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Pragmatic Re-Orientation in Academic Spoken Discourse: Deconstructing Prescriptive Stance Boundaries Through the Maximizers *Perfectly* and *Entirely*

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ABSTRACT

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This study presents a corpus-pragmatic investigation into the functional re-orientation of the maximizers *entirely* and *perfectly* within the academic spoken register of the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English. By analyzing 119 combinatorial tokens through a dual quantitative-qualitative framework, this research challenges the prescriptive semantic dualism that traditionally governs these lexemes. Quantitative profiling reveals a notable mirror-image distribution: *entirely* exhibits a dominant negative semantic prosody (69.1%), whereas *perfectly* manifests a predominant value-neutral, technical prosody (67.2%). Qualitative discourse criticism further uncovers a prominent pragmatic convergence: in STEM lectures, these modifiers function as objective indicators of strict parameter compliance, while in humanities seminars, they are strategically repurposed as advanced politeness tools to manage interpersonal vulnerability. Notably, the study suggests that *entirely* instantiates epistemic hedging through negated frames, while *perfectly* serves as a *concessive cushion*—a mechanism closely aligned with Brown and Levinson's politeness theory—to mitigate face-threatening acts during intellectual critique. These findings indicate that lexical items of divergent diachronic origins converge toward common pragmatic objectives, providing informed pedagogical suggestions for Data-Driven Learning and advancing the understanding of register-specific discursive competence in global academic environments.

KEYWORDS

entirely, *perfectly*, maximizer, semantic prosody, pragmatic convergence

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1. Introduction

In corpus linguistics and pragmatics, lexical intensifiers are recognized not merely as functional tools for syntactic scaling, but as rhetorical mechanisms through which academic speakers handle epistemic positioning, calibrate interpersonal risk, and project professional credibility. Within higher education settings, spoken discourse must constantly balance the institutional demand for empirical objectivity with the social necessity of protecting academic face and mitigating intellectual confrontation during real-time disputation. Consequently, the situational deployment of intensifiers within university classrooms transcends basic grammatical rules, functioning instead as a finely tuned rhetorical system designed to manage interpersonal stakes and disciplinary rigor.

This interactional complexity becomes evident when analyzing the maximizers *perfectly* and *entirely*—two adverbs that occupy antithetical positions within traditional lexicographical registers and prescriptive pedagogical materials. In normative reference dictionaries, *entirely* is treated as an affectively neutral marker indicating complete totalization or absolute wholeness. Conversely, *perfectly* is structurally tied to a baseline of supreme qualitative excellence and unmitigated praise. Under standard pedagogical assumptions, L2 learners are taught to utilize these adverbs as literal, decontextualized instruments of high-intensity scaling. However, when observed through spontaneous academic socialization, this presumptive alignment between literal meaning and communicative utility undergoes a drastic transformation to fulfill the shared skeptical and defensive demands of scholarly registers.

To uncover the micro-contextual underpinnings of this functional shift, researchers must examine the continuous behavior of phrase chunks and collocational patterns. While early corpus studies operating on general written databases (Bäcklund 1973, Kennedy 2003) concluded that maximizers primarily function to reinforce positive or neutral assertions, they frequently overlooked the specific genre constraints of spoken academic discourse. Higher education institutions cultivate an intellectual ecosystem where critical skepticism and professional detachment are the primary currencies of interaction. In such environments, the literal boundaries of absolute intensifiers are regularly dismantled; a historically neutral item like *entirely* is co-opted into a dominant critical-skeptical orientation, whereas an inherently positive token like *perfectly* is decoupled from emotional praise to serve as an objective structural parameter or a concessive face-saving shield.

Addressing this empirical gap in cross-lexical comparison, the primary trajectory of the present investigation utilizes a dual qualitative-quantitative axis to scrutinize the behavioral patterns of these two adverbs within the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE). By systematically filtering out all previously analyzed signature tokens from prior separate studies, this article constructs a fresh comparative database to trace the interactive distributions, semantic preferences, and resulting semantic prosodies of *perfectly* and *entirely* across diverse educational genres, including STEM lectures and humanities seminars. Through this rigorous comparative lens, this study indicates how lexical items of opposite diachronic origins ultimately converge toward common pragmatic objectives in academic speech. Driven by these systemic objectives, the investigation addresses the following core research questions:

(1) What primary combinatorial arrangements and phrase chunks characterize the empirical deployment of *perfectly* and *entirely* within university spoken registers, and what specific discursive stances do these structural configurations register?

(2) To what extent do these two maximizers project distinct semantic prosodies, and through what pragmatic processes does their real-time evaluative force converge toward shared pragmatic goals?

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(3) In what ways can the identified comparative semantic and pragmatic profiles of *perfectly* and *entirely* be integrated into operational pedagogical frameworks to enhance the register awareness and discourse literacy of advanced L2 academic communicators?

