

On the Pragmatic Functions of Modal Adverbs: A Corpus-based Study of Linguistic Variations in Present-day English *

Daisuke Suzuki

1. Introduction

This study examines the pragmatic functions of modal adverbials *no doubt* and *surely* in present-day English through a comparison with four other synonymic adverbs: *doubtless*, *undoubtedly*, *certainly*, and *definitely*. As is well known, these adverbials fall into the same semantic category and express a speaker's judgment about the certainty or probability of a proposition, as demonstrated by Examples (1a, b):

- (1) a. It was *no doubt* clever of him to offer his resignation at that point in the proceedings. (Quirk et al. 1985: 622)
- b. He has *surely* made a mistake. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 767)

As Table 1 shows, Biber et al. (1999: 854) also classify *no doubt* as epistemic stance adverbials, which express the speaker's judgment

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regarding a proposition:

Table 1. Doubt and certainty adverbials (Based on Biber et al. [1999: 854])

Semantic category	Adverbials
Doubt and certainty	<i>no doubt</i> , <i>certainly</i> , <i>undoubtedly</i> , probably, perhaps, maybe, arguably, decidedly, <i>definitely</i> , incontestably, incontrovertibly, most likely, very likely, quite likely, of course, I guess, I think

On the other hand, based on their research, Huddleston and Pullum (2002) propose that modal adverbs express four levels of strength according to the speaker's commitment: (i) strong, (ii) quasi-strong, (iii) medium, and (iv) weak. They place *surely* into the strong category, as in List (2):

- (2) i assuredly, *certainly*, clearly, *definitely*, incontestably, indubitably, ineluctably, inescapably, manifestly, necessarily, obviously, patently, plainly, *surely*, truly, unarguably, unavoidably, undeniably, *undoubtedly*, unquestionably
- ii apparently, *doubtless*, evidently, presumably, seemingly
- iii arguably, likely, probably
- iv conceivably, maybe, perhaps, possibly

(Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 768)

The purpose of this study is to discuss how the modal adverbs have

developed as pragmatic markers in present-day English and to what extent they behave differently in British English and American English.

2. Previous studies

In this section, I will confine my attention to previous accounts of *no doubt* and *surely*. Quirk et al. (1985: 623) and Konishi (2006: 420) mention that *no doubt* implies some doubt and is synonymous with “very probably.” Fukuda (2010) finds that its use is frequently associated with a modifier of the second coordinated constituent, as illustrated in Example (3):

- (3) A debate even begins about whether the army is not getting a little trigger-happy in its nervous and *no doubt* terrified tension. (Fukuda 2010: 11)

Moreover, Simon-Vandenberg and Aijmer (2007) analyze the semantics and pragmatics of *no doubt* in various contexts, such as expressing a high degree of probability and concessive meaning, and its ability to function as a discourse marker as illustrated in Examples (4a, b):

- (4) a. *No doubt*, money played its part in this (ICE-GB: W2C-007/64)
- b. Britain and Germany will *no doubt* continue to disagree on particular policy issues **but** Chancellor Kohl and John Major clearly feel that the important thing is to have the kind of

ongoing relationship ... (ICE-GB: S2B-002/105)

In regard to the grammaticalization of *no doubt*, they show the possibility of the following development:

(5)	Existential	>	<i>no doubt about it</i>	>	<i>no doubt</i>
	+ certain		+ certain		+ probable
	+ objective		± subjective		+ subjective

(Simon-Vandenberghe and Aijmer 2007: 127)

As for *surely*, Høye (1997: 191) states that “regardless of its syntactic position, *surely* functions to seek agreement in anticipation of some opposition and is not purely used for the reinforcement of truth-value; it also tends to precede a question.” On the other hand, Simon-Vandenberghe and Aijmer (2007: 119) argue that its functions depend on its position in the clause as well as the context. According to them, if *surely* is in the initial position, collocating frequently with a modal verb, the speaker very clearly expresses an opinion on what is possible/likely or what is desirable (pp.135–37). Meanwhile, when it is in medial position, *surely* is considered to lose its epistemic meaning, functioning instead as an emphaser or intensifier (pp.138–39).

