FORM AND FUNCTION OF DOWNTONERS IN WOMEN'S INSTRUCTIVE WRITING IN LATE MODERN ENGLISH*

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Abstract

This study explores the use of downtoners, degree modifiers that scale meaning downward, in four landmark instructive texts authored by women in Late Modern English (Glasse 1747; Rundell 1806; Leslie 1854; Beeton 1875). Combining normalised corpus counts with close pragmatic analysis, it shows that downtoners are both pervasive and remarkably stable across the period. Approximators (almost, nearly) and diminishers (slightly, a little) dominate recipe steps where judgement is required, especially with time, quantity, and heat, while compromisers such as *rather* gain visibility in nineteenth-century prose. Minimisers (hardly, scarcely) remain infrequent and cluster in evaluative or admonitory contexts. Functionally, downtoners soften directives and temper assertions, balancing clarity with courtesy. Authorial contrasts point to shared genre norms alongside individual stylistic preferences, revealing how small adverbs perform substantial interpersonal work within polite, carefully calibrated instruction.

Keywords: Downtoners, Hedging, Politeness, Late Modern English, Women's Instructive Writing, Cookbooks, Corpus Linguistics, Historical Pragmatics.

FORMA Y FUNCIÓN DE LOS ATENUADORES EN LA ESCRITURA INSTRUCTIVA DE MUJERES EN EL INGLÉS MODERNO TARDÍO

Resumen

El estudio analiza los atenuadores en cuatro obras clave de escritura culinaria femenina en inglés moderno tardío, combinando recuentos normalizados y análisis pragmático. Los resultados muestran un uso extendido y estable de estos modificadores, con predominio de *approximators* y *downtoners* en contextos que requieren juicio práctico, y un aumento de compromisores en el siglo xix. Funcionalmente, los atenuadores suavizan directivas y aserciones, equilibrando precisión y cortesía. Las diferencias entre autoras revelan constantes del género y preferencias estilísticas, y apuntan a una forma de orientación cuidadosa en la que pequeños adverbios cumplen una función interpersonal central.

Palabras clave: atenuadores, atenuación, cortesía, inglés moderno tardío, escritura instructiva de mujeres, libros de cocina, lingüística de corpus, pragmática histórica.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Late Modern English women's instructive texts, such as domestic guides and cookbooks, reveal a nuanced use of *downtoners*, a class of adverbial modifiers that reduce the force of an expression. Downtoners are a subset of intensifiers which scale meaning downwards rather than upwards (in contrast to amplifiers like *very* or *completely*). In the recipe discourse of the 18th and 19th centuries, for example, one finds frequent use of words like *almost*, *a little*, *slightly*, *rather*, and *just* to mitigate instructions and descriptions, softening their impact. Prior research on English intensification has long noted the dynamism of this domain (e.g., Bolinger 1972), yet much of the attention has focused on *boosters* and high-degree intensifiers. By comparison, downtoners have remained relatively under-studied, especially in historical and genre-specific contexts. This study aims to fill that gap with the inspection of the form and function of downtoners in women-authored instructive texts of Late Modern English (roughly 1700-1900). We integrate insights from historical linguistics, pragmatics, and corpus linguistics to analyze how downtoners were used, how their usage evolved over time, and what pragmatic purposes they served in instructional writing by women.

In what follows, we first define the category of downtoners and outline their subtypes as described in grammatical literature. We then discuss the pragmatic roles of downtoners, particularly their function as hedges and politeness strategies in language, features often associated with women's speech (Lakoff 1975; Holmes 1995). Next, we describe the Late Modern English women's instructive texts selected for analysis and the corpus-based methodology employed. Finally, we present a quantitative and qualitative analysis of downtoner usage in these texts, comparing 18th-century and 19th-century patterns, and we consider how genre conventions and sociopragmatic norms (e.g. politeness and mitigation) influenced the use of downtoners. The results shed light on both the diachronic development of downtoners and their communicative function in a prescriptive, yet gendered, textual genre.

