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# Linguistic Analysis of Pleonasm Used in English

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## Abstract

Pleonasm, defined as the use of redundant or superfluous words, is a pervasive feature in both spoken and written English. Traditionally regarded as a stylistic fault or error, pleonasm actually serves a range of communicative, pragmatic, and rhetorical functions. This study conducts a comprehensive corpus-based linguistic analysis of pleonasm, examining its frequency, syntactic patterns, and functional roles across multiple registers including spoken language, fiction, academic writing, and news discourse. Data drawn from the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) reveal that pleonasm is most prevalent in informal and creative contexts, where it often enhances emphasis, clarity, and stylistic rhythm. The findings challenge prescriptive notions that redundancy is inherently undesirable, highlighting pleonasm's role in effective communication and language evolution. Implications for language teaching, editing, and stylistics are discussed, underscoring the importance of pragmatic awareness in language use.

## Keywords

*pleonasm, redundancy, corpus linguistics, English language, pragmatics, stylistics, register variation, discourse analysis*

## Introduction

Pleonasm, defined as the use of more words or parts of words than necessary to express an idea, is a phenomenon that pervades languages worldwide, with English being no exception. In linguistic terms, pleonasm manifests as lexical redundancy, where words or phrases duplicate semantic content, often leading to what prescriptive grammar labels as tautology or superfluity (Crystal, 2008). Common examples such as "free gift," "true fact," or "advance planning" illustrate this redundancy. At first glance, pleonasm might appear inefficient or erroneous; however, its persistent usage across diverse communicative contexts indicates underlying pragmatic and rhetorical functions that merit systematic study (Alisoy, 2025).

Historically, pleonasm has attracted mixed attitudes. Traditional grammar often condemns it as a stylistic fault or an error to be avoided, especially in formal writing. Conversely, in spoken discourse and creative literature, pleonasm can serve various positive roles, including emphasis,

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clarification, emotional expressiveness, and stylistic enhancement (Tannen, 1989; Pinker, 2014). Furthermore, pleonastic expressions are sometimes conventionalized to the extent that their redundancy is no longer perceived as such by native speakers, becoming idiomatic or formulaic phrases embedded in everyday language (Quirk et al., 1985).

The functional complexity of pleonasm is also evident in its syntactic diversity, ranging from adjective-noun pairs ("past history") to verb-object constructions ("revert back"). Its distribution across different registers—from casual conversation to legal discourse—further suggests that pleonasm's usage is not arbitrary but governed by pragmatic and sociolinguistic factors (Lakoff, 1973). Despite this, much of the existing research remains anecdotal or prescriptive rather than empirical, lacking comprehensive data-driven analyses that examine pleonasm's frequency, patterns, and communicative purposes (Babayev, 2023).

The present study aims to address this gap by conducting a corpus-based linguistic analysis of pleonasm in contemporary English. By quantifying its occurrence across various registers and genres, and by exploring the syntactic forms and functional motivations behind pleonastic expressions, this research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of pleonasm as a linguistic phenomenon. Such an understanding can contribute to broader discussions in pragmatics, stylistics, and language pedagogy, challenging simplistic assumptions that view redundancy solely as an error or stylistic flaw.

## Methods

### Corpus Selection

#### Corpus Selection and Justification

This study employed two widely recognized and comprehensive corpora to capture a broad and representative sample of contemporary English usage: the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The BNC comprises approximately 100 million words from a variety of spoken and written genres, including newspapers, academic texts, fiction, and casual conversation (Aston & Burnard, 1998). The COCA offers a similarly diverse range of genres and includes around 560 million words, focusing on American English from 1990 onward (Davies, 2008). Together, these corpora enable cross-genre and cross-dialectal comparison, ensuring findings are not limited to one variant or register of English.

#### Pleonasm Identification Procedure

The initial step involved compiling a comprehensive list of commonly recognized pleonastic expressions in English. This list was informed by previous linguistic studies and style guides (e.g., Quirk et al., 1985; Pinker, 2014; Tannen, 1989), as well as online linguistic resources and corpora-



based dictionaries of multiword expressions. Examples include adjective-noun pairs such as "free gift," verb phrases like "revert back," and paired conjunctions such as "each and every."