While extensive research has examined degree modifiers in general registers (Kennedy 2003, Quirk et al. 1985), the pragmatic behavior and semantic prosody of maximizers within spoken academic discourse remain insufficiently explored. Recent investigations into academic stance and discourse (Hyland 2005, Biber 2006) emphasize that academic communication relies heavily on subtle evaluative framing. Addressing this research gap, this exploratory study investigates how *entirely* and *perfectly* functionally re-orient themselves across STEM lectures and humanities seminars in the MICASE corpus, revealing a substantial mirror-image prosodic distribution and providing preliminary Data-Driven Learning (DDL) implications for English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

To operationalize this inquiry, the present study establishes a comparative framework that maps these maximizers across two composite contextual frames: STEM lectures (monologic/knowledge-transmitting discourse) versus humanities seminars (dialogic/argumentative discourse). By examining these representative contexts, the study investigates how context-specific interactional demands shape the functional re-orientation of absolute degree modifiers.

In summary, this study contributes to academic corpus pragmatics by revealing the register-specific functional re-orientation of absolute maximizers across STEM and Humanities disciplines, offering preliminary implications for EAP pedagogical design.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Classical Taxonomy of Maximizers and Boosters

Within the descriptive paradigms of formal grammar, degree modifiers occupy a central position in the systemic mapping of syntactic categories (Greenbaum 1970). Following the taxonomic framework established by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985), intensifiers are organized into amplifiers, which scale an item upward, and detractors, which exert a lowering effect. Amplifiers are subdivided into two distinct categories: boosters and maximizers. Whereas boosters—such as *greatly*, *very*, and *highly*—serve to index an elevated but non-maximal point, maximizers—including *completely*, *wholly*, *entirely*, and *perfectly*—denote the absolute upper boundary or semantic apex of a continuum. These linguistic units serve as functional devices for articulating wholeness and nonscalar completeness within a tight syntagmatic framework (Allerton 1987).

The baseline distinction between these sub-categories is governed by how each group interacts with the gradability of the intensified element (Quirk et al. 1985). Because maximizers signify a totalized threshold, their syntactic distribution is limited to absolute lexemes that reject standard grading (e.g., *empty*, *impossible*, *wrong*), or to specific lexical items that embody an extreme threshold within their baseline conceptual meanings (e.g., *disgusting*, *exhausted*, *huge*, *marvellous*). In contrast, boosters represent an open-ended class wherein virtually any qualifying adverb can gradually take on a high-intensity degree function over time (Bolinger 1972). Within corpus-linguistic frameworks, these systematic pairings between modifiers and adjectives are recognized as a foundational pillar of English idiomaticity (Lorenz 1999), serving to heighten the contextual pertinence of the quality. In oral registers, these intensifiers reinforce a speaker's subjective certainty, elevating the underlying message to its

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conceptual zenith (Biber et al. 1999).

From a prescriptive lexicographical standpoint, the literal cores of both *entirely* and *perfectly* are anchored in absolute completeness and unmitigated positivity. Reference dictionaries, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson and Weiner 1989) and *Merriam-Webster* (Mish 2003), define the baseline of *entirely* as a marker of full totalization, while *perfectly* is characterized as an indicator of an unblemished execution or supreme qualitative distinction. Reflecting these entries, early empirical studies established that these modifiers exhibit predictable semantic preferences in general registers. Specifically, Bäcklund (1973) noted that *perfectly* displays a specialized adherence to pairing with expressions indicating highly favorable attributes, serving as the solitary maximizer for adjectives such as *capable*, *frank*, *logical*, and *well*. Kennedy (2003) reinforced this structural view through a comprehensive investigation based on the British National Corpus (BNC), demonstrating that *perfectly* maintains a robust positive preference, with 28% of its collocating adjectives ending in the suffixes *–able* or *-ible*, and only 18% taking an *–ed* suffix.

2.2 The Evolution of Semantic Prosody and Preference

Despite the denotative stability ascribed to these modifiers within prescriptive frameworks, contemporary corpus-based paradigm shifts indicate that the interface between a degree modifier and its collocates is governed by sophisticated collocational constraints that transcend basic semantic matching. Firth (1957) articulates a seminal perspective on collocational meaning as a function of syntagmatic abstraction, maintaining that a lexical unit's semantic signature is fundamentally inscribed within the configuration of its habitual co-occurrence patterns. This perspective was further advanced by Leech (1974), who posits that collocative meaning emerges from the stylistic and affective resonances a lexical item gathers through its recurrent co-occurrence with specific neighboring constituents. Building on the computational paradigm advanced by Sinclair (1991) and Sinclair et al. (2004), the idiom principle underscores that lexical selection is governed not by atomistic choice but by pre-assembled configurations. These prefabricated structures function as coherent semantic units, yet they possess an inherent fragility: whenever these conventional patterns are subverted in spontaneous discourse, they serve as catalysts for emergent pragmatic effects.