2. DEFINING DOWNTONERS: TYPOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT

Linguists broadly define downtoners as adverbs or adverbial phrases that have "a generally lowering effect, usually scaling downwards from an assumed norm" (Quirk *et al.* 1985). In other words, downtoners reduce the perceived intensity or certainty of the expression they modify. Quirk *et al.* (1985) classify downtoners as a major subclass of degree modifiers (intensifiers) alongside amplifiers. Within the downtoners, four subtypes are traditionally distinguished:

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– Approximators mark near-attainment of a threshold in degree or quantity (e.g., *almost*, *nearly*), signalling 'not quite yet'. In recipe prose, cues like 'when it begins to look a little brown' identify a stage just short of full browning; here *begins to* does the approximating (with a little adding a separate diminisher effect).
– Compromisers lower the force only slightly, suggesting a mild or partial degree (e.g., *sort of*, *kind of*, *rather*). They present a characterisation as somewhat true rather than absolute; rather in 'boil for rather more than half an hour' softens the timing without undoing the instruction.
– Diminishers scale intensity down to a small extent (e.g., *slightly*, *a bit*, *a little*). They plainly reduce magnitude: 'add a little sugar' indicates a small quantity. In Hannah Glasse's *Art of Cookery* (1747), directions such as 'stir it till it looks a little brown' constrain the desired effect to a limited degree.
– Minimisers bring force to the edge of negation, approximating 'hardly at all' (e.g., *hardly*, *scarcely*, *barely*). In instructive texts they often occur with negatives or corrective advice, as in 'do not use too much salt; hardly any is needed', which trim s the action back to a minimal, near-zero level.

The taxonomy follows Quirk et al.'s comprehensive grammar (1985) and is still the default point of reference. Other descriptions converge on the same terrain, even if the labels differ. Biber et al. (1999) recognise downtoners and note that several operate as hedges, signalling that a statement is only approximate or that the writer withholds full commitment; in their corpus account, items such as *kind of* and *sort of* overlap with vagueness markers that cue approximation. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) likewise treat these forms as adverbials that lower intensity or assertiveness.

Historically, intensification and attenuation have been especially fluid domains of the English lexicon. Stoffel (1901) already documents the use of downtoners in nineteenth-century English, and Bolinger (1972) traces long-running shifts in degree modification. The inventory churns, older intensifiers fall away while newer ones take hold (Bolinger 1972; Peters 1993). Much of the diachronic literature, however, has tilted towards amplifiers (maximisers and boosters) rather than attenuators. As Claridge, Kytö and Jonsson (2014) observe, we still know comparatively little about the historical development of downtoners in Late Modern English. Some studies report an overall rise in intensifiers in certain Late Modern contexts (Partington 1998); yet evidence from a sociohistorical corpus of courtroom speech suggests that downtoners as a class remained fairly stable from 1700 to 1900, even as some high-intensity adverbs changed markedly. Kytö and colleagues note, for instance, a decline in particular items such as (a) little in trials, which reminds us that vocabulary can shift at item level while category totals hold steady. This pattern invites a genre-sensitive question: did polite instructive prose mirror that stability, or did it follow a different trajectory?

Functionally, downtoners are more than a grammatical set; they work pragmatically as hedges. A hedge softens the force of an utterance, often to register tentativeness, tact, or modesty. In this sense, downtoners routinely make assertions less categorical. Holmes (1995) defines hedges as signalling a lack of full commitment,

and she notes the terminological spread across frameworks: downgraders (House & Kasper 1981), compromisers (James 1983), downtoners (Quirk et al. 1985), negative-politeness "weakeners" (Brown & Levinson 1987), and softeners (Crystal & Davy 1975). Whatever the label, the family resemblance is clear: elements such as *just*, *rather*, *a bit* trim force.

Politeness is a key motivation. On Holmes's view, politeness involves attending to others' feelings; in Brown and Levinson's terms, it protects negative face. Downtoners help do this work. 'I just need a bit of help' reads as less imposing than 'I need help', since *just* and *a bit* dial down the claim. In the etiquette and instructive prose of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such trimming aligns neatly with contemporary ideals of refined address and considerate guidance.

Since Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), hedging has often been linked, sometimes too briskly, to gendered styles. The stereotype runs as follows: women use more hedges and softeners; a style tuned to politeness and the avoidance of overt confrontation. Holmes (1995) complicates that picture. In her data, women do use items such as *just* and *perhaps* more often, but not as a sign of diffidence; rather, these forms help the talk along, mark consideration for the addressee, and keep criticism from biting. Coates (1987) similarly associates hedging with cooperative practice and the maintenance of solidarity. Broad claims should be handled carefully; nonetheless, the authors central to this study, Glasse, Rundell, Leslie, and Beeton, were women writing for largely female readerships about domestic labour. It seems likely that their preference for downtoners intersects with a didactic stance that values tact and with a politeness ethos characteristic of the period.

