

FROM “EXCUSE ME” TO “HEY”: EVOLUTION OF ATTENTION-GETTING STRATEGIES IN MODERN ENGLISH COMMUNICATION

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Abstract. This article examines the evolution of attention-getting strategies in modern English communication from a pragmatic perspective. It analyzes the shift from traditional politeness-oriented forms such as *excuse me* to more direct and informal expressions like *hey* and *listen*. Using a qualitative corpus-based approach with data from BNC, COCA, and MICASE, the study explores the linguistic forms, pragmatic functions, and contextual use of attention-getting devices. The findings reveal a clear trend toward informalization, highlighting the context-dependent and multifunctional role of attention-getting strategies in contemporary English discourse.

Keywords: attention-getting devices, pragmatics, discourse, corpus analysis, politeness, informalization, speech acts, interaction management.

Аннотация. В данной статье анализируется эволюция стратегий привлечения внимания в современном английском языке с прагматической точки зрения. Исследование направлено на изучение перехода от традиционных вежливых форм, таких как *excuse me*, к более прямым и неформальным выражениям, например *hey* и *listen*. Качественный анализ, основанный на данных корпусов BNC, COCA и MICASE, позволил выявить лингвистические формы, прагматические функции и контекстуальные особенности средств привлечения внимания. Результаты показывают тенденцию к неформализации в современном английском языке и подтверждают контекстуальную и многофункциональную природу данных прагматических средств.

Ключевые слова: средства привлечения внимания, прагматика, дискурс, корпусный анализ, вежливость, неформализация, речевые акты, управление взаимодействием.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqolada zamonaviy ingliz tilidagi e'tibor qaratish strategiyalarining pragmatik nuqtai nazardan rivojlanishi tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot 'excuse me' kabi an'anaviy muloyimlikka asoslangan shakllardan 'hey' va 'listen' kabi bevosita va norasmiy ifodalarga o'tish jarayonini o'rganishga qaratilgan. BNC, COCA va MICASE korpuslari asosida olib borilgan sifat tahlili e'tibor qaratish vositalarining lingvistik shakllari, pragmatik funksiyalari va kontekstual qo'llanishini aniqlashga imkon berdi. Natijalar zamonaviy ingliz tilida norasmiylashuv tendensiyasining kuchayganini hamda e'tibor qaratish vositalarining kontekstga bog'liq va ko'p funksiyali xususiyatga ega ekanligini ko'rsatadi.

Kalit so'zlar: e'tibor qaratish vositalari, pragmatika, diskurs, korpus tahlili, muloyimlik, norasmiylashuv, nutq aktlari, muloqotni boshqarish.

Introduction. Attention-getting devices represent a crucial yet often underestimated component of spoken interaction. In everyday communication, speakers employ specific linguistic forms to secure the addressee's attention, initiate discourse, and prepare the ground for subsequent speech acts. Expressions such as *excuse me*, *hey*, *listen*, or vocative constructions like *guys* function primarily as pragmatic tools rather than carriers of propositional meaning. Their main purpose is to organize interaction, manage turn-taking, and regulate interpersonal. Consequently, the study of attention-getting strategies is essential for understanding how language operates in real communicative contexts.

Traditional descriptions of English interaction associate attention-getting with politeness-oriented and formal expressions. Classical forms such as *excuse me*, *pardon me*, and *may I have your attention* have been interpreted as negative politeness strategies aimed at minimizing imposition and maintaining social distance. These expressions typically occur in institutional or hierarchical contexts, where respect and deference are communicatively important. However, contemporary English discourse demonstrates a noticeable shift toward shorter, more direct, and more informal attention-getting forms, including *hey*, *hi*, *look*, and *listen*. This change reflects broader processes of informalization and conversationalization in modern communication.

Recent studies suggest that modern English increasingly favors efficiency, immediacy, and solidarity over deference and formality. As a result, attention-getting devices have become more flexible, context-dependent, and multifunctional, serving not only to attract attention but also to signal urgency, authority, or interpersonal closeness.