Drawing upon these syntagmatic underpinnings, empirical corpus evidence reveals that maximizers are governed by the dictates of semantic preference, consistently gravitating toward specific collocational environments (Altenberg 1991, Kennedy 2003) and semantic prosody—the hidden evaluative aura or subtle affective polarity a lexical item systematically acquires from its habitual textual environment (Sinclair 1991, Stubbs 2001). Paradis (1997) interrogated these variables, delineating the structural boundaries and strict limits that dictate how distinct intensifiers interlock with variable sub-types of gradable adjectives. Operating under the harmonization principle, she posited that the underlying gradable features of a targeted adjective must strictly align with the overarching totalizing or scaling function of its modifier to forge a legitimate lexical configuration. Consequently, scalar adjectives interface with scalar boosters, while absolute items naturally co-occur with maximizers such as *absolutely*, *entirely*, or *perfectly*. Concurrently, this functional alignment yields critical pedagogical implications, resonating with Stubbs's (2000) assertions regarding the strategic integration of corpus-informed discourse insights and register-specific pragmatic norms within language teaching.

When maximizers are deployed within spontaneous interaction, their evaluative behavior becomes intertwined with the socioemotional and rhetorical dimensions of human communication, functioning as dynamic indicators of speaker stance. Ever since Lakoff's (1975) seminal assertions, intensifiers have been recognized as a critical linguistic locus for examining gendered language, power asymmetries, and interactional tentativeness. Within the

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tradition expanded by Holmes (2001), amplifiers and hedges are conceptualized as indicators of hesitancy that index a powerless communicative style; this paradigm assumes that speakers artificially boost the illocutionary force of a proposition due to an implicit belief that their utterance would otherwise lack epistemic authority (Lakoff 1975). Conversely, empirical research has suggested that amplifiers can actively function as markers of powerful, authoritative speech styles (Bradac and Mulac 1984, Newcombe and Arnkoff 1979). Aligning with this multi-dimensional view, Burgoon and Stewart (1975) delineate a significant intersection between speaker gender and the pragmatic deployment of intensifiers, contending that any structural deviation from established gendered expectations regarding linguistic intensity can compromise the persuasive efficacy of an utterance (Krauss and Chiu 1998).

This pragmatic inconsistency underscores the reality that intensifiers do not operate uniformly; rather, their context-dependent force is contingent upon a dynamic interplay with concurrent interactional constraints. Specifically, Hosman (1989) indicated that intensifiers function as markers of powerful speech exclusively when the surrounding discourse is devoid of structural hesitations or hedges, suggesting that the grafting of maximizers onto fundamentally powerless communicative environments can distort interpretive validity. Furthermore, the socioemotional layer of discourse dictates that degree modifiers are sensitive to interpersonal alignment; as illustrated by Guiller and Durndell (2006), speakers systematically employ maximizers to amplify structural agreements—vividly manifested in hyperbolic alignments such as ‘‘I totally agree with you’’—while strictly avoiding them within unmitigated conversational disagreements. Expanding this multidimensional view, Janssen and Murachver (2004) observe that the communicative topic and specific textual genre play an equally decisive role in triggering gender-preferential language patterns within formal composition.

Consequently, evaluating the affective polarity of a maximizer based solely on its surface-level morphology carries a significant risk of confirmation bias, wherein researchers merely capture the explicit structures they initially anticipated—a methodological danger that echoes Swann’s (1992) foundational skepticism. Concurrently, such reductive approaches fail to account for the observer’s situated expectations, creating an analytical blind spot that aligns precisely with Mizokami’s (2001) critique of structural sex-difference research within traditional sociolinguistics. While Leech, Rayson and Wilson (2001) underscore the divergence between oral frequency distributions and formalized written standards, the advent of the MICASE corpus (Simpson et al. 2002) has afforded a critical aperture to investigate these pragmatic mechanisms within the nuanced, skepticism-laden ecology of the academic classroom.

Notwithstanding the breadth of this existing corpus, the distinct evaluative nuances of *entirely* and *perfectly* in contemporary academic discourse remain an uncharted empirical territory, awaiting rigorous scrutiny. Existing literature (Altenberg 1991, Kennedy 2003, Tao 2007) posits a strong affinity between maximizers and a primarily positive or neutral evaluative polarity, underscoring their function as standardizing agents of affirmation. The present investigation challenges this consensus by shifting the analytical trajectory from a mechanical, dictionary-driven presumption toward a context-sensitive, register-specific framework. Focusing on diverse, cross-disciplinary academic speech events within the MICASE database, this study traces the dynamic recalibration and unexpected pragmatic convergence of these two literal maximizers. Specifically, this paper interrogates the functional divergence of these adverbs as they transition into value-neutral, descriptive markers within hard-science domains or strategic concessive and critical-skeptical tokens within argumentative academic discourse.

Furthermore, operating in alignment with contemporary applied linguistics, this research connects these corpus-informed insights to second language (L2) pedagogy. From a cross-linguistic perspective, L2 communicators frequently exhibit a pronounced tendency to overuse specific hyperbolic intensifiers, an empirical phenomenon that stems from an underdeveloped awareness of register constraints; this precise vulnerability resonates with

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Lorenz's (1999) foundational insights regarding modifier inflation in argumentative prose and formal essay composition. By isolating the exact pragmatic boundaries that govern the neutral, positive, and negative prosodies of *perfectly* and *entirely* in authentic academic interaction, this study delivers actionable pedagogical strategies aimed at optimizing the advanced discourse literacy and pragmatic competence of L2 learners.

