

Stance, Inter/Subjectivity and
Identity in Discourse

Juana I. Marín-Arrese / Laura Hidalgo-Downing /
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Stance, Inter/Subjectivity and Identity in Discourse



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MARIO SERRANO-LOSADA

Spoiler Alert, This is no Spoiler: Mirativity, Assumption and Irony at Play¹

Abstract: The present chapter focuses on the pragmatic parenthetical *spoiler alert*, which is used as a humorous, ironic device to underscore the obvious nature of a statement (e.g., *Four orcas chase a penguin and spoiler alert, it doesn't end well, NOW*). This corpus-based study first traces the history of this relatively recent innovation –which originates as a disclaimer to warn readers of potential plot revelations in online discussion forums– to then explore the meanings and pragmatic functions that this expression has acquired over its short history. Corpus data for this chapter were drawn from COCA and NOW. My analysis shows that, despite its specialised origins in online forums, the expression has attained a remarkably wide dispersion. Moreover, the parenthetical itself has undergone an important semantic shift. A warning expression in origin, *spoiler alert* first acquired mirative extensions, i.e., meaning related to surprise and unexpectedness, to then acquire assumed evidential extensions, expressing evidence based on assumption or logical reasoning. This shift from mirativity to assumed evidentiality was brought about through pragmatic enrichment, as a result of humorous and ironic uses of the parenthetical: *spoiler alert* no longer introduces surprising or revealing information, but a predictable or self-evident fact.

Keywords *spoiler alert, pragmatic parentheticals, language change, semantic shift, humour, cooptation, mirativity, evidentiality, assumption.*

1 Introduction

The existing inventory of pragmatic markers and parentheticals is in constant flux. Over the last decades, a particularly salient number of parentheticals have emerged: a group of expressions that convey mirative and assumed evidential overtones and which are frequently used with humorous or ironic intentions. This group includes expressions like *spoiler alert*, *plot twist*, *shocker*, *oh wait* and *surprise, surprise* as well as rebukes like *duh* and *no shit (sherlock)*. Many of them are associated with online communication and seem to be ephemeral – in fact, not all of them have actually diffused into the general language. However, with

1 For generous financial support, I am grateful to the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (grant PID2020-114604GB-100).

the sole exception of Andersen's (2015) study on *duh*, these expressions have received little scholarly attention. The present chapter zooms in on one of these relatively recent and unexplored innovations: the pragmatic parenthetical *spoiler alert*, illustrated in (1):

- (1) *Four orcas chase a penguin and spoiler alert, it doesn't end well.* (NOW:NZ:2020)

In (1), *spoiler alert* is used as a humorous device to underscore the obvious nature of the statement under its scope, by acknowledging that this information is expected or self-evident: it is a well-known fact that orcas are sophisticated predators that prey on fish, penguins, seals and even other cetaceans. The odds that the penguin will be able to escape the four killer whales are thus rather slim.

The aim of this contribution is twofold. First, this corpus-based study aims to trace the history of this expression, which originates as a disclaimer to warn readers of potential plot revelations in online discussions about films and television, as exemplified in (2):

- (2) *the following is a sample of what we received. (Spoiler alert! Many of the following responses contain key plot points.)* (COCA:News:2002)

Example (2) belongs to a piece on the movie *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* published in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. In this excerpt, *spoiler alert* is a disclaimer used to warn its readers about the remainder of the article: what follows the warning may disclose fundamental plot developments which those who have not seen the movie yet might not want to read about.

Second, this study aims to explore the range of meanings and pragmatic functions that *spoiler alert* has acquired over its short history. As will be shown, despite its specialised origins in online forums, the expression has attained a remarkable dispersion across different genres as a parenthetical expression (1). Moreover, this parenthetical has undergone an important semantic shift. A warning expression in origin, e.g. (2), *spoiler alert* first acquired mirative extensions, i.e., meaning related to surprise and unexpectedness, to then acquire assumed evidential extensions, expressing evidence based on assumption or logical reasoning. This shift from mirativity to assumed evidentiality was brought about through pragmatic enrichment, as a result of humorous and ironic uses of the parenthetical. Thus, *spoiler alert* does not necessarily introduce surprising or revealing information; it may also be used to underscore a predictable or self-evident fact, as shown in (1).

This chapter is organised as follows. Section 2 explores the notion of pragmatic parentheticals. Section 3 offers a brief outline of assumed evidentiality and mirativity, the two main semantic categories expressed through *spoiler alert*.

Section 4 introduces the data sources used in the study. While Section 5 explores the origins and the main discourse-pragmatic functions of *spoiler alert*, Section 6 provides an overall discussion of the rise and development of the parenthetical expression, focusing on semantic-pragmatic change. Finally, Section 7 puts forward some concluding remarks and issues for further research.

2 (Pragmatic) Parentheticals

As argued above, over its short history *spoiler alert* has become a formulaic expression that is often used parenthetically to express non-propositional, procedural meaning, as illustrated in (1) above. Parentheticals constitute a rather complex category. Broadly speaking, a parenthetical is an expression that is structurally independent from the utterance in which it is interpolated, and which interrupts the prosodic flow of that utterance (Dehé & Kavalova 2007: 1). Such expressions vary greatly as regards their length and category, and their main function is usually to add to, comment on or modify the proposition to which they are attached.

