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*Tut, Pooh, a*nd *Hum*: A Corpus-Driven Pragmatic Analysis of Onomatopoeic Interjections in *Sherlock Holmes* and Contemporary Fiction

NOM DE L'ESTUDIANT: Liuyue Zhang

NOM DEL TUTOR: Natàlia Judith Laso Martín

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UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

Coordinació d'Estudis
Facultat de Filologia i Comunicació

Gran Via
de les Corts Catalanes, 585
08007 Barcelona

Tel. +34 934 035 594
fil-coord@ub.edu
www.ub.edu

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1. INTRODUCTION

Interjections are difficult to define in absolute terms. Broadly, they can be described as "vocal gestures that are often used to express a speaker's mental state, action, attitude or reaction to a situation" (Ameka, 1992, p. 106). The class of interjections is open-ended and allows for a potentially unlimited number of new items (Norrick, 2008a, p. 887). Although often dismissed as peripheral elements in language, interjections can perform important pragmatic functions that are best interpreted in relation to the contexts in which they occur (Ameka, 1992, p. 107).

While reading Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes series, I noticed the frequent use of the interjection *tut* in character dialogues, but its meaning was not immediately clear to me. Most online dictionaries define *tut* as an exclamation expressing disapproval or annoyance. However, these definitions were insufficient for me, a non-native English speaker, to fully grasp the precise emotions or communicative functions conveyed by such interjections, especially when they appeared in narrative contexts. This observation led me to question whether other interjections in the Sherlock Holmes series might also pose challenges for readers due to the lack of phonetic, prosodic cues in the reading of written text.

Much of the existing research on the pragmatic functions of interjections has focused on spoken contexts. In addition, most studies on onomatopoeic interjections tend to concentrate on more commonly taught forms such as *oh* and *ah*, leaving less frequent interjections underexplored. In response to this, I conducted a broader search for onomatopoeic interjections in the Sherlock Holmes series, and eventually selected *tut*, *pooh*, and *hum* for analysis, as they appear less semantically transparent in written fiction and received relatively limited attention in existing research compared to more familiar interjections.

This paper aims to explore the frequency and pragmatic functions of three onomatopoeic interjections, *tut* (also spelled *tsk* or *tch*), *pooh*, and *hum*, in two corpora from different periods: Arthur Conan Doyle's complete series of *Sherlock Holmes* (written between 1887 and 1927), and the "Fiction" subsection of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; Davies, 2008). Adopting a corpus-driven approach, the study seeks to answer two central questions: (1) How have the frequencies of these interjections changed over time, from fiction at the turn of the 19th century to contemporary fiction? and (2) How do their pragmatic functions differ across the two corpora? By addressing these questions, this paper intends to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the use of *tut*, *pooh*, and *hum* in both *Sherlock Holmes* and contemporary fictional texts.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the classification of interjections, focusing primarily on Ameka's (1992) framework, along with previous discussions of interjections as pragmatic markers and Austin (1962) and Searle's (1976) Speech Act Theory as a basis for analyzing their functions. Section 3 describes the methodology, including the compilation and cleaning of the Sherlock Holmes corpus, the selection of interjections, and the procedures for data collection and analysis. Section 4 presents the results and discussion, combining a quantitative overview of frequency with a qualitative approach for contextual analysis. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper and reflects on its broader implications, while Section 6 discusses the limitations of the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition and Classification of Interjections

Interjections are difficult to define in precise terms, as they often overlap with other grammatical categories. For this reason, they have been described as a class with a prototypical structure (Gehweiler, 2010, p. 115). Broadly speaking, however, interjections are considered an open class of expressions that convey speaker attitudes, emotions, or reactions (Ameka, 1992, pp. 103–105). Additionally, there has been an ongoing debate regarding whether onomatopoeic words should be included within the category of interjections. While this remains a contested issue, Wierzbicka (1992, p. 178) notes that some interjections exhibit sound symbolism, sharing properties with onomatopoeic words.

In terms of form, Ameka (1992, pp. 105–113) provides a typological classification of interjections into primary and secondary types. Primary interjections are words used exclusively as interjections (e.g., *ouch*, *wow*, *gee*). These tend to be phonologically and morphologically anomalous, often composed of sounds not typically found elsewhere in the language, and they generally resist inflection or derivation (pp. 105–106). In contrast, secondary interjections originate from other grammatical categories, such as nouns or adjectives, but are used interjectionally (e.g., *careful*, *heavens*, *shame*). According to this typology, the three interjections examined in this paper, *tut*, *pooh*, and *hum*, belong to the category of primary interjections.

Furthermore, Ameka classifies interjections based on their communicative functions, identifying three main categories: expressive, conative, and phatic (1992, pp. 113–114). Expressive interjections convey the speaker's mental state and can be further divided into emotive interjections (e.g., *yuk*, *wow*, *ouch*), which express emotions and sensations, and cognitive interjections (e.g., *aha*), which reflect the speaker's momentary cognitive or informational context (p. 113). Conative interjections play a more interactive role, used to attract attention or prompt an action or response from the auditor (e.g., *sh*, used to demand silence). Phatic interjections help establish and maintain communication. These include vocalizations such as *mhm*, *uh-huh*, and *yeah*, which signal engagement or listener feedback. This category also covers interjections used in social routines such as greetings, farewells, and welcomes (Ameka 1992, p. 114).

It is important to note that this classification is based on the most predominant function of an interjection, and as Ameka (1992, p. 114) emphasizes, a single interjection may serve multiple functions depending on the context.

2.2 Tut, Pooh, and Hum

The three interjections *tut*, *pooh*, and *hum* all imitate sounds produced by speakers in interaction. Drawing on the insights of Wierzbicka (1992) and Ameka (1992) regarding the uses of interjections, this paper refers to *tut*, *pooh*, and *hum* as onomatopoeic interjections. This term is not meant to suggest that onomatopoeic words are a subset of interjections, but rather to highlight the onomatopoeic qualities that characterize these three particular interjections.

Tut, also spelled *tsk* or *tch* (Chambers 21st Century Dictionary, n.d.), represents a dental or alveolar click (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It has also developed spelling pronunciations such as [tʌt tʌt] or /tɪsk tɪsk/, and could function both as a verb (e.g., "to tut at someone") and a noun (referring to the sound itself). In its interjective use, Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines it as "used to express disapproval or disbelief," while the Chambers 21st Century Dictionary describes it as "expressing mild disapproval, annoyance, or rebuke" (n.d.). Other dictionaries offer more detailed explanations: the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) notes that *tut* can also be used "in a humorous way," and Collins Dictionary (n.d.) acknowledges its use to express sympathy.