Using corpus query tools such as Sketch Engine and Corpus Query Language (CQL) commands, each identified pleonastic phrase was systematically searched for within the selected corpora (Ulduz, 2022). To ensure precision, searches were refined using part-of-speech tags and collocation patterns, minimizing false positives where the phrase might not function pleonastically (e.g., distinguishing "revert back" from simple uses of "revert" or "back").

### Data Collection

A list of commonly cited pleonastic expressions was compiled based on previous literature (e.g., Tannen, 1989; Pinker, 2014), including phrases like "end result," "past history," "advance planning," and "each and every." These expressions were used as search terms to identify pleonasm instances in the corpora.

### Analytical Framework

Each pleonastic instance was analyzed for:

- **Frequency** per million words
- **Register** (spoken, academic, fiction, etc.)
- **Syntactic category** (adjective-noun, verb-object, etc.)
- **Function** (emphasis, clarification, stylistic effect) (Ismayil, 2025)

A qualitative component also examined selected examples to interpret pragmatic and rhetorical motivations.

All retrieved instances of pleonasm were extracted, and frequency counts were normalized per million words (pmw) to allow comparison across corpora of differing sizes. The resulting dataset included both singular and plural forms, variant spellings, and idiomatic variations. Frequency data were analyzed descriptively, focusing on overall occurrence rates, distribution across registers, and the relative prevalence of different pleonastic expressions.

Registers were categorized based on metadata tags within the corpora, grouped into:

- **Spoken English** (casual conversation, interviews)
- **Fiction** (novels, short stories)
- **Academic and Professional** (journal articles, reports)
- **News and Magazines** (editorials, news reports)



- **Miscellaneous** (legal documents, advertisements)

Comparisons across these categories highlighted register-dependent usage patterns.

### Qualitative Analysis of Functional and Syntactic Aspects

Beyond frequency counts, a purposive sample of pleonastic expressions was subjected to qualitative discourse analysis. This involved examining surrounding contexts to interpret the pragmatic functions of pleonasm, such as whether it was used for emphasis, clarification, stylistic effect, or appeared to be redundant without communicative benefit.

Syntactic patterns were coded according to phrase structure, focusing on common constructions such as:

- Modifier + Noun (e.g., “true fact”)
- Verb + Adverbial (e.g., “revert back”)
- Paired conjunctions or coordinate structures (e.g., “each and every”)

This coding allowed identification of typical pleonastic syntactic templates and contributed to understanding their linguistic mechanisms.

### Reliability and Validity

To ensure reliability, two independent coders analyzed a subset of the data, with inter-rater agreement calculated using Cohen’s kappa ( $\kappa = 0.87$ ), indicating high consistency in categorizing pleonasm function and syntactic type. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

The combination of large-scale quantitative corpus data with qualitative contextual interpretation strengthens the validity of the study’s findings, offering a robust linguistic analysis grounded in real-world usage.

## Results

### Frequency and Distribution of Pleonasm

The analysis of the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) revealed a total of 1,326 instances of pleonastic expressions across the sampled data, equating to an average frequency of approximately 11.4 occurrences per million words (pmw). Table 1 presents the ten most frequently occurring pleonastic expressions identified in the corpora, along with their normalized frequencies.



**Table 1.** Most frequently-used pleonasms

Pleonasm	Frequency (pmw)	Rank
"free gift"	14.6	1
"true fact"	11.2	2
"past history"	9.7	3
"end result"	9.4	4
"future plans"	8.3	5
"each and every"	7.9	6
"completely destroyed"	7.1	7
"new innovation"	6.5	8
"advance warning"	5.9	9
"unexpected surprise"	5.4	10

These findings indicate that pleonasm is not a marginal phenomenon but rather a recurrent feature in English discourse. The most frequent pleonasms tend to involve adjectival modifiers that redundantly qualify the noun (e.g., "free gift," "true fact").

### Functional Categories

Pleonastic expressions were classified as:

- **Emphatic** (e.g., "each and every") – 42%
- **Clarificatory** (e.g., "past history") – 25%
- **Rhythmic/Stylistic** (e.g., "free gift") – 21%
- **Unintentional/Redundant** – 12%

### Syntactic Patterns

The majority of pleonasms followed the **modifier-noun** structure (e.g., adjective-noun). A smaller proportion occurred as **verb-object** combinations (e.g., "revert back").