The most prototypical parentheticals are clausal forms like *I mean* or *you know*. However, a wide range of expressions fit the criteria to be considered parentheticals. In recent times, parentheticals have attracted a great deal of attention in the literature, having been examined from different theoretical frameworks both from a synchronic and a diachronic perspective (see, for instance, Dehé & Kavalova 2007; Brinton 2008; Kaltenböck, Heine & Kuteva 2011; Dehé 2014; Brinton 2017).

Any kind of linguistic material has the potential to be used parenthetically. Dehé (2014: 2–6) characterises parentheticals as a heterogeneous class that contains a diverse variety of expressions, ranging from finite clauses (e.g. *I guess*) to interjections (e.g. *huh*) or filled pauses (e.g. *um*). Thus, parenthetical expressions can virtually take any form, and any given segment of discourse could potentially be used parenthetically (Kaltenböck 2007: 29–31; Kaltenböck, Heine & Kuteva 2011: 856, 876).

Interpolated uses of *spoiler alert* like (3) can thus be broadly defined as parenthetical.

- (3) *Your dude will love you even if he knows that you poo sometimes! Which, spoiler alert, he already knows because you are a fellow human.* (COCA:Web:2012)

Brinton (2017) summarises the main characteristics of what she terms pragmatic parentheticals. I ground my consideration of *spoiler alert* as a pragmatic parenthetical on the following five very general characteristics adduced by

Brinton (2017: 8–10): in its parenthetical form, *spoiler alert* is (i) syntactically independent from its host clause, (ii) it has (limited) positional mobility, as it can appear in initial, medial or final position, (iii) it may constitute a separate intonation unit, (iv) its host clause is complete without the parenthetical expressions and (v) it has semantic secondary status (i.e., it is semantically backgrounded with respect to the host clause). These and other features have been dealt with extensively in the specialised literature.²

Several typologies and classifications of parentheticals have been put forward in the literature, and numerous terms have been used to refer to them and the various subtypes of expressions covered by this concept. While the terms *discourse marker* or *pragmatic marker* are generally used to describe shorter, highly frequent expressions such as *oh*, *well* or *like*, longer parenthetical expressions, especially clausal ones like *I mean*, *I think* or *as you know* have received a plethora of names. Such expressions are frequently described as *comment clauses* (see Quirk et al. 1985: 1112–1118; Brinton 2008), but also as *extra-clausal constituents* (see Kaltenböck, Keizer & Lohmann 2016: 1–2), *supplements* (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1350–1362) or *pragmatic parentheticals*, as Brinton (2017: 8–10) describes them in her most recent proposal.³

In a similar vein, Kaltenböck, Heine and Kuteva (2011: 856) put forward an alternative cover label for such expressions, the abbreviated form *thetical*, given that “not all instances of the category are in fact parenthetical in the sense that they are interpolated in or require an anchor utterance”, but can appear as free-standing expressions as well, as illustrated in the dialogue under (4):

- (4) - OPHIRA-EISENBERG: *And in the end of That Is All you do mention that he is the only person that will know what happened during the apocalypse.*
 - JOHN-HODGMAN: **Spoiler alert.**
 - OPHIRA-EISENBERG: *Yeah. (LAUGHTER)*
 - JOHN-HODGMAN: *It's possible that the world might not end on December 21st, 2012.*
 (COCA:SPOK:2012)

Given that *spoiler alert* can also be used in isolation forming utterances of its own, I will use both terms when describing the grammaticalised expression: *parenthetical* for actual interpolated instances like (1) and (3) and *thetical* for free standing instances of the expression like (4).

2 Not all authors agree on these features. Traugott (2015: 123), for instance, provides counterexamples to each of these characteristics. According to the author, “Comma intonation” is not required or even characteristic of PMs” (Traugott 2015: 126).

3 For terminological discussions, see, for instance, Heine (2013: 1207–1208) or Beeching (2016: 3–6).

3 Evidentiality and Mirativity from a Typological Perspective

In order to understand the meanings of parenthetical *spoiler alert*, it is important to have a working understanding of evidentiality and mirativity, as well as the relationship between these two semantic categories. This section puts forward some basic ideas regarding evidentiality and mirativity. After briefly examining these categories, I turn to the relationship between assumed evidentiality and mirativity.

3.1 (Assumed) Evidentiality

Roughly defined as “a linguistic category whose primary meaning is source of information”, evidentiality is a morphologically encoded category in about a quarter of the world’s languages (Aikhenvald 2004: 3). One of the most quoted examples in the literature appears under Table 1, which illustrates the three main evidential enclitics in Cuzco Quechua. As shown in the table, the same basic utterance (*parashan* ‘it is raining’) expresses different evidential meanings depending on which enclitic is used. Cuzco Quechua enclitics are used to mark direct evidence (*-mi*), reportative or hearsay evidence (*-si*) and reasoning or inferential evidence (*-chá*). According to Faller (2002: 14), these evidential markers are not obligatory, but their absence implies that the speaker has direct information.

Table 1. Cuzco Quechua evidentials (adapted from Faller 2002: 3)

<i>Direct evidence</i>	<i>Hearsay</i>	<i>Inference</i>
Para-sha-n- <i>mi</i> .	Para-sha-n- <i>si</i> .	Para-sha-n- <i>chá</i> .
rain-prog-3- <i>mi</i>	rain-prog-3- <i>si</i>	rain-prog-3- <i>chá</i>
‘It is raining (I see).’	‘It is raining (I was told).’	‘It might/must be raining (I conjecture).’