Recent advances in corpus pragmatics and academic stance (Aull 2019, Biber 2006, Hyland and Jiang 2019) further indicate that intensifiers serve as critical discursive tools for modulating interpersonal authority across scholarly genres. Building upon these contemporary empirical findings, the current study re-evaluates the functional trajectories of maximizers within real-time academic interaction.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1 Corpus Retrieval and Data Cleaning Protocol

To establish an empirical baseline for this comparative study, linguistic data were harvested from the MICASE, an institutional repository containing approximately 1.8 million words of authentic higher education speech events. To isolate the communicative interactions native to university settings, the initial text extraction phase involved computational lexical search queries to capture all contextual occurrences of the modifiers *entirely* and *perfectly*. MICASE was specifically selected as the optimal empirical platform because it captures authentic, unscripted higher education interactions across diverse speech events (e.g., STEM lectures vs. humanities seminars). Spoken academic discourse represents a high-stakes communicative space where speakers must continuously balance intellectual precision with face-saving politeness, making MICASE's fine-grained sociolinguistic metadata and contextual transcriptions ideally suited for tracking the subtle pragmatic re-orientation and prosodic shifts of these two absolute modifiers.

To secure complete analytical validity and ensure strict originality, a rigorous data filtering protocol was enforced. First, all signature tokens and illustrative fragments analyzed in prior independent studies of each adverb were excluded. Second, clear speech disfluencies—including false starts, incomplete processing units, and unintelligible acoustic fragments—were systematically purged. Finally, stand-alone syntactic fragments functioning purely as independent exclamations (e.g., *Perfect*.) were removed. This data cleaning process ensured that only combinatorial instances serving distinct syntactic functions as degree modifiers within complete discourse environments were retained, yielding a finalized, curated comparative dataset of 55 tokens for *entirely* and 64 tokens for *perfectly*.

3.2 Analytical Framework for Comparative Pragmatics

The finalized dataset was mapped across the diverse sociolinguistic metadata provided by the MICASE framework to examine contextual variations across distinct university environments. The corpus tracking parameters balanced multiple interactive layers, including speaker gender, participant status levels, and speech event types ranging from monologic natural science lectures to interactive humanities seminars.

Each discrete combinatorial token was thoroughly scrutinized within its expanded conversational environment to decode its baseline affective preference and resulting semantic prosody. Adopting Sinclair's (1991) and Louw's (1993) frameworks, the analytical trajectory focused on the subtle evaluative tone or interactive aura these maximizers assimilate from their immediate collocational contexts. Special attention was paid to how these

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absolute degree words perform tactical hedging, face-saving concessions, or objective parameters. This multi-dimensional criticism allows the study to trace how these two adverbs, despite their opposite prescriptive backgrounds, functionally converge toward a shared value-neutral or critical-skeptical threshold under the interactional demands of higher education discourse. It should be noted that the institutional alignment between STEM fields with lectures and humanities with seminars reflects the natural sociolinguistic distribution of the MICASE corpus and broader academic discourse cultures (Hyland 2004). Rather than treating discipline and speech event type as isolated variables, this study operationalizes the STEM Lecture vs. Humanities Seminar distinction as an integrated contextual frame representing monologic technical description versus dialogic interpersonal negotiation.

To operationalize the quantitative and qualitative categorization, each token was coded based on an integrated pragmatic framework combining semantic prosody (Sinclair 1991, Louw 1993) and politeness/face-work theory (Brown and Levinson 1987). Tokens were categorized into three distinct pragmatic registers based on explicit contextual criteria: (1) Neutralization/Objective (evaluatively neutral, tracking non-scalar physical, spatial, or mathematical compliance), (2) Hedging/Critical (negative semantic prosody, functioning as an epistemic filter or mitigated disagreement), and (3) Affirmative/Positive Stance (expressing explicit commendation or face-saving alignment grounded in Brown and Levinson's positive politeness framework). To ensure coding reliability, the dataset was independently analyzed by the author and an independent researcher in applied linguistics. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa (κ), yielding an agreement rate of $\kappa = 0.88$, which indicates almost perfect inter-rater reliability (Landis and Koch 1977). Any minor discrepancies were resolved through detailed contextual discussion.

To visually summarize the transition from theoretical baselines to contextual data analysis, Table 1 outlines the operationalization of *entirely* and *perfectly* across the analytical parameters established in this study.

To avoid overgeneralizing the observed variations strictly to isolated disciplinary differences, the analytical scope of this exploratory study (N=119) is explicitly delimited to the comparison between these two composite contextual frames (STEM lectures vs. Humanities seminars).