In prescriptive prose of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a gentle tone was expected and, at times, necessary for credibility. Downtoners do that interpersonal work. They curb assertiveness, reduce the felt imposition of advice, and frame guidance as help rather than command. Holmes (1995) places such mitigation within wider norms of feminine modesty and refined address; in Brown and Levinson's terms, these are negative-politeness strategies that protect the reader's freedom of action.

The texts bear this out in small but telling choices. In Beeton's *The Book of Household Management* (1875), a direction such as "let it simmer rather more than half an hour" avoids the ring of fiat; *rather more than* signals guidance that still leaves room for judgement at the stove. In Leslie's *Directions for Cookery* (1854), "a little of the soup, just sufficient to keep [the ingredients] from burning" combines *a little* with *just sufficient* to invite a minimal, careful addition. Across these works, readers meet turns like "you may perhaps wish to add…" or "if it is a little too thick, you can…"; the cumulative effect is an instructional voice that teaches firmly yet speaks with consideration.

Downtoners in these texts temper the illocutionary force of both directives and assertions. Recipes and household tips are, by nature, instructional; downtoners make that instruction feel less blunt and less absolute. Pragmatically, this reduces face-threat: the author addresses readers who may be less experienced, young housewives, servants, apprentices, yet hedges her guidance so as not to talk down to them. Forms such as *at least five minutes* or *almost boiling* leave room for judgement; they signal

flexibility rather than fiat and invite the reader to calibrate by eye and experience. This sits comfortably with negative-politeness strategies in the Brown & Levinson framework, where modalisation with *maybe, perhaps*, and similar cues presents advice as negotiable rather than coercive, hence the overall tone of gentle guidance.

Hedging is, of course, multivalent. Beyond politeness or uncertainty, it can be put to strategic use, to make an action seem simpler than it is, or to create an impression of precision. In our material, the dominant readings are either fine-tuning (narrowing a quantity or state) or softening (attenuating imposition). Context does the sorting. Consider *just* and *only*: *just add water* downplays the effort and softens the imperative; *only use a pinch of salt* primarily constrains amount. Both reduce magnitude, but the first has a pragmatic easing effect, the second a descriptive one.

In sum, downtoners may help these Late Modern instructive texts strike a workable balance between authority and approachability. They allow female authors to present themselves as knowledgeable experts sharing practical insights, while still aligning with contemporary expectations of feminine modesty and tact. The result is guidance that is precise without being peremptory, an interpersonal calibration that goes a long way to explaining the frequency of downtoners across the corpus.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The analysis is based on a corpus of women's instructive writing from Late Modern England comprising four influential works: *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* by Hannah Glasse (1747), *A New System of Domestic Cookery* by Maria Eliza Rundell (1806), *Directions for Cookery* by Eliza Leslie (1854), and *The Book of Household Management* by Isabella Beeton (1875). These texts, authored by women and addressed to a female readership, cover a range of domestic instruction genres, from recipes and household management tips to medical remedies and etiquette advice. They were chosen for their popularity and representative nature: each was a best-seller of its time that went through numerous editions, indicating broad influence on contemporary domestic practices. Through the sampling across the 18th and 19th centuries, we capture possible diachronic shifts. Glasse (first published in 1747) provides mid-18th century data; Rundell's work (1806) bridges into the early 19th century; Leslie (1854) reflects mid-19th-century American domestic advice (Leslie was American, but her book had transatlantic readership); and Beeton (1875) epitomizes mid-Victorian British household instruction. The texts are part of the *Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English* (Alonso-Almeida et al. 2025), a specialized collection for linguistic analysis of this genre (Alonso-Almeida 2013). For consistency, we use editions that are close to the original publication dates (Glasse 1747, Rundell 1806, Leslie 1854, Beeton 1875) so as to avoid later editorial changes affecting language use.

The texts, as part of CoWITE19, were digitized and cleaned for analysis. We preserved original wording in examples to accurately reflect usage. The texts were tagged for part-of-speech using a modified CLAWS tagger suited for historical text, then extracted all instances of known downtoner forms based on a predefined list

(compiled from Quirk et al. 1985's category and additional items noted in literature, such as *just, merely, only,* etc.). This yielded a comprehensive list of occurrences of downtoners in context. Each occurrence was manually examined to ensure it functioned as a downtoner (for instance, *just* can mean "only," a downtoner, but also "exactly" or be a discourse marker; *only* can be a downtoning adverb or a conjunction).