Taken as a whole, the existing literature variously interprets the usage of *no doubt* and *surely*; however, the development of modal adverbs in fulfilling discourse-pragmatic functions has not been discussed in the literature. This paper, therefore, provides some new insights into the development of *no doubt* and *surely*.

3. Data and method

For this study, I selected the British National Corpus (BYU-BNC) because of its large scale and wide range, and thus its ability to provide many instances of *no doubt* and *surely*. First, all occurrences of the two expressions were extracted from the corpus. The search in the BNC yielded 5,955 occurrences of *no doubt* and 6,032 of *surely*. Second, I examined these occurrences, and collected and enumerated all the examples functioning as sentence adverbs.¹ In all, **2,701** instances of *no doubt* and **5,369** of *surely* were identified. These frequencies will be used for a quantitative analysis of their behaviour in present-day English.

After this, I also used LOB and FLOB, which are representative corpora of British English in 1961 and 1991, respectively, as well as Brown and Frown, which represent American English in 1961 and 1991, as well. These four corpora are very helpful in exploring the possibility of the development of the target expressions during present-day English and the differences between the two varieties. I examined all the examples of *no doubt* and *surely* from these four corpora in the same way, and collected the instances as follows:

¹ For this analysis, I excluded all the examples of such idiomatic phrase as “slowly but surely” regarding those of *surely*. I also excluded those of the modal adverbs modifying not a clause but a phrase in which a comma (,) intensifies the expressed meaning, as in the following:

- i ..., and that a group of glaucous and ivory gulls were standing around, *no doubt* waiting in the hope of leftovers. (BNC: CRJ)
- ii Given the political will, a primitive nationalism can be generated by governments in a remarkably short space of time, *certainly* in less than a generation. (BNC: AE8)

Table 2. Instances of *no doubt* and *surely* in the four corpora

	LOB	FLOB	Brown	Frown
<i>no doubt</i>	79	48	33	26
<i>surely</i>	126	74	47	54

In my analysis of modal adverbs, I focused attention on information from the discourse and conversation in which those expressions occur, so my primary consideration was investigating two factors regarding their patterns of occurrence: (i) in what position they occur—initial, medial or final,² and (ii) what kind of pronouns fill the Subject slot in the clause.

4. Results and discussion

With regard to the position, Biber et al. (1999: 872) show that there is a preference for stance adverbials' occurring in medial positions, as in Table 3:

² In Hoyer (1997: 148) and Quirk et al. (1985: 490–91), the positions in which they appear are presented as follows:

<i>I</i>	(initial)	<i>Possibly</i> they may have been sent to London.
<i>iM</i>	(initial-medial)	They <i>possibly</i> may have been sent to London.
<i>M</i>	(medial)	They may <i>possibly</i> have been sent to London.
<i>mM</i>	(medial-medial)	They may have <i>possibly</i> been sent to London.
<i>eM</i>	(end-medial)	They may have been <i>possibly</i> sent to London.
<i>iE</i>	(initial-end)	They may have been sent <i>possibly</i> to London.
<i>E</i>	(end)	They may have been sent to London <i>possibly</i> .

(Hoyer 1997: 148)

Table 3. Positioning of stance adverbials across registers (based on Biber et al. [1999: 872])

	Initial (%)	Medial (%)	Final (%)
CONVERSATION	●●●	●●●●●●●●●●	●●●●●●●
FICTION	●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●	●●●●
NEWSPAPER	●●●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●	●●
ACADEMIC	●●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●	●

(each ● represents 5%)

In addition, Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the percentage of total occurrences in which two groups of synonymic modal adverbials—*no doubt*, *doubtless*, and *undoubtedly*, and *certainly*, *surely*, and *definitely*—are positioned in the initial, medial, and final positions, as shown in Examples (6a–c) and (7a–c). Despite the general trend shown in Table 3, we can observe that *no doubt* and *surely* are positioned in the clause-initial position relatively frequently in present-day English. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2004: 79–85), Høye (1997: 148–52), and Halliday (1970: 335) put it, a modal adverb positioned initially expresses the topic or theme of modality, so that there is a strong tendency for *no doubt* and *surely* to function as the marker of the topic in discourse. On the other hand, when they appear in the final position, they are considered to be discourse markers; that is, they also serve the communicative function between the speaker and hearer. This is illustrated by Examples (6c) and (7c), where *no doubt* and *surely* are used as a contextual device to confirm information and understanding between the speaker and hearer:

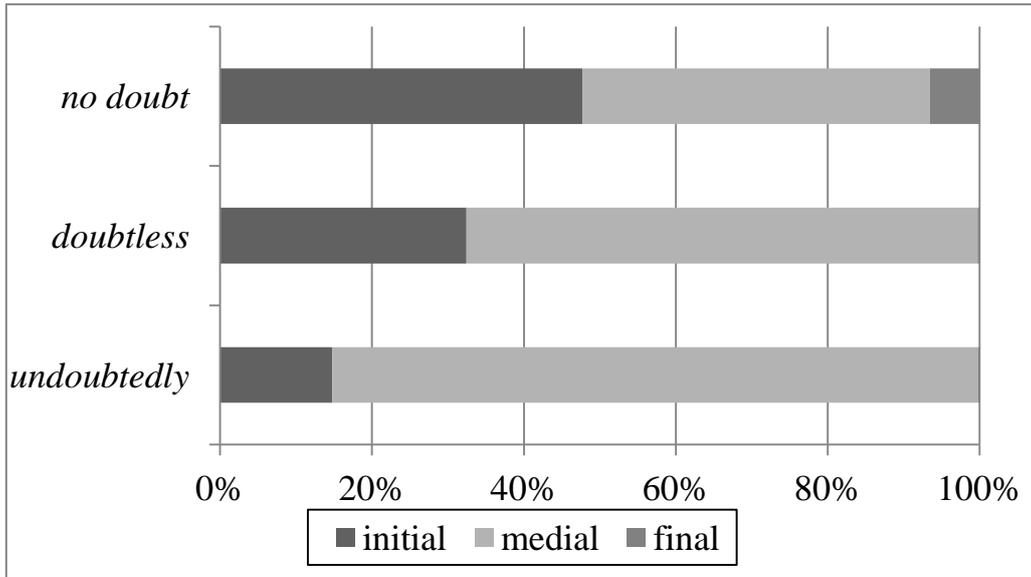


Figure 1. Percentage of initial, medial, and final positioning of *no doubt*, *doubtless*, and *undoubtedly* (BYU-BNC, based on Suzuki [to appear])³

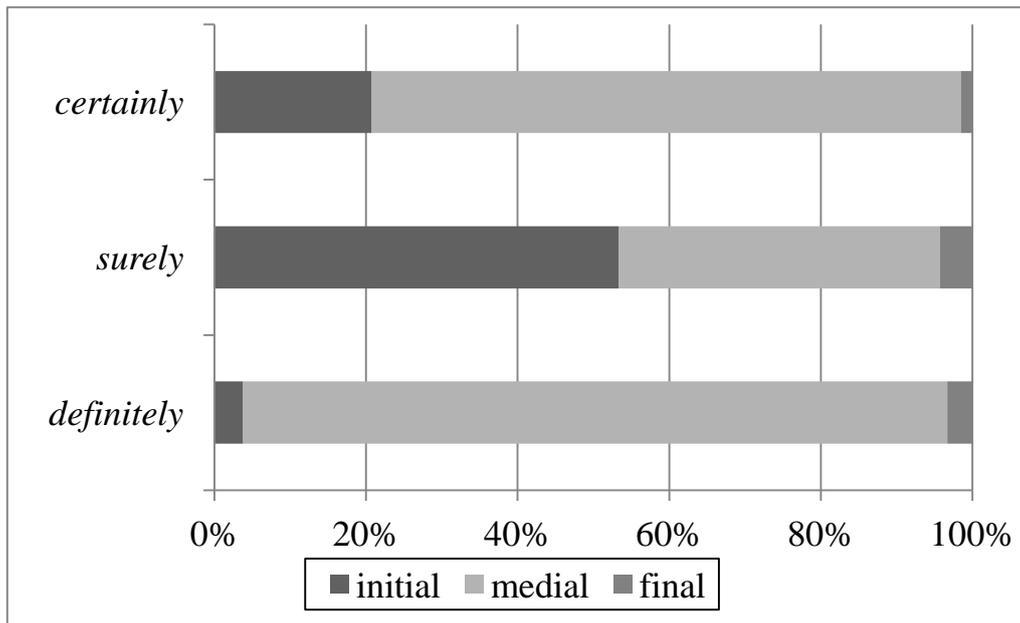


Figure 2. Percentage of initial, medial, and final positioning of *certainly*, *surely*, and *definitely* (BYU-BNC, based on Suzuki [2011: 190])

³ The data of Figures 1–6 are given in the appendix.