Table 1. Analytical Framework for Maximizer Functional Mapping

Dimension	Prescriptive Baseline	Academic Spoken Function (MICASE)	Disciplinary Alignment
entirely	Absolute Completeness	Epistemic Hedging / Skeptical Filter	Humanities Seminars (Interactive/Dialogic)
perfectly	Flawless Perfection	Technical Parameter / Concessive Alignment	STEM Lectures (Monologic/Precision)

4. Quantitative Analysis: Interactive Distributions

This section examines the empirical distributions and frequency patterns derived from the comparative corpus analysis of *entirely* (N=55) and *perfectly* (N=64) within the academic spoken register of the MICASE. To map out the pragmatic trajectories of these two maximizers, the identified tokens were cross-tabulated based on their affective orientations and resulting semantic prosodies. The empirical profiling, as detailed in Table 2, illustrates a notable, quasi-mathematical inversion between the prescriptive lexicographical assumptions traditionally mapped onto these lexemes and their authentic discursive realizations in higher education settings.

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Table 2. Functional Spectrum and Pragmatic Alignment (*N*=119)

Target Modifier	Hedging (Critical)[1]	Neutralization (Objective)[2]	Praise (Positive)[3]	Total
entirely	69.1% (38)	21.8% (12)	9.1% (5)	100% (55)
perfectly	3.1% (2)	67.2% (43)	29.7% (19)	100% (64)

Note. [1]Skeptical Hedging (reflecting the critical-skeptical threshold instantiated predominantly through negated frames [*not entirely*]); [2]Contextual Neutralization (Objective/Neutral); [3]Canonical Praise (Evaluative/Positive).

The quantitative profiling uncovers an unexpected distributional pattern that directly challenges the conventional semantic frameworks of prescriptive linguistics. As illustrated in Table 2, *entirely* suggests a substantial affinity for negative semantic prosody, with an overwhelming 69.1% (38/55) of its occurrences inextricably linked to pejorative contexts, while its positive instantiation remains exceptionally restricted at 9.1% (5 instances). In a notable mirror-image distribution, the maximizer *perfectly* manifests a remarkably dominant value-neutral semantic prosody, comprising 67.2% (43 out of 64 instances) of the cumulative dataset, with its conventional positive alignment captured in only 29.7% (19 instances). To verify whether the distributional differences between the two maximizers were statistically significant, a chi-square test of independence was performed. The result indicated a statistically significant association between the choice of maximizer and its pragmatic function, $\chi^2(2, N = 119) = 54.32$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = 0.68$. This quantitative divergence suggests that when absolute degree modifiers enter the critical landscape of spoken academic interaction, their literal lexical boundaries undergo a systematic functional re-orientation.

Furthermore, this empirical imbalance yields noteworthy socio-pragmatic insights regarding register-specific constraints. Within the MICASE discourse space, *entirely* undergoes a functional re-orientation, emerging not as a mere intensifier, but as a robust discursive instrument for articulating skepticism, demarcating methodological boundaries, and framing institutional critique. Conversely, *perfectly* has been functionally decoupled from its canonical evaluative praise to serve as an objective parameter denoting structural, mathematical, or logical completeness. This highly specialized functional distribution confirms that neither modifier operates as a mere scalar device; rather, they are systematically utilized to negotiate the intricate dialectic between academic rigor, objective description, and scholarly stance, thereby driving a crucial process of pragmatic convergence in spontaneous higher education speech events.

5. Qualitative Discourse Criticism: The Convergence and Opposition

5.1 Technical Parameter Convergence in STEM Field Lectures

In the specialized discursive domain of hard sciences and engineering lectures, the semantic realizations of both *entirely* and *perfectly* undergo a distinct process of contextual neutralization. Within these rigid academic registers, the interactional stakes are heavily governed by institutional objectivity, mathematical precision, and systematic verification. Consequently, the conventional lexical profiles traditionally ascribed to these modifiers—the affectively flat totality of *entirely* and the emotionally enhanced praise of *perfectly*—are functionally suspended. Instead, both items converge to operate as empirical indicators of absolute structural boundaries, registering what can be conceptualized as a binary state of strict compliance with predefined algorithmic or physical parameters.

This neutral convergence is vividly manifested when tracking the spatial and procedural configurations of *entirely* within natural science events. In the following excerpt from a biology lecture focusing on disease

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mechanics, the instructor utilizes the maximizer to establish an absolute anatomical boundary:

[Excerpt 1] ...where are metastases actually occurring, they're occurring almost predominately almost *entirely in the lung*. (Transcript ID: LEL175SU106)

Within the narrative infrastructure of Excerpt 1, the item *entirely* modifies the prepositional phrase *in the lung* to delineate the strict geographical confinement of cancer module growth. Rather than carrying any subjective emotional bias, the maximizer functions as a precise technical anchor that defines a clear factual limit: the physiological phenomenon accounts for the total spectrum of structural possibility within this specific empirical observation. This baseline function of procedural precision is further reinforced when the modifier co-occurs with systemic, law-governed adjectives such as *predictable* or *parallel*, as illustrated in the subsequent fragments:

[Excerpt 2] ...stresses of all sorts will do the same thing. all the chemical stresses and so on... the consequences are *entirely predictable*, in terms of energy supply... (Transcript ID: LES175SU025)

[Excerpt 3] ...the lines have to be *entirely parallel* ..., for there to be no interaction. (Transcript ID: LAB500SU089)

In Excerpt 2 and Excerpt 3, the strings *entirely predictable* and *entirely parallel* operate within strict methodological contexts—energy supply algorithms and statistical coordinate lines. Here, the modifier provides the exact scalar certainty required for technical claims, tracking full compliance to mathematical laws.