Pooh, as an interjection, is recorded in the Chambers 21st Century Dictionary (n.d.) as a colloquial exclamation of scorn or disgust, particularly in reaction to an offensive smell. *Hum*, when used as an interjection, is described by Merriam-Webster (n.d.) as a British spelling of *hem*, typically used to indicate a vocalized pause in speech. In contrast, the Chambers 21st Century Dictionary (n.d.) defines *hum* as an exclamation expressing embarrassment or hesitation, whereas *hem* is described as a slight clearing of the throat used to show hesitation or to draw attention. Compared to *tut*, the spelling and conventionalization of *hum* as an interjection are less consistent across sources. This suggests a greater variation in both form and usage of this interjection.

These dictionary definitions provide what Wierzbicka (1992, p. 163) refers to as semantic invariants. They are basic, context-independent meanings that account for the interjections' core functions. However, such entries often lack the pragmatic detail needed to capture the subtler, context-sensitive ways in which these interjections operate in actual interaction. As will be shown in later sections, corpus data indicate that the functions of *tut*, *pooh*, and *hum* frequently extend beyond what is reflected in standard dictionary accounts.

2.3. Interjections as Pragmatic Markers

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the importance of the pragmatic functions of interjections. From a pragmatic perspective, interjections can be defined as a subset of linguistic items that encode speakers' attitudes and communicative intentions, and are inherently context-bound (Ameka, 1992, p. 107). Wilkins (1992) argues that all interjections serve illocutionary functions and should be understood as speech acts, capable of conveying interrogative, imperative, or exclamative force (pp. 145–152).

Previous research on the pragmatic functions of interjections has primarily focused on spoken data. For instance, Norrick (2008b) examines the use of interjections in conversational storytelling and finds that they play important roles in shaping narrative structure and engagement. Truan (2016) studies interjections in parliamentary debates, showing how they function as strategic tools for managing interpersonal dynamics. Online communication is another area of research. Oladipupo and Akinola (2025), for example, explore the use of the interjection *omo* in Nigerian multilingual online interactions.

In contrast, studies adopting a historical pragmatic perspective often focus on written texts with close attention to genre-based differences (Gehweiler, 2010, pp. 332–341). Person (2009) applies conversation analysis to interjections in historical written texts and argues that historical literary data can contribute valuable insights to the study of contemporary conversation (pp.104-105).

Some researchers have studied specific interjections in depth. Wilkins (1992) discusses *wow*; Aijmer (2002) examines interjections such as *oh* and *ah* within the broader category of pragmatic particles. Norrick (2008a) focuses on how interjections function in turn-initial positions in conversation. Much of this research has centered on interjections that are frequently used.

It is clear that interjections serve important pragmatic functions, but more work is needed, especially on less frequently studied forms. This study addresses that gap by using a corpus-driven and bottom-up approach to analyze *tut*, *pooh*, and *hum* in fictional texts, to provide a clearer understanding of the three interjections.

2.4. Speech Act Theory

This study adopts Austin's (1962) theory of speech acts and Searle's (1976) taxonomy of illocutionary acts as its theoretical framework. In *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), Austin argues that utterances are not merely vehicles for conveying information (constatives) but also function as actions in themselves (performatives). He emphasizes the difficulty of drawing a strict boundary between constative and performative utterances, noting that "doing" is almost always involved in "saying" (p. 94).

Austin identifies three distinct levels of speech acts: The locutionary act, which involves the basic act of producing meaningful utterances that include noises, vocables or words; The illocutionary act, which refers to the speaker performing an action through the utterance, such as asserting, warning, or requesting; The perlocutionary act, which focuses on the effect of the utterance on the listener (1962, pp. 94–101).

Building on Austin's work, Searle (1976) proposed a systematic classification of illocutionary acts into five categories: representatives (assertives), directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations (pp. 10-16).

In the first category, representatives (assertives), the speakers commit to the truth of a proposition representing how the world is or as they believe it to be (Searle, 1976, p. 10). These acts can be evaluated in terms of truth or falsity. Examples of performative verbs include *complain*, *conclude*, and *hypothesize*.

Directives, on the other hand, are "attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something" (Searle, 1976, p.11). Typical examples include *order*, *request*, and *advise*, while Searle also identifies verbs such as *dare*, *defy*, and *challenge* as part of this category. In contrast, commissives are acts by which the speaker commits to a future course of action (Searle, 1976, p. 11). Unlike directives, which aim to influence the hearer's actions, commissives involve future action on the part of the speaker. Typical verbs include *promise*, *vow*, *pledge*, and *undertake*.

A separate category, expressives, conveys the speaker's psychological state or attitude toward a certain situation or proposition whose truth is presupposed (Searle, 1976, p. 12). This category includes verbs such as *thank*, *congratulate*, *apologize*, and *condole*.

Declarations are unique in that the utterance itself enacts a change in the world when performed under appropriate conditions (Searle, 1976, p. 13). Examples include *I resign*, *You're fired, I now pronounce you husband and wife*. Declarations require institutional authority and specific contextual conditions to be valid (Searle, 1976, pp. 14–15). For

instance, only a judge can legally declare someone guilty, or a priest can validly marry a couple.

Searle also acknowledges that some utterances may overlap categories. For instance, what he calls a “representative declaration” may both assert a fact and enact a decision. When an umpire says, “You’re out,” the veracity of the claim is assessable (representative), and at the same time, the statement functions as a declaration that changes the player’s status (1976, p. 15).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study draws on both Austin's and Searle's frameworks to analyze the pragmatic functions of onomatopoeic interjections. Each occurrence of *tut*, *pooh*, and *hum* is classified according to Searle's five speech act categories. To provide a more detailed analysis, the performative verb underlying each use is also identified based on its contextual function.

3.1 Corpus Selection and Data Collection

The Sherlock Holmes corpus was obtained from Project Gutenberg (Project Gutenberg, n.d.) and downloaded as nine separate files. It consists of the following works: *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), *The Sign of the Four* (1890), *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901–1902), *The Valley of Fear* (1914–1915), and five books of collections of short stories: *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894), *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1905), *His Last Bow* (1917), and *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927).