- (6) a. ..., but *no doubt* that was the way in which he put the case to the Cabinet. (BNC: HHX)
- b. Pupils will at first *no doubt* compare and contrast the past and the present. (BNC: HXF)
- c. They're very different in many ways, *no doubt*. (BNC: FU8)
- (7) a. *Surely* there are more testing comparisons to be made. (BNC: FS8)
- b. Egypt is *surely* the motif of the year. (BNC: G06)
- c. That sounds odd though, *surely*. (BNC: KPV)

When we turn to an examination of *no doubt* and *surely* and focus on two regional varieties of English, the percentage of occurrences of *no doubt* and *surely* varies among the three positions in British English, as indicated by Figures 3 and 4. As can be observed, the percentage of *no doubt* in clause-initial position is significantly high, and the increase of both *no doubt* and *surely* in occurring at the end between 1961 and 1991 is marked, as illustrated in Examples (8a–d):

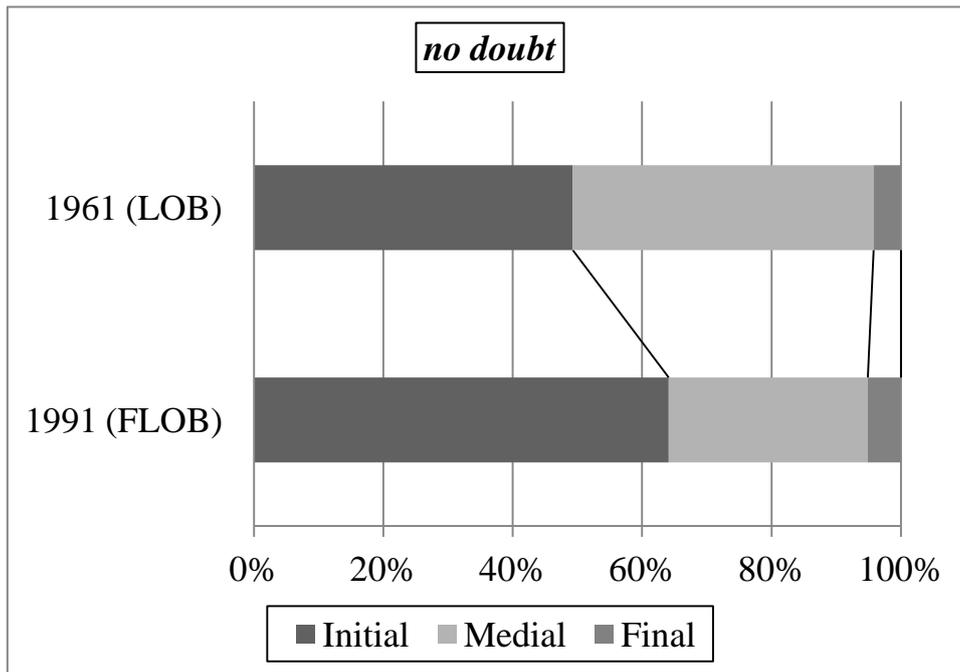


Figure 3. Percentage of initial, medial, and final positioning of *no doubt* in LOB and FLOB