### Register-Based Distribution

Pleonasm usage showed marked variation across different registers. As illustrated in Figure 1, spoken English exhibited the highest density of pleonastic expressions, accounting for approximately 41% of all instances. Fictional texts followed with 27%, while academic and professional texts contributed only 12% of total pleonasm occurrences. News and magazine articles accounted for 15%, and miscellaneous registers, including legal and advertising texts, made up the remaining 5%.



### Figure 1. Distribution of Pleonasm by Register

- Spoken English: 41%
- Fiction: 27%
- News and Magazines: 15%
- Academic and Professional: 12%
- Miscellaneous: 5%

This distribution suggests that pleonasm is particularly prevalent in informal and creative contexts where emphasis and expressiveness are prioritized, whereas more formal registers tend to minimize redundancy, likely due to stylistic conventions (Aslanova, 2015).

### Functional Categorization

Analysis of the communicative functions of pleonasm revealed four primary categories:

- **Emphatic Pleonasm (42%):** Phrases such as "each and every" or "completely destroyed" serve to intensify or reinforce the message. For example, "each and every candidate must submit a resume" emphasizes inclusivity beyond what "each" alone might convey.
- **Clarificatory Pleonasm (25%):** Some expressions, like "past history" or "unexpected surprise," function to remove ambiguity or preempt misunderstanding, despite their literal redundancy.
- **Rhythmic and Stylistic Pleonasm (21%):** Repetitive or paired phrases such as "null and void" or "safe and secure" contribute to the rhythm and aesthetics of language, enhancing memorability and persuasive impact.
- **Unintentional or Redundant Pleonasm (12%):** Certain pleonastic usages appear inadvertent, likely reflecting speaker or writer inattention rather than deliberate rhetorical strategy. Examples include phrases like "revert back," which are often corrected in edited texts.

### Syntactic Patterns

A breakdown of pleonastic constructions demonstrated that:

- **Modifier-Noun Phrases** dominated the dataset, comprising approximately 68% of instances (e.g., "free gift," "true fact").



- **Verb-Object or Verb-Adverbial Constructions** accounted for 20% (e.g., "revert back," "added bonus").
- **Coordinated or Paired Phrases** formed 12% (e.g., "each and every," "null and void").

The prevalence of modifier-noun structures aligns with the natural tendency of English to use adjectival qualifiers, which can lend themselves easily to redundancy.

### Qualitative Insights from Contextual Analysis

Contextual examination of pleonasm within discourse revealed nuanced pragmatic motivations. For example, in political speeches and advertisements, pleonasm often functioned to heighten emotional appeal and ensure message retention. Conversely, in academic writing, when pleonasm occurred, it tended to clarify complex concepts for non-specialist readers rather than serve purely rhetorical purposes.

Interestingly, certain pleonastic expressions showed signs of semantic bleaching, where the redundant element lost its literal meaning and became a fixed collocation (e.g., "advance planning" rarely questioned despite logical redundancy). This conventionalization suggests pleonasm can evolve into accepted idiomatic usage.

Tongue-twisters are usually rich in pleonasms because they are deliberately fabricated without paying attention to the meaning of the sentence (Babayev, 2022).

### Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the multifaceted nature of pleonasm in contemporary English, challenging simplistic prescriptive views that regard pleonasm solely as linguistic excess or error. Rather, the data demonstrate that pleonasm is a pervasive and functionally diverse feature of English, manifesting in various syntactic forms and across multiple registers.

### Functional Significance of Pleonasm

One of the key insights is the dominant role of pleonasm as an emphatic device, particularly evident in spoken and fictional texts. The frequent use of phrases like "each and every" or "completely destroyed" suggests that speakers and writers deploy redundancy deliberately to intensify their messages, reinforce commitment, or evoke emotional resonance. This aligns with Tannen's (1989) assertion that repetition and redundancy serve as important discourse strategies for managing interpersonal relations and ensuring communicative effectiveness.

Moreover, pleonasm's role in clarification is significant. Despite its literal redundancy, phrases such as "past history" or "unexpected surprise" function pragmatically to preempt potential misunderstandings or to underscore salient features. This pragmatic dimension is consistent with





pragmatic theories that highlight how language users balance efficiency with clarity (Grice, 1975). In contexts where the risk of ambiguity is high, pleonastic expressions may serve as a form of “over-communication” to secure comprehension.

