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#JustSaying – Tracking constructional change in online communication

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Constructional change in the progressive

- The progressive (BE + *Ving*) has increased particularly strongly with the most prototypical forms (present-tense, dynamic situations, activity/communication verbs)
 - Entrenchment: A process in which frequent linguistic items become even more frequent because they are more strongly associated with their meaning
- A change in the construction does not necessarily affect the whole construction, but more likely a part of it:
 - One variant of the construction may gain in frequency while others become less frequent (e.g. present-tense progressives), or
 - New variants may be added to the construction (e.g. progressive passive), and
 - Non-aspectual uses of the progressive: the increasing use of the prototypical progressives increases the potential of new and innovative uses occurring

Hilpert (2013); Rohe (2019); Schmid (2023)



Focus on BE *saying*

- BE *saying* is one the most rapidly increasing combinations of individual verbs and the progressive in recent BrE (Rohe 2019; Rautionaho, in press) and AmE (Rautionaho, ICAME46)
- Rohe (2019): the progressive from a constructional viewpoint
 - Developments with BE *saying* can be explained as constr. change
- Fixed patterns with BE *saying*, usu. non-aspectual meaning:
 1. *I'm not saying/I'm just saying* - Downtoning to less definitive statement; cf. interpretative prog. (Martínez Vázquez 2019)
 2. *As I was (just) saying* – Recentness (Pfaff, Bergs & Hoffmann 2013)
 3. *That's what I'm saying* - Argumentative standpoint (Craig & Sanusi 2000)



I'm just saying >> *#justsaying*

- *(I'm) just saying* one of the most frequently occurring patterns
 - BE *just saying* has increased by +225% in spoken AmE since the 1990s (Rautionaho, ICAME46)
 - Provides interpretation of what was meant (e.g. *I'm not saying X, I'm just saying Y*), or a downtoner (e.g. *Don't get in trouble with the Italians. **Just saying.*** COCA, Spok_2012)
- Hashtag *#justsaying*
 - No instances in traditional corpora (BNC, COHA, COCA)
 - Corpora with web-based language:
 - 18 instances in GloWbE; 277 instances in NOW



Digital social networks

- Social media as data:
 - A massive collection of texts > a huge corpus for finding emergent or otherwise infrequent features
 - A massive collection of social networks > a dataset for looking at how language is used and how it changes
- Social media: the main purpose of social media is to form and be part of meaningful communities (Laitinen & Fatemi 2023)
- Social network theory (Milroy & Milroy 1985)
 - Innovations first crop up in weak-tie networks, i.e. networks whose members are only loosely connected to one another. Individuals in weak-tie networks are more likely to be innovators in language use, but for a new feature to gain foothold, its use needs to be adopted by central individuals with strong ties in their network.



Motivation and Research questions

- How do the different patterns with BE *saying* manifest in digital data: *#justsaying* vs. other forms?
- Research questions
 - What is the short-term diachrony of *#justsaying* and how does it compare to other forms of BE *saying*?
 - What is the role of social network structure and size in the use and frequency of *#justsaying*?
 - ~~– To what extent does the social network theory hold for digital social networks, i.e. are innovations introduced in weak-tie networks?~~

Data and methods



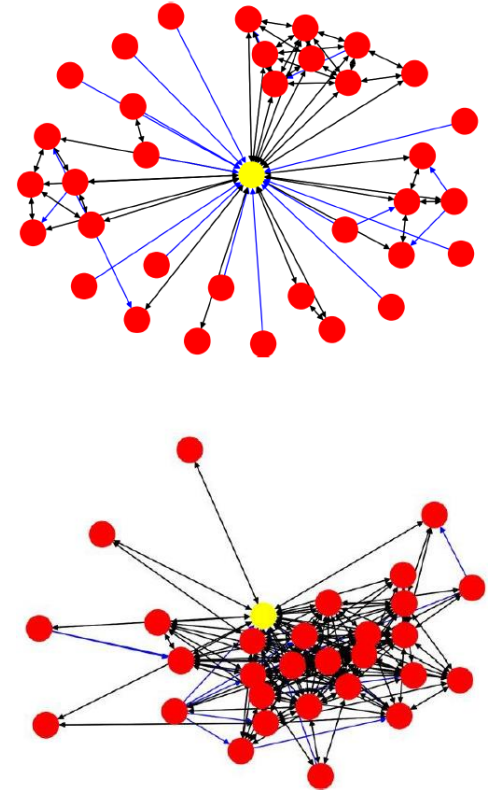
Data

- Digital Social Network corpora (DSN corpora)
 - Data collected via the Twitter API in 2023; **UK, US** and AUS
 - API now closed and compiling similar data would be very expensive
 - Tweets, but more importantly data enriched with network information: interactions between people (Laitinen & Fatemi 2022)
 - 5,775 ego networks with 435,345 individuals who sent over 561 million messages and generated over 7.8 billion words