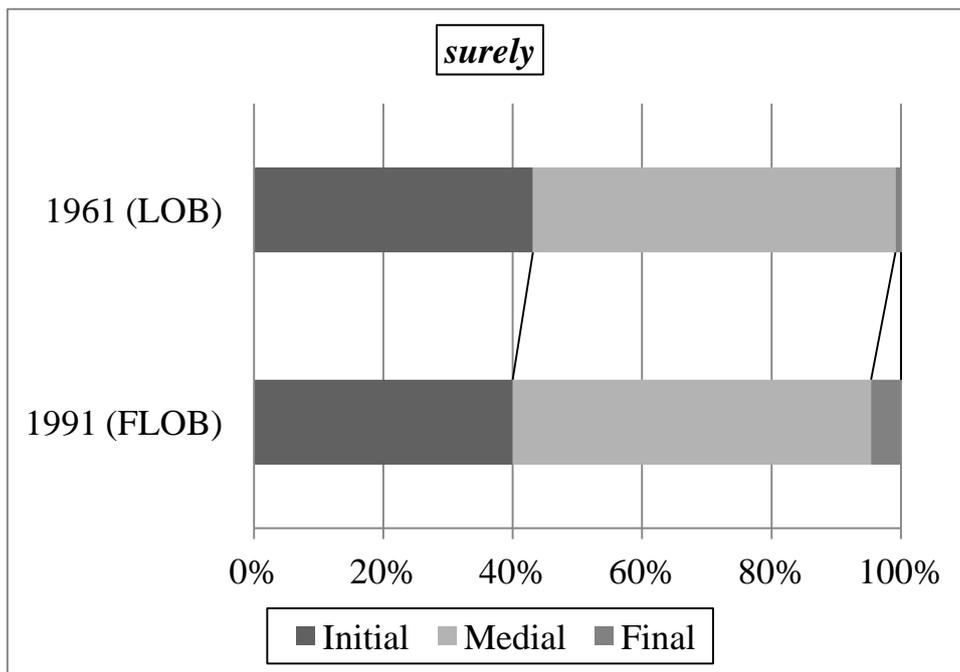


Figure 4. Percentage of initial, medial, and final positioning of *surely* in LOB and FLOB

- (8) a. His face was shiny and sweating; so was mine, *no doubt*.
(LOB, N)
- b. “Is he indeed? As keeper of the Realm, he has come to meet the King on his return from Ireland, *no doubt*. How did he greet Henry?” (FLOB, P)
- c. “If that had been the case she would have left a letter or a message, *surely*?” (LOB, P)
- d. You cannot have two days like that *surely*? (FLOB, A)

On the other hand, Figures 5 and 6 show the quantitative distribution of the instances in Brown and Frown—that is, American English. We observe a significant increase of *no doubt* and *surely* occurring in the clause-initial position between 1961 and 1991. Another noteworthy thing here is that no instances of the adverbials in final positioning occurred in 1961 and 1991. This indicates that from the viewpoint of communication, American English had not developed the communicative function of *no doubt* and *surely* between 1961 and 1991, unlike British English.

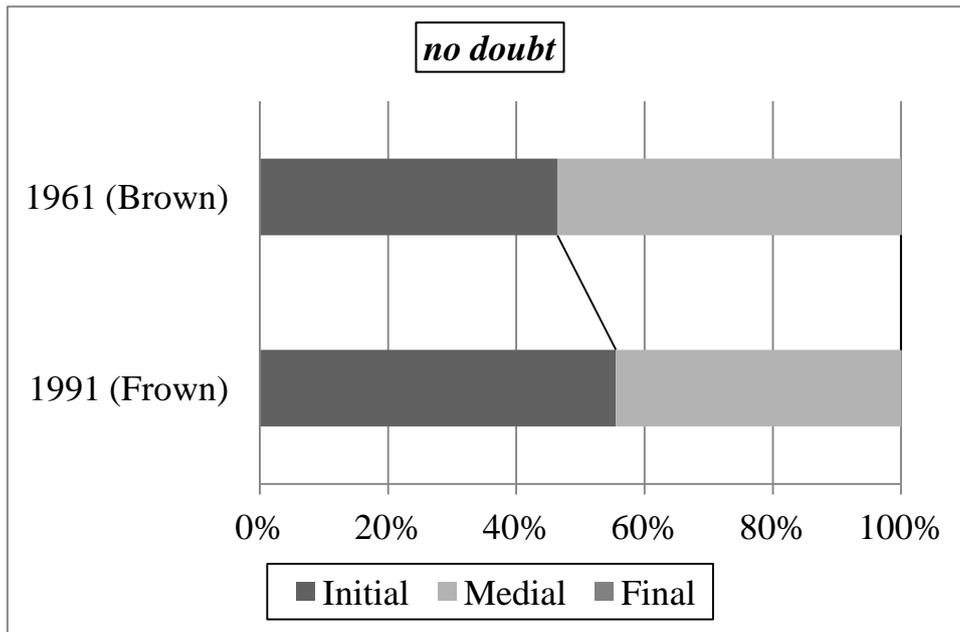


Figure 5. Percentage of initial, medial, and final positioning of *no doubt* in Brown and Frown

