/Write no more than you must and *mean* more thereby" (my emphasis). It is by the factor of implicature that *surely* can be explained in all its uses. As a result of its semantic bleaching it invites confirmation or agreement, or pre-empts possible objections. It avoids making a stronger challenge or confrontation, as well as unnecessary prolixity, while in clause-internal position it allows to speaker to avoid making a stronger commitment to certainty. At the same time, the issue of superior knowledge, experience or right, is expressed covertly, with discretion, not made a major point of controversy. *Surely* then says less in order to imply more.

Another important seventeenth-century idea is the limited nature of human knowledge, propounded by John Locke in his *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690). This work is celebrated for its strong influence on English and American thought in educated circles, an influence that has lasted over three centuries. To his contemporaries, the philosopher's most impacting idea was his view that human knowledge of the physical world and of ourselves is probable and limited. It rests on judgment rather than truth and there are 'degrees of assent':

[...] most of the propositions we think, reason, discourse – nay, act upon, are such as we cannot have undoubted knowledge of their truth....But there being degrees herein, from the very neighbourhood of certainty and demonstration, quite down to improbability and unlikeliness, even to the confines of impossibility; and also to degrees of assent from full assurance and confidence, quite down to conjecture, doubt and distrust. (Locke, 1959 [1690], 364)

Some of these degrees of assent or “postures of the mind” are reflected in discourse prefaced by *surely*. Since its use is based on different degrees of evidence, contradictory assumptions may be evoked as in (5c), a state that is sometimes characterised as ‘wishing to believe’ (Downing, 2001). The awareness of the limitations of certainty enables us to comply with another Anglo script: *I think* vs *I know* script, suggested by Wierzbicka (39):

[people think like this]
if I think something about something, I can
say “I think like this about it”
I can’t say “I know it”
It is not good if a person says about
something “I know it” if they don’t know it.”

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of *surely* is that especially in medial position it avoids making a stronger commitment to certainty.

5. Conclusion

In comparison with many present-day pragmatic markers, *surely* has not attained a level of frequency akin to that of *basically* and *like*. The latter are tending, through over-use, to become in at least certain of their functions, involuntary expressions of hesitancy. *Surely*, by contrast, is always motivated and is used sparsely but effectively in argument. I have aimed to show that it is a pragmatic marker of moderate-to-strong, though indeterminate, meaning which is inferred by addressees and readers in discourse. In its indeterminacy lies its rhetorical strength. As used in everyday discourse it may align with or challenge the addressee. It can be polite and inviting or it may conceal hidden threats. Even when it implies superior knowledge and entitlement or simply commonsense, its user avails herself of the marker to defend her own position while at the same time to refrain from launching too strong a claim or too direct a criticism. In fact, the discourse evidence leads me to consider *surely* as typically a confidence marker, but confidence mitigated by epistemic restraint.

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