Network properties

- Direct graph ego networks (Trudeau 1993)
 - Egos: anchor individuals
 - Alters: other people connected to egos
 - Edges: interactions with directions
 - Network strength index (Laitinen et al. 2025)
 - 0 = maximally weak-tie network ~ acquaintances
 - 1 = maximally strong-tie network ~ friends





Methods

- Extraction of tweets including
 - "just saying | sayin' | sayin"
 - "justsaying | sayin' | sayin"
 - "#justsaying | sayin' | sayin"
- Variables: userid, egoid, node type (ego vs. alter), networkID, location (UK vs. US, rural vs. urban), network size (no of people), NSI score (0-1), date (2010-2023)
- Manual validation, identification of patterns

Findings



Overlook of the findings

- 104,375 hits in the DSN corpora
 - UK 19,345; US 85,030
- Random sample of c. 25,000 tokens used for the analysis
 - UK 4,727; US 20,843
- 17,498 individual users; 3,447 individual networks

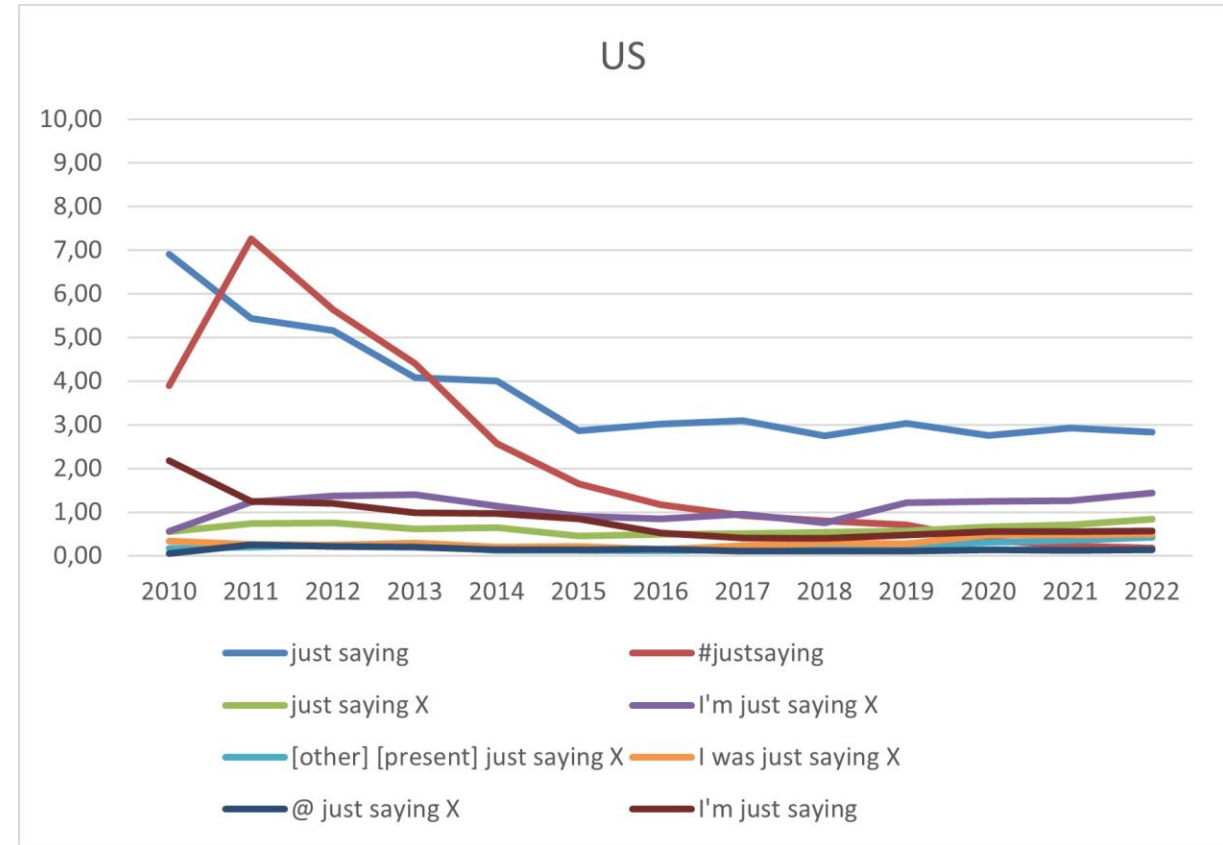
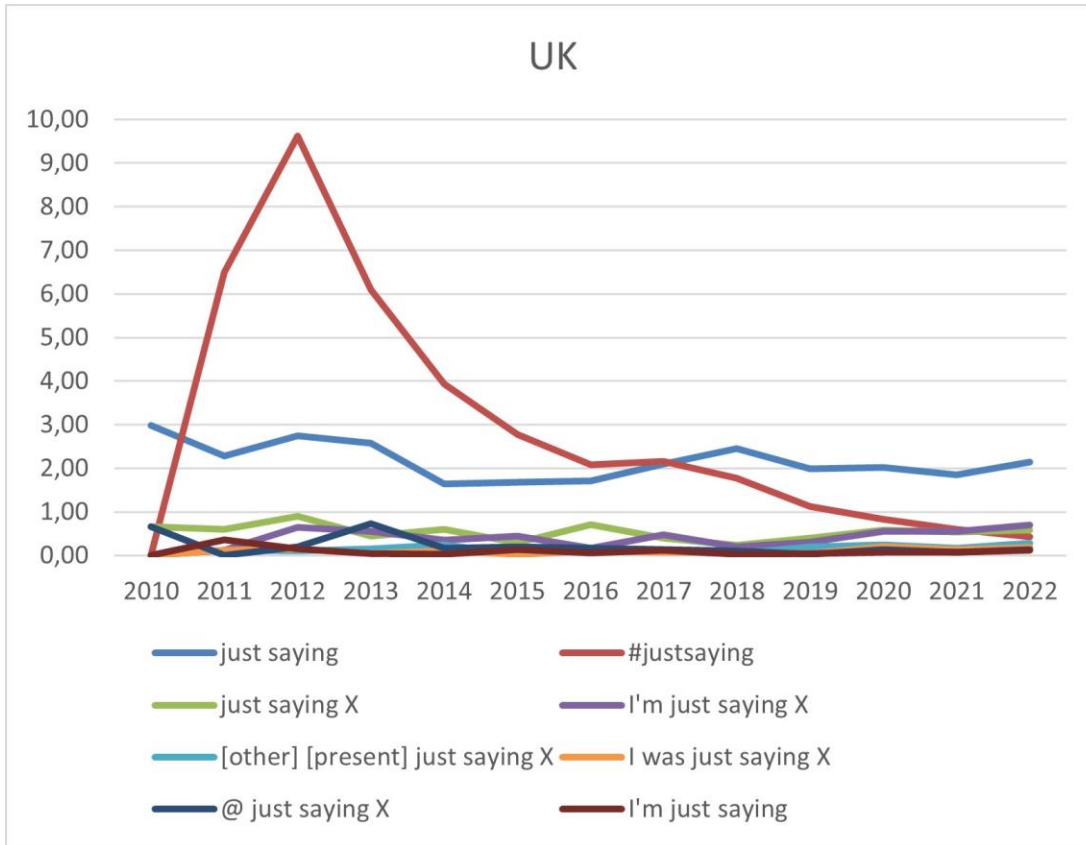


Patterns identified in UK and US

Pattern	UK	US	Stat. significant difference
just saying	39.2% (1,854)	41.1% (8,562)	ns.
#justsaying	28.0% (1,323)	11.2% (2,343)	***
just saying X	10.0% (471)	9.2% (1,913)	ns.
I'm just saying X	9.7% (459)	16.5% (3,435)	***
[other] [present] just saying X	3.6% (170)	4.1 % (846)	ns.
I was just saying X	2.5% (120)	5.3% (1,112)	***
@ just saying X	2.5% (119)	1.8% (371)	**
I'm just saying	1.6% (75)	8.1% (1,684)	***
Other patterns	2.9% (136)	2.8% (577)	ns.
Total	100% (4,727)	100% (20,843)	