The Sherlock Holmes corpus was then cleaned for data collection, removing irrelevant information such as prefaces and acknowledgements, tables of contents, book titles and author names, publishing and printing information, and chapter numbers. Only the narrative texts and the chapter headings remained for data collection and analysis. The final size of the Sherlock Holmes corpus is 666,336 tokens.

To compare interjection usage in *Sherlock Holmes* with contemporary fiction, a comparable contemporary target corpus was required. However, identifying an ideal corpus, such as a contemporary detective novel of similar length, proved challenging, as few contained a sufficient variety of interjections. Consequently, the "Fiction" subsection (119,505,292 words) of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) was selected as the reference corpus for comparison.

Manual filtering was performed on COCA search results before data collection. Typos and irrelevant instances (e.g., names of fictional characters) were removed. Uses of *tut (tsk, tch)* as animal calls or imitations of foreign words were also excluded. Additionally, quotations from 19th-century texts included in contemporary reviews were eliminated to ensure only contemporary interjection usage in COCA was analyzed. For instance, *pooh* appeared in COCA (Fiction) within quotes from contemporary reviews of *Moby Dick*, a 19th-century novel.

Some instances of the target interjections appear as verbs or nouns in COCA. As these uses fall outside the domain of interjections, only occurrences in direct speech functioning strictly as interjections were analyzed. This decision reflects the observation that, in the

Sherlock Holmes corpus, all instances of the selected interjections appear directly in dialogue rather than narrative description.

Lastly, repeated interjections used for emphasis, such as in “tut, tut”, or “pooh, pooh, pooh”, were counted as a single occurrence. Redundant instances in COCA, where the same usage appears in publications from different years, were also counted only once.

The final dataset includes 58 interjection instances from the Sherlock Holmes corpus, comprising *tut* (*tsk*, *tch*) (23 occurrences), *pooh* (5), and *hum* (30), and 99 instances from the “Fiction” subsection of COCA, comprising *tut* (57), *pooh* (23), and *hum* (19). Altogether, 157 cases are analyzed in this paper.

3.2 Selection of Interjections

To compile a list of possible onomatopoeic interjections for analysis, a variety of sources were consulted. These included online resources such as Langeek.co (Langeek, n.d.), Busuu.com (Busuu, n.d.), and ThoughtCo.com (Nordquist, 2024), along with the comprehensive linguistic reference *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* by Quirk et al (1985). These sources provided lists of onomatopoeic interjections and their definitions. The presence of these interjections was then examined within the Sherlock Holmes corpus using AntConc 4.3.1. Other than *tut*, a provisional list, including *ah*, *aha*, *eh*, *ha*, *hist*, *hum*, *oh*, *pooh*, was identified in the corpus.

After evaluating their frequencies, interjections with fewer than three occurrences were excluded from the analysis as they did not provide sufficient data for reliable comparison across corpora. Consequently, *aha* and *hist* were removed from the list of target items.

In addition to the issues outlined in previous sections regarding the limited treatment of certain interjections in existing studies, this study also considered pedagogical relevance and semantic transparency in selecting the target interjections. Interjections such as *ah* or *oh* are widely recognized and frequently included in language learning materials. On the other hand, forms like *tut*, *pooh*, and *hum* are less frequently taught and are rarely featured in textbooks.

These interjections also exhibit lower semantic transparency compared to more prototypical forms like *ah*, *oh*, or *eh*, whose meanings in fiction are often readily understood by the readers. In contrast, the functions of *tut* or *pooh* are more context-dependent and less immediately apparent. A contextual analysis is then essential for identifying the subtle pragmatic functions of interjections such as *tut*, *pooh*, and *hum* for developing a more thorough understanding of their use.

In light of these considerations, this study focuses on *tut* (*tsk*, *tch*), *pooh*, and *hum* to analyze their pragmatic functions in fictional contexts.

3.3 Data Analysis and Instruments

The study adopts a corpus-driven approach using AntConc 4.3.1 to examine the frequency and pragmatic function of the selected interjections in *Sherlock Holmes*. Concordance lines were extracted from both corpora for analysis of contextual usage. The pragmatic functions of each interjection were analyzed using J. L. Austin's and John R. Searle's Speech Act framework.

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are used to present the data of the findings of the paper. First, quantitative comparisons were made across both corpora to identify differences in frequency, as well as the proportion of instances of different speech acts. Frequencies in the two corpora were calculated and normalized as occurrences per million words for comparison. Furthermore, a qualitative approach was applied to analyze examples in detail with contextual explanations.

The Sherlock Holmes corpus was obtained from digitized texts from Project Gutenberg.org, whereas the COCA "Fiction" subsection was accessed through the COCA database (Davies, 2008). AntConc 4.3.1 was used for corpus processing, frequency analysis, and concordance extraction.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Frequencies

Table 1 presents the raw occurrences, corpus sizes, and normalized frequencies (occurrences per million words) for the onomatopoeic interjections *tut*, *pooh*, and *hum* in the Sherlock Holmes corpus and the "Fiction" subsection of Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

Table 1

Frequency of Hum*,* Pooh, *and* Tut *in the Sherlock Holmes corpus and COCA (Fiction)*[1]

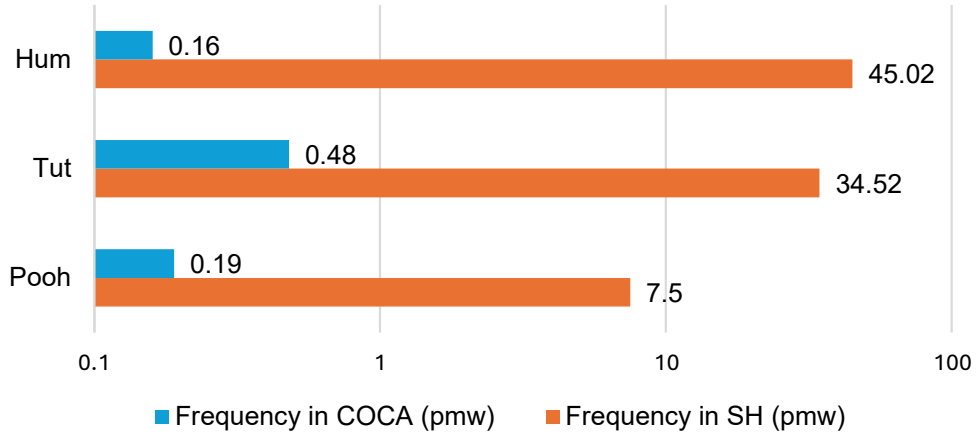
Item	Occurrence (raw) counts		Normalized frequency (instances pmw)	
Corpus	SH	COCA	SH	COCA
Hum	30	19	45.02	0.16
Tut	23	57	34.52	0.48
Pooh	5	23	7.50	0.19