Many existing descriptions rely on isolated examples rather than empirical evidence from authentic language use. There is therefore a need for research that combines pragmatic theory with corpus-based analysis to reveal how attention-getting devices function in contemporary English discourse.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the pragmatic evolution of attention-getting strategies in modern English communication. The research focuses on the shift from classical, politeness-based forms such as *excuse me* to more direct and informal expressions like *hey* and *listen*. In order to provide an empirically grounded account, the study incorporates authentic examples from major English-language corpora, including the British National Corpus (BNC), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), and the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE). These sources allow for the analysis of attention-getting devices across a range of communicative settings, including informal conversation, pedagogical discourse, and institutional interaction.

Methodologically, the study integrates speech act theory, discourse analysis, and contextual-pragmatic interpretation. Attention-getting devices are analyzed with regard to their linguistic form, pragmatic function, and sequential position within discourse. Special emphasis is placed on identifying classical patterns, emerging innovative forms, and the pragmatic shifts that characterize contemporary English communication. Corpus examples are used throughout the analysis to illustrate how these devices operate in real-life contexts and to demonstrate the functional differences between formal and informal strategies.

Literature analysis. In linguistic pragmatics, attention-getting devices are understood as interactional tools whose primary function is to initiate, regulate, or redirect communication rather than to convey propositional meaning. Scholars emphasize that such devices operate at the level of discourse organization and social interaction, serving as pre-sequences that prepare the ground for subsequent speech acts.

Mey argues that pragmatic meaning emerges from language use in context, highlighting the importance of speaker intention and shared situational knowledge. Similarly, Yule notes that such expressions are closely linked to speech act realization, particularly in initiating requests, warnings, or directives. Schegloff demonstrates that speakers frequently employ pre-opening moves to secure interactional alignment before delivering the main utterance. In this sense, attention-getting expressions are integral to the mechanics of spoken discourse and interpersonal coordination.

Recent research indicates a significant shift in attention-getting strategies in modern English, characterized by increasing informality and directness. Fairclough attributes this change to broader processes of informalization, whereby conversational norms penetrate institutional and professional communication. Tagliamonte, examining contemporary spoken corpora, demonstrates that informal discourse markers are increasingly favored by younger speakers and in media-influenced contexts. These forms often function as efficient, low-cost attention-getting devices that establish immediacy and solidarity rather than deference.

Culpeper observes that the decline of overt politeness markers does not necessarily indicate impoliteness; instead, it reflects changing social expectations and relational norms. In modern English discourse, attention-getting strategies prioritize speed, accessibility, and interpersonal closeness, especially in digitally mediated communication.

In contemporary communication, attention-getting devices play a crucial role in discourse management. Heritage highlights their function in establishing epistemic authority and controlling interactional flow. Digital communication has further accelerated pragmatic change. Crystal notes that online and social media environments favor brief, informal attention-getting forms that align with rapid turn exchange and reduced social distance. Biber et al. observe that formal attention-getting devices are significantly more frequent in prepared speech and public announcements than in casual conversation, reinforcing their status as markers of formality and social distance. Fairclough interprets this shift as part of a broader process of discursive informalization, whereby conversational norms permeate public and institutional communication.

Despite occurring in a semi-formal setting, the attention-getting device *hey, guys* expresses solidarity and reduces hierarchical distance. Tagliamonte notes that such forms are especially prevalent among younger speakers and function as markers of in-group identity rather than deference. Culpeper argues that the rise of direct attention-getting forms should not be equated with impoliteness. Instead, these strategies reflect evolving social norms in which efficiency and interpersonal closeness are prioritized over formality.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that attention-getting devices in English have evolved from formal, politeness-oriented expressions to flexible, context-sensitive pragmatic tools. Corpus evidence confirms that this evolution is closely tied to

sociocultural change, discourse type, and communicative goals. However, despite extensive research on English, comparative and discourse-functional analyses remain limited, particularly in relation to non-Indo-European languages such as Uzbek. This gap underscores the relevance of further pragmatic investigation grounded in empirical data.