Aikhenvald’s (2004) detailed crosslinguistic survey on evidentials distinguishes as many as six different semantic parameters, which can be roughly classified as either ‘firsthand’ (visual and non-visual sensory), or ‘non-firsthand’ (inference, assumption, hearsay and quotative), that is, as direct or indirect evidentials.

Unlike many of the world’s languages which, like Quechua, have complex grammaticalised evidential systems, European languages generally express evidentiality lexically. Such is the case of English, which features abundant indirect evidential strategies (e.g. inferential/hearsay *seem*, Aijmer 2009; reportative *reportedly*, Celle 2009; Rozumko 2019). Whereas inference is based

The emphasised expression in (6), *obviously*, conveys assumed evidential nuances, since it entails assumption or general knowledge. In using this expression, the speaker points to the evidential source of what he is saying, emphasising shared points of view and common places (i.e., it is generally known that Democrats and Republicans hold opposite views on key issues like LGBTBI+ rights or gun control). Similarly, parenthetical *spoiler alert* in examples like (1) and (3) signals assumed evidentiality as well.

3.2 Mirativity

Closely related to evidentiality is the notion of mirativity. This category conveys “information which is new or unexpected to the speaker” (DeLancey 1997: 33), with overtones of surprise, sudden discovery and counter expectation (see DeLancey 2001; DeLancey 2012; Aikhenvald 2012). Despite their similarities, mirativity is regarded as a category of its own, independent from evidentiality, in the typological literature. Take the Tarma Quechua example in (7):

- (7) *turumanya* *inti-ta-m* *muyu-ra-ya:-naq*
 rainbow sun-ACC-CERT turn-CONT-PROG-3A/S.MIR
 [(*turns out*) a rainbow was surrounding the sun]
 (adapted from Adelaar 2013: 102)⁵

The Tarma Quechua mirative particle *-naq*, which I have rendered in English as *turns out*, marks the statement under its scope as unexpected and thus surprising. Notice that in this Quechuan variety, the mirative combines freely with the evidential marker of certainty (*-m*).⁶ The fact that evidential and mirative markers are compatible provides strong evidence for the consideration of the two phenomena as independent grammatical categories. Grammatical mirativity is attested in a vast number of languages; however, it is less widespread than evidentiality in the languages of the world (Aikhenvald 2012: 473).

5 The following abbreviations are used in this gloss: ACC = accusative; CERT = certain; CONT = continuous aspect; PROG = progressive aspect; A/S.= agent; MIR = mirative.
 6 According to Adelaar (2013: 102), ‘Tarma Quechua has a transparent system of evidentials consisting of three mutually exclusive categories: Certainty, Reported and Conjectural. The ‘Certainty’ evidential implies a firm conviction on the side of the speaker. It does not always mean that the speaker has witnessed the communicated state or event in person, but the utterance contains information that (s)he can vouch for.’

Languages around the globe have infinite ways to convey the linguistic reflexes of new information, surprise and related meanings like unexpectedness and counter expectation. Just like evidentiality, this semantic category can be expressed through a wide array of linguistic means. The pragmatic parenthetical *turns out* exemplified in (8) illustrates the use of a mirative strategy in English. Likewise, parenthetical *spoiler alert* is oftentimes used with a mirative intent (see Section 5.4.).

- (8) *I thought I'd looked everywhere. Everywhere but up, turns out.* (COCA:2009, in Serrano-Losada 2017: 174)

As hinted above, mirativity has often been accounted for in close connection with –and even as a part of– evidentiality. This is explained by the close ties between both categories: typologically, the connection between them is robust; in fact, most languages that mark mirativity have evidential systems, whether large or small. Moreover, evidential markers can have mirative overtones. The extant literature, however, generally agrees that, in spite of their close ties, there is enough evidence to consider evidentiality and mirativity as independent grammatical categories (see, among others, Aikhenvald 2004: 195–215 for an overview of the relationship between evidentiality and mirativity; Aikhenvald 2012; DeLancey 2012; Peterson 2015).

3.3 Assumed Evidentiality and Mirativity

Unlike other evidential categories, assumed evidentiality has been largely overlooked in English linguistics (see Blanco-Suárez & Serrano-Losada 2017). In fact, constructions that could be analysed as expressing this category have been sometimes analysed as mirative expressions. Such is the case of the *no wonder* construction illustrated in (9):

- (9) *No wonder model Sophie Dahl has health problems if she has dieted down from size 16 to size 8* (Gentens et al. 2016: 126)

According to Gentens et al. (2016) and Van linden (2020), such a construction would be an instance of mirativity, as *no wonder* encodes a meaning of lack of surprise. Their analysis is sound insofar as it adapts a label, mirativity, to account for both ends of the spectrum: surprise and the lack thereof. Typological studies, however, consistently define mirativity as the linguistic encoding of surprise and related notions, including unexpectedness, sudden realisation and new information (Aikhenvald 2012), and no mirative markers have been described for meanings related to unsurprise. ‘Lack of surprise’, then, seems to be something else altogether. Assumed evidentiality would be a viable category when trying to

describe such lack of surprise: if something can be described as not surprising, it must be because it is expected. Moreover, if something is expected there must be a source of information involved, whether assumption, general knowledge or logical reasoning. In this chapter, thus, lack of surprise is not considered as a mirative extension; rather, it is understood as involving assumed evidential nuances.