As shown above, all three interjections occur significantly more frequently in the Sherlock Holmes corpus than in COCA's "Fiction" subsection. *Hum* appears 282.5 times more frequently in the Sherlock Holmes corpus (45.02 instances pmw) than in COCA (0.16 instances pmw). Similarly, *tut* occurs approximately 72 times more frequently in *Sherlock Holmes* (34.52 instances pmw) than in COCA (0.48 instances pmw). The difference in the frequency of *pooh* is smaller but still notable. It is about 39.5 times more frequent in the Sherlock Holmes corpus (7.50 occurrences pmw) than in COCA (0.19 occurrences pmw). This huge difference in frequency suggests a notable decline in the usage of these three interjections in contemporary fiction compared to 19th-century fiction. Figure 1 visualizes the contrasts in normalized frequency between the two corpora using a log scale to better represent the extent of the differences.

[1] *Note.* SH = Sherlock Holmes corpus (666,336 words); COCA = *Corpus of Contemporary American English* ("Fiction" subsection, 119,505,292 words). pmw = per million words.

Figure 1

Log-Scaled Normalized Frequency of Hum, Pooh, *and* Tut *in* SH *and COCA (Fiction)*



Within the Sherlock Holmes corpus, *hum* is the most frequent of the three interjections, followed by *tut*, while *pooh* is significantly less frequent. In contrast, in COCA's "Fiction" subsection, *tut* (including *tsk, tch*) is used most often, while *hum* and *pooh* both appear at much lower frequencies. Tut is more than twice as frequent as either *hum* or *pooh* in COCA.

4.2 Tut (tsk, tch)

As shown above, *tut* is considerably more frequent in *Sherlock Holmes* than in contemporary fiction. Notably, only the spelling "tut" appears in the Sherlock Holmes corpus, whereas COCA (Fiction) also includes the alternative forms, "tsk" and "tch".

All 80 occurrences across both corpora serve an expressive function according to Searle's taxonomy of speech acts (1976). Most commonly, they convey attitudes such as dismissal, disapproval, disappointment, or frustration. In fewer cases, they also express stronger emotions such as irritation or disgust. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the distribution of speech act types in the Sherlock Holmes corpus and the COCA (Fiction) corpus.

Figure 2

Speech Act Distribution of Tut *in the Sherlock Holmes series*

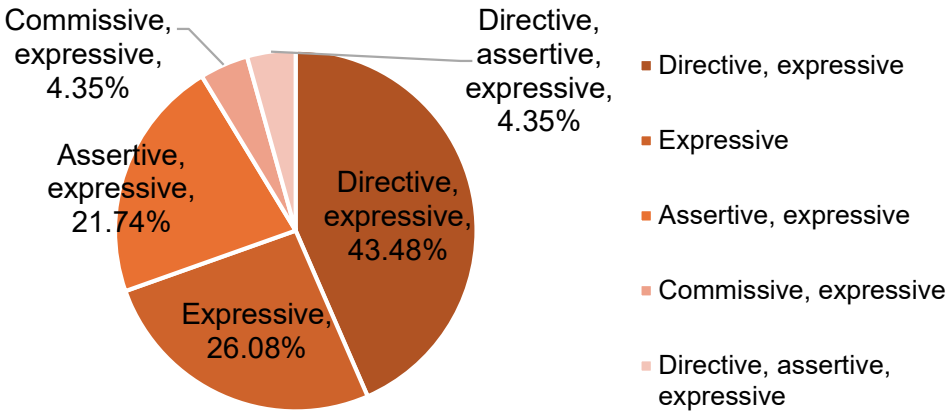
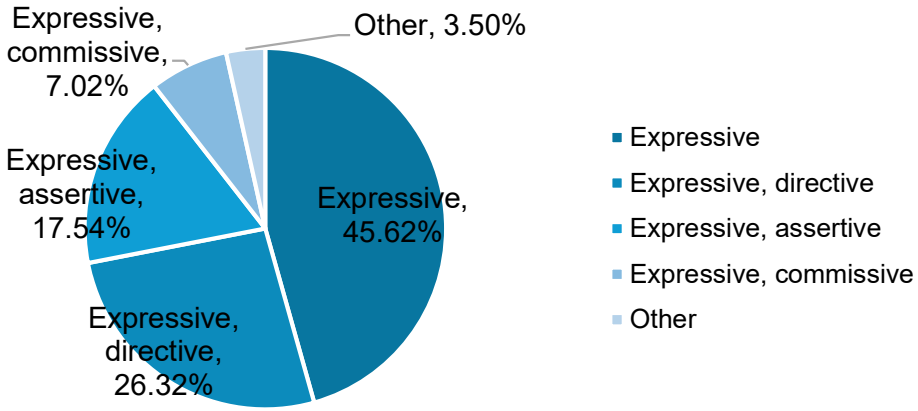


Figure 3

Speech Act Distribution of Tut (tsk, tch) *in COCA (Fiction)*[2]



Tut performs multiple layers of pragmatic functions across both corpora; that is, in most instances, *tut* performs more than one speech act. In the COCA (Fiction) subcorpus, over 50% of *tut* instances fall into this category, while in the Sherlock Holmes corpus, the proportion is even higher, exceeding 70%.

Notably, in *Sherlock Holmes*, 43.48% of these instances involve a directive component in addition to the expressive function. Meanwhile, 26.08% are solely expressive, and 21.74% combine expressive and assertive functions. Less frequently, one instance (4.35%) involves both expressive and commissive speech acts, and another (4.35%) shows a combination of three speech acts: expressive, directive, and assertive.

[2] *Note.* Other = Expressive, directive, assertive (1.75%) and Expressive, directive, commissive (1.75%)

In the COCA (Fiction) corpus, 45.62% of occurrences of *tut* (including *tsk* and *tch*) are purely expressive. Another 26.32% combine expressive and directive acts, while 17.54% involve both expressive and assertive acts. Less commonly, 7.02% perform both expressive and commissive forces. Finally, two rare cases (1.75% each) show features of triple-layered speech acts: one combines expressive, directive, and assertive, while the other combines expressive, directive, and commissive.