Research methodology. The present study adopts a **qualitative, corpus-based pragmatic approach** to examine attention-getting devices in contemporary English discourse. The research is descriptive and interpretative in nature, aiming to identify how different linguistic forms function pragmatically in real communicative contexts. Rather than measuring statistical frequency, the study focuses on **functional explanation, contextual interpretation, and discourse organization**, which are central principles in pragmatic research (Levinson, 1983; Mey, 2001).

The methodological procedure was designed to reveal how attention-getting strategies vary according to discourse type, communicative intention, and social context. The analytical outcomes of this procedure are summarized in **Table 1**, which presents annotated corpus excerpts and their pragmatic interpretation.

The empirical material for the study was collected from established English-language corpora that represent a wide range of spoken and written interaction. The primary data sources include:

- **The British National Corpus (BNC)** – spontaneous spoken interaction and institutional communication
- **The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)** – conversational and academic spoken data
- **MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English)** – classroom and pedagogical discourse

The analysis is based on a **multi-layered pragmatic framework** that combines three complementary approaches and to produce the analytical results summarized in **Table 1**, all collected examples were manually coded according to a set of clearly defined parameters.

As for methodological limitations, the study does not aim to provide quantitative frequency counts of attention-getting devices. Instead, it focuses on **functional and contextual explanation**. Future research may complement this approach with statistical corpus analysis or experimental methods to further verify the observed patterns.

Results and discussion. *Traditional politeness-oriented forms*

Corpus analysis reveals that in formal and institutional settings, attention-getting devices in English are predominantly realized through **politeness-based formulas**, such as *excuse me, pardon me, and may I have your attention*. These forms function primarily as **mitigating strategies** that acknowledge potential intrusion into the addressee's personal space.

Example (BNC – Service encounter):

Excuse me, could you tell me where the nearest bus stop is?

In this instance, the attention-getter *excuse me* precedes a request and operates as a negative-politeness marker. The pragmatic intention is not simply to attract attention but to **soften the directive force** of the subsequent speech act.

Such expressions occur most frequently in:

- public announcements
- customer–service interactions
- academic and professional discourse

This confirms that classical attention-getting forms are closely linked to **social distance and hierarchical communication**.

Rise of Direct forms

In informal discourse, especially among peers, the data demonstrate a clear preference for **direct and brief forms**, such as *hey, look, listen*, and vocative expressions like *guys* or personal names.

Example (COCA – Spoken conversation):

Hey, are you coming to the meeting later?

Here, *hey* functions as an **interactional initiator**, establishing immediate contact without any mitigation. Unlike *excuse me*, it assumes minimal social distance and expresses familiarity. Another frequent pattern is the combination of multiple markers:

Example (COCA):

Hey, listen, I need to talk to you about something.

This layered structure shows how attention-getting devices can accumulate to strengthen pragmatic effect.

Pedagogical discourse and directive context

In classroom settings, attention-getting devices serve to **control interaction and maintain institutional authority**.

Example (MICASE – Lecture):

Okay everyone, listen up for a second.

The expression *okay everyone* organizes the group, while *listen up* functions as a directive. This hybrid form balances authority with conversational informality, reflecting modern pedagogical communication norms.

In warning situations, attention-getting devices become highly imperative and emotionally charged.

Example (BNC – Emergency context):

Hey! Watch out!

Here the pragmatic goal is immediate reaction rather than politeness. The device is short, loud, and semantically reduced to pure **attention activation**.

Below are **annotated analyses** demonstrating the methodological procedure.

Table 1. Annotated Corpus analysis of attention-getting devices in English.