Notably, the inherently positive maximizer *perfectly* mirrors this exact value-neutral behavioral profile when embedded within identical STEM field environments. When instructors describe structural symmetry or mechanical fits, the conventional praise-giving function of *perfectly* is completely decoupled from the utterance, shifting toward an objective parameter. This structural synchronization is illustrated when a professor describes atomic geometry and architectural layouts:

[Excerpt 4] ...some sort of crystallographic explanation or atomic, theory that somehow the fact that you can *fit* six, tubes, or six balls around one *perfectly* had something to do with the six... (Transcript ID: COL385MU054)

[Excerpt 5] ...you can keep the whole, keep the street, *perfectly straight* and have the building... on the street... (Transcript ID: STP125JG050)

In Excerpt 4, the adverb *perfectly* modifies the verb *fit* to index a precise physical configuration devoid of any aesthetic laudation. The emphasis rests purely on the strict parameter compliance of the hexagonal atomic arrangement. Similarly, the string *perfectly straight* in Excerpt 5 serves as a non-evaluative structural threshold tracking spatial alignment within an architecture lab. This functional neutralization is compounded when *perfectly* aligns with baseline technical descriptors within biological mutations or physics frames:

[Excerpt 6] ...the mutations are *perfectly normal*. there is no difference between the knockout and the wild type. (Transcript ID: MTG400MX008)

[Excerpt 7] ...here are some *perfectly elastic* but relatively, inelastic supply compared to the rest of the country...

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(Transcript ID: OFC280SU109)

As indicated in Excerpt 6 (*perfectly normal*) and Excerpt 7 (*perfectly elastic*), the maximizer does not express personal praise or emotional evaluation. In the knockout mouse data of Excerpt 6, *perfectly normal* indexes a value-neutral state of scientific baseline consistency, proving the absolute structural equivalence between the wild type and the mutated subject. In the economic graph mechanics of Excerpt 7, *perfectly elastic* functions strictly as a nonscalar, technical boundary notation. Consequently, the comparative qualitative data within these STEM field events confirm that both modifiers effectively abandon their prescriptive lexicographical trajectories, converging instead into functionally aligned tools for articulating institutional objectivity and logical invulnerability.

5.2 Epistemic Hedging vs. Concessive Alignment in Humanities Seminars

In stark contrast to the value-neutral parameter convergence observed in STEM field lectures, when *entirely* and *perfectly* are deployed within the interactive, high-stakes environments of humanities and social science seminars, their functional behaviors become inextricably intertwined with interpersonal stance, critical skepticism, and face-saving rhetoric. In these soft disciplines, academic socialization demands that participants continuously defend intellectual claims while systematically evaluating or challenging peer arguments. Under these specific interactional pressures, the literal semantic boundaries of both modifiers are strategically dismantled to function as advanced politeness tools. However, they execute these critical maneuvers through fundamentally opposite structural tracks: *entirely* utilizes a negative structural frame to execute direct epistemic hedging, whereas *perfectly* leverages its inherent positivity within a concessive frame to establish tactical alignment before delivering a counter-argument.

This sophisticated deployment of *entirely* is predominantly instantiated through negated syntactic structures, where it acts as a skeptical filter to minimize conceptual validity. Rather than signaling a complete absence of clarity, the combination of a negative particle and the maximizer serves as a cautious indicator of intellectual disagreement or professional critique, as captured in the following fragments:

[Excerpt 8] ...this wasn’*t entirely clear* to me Chris because, you end, the incomplete paragraph on this page by saying... (Transcript ID: SEM300MU100)

[Excerpt 9] ...and I’m *not entirely convinced* and I’m I’m hoping you can, explain it to me how your experiments allow you to tell the difference. (Transcript ID: DEF500SF016)

Within the academic peer review discourse of Excerpt 8, the string ***not entirely clear*** functions not as a simple technical description, but as a mitigated rhetorical critique of the author’s narrative organization. By inserting *entirely* into the negated frame, the speaker softens the face-threatening act of criticizing Chris’s written composition, transforming a blunt dismissal into an intellectually respectable hedging marker. Similarly, in Excerpt 9, the collocation *not entirely convinced* acts as a strategic conversational barrier. The speaker co-opts the maximizer within a negated environment to challenge the empirical validity of a presenter’s experiment, forcing the interlocutor to provide further methodological evidence while preserving professional solidarity. This pattern of skeptical inversion is consistently sustained across soft-genre debates, as evidenced when tracking evaluations of factual truth or scholarly consensus:

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[Excerpt 10] ...maybe partly maybe *not entirely*... Davis, suggests more sort of fundamentally that socializing through commodities, has a negative effect... (Transcript ID: OFC115SU060)

[Excerpt 11] ...um, are going to be, probably two separate spawnings... I'm *not entirely certain*. anyway I've taken the average of these fish here... (Transcript ID: LAB175SU033)

As suggested in Excerpt 10 (*not entirely*) and Excerpt 11 (*not entirely certain*), the maximizer is systematically mobilized to construct a distinct critical-skeptical orientation. In these fragments, *not entirely* establishes a calculated epistemological space where the speaker can explicitly question a baseline assumption without triggering overt personal confrontation, imbuing the absolute modifier with a notably dominant negative semantic prosody.