Across both corpora, the most frequent speech act combinations are expressive only, expressive and assertive, and expressive and directive. An example of *tut* performing an exclusively expressive function is found in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (Doyle, 2006), where it conveys Holmes's disappointment and slight irritation:

> "At the point where the path passes through the gate, you could surely pick up the tracks?"
>
> "Unfortunately, the path was tiled at that point."
>
> "Well, on the road itself?"
>
> "No, it was all trodden into mire."
>
> "**Tut-tut!** Well, then, these tracks upon the grass, were they coming or going?"

A clear instance of *tut* serving both expressive and assertive functions appears in *His Last Bow*, where the character Mr. Culverton Smith uses it to express lamentation and to preface a judgment about Holmes's condition: "**Tut, tut**! This sounds serious." (Doyle, 2000)

Notably, occurrences involving both expressive and directive speech acts are less frequent in COCA (Fiction) than in *Sherlock Holmes*, but they still represent the second most common category in both corpora, following expressive only (see Figure 3).

In both corpora, occurrences where *tut* performs both expressive and directive functions typically involve a speaker first expressing dismissal, disapproval, or impatience in response to a previous utterance by another interlocutor, followed by the speaker's act of advice, command, request, or even threat. In the Sherlock Holmes corpus, directive speech acts are present in 47.83% of *tut* occurrences; in COCA (Fiction), they appear in 29.82% of the occurrences (see Figures 2 and 3). An example from *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (Doyle, 1997) illustrates this use:

> "Arrest these men, Inspector!" he gasped.
>
> "On what charge?"
>
> "That of murdering their coachman, William Kirwan!"

> The Inspector stared about him in bewilderment. "Oh, come now, Holmes," said he at last, "I'm sure you don't really mean to—"
>
> "**Tut**, man, look at their faces!" cried Holmes, curtly.

Here, Holmes uses *tut* not only to express impatience with the inspector's hesitation, but also to urge the inspector to act decisively and make the arrest. Implicitly, Holmes is saying: "Stop hesitating. It is obvious they are guilty."

Tut is also used in both corpora to perform milder directive functions, such as making a request or offering advice. For instance, the following COCA excerpt shows the interjection used to express mild irritation at an interruption, followed by a request to allow the speaker to continue his speech:

> "… What do you suppose would bring such a woman to a public park?"
>
> "Really, Montague, "I said. "You have no right-" "**Tut**, my dear fellow. I am merely exercising the possibilities. In truth, I have barely scratched the surface. Where were we? Oh, yes…" (Davies, 2008)

Moreover, it is worth noting that not all directive uses of *tut* are rebukes or expressions of negativity. In some cases, the interjection precedes the speaker's encouragement or positive reinforcement, especially when the hearer is hesitant or facing a difficult task. In these contexts, *tut* can serve to dismiss self-doubt and prompt action or confidence. Consider the following example from *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*:

> "'(…) but you are to have an overriding commission of one per cent on all business done by your agents, and you may take my word for it that this will come to more than your salary.'
>
> "'But I know nothing about hardware.'
>
> "'**Tut**, my boy; you know about figures.' (Doyle, 1997)

Here, the speaker (the financial agent) dismisses Mr. Pycroft's concern and lack of confidence and encourages him by affirming his relevant skills. The interjection functions to counter self-doubt and guide the hearer toward accepting the job.

A similar use appears in COCA: "Papa... I can't." "**Tut tut**, child. You can. This one is newly born to darkness. Still weak. Those to come won't be nearly so easy to deal with" (Davies, 2008). In this case, *tut* is used to reject the hearer's reluctance and encourage action. While the encouragement is forceful and slightly harsh, it is still intended to be motivational, as the speaker provides reassurance in the following sentences that the task is manageable.

In addition to the commonly observed directive functions of *tut* (and its variants *tsk* and *tch*), it is also important to note its capacity to perform commissive speech acts. One

instance (4.35%) in the Sherlock Holmes corpus was found to exhibit both expressive and commissive functions, while four occurrences (7.02%) in COCA (Fiction) displayed this combination. Additionally, one COCA instance included both directive and commissive acts, in addition to an expressive function.

A clear example appears in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (Doyle, 1997), when Mr. Trevor is reunited with Hudson after more than thirty years. Upon recognizing him, Mr. Trevor uses *tut* to express emotional recognition while simultaneously committing himself to aiding Hudson. Mr. Trevor's intention to provide food and help Hudson in finding employment is confirmed through his subsequent words, as he instructs Hudson to go to the kitchen for refreshment and assures him that he will help secure a position:

> "'**Tut**, you will find that I have not forgotten old times,' cried Mr. Trevor, and, walking towards the sailor, he said something in a low voice. 'Go into the kitchen,' he continued out loud, 'and you will get food and drink. I have no doubt that I shall find you a situation.'

In COCA, a commissive use is also observed in this excerpt: "The water sloshed onto the grass at his feet, and it took all his strength to set the bucket down on the table next to the moussaka. Mena: '**tsk, tsk**', and she lifted the bucket, examining its contents before lowering it gently to the ground "(Davies, 2008). Although there is no interpersonal dialogue, Mena's *tsk* expresses mild irritation at the inappropriate placement of the bucket. However, her immediate action of relocating the bucket constitutes a commissive act, as she voluntarily takes responsibility for correcting the situation.

The example of *tut* performing expressive, directive, and commissive is found in COCA (Fiction): "…and yet you have the unmitigated temerity to speak of things so frivolously whimsical as spiritual values. **Tut, tut,** and let us not be babies until we must be" (Davies, 2008). Here *tut* is used to express disappointment towards the hearer's speaking of "spiritual values" in a harsh social condition, and "let's" functions as a signal of both directive and commissive speech acts, as the speaker simultaneously urges the hearer and commits himself to focus on more realistic problems.

Beyond the above speech acts observed in both corpora, COCA (Fiction) displays a slightly broader diversity in the performative functions of *tut (tsk, tch)*. For instance, a mocking or teasing use is found in COCA's "Fiction" subsection: "**Tsk, tsk, tsk**. Coffee and a muffin? Not quite the breakfast of champions I'd expect from someone as purportedly health conscious as young Ms. Keli Milanni" (Davies, 2008). Instead of expressing a genuine

emotional response, such as disapproval or concern, the speaker adopts a disapproving tone with the primary goal of teasing or mocking the hearer.