4 Data

In order to study the emergence and meaning of *spoiler alert*, data were drawn from Mark Davies' the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) and the *News on the Web* (NOW) corpus.

COCA, which includes texts spanning 1990–2019, contains over one billion words distributed across eight different genres: spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, academic texts, TV and movies subtitles, and blogs and other web pages. The search query for *spoiler alert* throws 473 tokens. These include both instances of warnings such as (2) and (paren)theticals like (1) and (3). The first documentation of *spoiler alert* in COCA, included under (2) above, dates from 2002. Table 2 records the raw number of instances for the search string 'spoiler alert' yielded by COCA. In turn, Figure 1 illustrates the exponential growth of *spoiler alert* across time.

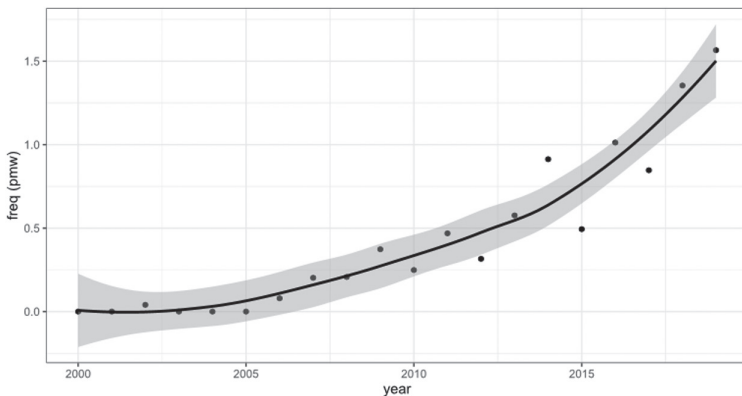


Figure 1. Instances of *spoiler alert* in COCA (pmw)

Despite its value, the COCA dataset presents a limitation to study the dispersion of the expression over internet-based genres. While most of the textual genres provide us with a particular date, blogs and web pages do not, as they were only collected and incorporated to COCA in October 2012. Thus, these two text types cannot be considered from a diachronic perspective. This is problematic insofar as the use of *spoiler alert* has its roots in online forums and discussion lists. Nevertheless, early attestations in genres other than blogs and web pages are an indication that the expression has diffused across different text types over the last two decades. Davies' *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA) was probed for earlier attestations, but it yielded one token alone: the same example included under (2) and coincidentally the first attested example in COCA.

According to the corpus description, NOW contains data from “2010 -

Table 2. Raw frequencies for *spoiler alert* in COCA

	Academic	Blog	Fiction	Magazine	Movies/ TV	News	Spoken	Web	Total
2000s	1	-	-	9	2	7	3	-	22
2010s	2	148	6	61	53	30	40	111	451

yesterday”, roughly 12.2 billion words as of 21 March 2020. This corpus includes web news from a wide range of World English varieties. The search string *spoiler alert* throws 11,676 tokens worldwide (5,128 of them in the US). In order to focus on parenthetical uses, I limited my search to < spoiler alert, >, a query that yielded 330 tokens in total. These tokens have been analysed to explore the functions of parenthetical *spoiler alert* across web-based newspapers, blogs and magazines. Despite its restrictions as regards text types, NOW serves as an ideal testing ground to probe ongoing changes and phenomena taking place in the language at present, as is the case with *spoiler alert*.

5 Origin, Meaning, Form and Function of *Spoiler Alert*

Before exploring the meaning, form and function of *spoiler alert* in the corpus data, it is important to pinpoint the origins of the expression.

5.1 *Tracing the Origins of Parenthetical Spoiler Alert*

The diachronic study of pragmatic markers and parentheticals entails some limitations. Most pressing is the “primarily oral nature of pragmatic markers” (Brinton 2017: 12), which complicates the diachronic study of such expressions.

In this case, however, the origins of the parenthetical can be traced back to exclusively written sources, more specifically, to internet discussion groups. In an OED blog entry on new word notes, Martin (2018) puts forward a short squib about the meaning and origins of *spoiler alert*:

the phrase spoiler alert has become commonplace in online discussions of films and television as a way of warning readers that an important detail of the story is about to be divulged. Its roots go back to the early years of internet fandom: the earliest citation comes from a post about the film *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* on a Usenet newsgroup in 1982.

The expression has thus rather specialised origins, as it is said to have first appeared in film discussion forums on USENET – a discussion system that predates the internet – during the 1980s. The earliest citation mentioned by Martin (2018) is reproduced in Figure 2.

As illustrated in Figure 2, disclaimer *spoiler alert* is an expression of warning

ST-2 A QUESTION – (nf)

[...] Jun 8 00:47:00 1982

[SPOILER ALERT]

regarding Spock's parting gesture to McCoy, it wouldn't surprize me if that's how they bring him back (if they do); but then, i have a low opinion of ST's script(s). Spock's farewell to Kirk sounded pretty final to me.