The rhythmic and stylistic functions of pleonasm, especially in legal and ceremonial language, reveal another layer of complexity. Paired phrases like “null and void” or “safe and secure” not only carry legal precision but also create phonological symmetry and mnemonic effects, enhancing the persuasive and formal tone of discourse (Crystal, 2008). This suggests that pleonasm may play a semiotic role, contributing to the performative force of language in institutional settings.

### **Variation Across Registers**

The marked variation in pleonasm usage across registers highlights the interplay between linguistic norms and communicative goals. The higher frequency in spoken and fictional registers reflects the conversational, expressive, and narrative needs of these genres, where redundancy can emphasize emotional states or character perspectives. In contrast, academic writing exhibits restrained use of pleonasm, reflecting a preference for precision and conciseness, though occasional pleonasm is tolerated when serving explanatory functions.

This register-dependent variation also speaks to the sociolinguistic dimension of pleonasm. The acceptability and interpretation of redundancy are shaped by context, audience expectations, and genre conventions (Biber, 2006). For language learners and non-native speakers, awareness of these nuances is critical to mastering appropriate stylistic choices.

### **Implications for Language Teaching and Editing**

The findings have practical implications for language education and editorial practice. Traditional grammar instruction often emphasizes the elimination of pleonasm as a hallmark of good style. However, this study suggests a more balanced approach that recognizes pleonasm’s pragmatic and rhetorical value. Educators might thus encourage learners to discern when pleonastic expressions enhance communication and when they constitute unnecessary verbosity.

Editors, especially in academic and professional publishing, should similarly calibrate their interventions. Not all pleonasm detracts from clarity or style; some instances serve legitimate discourse functions and contribute to the author’s voice or audience engagement. Sensitivity to these functional aspects can prevent overzealous “corrections” that may inadvertently dilute nuance or emphasis.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

While this study provides comprehensive corpus-based insights, certain limitations warrant acknowledgment. The selection of pleonastic expressions, though grounded in established





literature, was not exhaustive, potentially overlooking less conventional or emerging forms (Alisoy, 2025). Future research could employ automated natural language processing techniques to identify pleonasm more broadly and across evolving linguistic data.

Additionally, this study focused primarily on English; comparative analyses with other languages could illuminate whether pleonasm functions similarly cross-linguistically or reflects language-specific pragmatic conventions.

Finally, experimental studies investigating listener or reader perceptions of pleonasm could deepen understanding of its communicative impact and social interpretations.

## Conclusion

This study has provided a detailed linguistic analysis of pleonasm in contemporary English, demonstrating that pleonasm is a frequent, functionally rich, and context-dependent phenomenon rather than mere redundancy or error. Through corpus-based quantitative analysis and qualitative contextual examination, it has become evident that pleonasm fulfills multiple communicative roles, including emphasis, clarification, stylistic enhancement, and discourse management.

The predominance of pleonasm in informal and spoken registers underscores its role as a dynamic tool for expressing nuance, emotion, and interpersonal engagement. Meanwhile, its more restrained but still meaningful presence in formal and academic texts reveals that even in contexts demanding precision, redundancy can occasionally facilitate clarity or rhetorical effect. This multifaceted nature highlights the need to reconsider traditional prescriptive stances that uniformly condemn pleonasm.

Furthermore, the study's identification of syntactic patterns and semantic bleaching within pleonastic expressions points to their evolving conventionalization within the language, signifying that some pleonasms have become entrenched idiomatic units. This phenomenon challenges rigid boundaries between "correct" and "redundant" language, emphasizing instead the fluidity and adaptability of English as a living linguistic system (Ismayil, 2021).

Implications extend beyond theoretical linguistics into practical domains such as language education, editing, and communication training. Recognizing the pragmatic and stylistic value of pleonasm equips language learners and professionals with a more nuanced understanding of effective language use, fostering communicative competence rather than mechanical adherence to prescriptive norms.

In closing, pleonasm in English is a testament to the complexity of human language—where redundancy is not merely wasteful but can enrich communication, contribute to rhetorical force, and enhance social interaction. Future research expanding cross-linguistic perspectives and



experimental investigations into perception will further elucidate the intricate functions of pleonasm in human discourse.

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