Another unique performative function of *tsk* found in COCA is its use as a mood transitioner: “EDWARD Where’d you learn to do this? VIVIAN (sarcastic) I fucked the debate team in high school. **Tsk**. I had a grampa. He liked ties on Sundays…” (Davies, 2008). Vivian starts with a sarcastic reply, but then uses *tsk* to change the mood from humorous to more serious and thoughtful. The interjection marks a transition in mood from irony to sincerity and mild nostalgia. By saying *tsk*, the speaker quietly dismisses her joke as if saying “of course not” and then gives a more genuine and emotional answer to Edward’s question.

In summary, in both *Sherlock Holmes* and COCA (Fiction), *tut* (including *tsk* and *tch*) frequently performs directive speech acts, with functions ranging from orders to requests, and encouragement. These examples show the interjection’s flexibility in expressing not only disapproval but also strategic and motivational support. Commissive uses are less common but present in both datasets. Additionally, COCA displays slightly greater functional diversity than the Sherlock Holmes corpus, with additional uses including mocking, teasing, and mood-shifting.

4.3 Pooh

The interjection *pooh* is relatively rare in both the Sherlock Holmes corpus and COCA (Fiction), but like *tut* and *hum*, its frequency is higher in *Sherlock Holmes* (7.5 occurrences per million words) than in the “Fiction” section of COCA (0.19 occurrences per million words).

In *Sherlock Holmes*, the most frequent use of *pooh* (40% of occurrences) involves a combination of expressive, directive, and assertive acts (see Figure 6). In COCA (Fiction), the most common usage is purely expressive (43.48% of occurrences), followed by combinations with assertive (30.43% of occurrences) and directive (21.74% of occurrences) functions (see Figure 7).

No instance of *pooh* performing a commissive act was found in *Sherlock Holmes*, while one such instance was identified in COCA (Fiction). Conversely, pooh is found twice in *Sherlock Holmes*, performing a combination of expressive, directive, and assertive speech acts, a pattern not observed in COCA.

Figure 6

Speech Act Distribution of Pooh *in the Sherlock Holmes series*

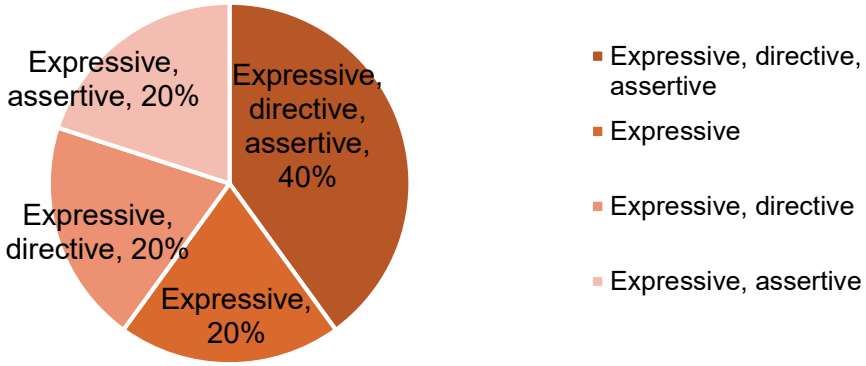
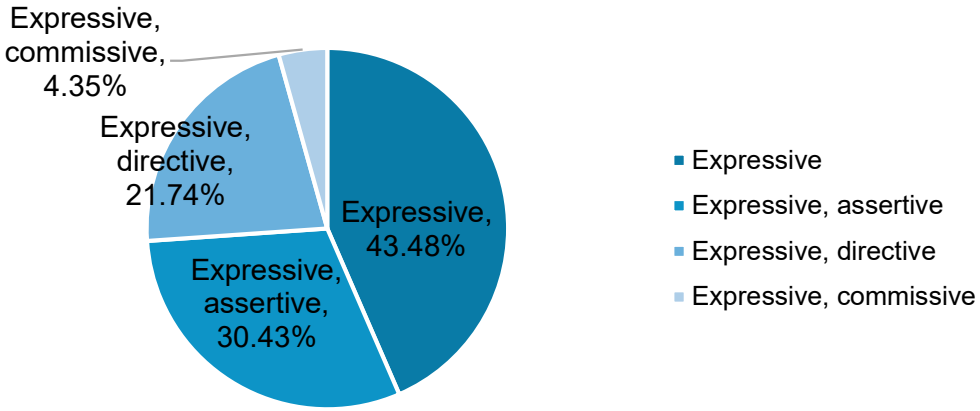


Figure 7

Speech Act Distribution of Pooh *in COCA (Fiction)*



As with *tut (tsk, tch)*, all instances of *pooh* in both corpora perform at least some degree of the expressive act, typically to convey disapproval, dismissal, or frustration. In *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes*, *pooh* is also used to express disgust towards an unpleasant smell: "**Pooh**! What an awful smell of paint!" (Doyle, 2023).

By contrast, in COCA, *pooh* is more often used to express contempt towards abstract or ideological concepts rather than physical discomfort. Examples include expressions of contempt for "polite society", as in "**Pooh** to polite society!", or for "false doctrine", as in "False doctrine. **Pooh**." (Davies, 2008). This shift suggests a diachronic change in function from expressing disgust toward the concrete and sensory in *Sherlock Holmes* to rejecting ideological or social concepts in COCA.

The second most prominent speech acts associated with *pooh* in *Sherlock Holmes* are directive and assertive. Of the five occurrences in *Sherlock Holmes*, three (60%) involve a directive function, including instances of forbidding, suggesting, and encouraging, and three (60%) also involve an assertive act. The following example illustrates the combination of expressive, directive, and assertive functions.

In *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (Doyle, 1997), when Mr. Pycroft defends his interest in a modest clerical job, Mr. Pinner responds: "**Pooh**, man; you should soar above it. You are not in your true sphere… What I have to offer is little enough when measured by your ability, but when compared with Mawson's, it's light to dark…" Here, *pooh* expresses disapproval of Pycroft's modesty, asserts the speaker's view of his potential, and encourages him to pursue a more ambitious role. This demonstrates how *pooh*, like *tut*, can simultaneously perform expressive, directive, and assertive speech acts.

Unlike in *Sherlock Holmes*, one instance of *pooh* in COCA's "Fiction" subsection performs a commissive act. In this case, a character expresses frustration and appears to comply with a demand to leave, but secretly passes a note arranging a later meeting:

> "Oh, **pooh**." Deirdre stuck out her hand, gold bracelets jingling. "Good to meet you, Mr. Markson." … She was halfway out the door before it registered that a folded scrap of paper had been slipped into my hand. The note read, simply: Coffee shop at 2:00. (Davies, 2008)

The interjection *pooh* functions not only to express emotion but also to signal the speaker's covert commitment to future action.