Figure 2. Earliest attested instance of disclaimer *spoiler alert* (Usenet Newsgroups archives, compiled on Google Groups)^a

^a Available at https://groups.google.com/g/net.movies/c/c09z1_ob--M/m/hTh1SpYoSa4J?pli=1 (last accessed February 2021).

used to forewarn the reader about possible surprising bits of information that are about to be divulged. Such pieces of information usually refer to important plot revelation which the readers or audience of books, TV shows or films would rather prefer to remain undisclosed. According to a 1994 article in *The Washington Post*:

- (10) *On movie buffs' discussion lists... there is wide use of the term 'spoiler alert', which is a warning inserted before any comment that would give away a film's ending.* (1994 *Washington Post*, s.v. OED, *spoiler*, n.)

The expression, thus, seems to have become increasingly common over the 1990s. Disclaimer *spoiler alert* gained momentum over the years, with the popularisation

and expansion of the internet (1990s-2000s), where internet forums, blogs, film and TV reviews abounded. In such platforms, it became commonplace to warn readers of the spoilers that could reveal essential plot points. The disclaimer expression, however, soon started to appear in parenthetical instances, like (12) below.

Although such parenthetical instances at first retain their function as a disclaimer, new parenthetical uses emerge as the expression diffuses through

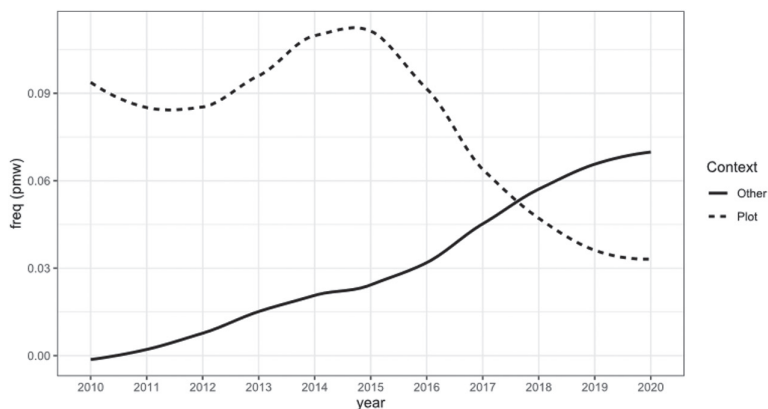


Figure 3. Contexts for parenthetical *spoiler alert* (NOW dataset)

other text genres during the 2010s, making it into oral communication. Over this decade, as shown in Figure 3, parenthetical *spoiler alert* began to appear in contexts other than plot discussions (e.g., sports or technology). In such contexts, the warning sense of *spoiler alert* shifted to meanings related to mirativity and assumed evidentiality. In what follows, I provide an overview of the main uses of *spoiler alert*, as transcends from the available corpus data.

5.2 Disclaimer Spoiler Alert

Disclaimer *spoiler alert* describes those literal instances in which the expression is used as a warning. This first type follows certain typographic conventions, especially in its earlier uses (cf. also Figure 2): it is usually set in all caps, centred, with some blank space following the disclaimer so that readers who do not want to learn about plot developments do not read on. The disclaimer may also

appear enclosed in brackets or simply set apart by punctuation (e.g., followed by a colon). Take (11) below:

- (11) ARGH, ETHAN! **Spoiler alert**, please! If anyone's reading this page and is concerned about spoilers, PLEASE don't read Ethan's comment. I know it's one thing to say that certain endings of certain stories are telegraphed by their authors (...) but at least put a *****SPOILER***** warning on your post, as not everyone has read the book and the movie's only just coming out. (NOW:US:2010)

Example (11) is an answer to a post on the *Los Angeles Times*. The comment to which the author is replying concluded with a reference to the ending of *Somebody Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* ("Has anybody else read/seen *Cuckoo's Nest* that can relate? Obviously the ending is not the same but the premise is: that it's all made up."). The writer in (11), annoyed by the revelation, rebukes the spoiler in Ethan's post, reprimanding him for not having included a disclaimer *spoiler alert* in his comment.

Oftentimes, the expression *spoiler alert* appears as a parenthetical expression (P), whether in the context of film/TV reviews or elsewhere. I have identified three different types of parentheticals: parenthetical disclaimers (Section 5.3), mirative parentheticals (Section 5.4) and assumed evidential parentheticals (Section 5.5).

5.3 Parenthetical Disclaimer

Parenthetical disclaimer *spoiler alert* amounts to 29.2 % of all parenthetical instances in the NOW dataset. In (12) below, the parenthetical *spoiler alert* aims to forewarn the reader about an immediate plot revelation (that the skulls in the Indiana Jones film turn out to be alien in origin). However, such parenthetical disclaimers introduce some differences in relation to the non-parenthetical ones.

- (12) [An archaeologist in Belize has filed a lawsuit against the makers of the film "Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull," alleging that the movie profits off references to an artifact illegally stolen from the country.] *The skull is smaller than the life-size ones seen in the Indiana Jones film (which are also, spoiler alert, alien in origin)*. (Now:US:2012)

Some parenthetical disclaimer instances are sometimes ambiguous, as they do not seem to behave as warnings; rather, they introduce mirative nuances, since they are used to introduce newsworthy information, even breaking news. That is to say, the original disclaimer/warning meaning seems to naturally give way to meanings related to surprise.

Parenthetical *spoiler alert* often appears outside of contexts which refer to narrative plots. In such contexts, the expression is not used as a literal warning to prevent the reader from an actual plot revelation, but to encode a different type

of meaning. Such instances of P *spoiler alert* seems to fall into two main types according to its meaning: mirative *spoiler alert*₁ (P₁) and assumed evidential *spoiler alert*₂ (P₂).