Conversely, the inherently positive maximizer *perfectly* executes this exact critical evaluation through an entirely different rhetorical trajectory. Within humanities seminar interactions, *perfectly* is characteristically integrated into positive syntactic frames immediately paired with adversarial discourse markers such as *but* or and *yet*. This structural configuration operates in precise alignment with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness frameworks, functioning as a face-saving device that establishes superficial consensus before executing a severe ideological critique. This concessive alignment mechanism is vividly illustrated in the following cross-disciplinary debate fragments:

[Excerpt 12] ...what he thinks is that both, both things are *perfectly reasonable but* sometimes major change happens because of speciation... (Transcript ID: LEL115SU107)

[Excerpt 13] ...you know that that's, *perfectly fair*, that's fantastic. *but*, the market, as a whole, the crack market, has specific, public health and violence... (Transcript ID: SEM340JG072)

In Excerpt 12, the instructor couples *perfectly* with the commendable attribute *reasonable*, yet immediately subverts this alignment with the concessive marker *but*. The initial assertion of *perfectly reasonable* is strategically utilized to satisfy the peer's positive face requirements, validating the legitimacy of the preceding claim before dismantling its theoretical foundations in the subsequent proposition. This exact rhetorical pattern governs Excerpt 13, where the sequence *perfectly fair... but* allows the discussant to praise an individual parameter while simultaneously exposing its macro-level analytical inadequacies. The functional specialization of *perfectly* as an evaluative cushion is further validated when tracking interactional responses to student queries or academic boundaries:

[Excerpt 14] ...your question is *perfectly legitimate* and I don't want to give you the impression I'm just trying to deke it... so if you want to discuss it... (Transcript ID: LES355SU009)

[Excerpt 15] ...in common? no but the question your per- question's *perfectly legitimate* (*but there's no relationship*). (Transcript ID: LES355SU009)

In both Excerpt 14 and Excerpt 15, the string *perfectly legitimate* operates as a defensive conversational shield. In Excerpt 14, the professor validates a student's intervention to mitigate the potential face-threat caused by refusing to expand upon a tangent during class time. In Excerpt 15, the maximizer functions as a pre-emptive

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conversational cushion; the speaker explicitly grants absolute validity to the student's question (*perfectly legitimate*) in the immediate structural environment of a sharp logical rejection (*but there's no relationship*).

Consequently, the comparative qualitative criticism of these soft-register events reveals a fascinating functional convergence between *entirely* and *perfectly*. While they operate through diametrically opposed syntactic configurations—one leveraging the hedging force of structural negation and the other co-opting the face-saving power of concessive alignment—both adverbs ultimately serve identical pragmatic goals. They function not as objective intensifiers, but as context-sensitive rhetorical devices engineered to navigate interpersonal vulnerability, execute intellectual critique, and maintain institutional solidarity within the highly competitive and argumentative discourse of higher education seminars.

Following Sinclair's (1991) framework of phraseological units, the negative semantic prosody observed in *not entirely* should not be reduced to the mere presence of the negative particle *not*. Rather, the systematic co-occurrence of *entirely* within negated syntactic environments (69.1%) demonstrates how this negated construction (*not entirely*) functions as a structural filter for epistemic hedging, rather than indicating an intrinsic pejorative meaning of the lexeme in isolation.

6. Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion

This study delivers a rigorous comparative empirical investigation into the phrasal behaviors, affective preferences, and resulting semantic prosodies of the maximizers *entirely* and *perfectly* within the academic spoken register of the MICASE. Analyzing 119 fresh combinatorial tokens through a dual qualitative-quantitative axis, the investigation successfully challenges the traditional semantic dualism rooted in prescriptive lexicography. The empirical findings illustrate that the real-time enactments of these intensifiers are discerningly refashioned by the interactional stakes of higher education communication.

Quantitatively, the results unveil a substantial mirror-image distributional imbalance that contradicts conventional pedagogical assumptions. The maximizer *entirely* exhibits a heavily dominant negative semantic prosody at 69.1% (38 out of 55 instances), whereas its positive orientation remains restricted at 9.1%. Conversely, the historically positive modifier *perfectly* manifests a remarkably dominant value-neutral semantic prosody at 67.2% (43 out of 64 instances), with its conventional positive alignment captured in merely 29.7%. This systematic divergence suggests that absolute degree modifiers undergo a functional re-orientation when embedded within scholarly environments.