Example (Corpus source)	Attention-getting device	Linguistic form	Discourse context	Core Speech Act	Pragmatic function	Interpretation
<i>Hey, can you pass me the salt?</i> (COCA – Spoken)	Hey	Interjection	Informal conversation	Request	Interaction initiation	Signals familiarity and low social distance; functions as a direct and unmitigated attention-getter
<i>Excuse me, may I ask a question?</i> (BNC – Academic)	Excuse me	Politeness formula	Formal institutional setting	Request	Mitigation and politeness	Reduces imposition, protects addressee’s face, establishes respectful interaction
<i>Okay class, look at the board.</i> (MICASE – Classroom)	Okay class	Vocative phrase	Pedagogical discourse	Directive	Group attention focusing	Organizes classroom interaction and prepares addressees for instruction
<i>Hey, listen, I need to talk to you.</i> (COCA – Spoken)	Hey, listen	Compound marker	Informal interpersonal talk	Statement/Request	Discourse control	Strengthens attention claim and signals importance of upcoming message
<i>Hey! Watch out!</i> (BNC – Emergency)	Hey!	Exclamatory interjection	Urgent situation	Warning	Immediate alert	Expresses urgency; prioritizes rapid reaction over politeness
<i>Sorry, could I just interrupt for a moment?</i>	Sorry	Apology-based marker	Semi-formal interaction	Request to interrupt	Softening device	Acknowledges intrusion and mitigates face threat

Example (Corpus source)	Attention-getting device	Linguistic form	Discourse context	Core Speech Act	Pragmatic function	Interpretation
(BNC – Meeting)						
<i>Guys, we need to start now.</i> (COCA – Spoken)	Guys	Vocative address	Informal group setting	Directive	Collective attention-getting	Establishes solidarity and addresses multiple addressees

Table 1 summarizes the functional analysis of representative corpus examples. The data demonstrate that attention-getting devices vary significantly according to discourse context and communicative intention. Formal settings predominantly employ mitigation-oriented forms such as *excuse me*, while informal interaction favors direct interjections like *hey*. Pedagogical discourse combines organizational vocatives with directives, and urgent contexts prioritize brevity and immediacy. These patterns confirm that attention-getting strategies in English are highly context-sensitive and pragmatically multifunctional.

The findings summarized in Table 4 demonstrate that attention-getting devices in contemporary English are highly **context-dependent** and reflect broader pragmatic changes in communication. A clear contrast emerges between **formal and informal interaction**. In institutional settings, traditional forms such as *excuse me* and *sorry* continue to function as politeness-oriented strategies that mitigate imposition and protect the addressee's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). These expressions remain typical of hierarchical or public discourse where social distance is maintained.

In informal contexts, however, more direct devices such as *hey* and *listen* dominate. Their frequent use indicates a shift toward immediacy, efficiency, and solidarity, supporting the view that modern English communication has undergone significant informalization (Fairclough, 1992). Rather than signaling deference, these forms emphasize familiarity and quick interactional engagement.

The analysis also shows that attention-getting devices serve multiple pragmatic functions beyond simple interaction initiation. In pedagogical discourse, hybrid expressions like *okay class* or *listen up* combine organizational and directive roles, enabling speakers to manage group attention effectively. In urgent situations, short and forceful forms such as *hey!* are preferred, as pragmatic efficiency outweighs politeness considerations. This confirms that the selection of attention-getting strategies is closely linked to communicative goals and situational urgency.

Conclusion. This study has examined the evolution of attention-getting strategies in modern English communication through a pragmatic and corpus-based analysis. The findings demonstrate that attention-getting devices function as essential tools for initiating interaction, managing discourse, and signaling communicative intention. A clear pragmatic shift has been identified from classical politeness-oriented forms such as *excuse me* toward more direct and informal expressions like *hey* and *listen*.

The analysis confirms that the choice of attention-getting device is strongly influenced by contextual factors, including formality level, social relations, and communicative urgency. Formal settings continue to favor mitigated and deferential strategies, while informal interaction increasingly relies on immediate and solidarity-oriented forms. These tendencies reflect broader processes of informalization and changing norms of interpersonal communication in contemporary English.

By integrating theoretical perspectives with authentic corpus examples, the study contributes to a better understanding of how attention-getting devices operate as pragmatic markers in real discourse. Future research may extend this investigation through quantitative corpus analysis or cross-linguistic comparison to further explore the universal and language-specific aspects of attention management.

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