5.4 Parenthetical Spoiler Alert₁

P₁ refers to instances which introduce a mirative nuance, i.e., it introduces new, unexpected information (cf. other similar expressions like parenthetical *turns out*, Serrano-Losada 2017). P₁ instances amount to 33.9 % of the total parentheticals in the NOW dataset. The emergence of such mirative uses can be explained as the expression begins to be used out of contexts in which readers are being warned.

- (13) *We had the chance to try some of the awesome things the company's Advanced Technology and Projects (ATAP) team is working on, including the Projects Soli, Jacquard and Vault detailed earlier. **Spoiler alert**, they were all awesome.* (NOW:US:2015)
- (14) *After months of hype, the world finally has human trial data from a front-running vaccine collaboration between the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca Plc. **Spoiler alert**, it's good news.* (NOW:US:2020)

Examples (13) and (14) are both used out of the context of film or book discussions. The initial P in both examples is used to introduce a piece of newsworthy, surprising information. In the case of (13), P₁ is used to emphasise that all of the projects that the company are working on are awesome; in (14), it is used to reveal important newsworthy information: that the human test trial data for the AstraZeneca vaccine have been positive. Unlike the P₂ examples in Section 5.5 below, the use of P₁ is not meant as a humorous device. Aimed at surprising the reader, *spoiler alert*₁ is simply used to introduce a sudden discovery (cf. 'Turns out, they were all awesome'; 'turns out, it's all good news'). Given that P₁ usually anticipates forthcoming discourse, it generally appears at left periphery, although it might also appear clause medially, as in (15):

- (15) *Brimming with humor, this animated comedy follows a group of children trying to escape the clutches of La Llorona (who, **spoiler alert**, is depicted as much more empathetic than usual!)* (NOW:US:2020)

Even though *spoiler alert* in (15) is used in the context of a film review, its use is clearly mirative (cf. 'La Llorona, who, *surprisingly*, is depicted as much more empathetic than usual').

5.5 Parenthetical Spoiler Alert₂

In this use, the P acquires an assumed evidential function. Such instances, which are humorous or ironic in intention, amount to 37 % of the total parentheticals in the NOW dataset. Take examples (16) and (17) below:

- (16) *After Robyn arrives, Karen tells her and Gizelle all about Raymond's golf-duel with Michael. Gizelle is pleased with this news, only wishing she'd been there to see it. **Spoiler alert**, Gizelle: it wasn't all that. (NOW:US:2016)*
- (17) *Like many women, I was raised around the idea that if you put your head down and work hard, your work will speak for itself and you will (eventually) be acknowledged. **Spoiler alert**, that's not how the world works (especially in male dominated industries). (NOW:US:2019)*

In (16), the author is discussing the TV show *The Real Housewives of Potomac*. In this specific instance, however, the author is not discussing the plot itself: in her writing, she is addressing Gizelle, one of the cast members. The parenthetical expression is used ironically to emphasise that the golf duel was utterly unremarkable. In (17), the writer is describing the difficulties that women face in the job market. In spite of the common narrative the writer grew up with (that hard work would take her to great places), the truth is that she has faced a completely different reality. P *spoiler alert*₂ in (17) is used to introduce a piece of information which the writer considers absolutely obvious: that women face great disadvantages as many are not able to break the glass ceiling, especially in male dominated industries.

Unlike P₁, P₂ does not introduce surprising information. Rather, it is used to introduce well-known facts or issues considered common knowledge by the speakers/writers. P₂ represents an assumed evidential use: the proposition under its scope is anything but surprising. Such interpretations are the result of the humorous or ironic intentions of the speaker. In other words, P₂ is used to introduce “an evaluative utterance, the valence of which is implicitly reversed between the literal and intended evaluation” (Burgers 2010: 19).

5.6 Rebuke Spoiler Alert

A final type⁷ of *spoiler alert* is that exemplified in (18):

- (18) - DEREK: *Wait a second. So the Library's responsible for hedge witches dying?*
 - PENNY: *Yeah, but they don't know that yet.*

7 Given the make-up of the NOW corpus and the query carried out in this corpus ('spoiler alert'), no such examples appeared in this dataset. The COCA data, however, yielded several such instances, both in Movie/TV scripts and in the spoken component.

- DEREK: **Spoiler alert.**
- PENNY: *Zelda had some other things on her mind at the time.*
- DEREK: *Her dead daughter. Wait, is she, like, down here?*
- PENNY: *I thought you didn't like spoilers.* (COCA:TV:2019)

Like P_2 , the expression in (18), taken from an exchange from the TV series *The Magicians*, is used with an ironic intent. Such thetical instances are attested in oral conversation, both in scripted dialogue and in unscripted conversation. In these contexts, thetical *spoiler alert* is used as an ironic, mild reproach with assumed evidential meaning: Penny's reply is deemed obvious by Derek, who uses *spoiler alert* as a rebuttal to Penny's evident remark. The expression is thus similar in use to other rebukes like *duh* or *no shit*. In such instances *spoiler alert* has an interactional and intersubjective function.