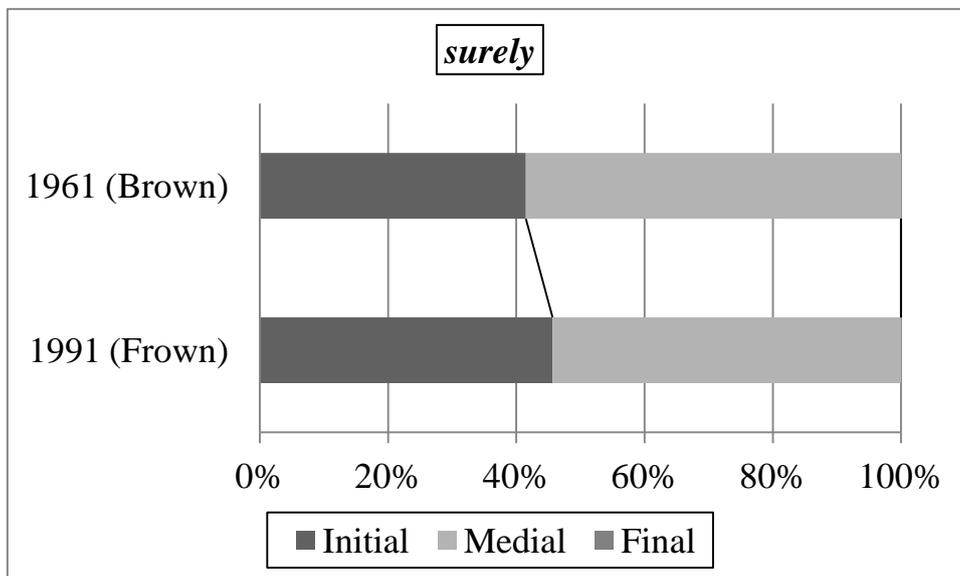


Figure 6. Percentage of initial, medial, and final positioning of *surely* in Brown and Frown

To support this analysis of *no doubt* and *surely* explicitly in interpersonal contexts, I use data from Tables 4 and 5. They show

the quantitative distribution of the instances of the six adverbials among the pronouns in the Subject slot, with such positioning linguistically illustrated in Examples (9a, b) and (10a, b). *No doubt* and *surely* display a tendency toward a higher frequency of co-occurrence with the subject pronoun *you*, in contrast with the other four expressions: *doubtless*, *undoubtedly*, *certainly*, and *definitely*.

Table 4. Frequencies of *no doubt*, *doubtless*, and *undoubtedly* with clause subject pronouns (BYU-BNC, based on Suzuki [to appear])⁴

	<i>no doubt</i>		<i>doubtless</i>		<i>undoubtedly</i>	
	Freq.	Per 1,000	Freq.	Per 1,000	Freq.	Per 1,000
I	49	18.14	9	12.31	9	4.09
you	182	<u>67.38</u>	27	36.94	29	13.17
he	209	77.38	49	67.03	90	40.87
she	88	32.58	11	15.05	21	9.54
it	187	69.23	52	71.14	182	82.65
we	55	20.36	4	5.47	13	5.90
they	120	44.43	30	41.04	72	32.70
this	92	34.06	18	24.62	92	41.78
that	28	10.37	9	12.31	24	10.90
these	3	1.11	2	2.74	5	2.27
those	1	0.37	0	0.00	0	0.00

⁴ In Tables 4 and 5, the raw frequencies of pronouns are given for each form, followed by the normalized figure of the number of occurrences per 1,000 instances.