Furthermore, in COCA, a culturally specific use of *pooh* appears in the context of Jewish ritual language. Three occurrences show *pooh* functioning as a self-protective, coping interjection in response to taboo topics or unlucky thoughts within Yiddish and Jewish cultural contexts. This is evident in the following case:

> One day in January I asked my mother, "What happened to Mr. Zapiski during the war?" … "Can it happen to me if I fight in a war?" "**Pooh pooh pooh**! Don't say such things. "Go talk to your father." (Davies, 2008)

In Jewish custom, saying "pooh pooh pooh" mimics spitting three times—a traditional reaction to especially good or bad events, meant to ward off evil or bad luck (American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, n.d.). In this excerpt, after the child asks about the possibility of being injured in war, the mother responds with *pooh* as a ritualistic gesture to ward off bad

luck. The interjection functions as an expressive, conveying anxiety and discomfort, but also carries a directive force by forbidding the child from speaking of such ominous possibilities.

Finally, *pooh* is also found in COCA as an expression of mockery and scorn, particularly when used to humiliate or demean. For example:

> "Yesterday I'm on a bus, and the conductress says to an African: 'Your fare please, comrade.' And he says: 'I am not a comrade but sir.' And she says, for the whole bus to hear: **Pooh**! It's only yesterday you came down from the trees—and now you're sir already!" (Davies, 2008)

In this case, *pooh* is used to express racist contempt, functioning as a strong expressive act of humiliation and superiority.

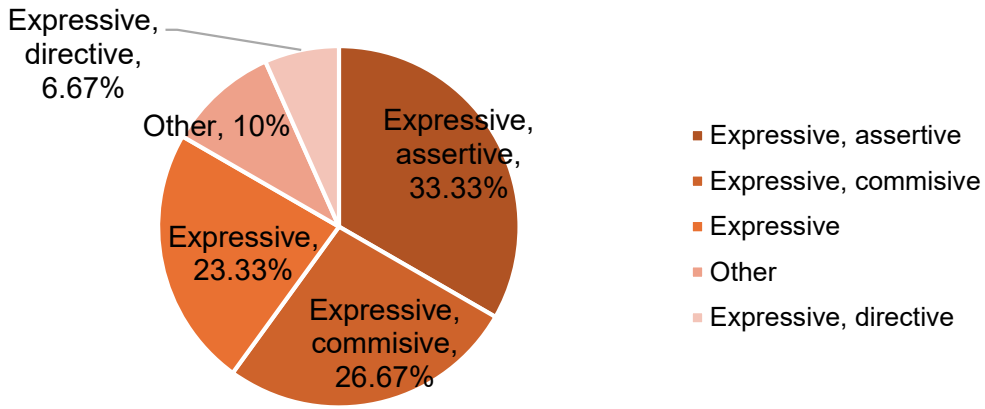
Taken together, *pooh* is rare in both corpora but appears more frequently in *Sherlock Holmes*. Across both datasets, it primarily performs expressive functions, often combined with directive or assertive acts, and in COCA, occasionally with commissive functions as well. While uses in *Sherlock Holmes* focus on physical or personal rejection, COCA shows broader functions, including cultural, ideological, and mocking uses.

4.4 Hum

The interjection *hum* also demonstrates a range of speech act functions; however, the illocutionary forces it carries show different patterns across the two corpora. Figures 8 and 9 illustrate how these speech acts are distributed proportionally within each corpus.

Figure 8

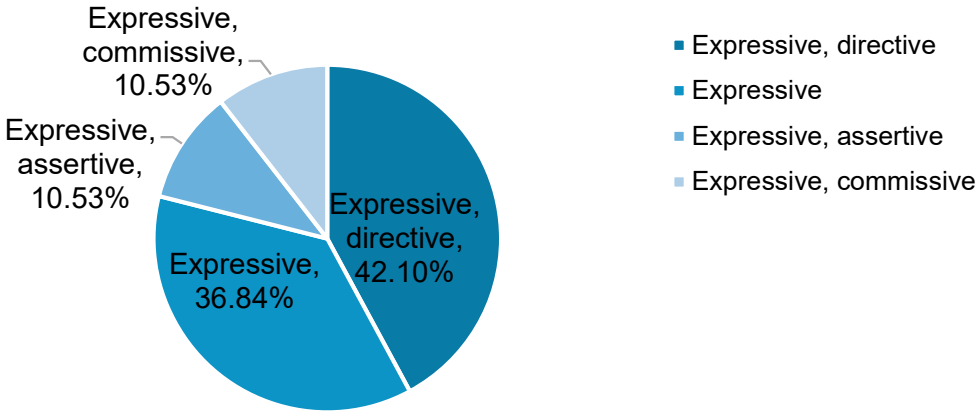
Speech Act Distribution of Hum *in the Sherlock Holmes series*[3]



[3] *Note.* Other= Expressive, directive, assertive (3.33%) and Expressive, assertive, commissive (6.67%)

Figure 9

Speech Act Distribution of Hum *in COCA (Fiction)*



As with *tut* and *pooh*, *hum* is almost always expressive, generally functioning as a vocalization of thinking aloud, often indicating surprise, interest, concentration, or suspicion towards the situation.

In the Sherlock Holmes corpus (see Figure 8), the most frequent secondary speech acts are assertive (43.33% of occurrences) and commissive (33.34% of occurrences). As an assertive, *hum* often marks the speaker's contemplation or uncertainty and is followed by statements of judgment, deduction, or observation, which are typically signaled by expressions like "I think," "I perceive," "you seem," or "I have no recollection of." The commissive *hum* often signals the speaker's deeper engagement with the situation and a willingness to act or investigate further.

An example of both expressive and commissive use appears in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Doyle, 1999):

> "Have you ever observed that his ears are pierced for earrings?"
>
> "Yes, sir. He told me that a gipsy had done it for him when he was a lad."
>
> "**Hum**!" said Holmes, sinking back in deep thought. "He is still with you?"
>
> "Oh, yes, sir; I have only just left him."

Here, *hum* conveys Holmes's surprise and curiosity. His immediate follow-up questions signal his intent to investigate the matter further, thus realizing a commissive act.

However, in COCA (Fiction), *hum* appears in a wider range of more interpersonal and dialogic contexts, and the proportion of expressive plus directive functions is particularly high (42.1%). This is largely due to its use in prompting clarification or responses, especially in moments of confusion. It often appears independently in interrogative or prompting forms.