6 Discussion: The Emergence of Parenthetical *Spoiler Alert*

The different functions and meanings of parenthetical *spoiler alert* described in Section 5 point to the existence of a semantic path from warning to mirativity and assumption. Figure 4 schematises the hypothesised semantic changes undergone by the expression.

The corpus data suggest that the disclaimer expression *spoiler alert* is frequently used parenthetically. As shown in Figure 5, earlier instances of the parenthetical are still used as expressions of warning in the context of film, TV or book reviews (I). The parenthetical, however, undergoes a process of semantic generalisation, which allows for mirative nuances to emerge: the expression is no longer used to give notice of an upcoming plot revelation, but to signal information that is surprising or unexpected, emphasising the newsworthiness of the propositions within its scope (II). Mirative nuances are thus inherited from the original disclaimer construction as the parenthetical diffuses to contexts other than plot discussions.

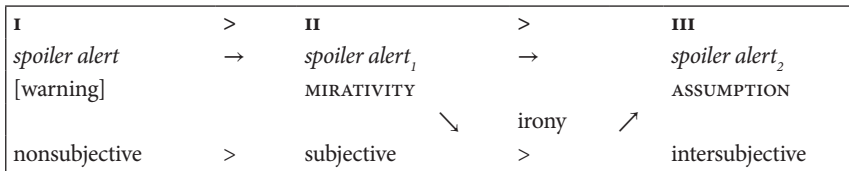


Figure 4. Semantic change of P *spoiler alert*

The emergence of mirative readings can be understood as the result of a process of subjectification (see Figure 4). As argued by Traugott (2003: 126), this mechanism enables the semantic encoding of erstwhile contextual or pragmatic senses which reflect a speaker oriented perspective. Thus, a nonsubjective meaning (a warning about an upcoming plot revelation) comes to be encoded subjectively (i.e., as mirativity) as the expression generalises to other contexts: when using P_1 , the speaker expresses their subjective perspective by assessing the proposition as surprising or newsworthy.

In this sense, mirative meaning in P_1 is conventionalised and not the result of conversational implicatures. In order to test this claim, I have restated a reduced version of example (15) in (15') and (15'') below. P_1 can be paraphrased using mirative adverbials such as *surprisingly*, *turns out* or *unexpectedly*, as shown in (15'). In fact, it is not possible to cancel out the parenthetical's mirative scope. In this respect, (15'') presents us with a simple entailment test: negating its mirative scope proves odd (if not contradictory).

- (15') *Who, turns out/surprisingly, is depicted as much more empathetic than usual!*
- (15'') *Who, spoiler alert, is depicted as much more empathetic than usual! # Not that this is a newsworthy, unexpected or surprising discovery.*

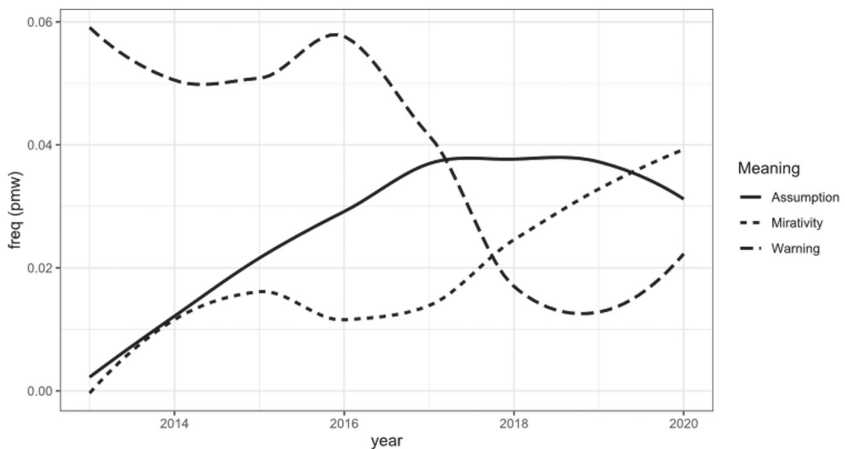


Figure 5. Parenthetical spoiler alert in the NOW Corpus

As regards assumed evidentiality, such nuances emerge as a result of humorous and ironic uses (III). Consequently, assumptive readings are the result of pragmatic enrichment. When used ironically, the value of the mirative parenthetical is reversed. Thus, if something is not surprising at all it becomes completely expectable. In such instances, it can be interpreted that there are grounds on which to base our assumption, namely, logical reasoning or general or common knowledge. Example (3), restated in a minimal form below, can help us understand this assumed evidential nuance. In (3'), *spoiler alert*₂ has been replaced by *obviously*. Unlike P₁, however, P₂ is not fully conventionalised, and we must rely on the context to disambiguate the ironic intention and thus the assumed evidential meaning of the parenthetical.

(3') *Which, obviously, he already knows because you are a fellow human.*

The cline of subjectification in Figure 4 – nonsubjective > subjective > intersubjective – was put forward by Traugott and Dasher (2002: 40). Alongside its assumed evidential readings, P₂ has an interactional and intersubjective function and is aimed at seeking agreement with the interlocutor. By using *spoiler alert*₂, the speaker is making their interlocutor a part of their community of practice (i.e., the speaker takes for granted that the interlocutor shares, at least partially, common points of view, experiences or knowledge). Moreover, the assumed evidential expression has face-saving purposes, as the speaker foregrounds that whatever they are saying is either self-evident or well-known by everyone within their sociocultural community.