Table 5. Frequencies of *certainly*, *surely*, and *definitely* with clause subject pronouns (BYU-BNC, based on [Suzuki 2011: 191])

	<i>certainly</i>		<i>surely</i>		<i>definitely</i>	
	Freq.	Per 1,000	Freq.	Per 1,000	Freq.	Per 1,000
I	1,413	89.9	110	20.5	272	115.7
you	517	32.9	412	<u>76.7</u>	136	57.9
he	928	59.0	303	56.4	139	59.1
she	388	24.7	167	31.1	99	42.1
it	2,531	161.0	672	125.2	270	114.9
we	671	42.7	198	36.9	115	48.9
they	771	49.1	224	41.7	115	48.9
this	380	24.2	245	45.6	57	24.3
that	336	21.4	255	47.5	93	39.6
these	36	2.3	9	1.7	12	5.1
those	13	0.8	2	0.4	1	0.4

- (9) a. “It means that any office development or commercial of this kind in this I twelve policy that was to occur in Harrogate would not be counted off the sixty hectares of em erm of I five allocation, it would be in addition to it, and that may be a very important breakthrough for us. Well yes. *No doubt you*’ll want to return to that. Thank you very much.” (BNC: JAD)
- b. “... should it ever become necessary to activate this device, I assure you that both I and my staff will be well clear of its effects. *No doubt you* are disappointed to hear that.” “You’re right, Nate.” (BNC: HJD)

- (10) a. Not so very. Not so very. You know her. I think you know her. Anyway you know all about her, for I have told you. And you have seen her. *Surely* **you** remember her? They say she is very clever and will keep my house well. This is more important than a long nose, don't you think? (BNC: CDX)
- b. Obviously, you're fond of him, but *surely* **you** can see? His accent, Edouard. You'll never eliminate it altogether, you know. (BNC: C8S)

Moreover, the marked pattern of the use in interrogative contexts can be observed in the BNC. The following are examples of *no doubt* and *surely*, used as a meta-linguistic device to confirm or emphasize information and understanding concerning the speaker and hearer—that is, to fulfill an interpersonal function:

- (11) a. And then **you** called in the Royal Oxford, *no doubt?* (BNC: HWM)
- b. **You** have heard of Vechey's death, *no doubt?* (BNC: H98)
- (12) a. **You** don't have to eat the skin, *surely?* (BNC: KBW)
- b. **You** can wait until then, *surely?* (BNC: EVC)

In sum, the modal adverbs *no doubt* and *surely* fulfil a more interpersonal function, and in present-day English, they have developed as a pragmatic marker. They tend to be free in the positioning in a sentence and assume a more discourse-based function, so it seems that *no doubt* and *surely* have undergone a process of grammaticalization, as shown in Table 6:

Table 6. Summary of the modal adverbs

<i>no doubt, surely</i>		
<i>doubtless, undoubtedly,</i> <i>certainly, definitely</i>		
semantic level	discourse-pragmatic level	
modal meaning	discourse function	interpersonal function
-----> grammaticalization		
British English		
American English		

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have demonstrated that the development of *no doubt* and *surely* is a clearer case of grammaticalization than the other four modal adverbs. In addition, it is shown that British English and American English differ in terms of the part the modal adverbials play at a discourse-pragmatic level.

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Appendix: Data for Figures 1–6

Data for Figure 1

	Initial	Medial	Final	Total
<i>no doubt</i>	1,288	1,237	176	2,701
<i>doubtless</i>	237	492	2	731
<i>undoubtedly</i>	325	1,873	4	2,202

Data for Figure 2

	Initial	Medial	Final	Total
<i>certainly</i>	3,261	12,218	239	15,718
<i>surely</i>	2,863	2,275	231	5,369
<i>definitely</i>	89	2,183	78	2,350

Data for Figure 3

	Initial	Medial	Final	Others	Total
1961 (LOB)	35	33	3	8	79
1991 (FLOB)	25	12	2	9	48

Data for Figure 4

	Initial	Medial	Final	Others	Total
1961 (LOB)	50	65	1	10	126
1991 (FLOB)	26	36	3	9	74

Data for Figure 5

	Initial	Medial	Final	Others	Total
1961 (Brown)	13	15	0	5	33
1991 (Frown)	10	8	0	8	26

Data for Figure 6

	Initial	Medial	Final	Others	Total
1961 (Brown)	17	24	0	6	47
1991 (Frown)	21	25	0	8	54