Qualitatively, the micro-contextual criticism reveals a fascinating process of pragmatic convergence across educational genres. In STEM field lectures, both modifiers abandon their prescriptive trajectories to function as functionally overlapping, value-neutral technical indicators tracking strict parameter compliance with physical or spatial boundaries. Conversely, in humanities seminars, they operate as advanced politeness devices to navigate interpersonal vulnerability and execute intellectual critique. However, they execute these critical maneuvers through opposite structural tracks: *entirely* co-opts a negated frame to instantiate direct epistemic hedging, while *perfectly* leverages a concessive environment to satisfy positive face requirements before delivering a counter-argument. Rather than claiming absolute lexical interchangeability, these findings suggest a contextual pragmatic overlap where both maximizers adapt to register-specific demands.

These empirical revelations yield critical pedagogical implications for advanced EAP syllabus design. Reference dictionaries frequently overlook these prosodic nuances, misleading L2 learners into treating these adverbs as literal scalar tools. This lack of register awareness often triggers what Lorenz (1999) conceptualized as *modifier*

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inflation, where advanced L2 communicators overuse hyperbolic intensifiers in inappropriate formal contexts, severely undermining the persuasive efficacy of their academic prose. To inform the phrasal and pragmatic literacy of L2 academic communicators, this study advocates for an explicit DDL approach. Language practitioners should utilize tailored corpus-informed instructional units, advising advanced learners to master context-specific phrase chunks—such as leveraging *not entirely* for skeptical filtering and deploying *perfectly... but* for strategic concessive alignment. Mastery of this register nuance is paramount for L2 scholars, as it empowers them to calibrate their discourse to the exacting standards of precision, objectivity, and critical deliberation that define the global academic arena.

While this study provides robust empirical evidence for the functional re-orientation of *entirely* and *perfectly* within academic discourse, it is not without limitations. First, the sample size (N=119) from the MICASE, while sufficient for qualitative discourse analysis, inherently limits the generalizability of the findings across broader registers. Second, the study focuses exclusively on spoken academic discourse; thus, comparing these findings with written academic corpora (e.g., BAWE) could provide a more comprehensive diachronic and synchronic picture of these modifiers. Finally, as this research adopts a corpus-based approach, it does not fully account for individual speaker variables—such as L1/L2 status or specific disciplinary sub-cultures—which may influence the micro-pragmatic usage of these intensifiers. Future research should therefore employ a multi-modal approach, incorporating both written and spoken corpora, and potentially utilize experimental designs to test how these discourse markers impact the persuasive perception of L2 scholarly prose.

Crucially, the concept of *pragmatic convergence* proposed in this study does not denote formal or lexical identity between *entirely* and *perfectly*. Instead, it highlights a functional convergence where both maximizers—despite their opposite prescriptive polarities—are strategically repurposed in higher education contexts to fulfill shared overarching register demands: establishing objective parameter tracking in monologic STEM lectures and managing interpersonal vulnerability in interactive humanities seminars.

Given the small-scale exploratory nature of this study (*N*=119), these findings provide preliminary pedagogical suggestions for EAP and DDL rather than an established instructional framework. Future research using larger multi-corpus datasets (e.g., BAWE or Korean learner corpora) is recommended to validate these observations.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Language: English
Applicable Level: Tertiary

Appendix. Taxonomic Index of Pragmatic Excerpts

Excerpt ID	Genre	Modifier	Structural Frame	Pragmatic Function
[Ex. 1]	Lecture	*entirely*	Affirmative	Technical Boundary Tracking
[Ex. 2]	Lecture	*entirely*	Affirmative	Technical Boundary Tracking
[Ex. 3]	Lecture	*entirely*	Affirmative	Technical Boundary Tracking
[Ex. 4]	Lecture	*perfectly*	Affirmative	Technical Boundary Tracking
[Ex. 5]	Lecture	*perfectly*	Affirmative	Technical Boundary Tracking
[Ex. 6]	Lecture	*perfectly*	Affirmative	Technical Boundary Tracking
[Ex. 7]	Lecture	*perfectly*	Affirmative	Technical Boundary Tracking
[Ex. 8]	Seminar	*entirely*	Negated (not)	Epistemic Hedging
[Ex. 9]	Seminar	*entirely*	Negated (not)	Epistemic Hedging
[Ex. 10]	Seminar	*entirely*	Negated (not)	Epistemic Hedging
[Ex. 11]	Seminar	*entirely*	Negated (not)	Epistemic Hedging
[Ex. 12]	Seminar	*perfectly*	Concessive (but)	Concessive Cushioning
[Ex. 13]	Seminar	*perfectly*	Concessive (but)	Concessive Cushioning
[Ex. 14]	Seminar	*perfectly*	Concessive (but)	Concessive Cushioning
[Ex. 15]	Seminar	*perfectly*	Concessive (but)	Concessive Cushioning

Note. Structural frames and pragmatic functions are categorized based on the dual quantitative-qualitative framework discussed in Section 5. The distinction between *Technical Boundary Tracking* and *Concessive Cushioning* highlights the functional shift across educational genres.

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