The question remains as to how to explain the emergence of parenthetical instances out of a former disclaimer expression. The cognitive-communicative strategy of cooptation (see Kaltenböck, Heine & Kuteva 2011; Heine 2013; Heine et al. 2017) may shed some light in this regard. Cooptation has been defined as a “packaging strategy whereby a clause, a phrase, a word, or any other unit is taken from SG [=Sentence Grammar] and is coopted (or re-defined) for use as a thetical” (Heine 2013; Kaltenböck, Heine & Kuteva 2011: 879). Within the framework of discourse grammar (see Kaltenböck, Heine & Kuteva 2011; Heine et al. 2013; Heine et al. 2017), discourse is organised into two interdependent domains: the domain of sentence grammar (SG) and the domain of thetical grammar (TG). The mechanism of cooptation would allow any element to be coopted or redefined for use as a thetical element. That is, any expression would have the potential to be used parenthetically out of Sentence Grammar. While SG “is organized in terms of parts of speech or constituent types such as sentences, clauses, phrases, words, and morphemes, plus the morphosyntactic machinery to relate constituents to one another”, TG includes “a catalogue of

thetical formulae and constructions as well as the ability to form new theticals via cooptation from Sentence Grammar” (Heine et al. 2017: 816)

The emergence of parenthetical uses of *spoiler alert* could thus be explained via cooptation, i.e., as a sentence element that has been coopted or taken from SG and redefined as a thetical in TG. Consider in this regard the examples under (19):

- (19) (a) *So you guys know and this is not a spoiler alert, because we don't know this.*
(COCA:Spok:2016)
- (b) *Bert's never misspelled a word in his whole life. And spoiler alert, ladies and gents, he's not about to start now.* (COCA:Mov:2019)

In (19a) disclaimer *spoiler alert* is used as a predicative complement. In (19b), however, *spoiler alert* appears parenthetically. From the perspective of Discourse Grammar, parenthetical instances like (19b) could be conceived of as coopted elements, as they are used thetically, freed from the syntactic constraints of SG. In (19b) the coopted parenthetical has acquired secondary status (non-propositional meaning) and could potentially be moved around within the sentence (e.g. ‘And ladies and gents, *spoiler alert*, he’s not about to start now’). Moreover, the parenthetical appears to be prosodically, semantically and syntactically independent from the utterance in which it is linearly integrated (see also Serrano-Losada 2020 on *end up* parentheticals).

As argued by Kaltenböck, Heine and Kuteva (2011: 879), frequent repetition of cooptation can lead to grammatical change. Thus, even though a coopted unit such as *spoiler alert* might first appear spontaneously, recurrent repetition probably led to the entrenchment and eventual grammaticalisation of the parenthetical expression. It goes without saying that cooptation and grammaticalisation are distinct processes. However, as argued by Heine (2013: 1223), cooptation could well be a prerequisite for the emergence of grammaticalised parentheticals expressions. Thus, once an element has been coopted as a thetical expression, it may then evolve from a spontaneous to a formulaic parenthetical.

7 Conclusion

The present chapter has explored the diachronic emergence and present-day uses of parenthetical *spoiler alert*. My findings reveal that, albeit its specialised origins in online film discussions, the expression has attained a surprisingly wide dispersion, appearing across all text genres in COCA. Its meaning, which originally invoked a warning, has acquired mirative nuances, as well as assumed evidential extensions via pragmatic extension in humorous or ironic contexts. Thus, in some contexts *spoiler alert* does not introduce newsworthy or

surprising information. Rather, it may convey a humorous or an ironic twist: far from introducing revealing information, *spoiler alert* may be used to signal a predictable fact. In this sense, *spoiler alert* has an interactional and intersubjective function.

The actual development of parenthetical *spoiler alert* is remarkable insofar as it involves the generalisation of an expression emerged in the (underground) fandom subculture, i.e., as a domain-specific expression that eventually made it into the general language. This recently emerged parenthetical expression seems to be on the rise and is ubiquitous across genres, despite having a restricted use in its inception.

The corpus data indicate that, through a process of semantic generalisation and subjectification, this domain specific expression of warning acquired mirative nuances – when used outside of its original contexts to reveal new, surprising information – as well as assumed evidential meanings as a result of pragmatic enrichment – when used with a humorous or an ironic intent. Furthermore, the development of this parenthetical expression seems to be the result of a process of grammaticalisation via cooptation.

This chapter, however, does not suffice to fully account for the development of parenthetical *spoiler alert*. Further accounts should take into consideration related expressions, which in turn would allow us to explore the relationship between mirativity and assumed evidentiality further. The role of text genres in its development deserves a detailed analysis, as they may prove key to explore the diffusion and entrenchment of the parenthetical expression. Moreover, studying internet-related expressions like *spoiler alert* or *plot twist* is essential to further explore the possible role that internet communication might be playing in the diffusion of linguistic innovations.⁸

Sources

COCA = *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, 2008-. Compiled by M. Davies. <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>.

NOW = *Corpus of News on the Web: 3+ billion words from 20 countries, updated every day*, 2010. Compiled by M. Davies. <http://corpus.byu.edu/now/>.

OED = *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/>.

8 See, for instance, the debate on the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 18(2), as a response to Sayers (2014), in which the possible role of the influence of the media on language change is explored from different perspectives.

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