In one case of *hum* used as a directive, it is used as a question tag, inviting the addressee's reflection: "Shouldn't a school be enjoyed as well as endured, **hum**?" (Davies, 2008).

Additionally, in COCA (Fiction), there is one instance where *hum* is used to signal reluctance or disengagement, and one where it serves as a filled pause. In one COCA example, a character reluctantly revisits a painful topic, responding with "**Hum**, we're back to that" (Davies, 2008) after another speaker insists, they talk about someone who was loved and has died. The interjection here signals emotional resistance to re-engaging with a difficult subject. In another COCA example, *hum* is used as a filled pause during a moment of hesitation in speech, appearing alongside other hesitation markers: "So ... ah... hum... well, good luck to you." (Davies, 2008)

To summarize, in the Sherlock Holmes corpus, *hum* primarily functions as an internal analytical marker, often to assert a deduction or show a willingness to investigate an issue further. In contrast, in COCA (Fiction), *hum* is more commonly used in social and dialogic contexts to seek clarification or express hesitation. This contrast suggests a functional shift in the use of *hum* over time, from a marker of reflective thinking to a tool for conversational interaction.

Taken together, the findings across all three onomatopoeic interjections demonstrate the multifunctionality and contextual flexibility in both fictional corpora. While all three consistently perform expressive acts, they also frequently realize additional illocutionary forces. In both corpora, *tut* and *pooh* often combine expressive functions with assertive and directive acts, especially in moments of judgment, persuasion, or encouragement. *Hum*, while also primarily expressive, more commonly aligns with assertive and commissive acts in *Sherlock Holmes*. In contrast, in COCA's "Fiction" texts, it appears more frequently as a directive to prompt clarification. This variation supports Searle's (1976) view that illocutionary acts can overlap and aligns with Ameka's (1992) claim that the pragmatic functions of interjections are highly context sensitive.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the onomatopoeic interjections *tut (*including *tsk, tch)*, *pooh*, and *hum* occur significantly more frequently in the Sherlock Holmes corpus than in contemporary fiction, as represented by the "Fiction" subsection of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). This notable difference in frequency may reflect diachronic shifts in stylistic preferences and the evolution of fictional dialogue. Nineteenth-century fiction, such as *Sherlock Holmes*, typically exhibits a higher density of interjections and a greater degree of orality in its character exchanges than contemporary fiction.

In both the Sherlock Holmes corpus and COCA (Fiction), *tut* (including *tsk* and *tch*) frequently performs directive speech acts, often accompanying its core expressive function of disapproval or frustration. In *Sherlock Holmes*, it is frequently used to urge the hearer into action or convey impatience, while in COCA, its usage extends further to include teasing, mocking, and mood-shifting functions. Although commissive uses are relatively rare, they are present in both datasets.

Although *pooh* is far less frequent than *tut* or *hum*, it consistently performs an expressive act in both corpora, often signaling disappointment or contempt. In *Sherlock Holmes*, it is frequently combined with directive or assertive functions. In COCA, however, *pooh* displays a broader functional range: in addition to expressive, directive, and occasional commissive acts, it also appears in culturally specific contexts, such as Jewish ritual language used to ward off misfortune.

While *tut* and *pooh* repeatedly express negative emotions or attitudes of disapproval, they can also serve more supportive or encouraging functions in a few cases. In both corpora, *tut* and *pooh* are occasionally used to dismiss the listener's self-doubt or disbelief, followed by an encouraging directive that promotes confidence or encourages action. These uses, often overlooked in dictionary definitions, demonstrate that *tut* and *pooh* are not inherently negative. Rather, they can reflect positive interpersonal dynamics, such as reassurance or motivational support. Notably, such uses appear both in the 19th-century Sherlock Holmes series and in contemporary COCA's "Fiction" subcorpus.

Hum appears primarily as an expressive marker in both corpora, typically signaling thoughtfulness, curiosity, or doubt. In *Sherlock Holmes*, it often combines expressive with assertive or commissive functions, indicating logical deduction or a commitment to further investigation. This observation aligns with the conventions of the detective genre. In contrast, in COCA, *hum* leans more toward directive uses, particularly in questions that elicit clarification or response from the interlocutor.

Overall, this study demonstrates that the pragmatic functions of these onomatopoeic interjections are influenced not only by their immediate context but also by broader cultural influences. While the expressive force dominates across both corpora, *tut*, *pooh*, and *hum* constantly perform additional illocutionary forces such as assertive, directive, and commissive speech acts. Compared to the Sherlock Holmes corpus, COCA (Fiction) reflects greater sociocultural diversity, allowing these interjections to take on expanded performative roles such as mockery and culturally specific conventions.

These findings have meaningful implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Interjections like *tut*, *pooh*, and *hum* convey subtle and context-dependent pragmatic functions that are often overlooked in dictionary definitions. Explicit instruction using authentic examples from both historical and contemporary fiction can enhance learners' pragmatic competence and help them better interpret speakers' intentions in fiction reading. The use of multimodal resources, such as video clips and audio recordings, can further support learners by providing intonation patterns and paralinguistic cues (e.g., facial expressions, gestures), which are essential for understanding how interjections function in both literary and real-life communication. Moreover, the variation in how these interjections function across different cultural contexts brings importance to teaching them as socially and culturally embedded. In this regard, providing learners with relevant cultural background information is also crucial for developing accurate and context-sensitive interpretation.

6. LIMITATIONS

This study faces several limitations in its approach to analyzing the performative functions of onomatopoeic interjections. First, the interpretation of speech acts is inherently ambiguous, as pragmatic functions often depend on subtle contextual cues and may vary across different readers' perspectives. Consequently, the results lack full objectivity, and the quantitative data should be treated as indicative rather than definitive. Second, the COCA's "Fiction" subcorpus includes movie and television scripts, which, while categorized as fiction, lack accompanying multimodal features such as intonation, facial expressions, or gesture. This absence of paralinguistic and prosodic context can limit accurate analysis of the pragmatic functions of interjections. Third, the study focuses exclusively on interjections used in direct speech, but nominal or verbal uses of interjections may still carry pragmatic significance. Lastly, although frequency was converted to occurrences per million words (pmw), the relatively small size of the Sherlock Holmes corpus restricts the generalizability of the findings and may not fully capture the range of interjection usage in fiction from the same period.

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