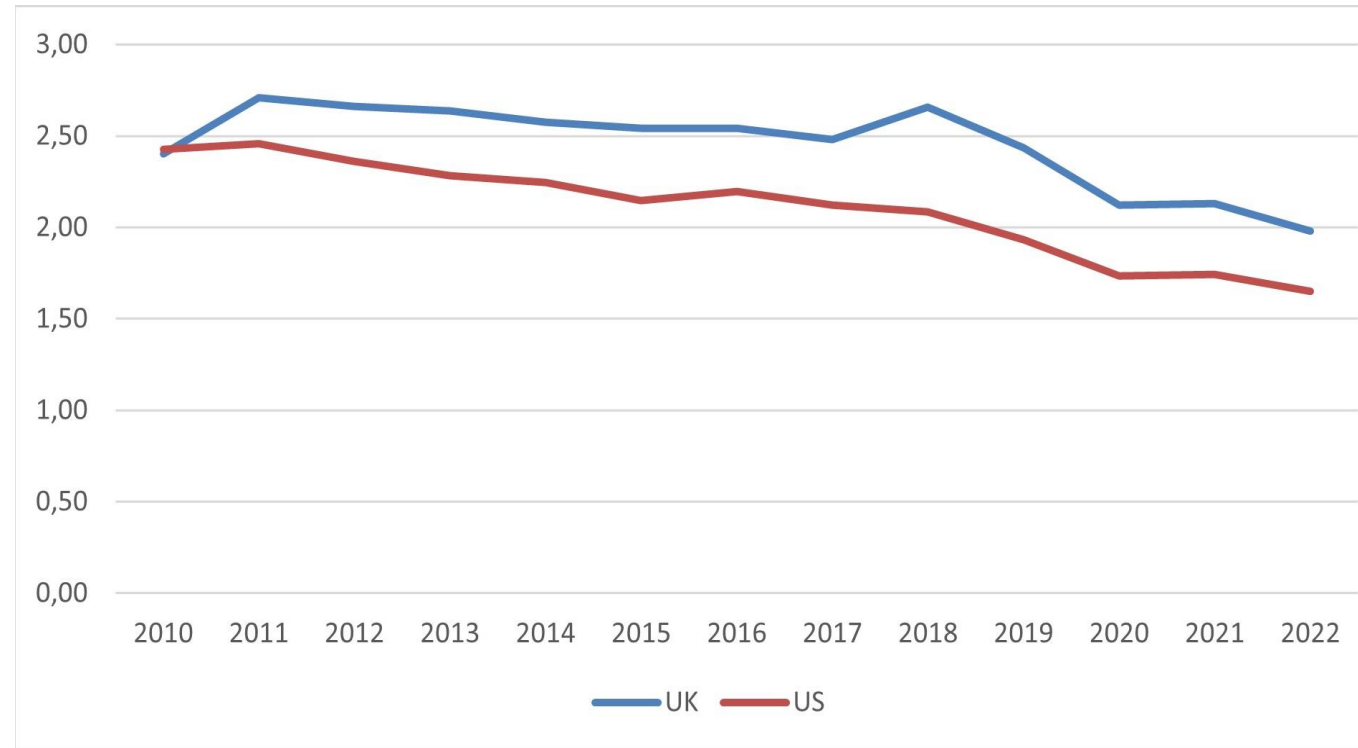
Frequency trends





Constructional change

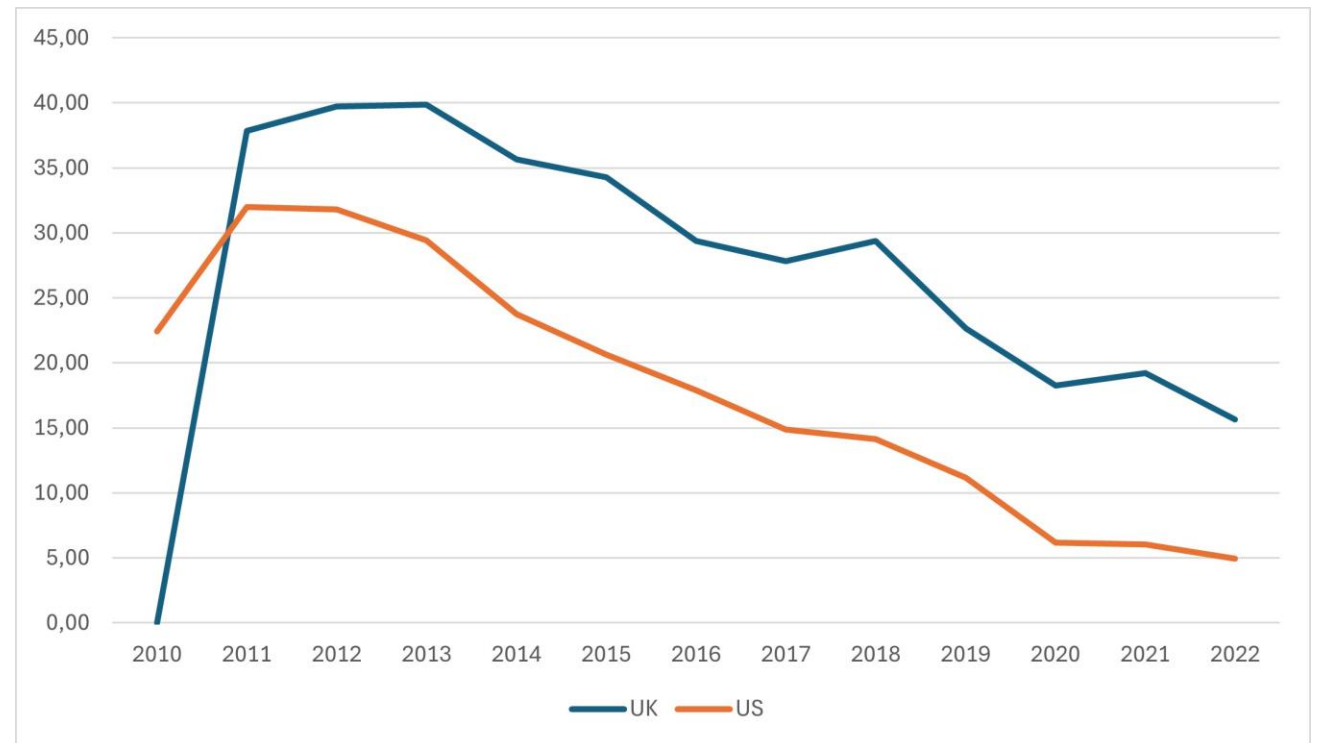
- Cline of constructional changes operationalized
 - Full form = 0
 - Element(s) missing = 1-2
 - (#)just saying = 3
- Rate of change rather high throughout, but clear decreasing trend
 - Proportion of more standard forms increases





Networks using #justsaying

- The use *#justsaying* is adopted rather quickly to 30-40% of all networks using BE *just saying* in 2011-2013
- The proportion decreases steadily; larger coverage in the UK data





Focus on some social networks

- US2680: 29 members; NSI 0.46 (higher than average strenght)
 - All instances come from one speaker; others do not adopt the form
- US58: 58 members, NSI 0.43 (slightly higher than ave.)
 - #justsaying used by four different speakers in 2011; some of the same speakers use it again later in the data
- UK379: 118 members, NSI 0.39 (lower than average)
 - #justsaying used by one speaker in 2011; different speakers in 2012-2017

Discussion



#justsaying on Twitter

- #justsaying peaks in 2011-2013, then starts to decrease
- Met with criticism for allowing people to be rude:
 - *here's another #phrase i don't like: just sayin'. **it's the universal get-out-of-bad-behavior line.*** (US 2013)
 - *ban this phrase from your vocab this week: "i'm just sayin' ..." it's not a magic line that **lets you get away with being rude.*** (US 2014)
 - *people use the phrase, "just saying" because "you're right. i should've kept my mouth shut with **my unsolicited advice**, but since i'm such a train wreck, i want to pretend i'm helping others" is too many words for them* (US 2021)
 - *and i thought "just saying" **went away years ago*** (US 2022)



***#justsaying* on Twitter**

- The criticism is directed towards all uses of BE *just saying*, but seems to mostly affect the use of *#justsaying*
 - Other forms remain stable (except for *just saying* in US)
- The cline of constructional change reversing, as the momentum of *#justsaying* halts and the proportion of standard form increases



Network properties

- *#justsaying* most "successful" in a large network with weak connections
 - In tune with the social network theory (Milroy & Milroy 1985)
- Innovations first crop up in weak-tie networks, i.e. networks whose members are only loosely connected to one another.
 - Individuals in weak-tie networks are more likely to be innovators in language use (ibid.), but
 - for a new feature to gain foothold, its use needs to be adopted by stronger, more close-knit networks.



Caveat and opportunities

- The NSI score is static, representing the networks as they were at the time of collection, 2022-2023
- Currently, we're working on accessing network data at different data points
 - This would help us validate the social network theory's principles more efficiently
- In any case, our dataset is unique and offers ample opportunities for linguistic, social network and social media analyses



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Weak-tie hypothesis in
complex digital networks



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