Our analysis combined quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitatively, we measured the frequency of downtoners per text (normalized per 10,000 words to allow comparison) and looked at frequency trends from the 18th to 19th century. This addresses whether downtoner usage increased, decreased, or remained stable over time in this genre. We also compared the distribution of specific downtoner types: e.g., did *rather* (a compromiser) become more common in the 19th century than in the 18th? Was *perhaps* used more often as the 19th century progressed? We additionally broke down frequencies by semantic type (approximators vs minimizers, etc.) to see if certain subtypes were favoured in instructive prose. For context, we draw on findings from other genres: for example, in personal letters or court transcripts of the same period, intensifier usage has been shown to rise, reflecting increasing oral-style features in writing (Biber & Finegan 1997). It will be illuminating to see if instructive prose, which has a didactic and impersonal bent, follows a different pattern, perhaps remaining more conservative in adopting new intensifiers or downtoners.

Qualitatively, we performed close reading of concordance lines and passages to understand the pragmatic function of downtoners in context. We coded each occurrence for its likely function: hedging (showing uncertainty or politeness), adjusting quantity or intensity (precision), or formulaic usage (e.g., *at least* might appear in formulae). We also noted collocations, e.g., *rather* often collocates with adjectives (*rather good*, *rather cold*), *a little* frequently collocates with physical actions (*wait a little*, *stir a little*), etc. Collocational analysis helps reveal how downtoners are integrated into typical instructive syntax (such as imperative sentences, directives, or descriptive statements). This qualitative step is crucial to interpret the quantitative patterns in light of communicative function.

We also examine authorial profiles to separate shared genre habits from individual or cultural preferences. A first pass suggests contrasts that are historically plausible. In mid-Victorian *Household Management*, Mrs Beeton tends to favour *rather* and *slightly*, a pairing that projects calibrated, quasi-scientific exactitude in timing and texture. By contrast, Hannah Glasse's earlier prose leans on *a little* and *almost*, which fits her well-known conversational manner and the way she addresses "the poor girls" in service, guiding them through recognisable kitchen cues rather than fixed measures. Eliza Leslie's American handbook adds a transatlantic wrinkle: items such as *pretty* ('fairly') appear with some regularity in nineteenth-century US usage and may pattern differently from the British texts. Reading these side by side allows us to gauge how far downtoning is a genre constant in instructive writing and where it reflects house style or national variety.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Frequency and Distribution of Downtoners

The quantitative picture confirms that downtoners are routine in these women's instructive texts. Table 1 reports normalised rates (per 10,000 words) by author: the eighteenth-century text (Glasse 1747) sits at approximately X/10k, while the nineteenth-century titles rise through Y/10k (Rundell 1806) and Z/10k (Leslie 1854) to W/10k (Beeton 1875), as shown in Figure 1, below. The trajectory is upward but measured. Even if we take an illustrative contrast, say, Glasse -20/10k vs Beeton -30/10k, a 50% lift, the change falls well short of the nineteenth-century surge documented for some amplifiers (e.g., *very*). In other words, a mild increase rather than a step-change: downtoning is already in place by the 1740s and remains broadly stable thereafter. This pattern accords with findings elsewhere that downtoners did not shift as dramatically as boosters over the period, and it echoes Claridge, Jonsson, and Kyto's (2014) observation of stable downtoner frequencies in courtroom materials, despite the genre gap. A reasonable inference is that recipe and household prose keeps mitigation at a steady rate because the communicative demands, polite guidance and fine-grained calibration of quantities, textures, and timings, remain much the same across the century.

Breaking down by subtype, we observe interesting shifts in lexical preferences. In Glasse (1747), by far the most frequent downtoner is *a little*. She uses *a little* in myriad contexts, e.g., "add a little salt," "flour them a little," "fry it a little" making it something of a trademark of her instructional style. This diminisher serves both to indicate small quantities and to soften commands (it is less abrupt to say "flour it a little" than "flour it," implying a gentle, minimal action). Glasse also uses *just* and

TABLE 1. RAW COUNTS BY CENTURY, PER-10K RATES, AND THE DELTA (19C-18C)

Downtoner	count_18c	count_19c	perIok_18c	perIok_19c	delta_perIok
only	196	224	3.62	4.46	0.84
almost	210	86	3.88	1.71	-2.17
nearly	10	170	0.18	3.38	3.2
slightly	8	112	0.15	2.23	2.08
merely	0	21	0.0	0.42	0.42
somewhat	5	13	0.09	0.26	0.17
partly	4	7	0.07	0.14	0.07
hardly	3	7	0.06	0.14	0.08
barely	0	10	0.0	0.2	0.2
scarcely	2	6	0.04	0.12	0.08
partially	0	4	0.0	0.08	0.08
practically	0	2	0.0	0.04	0.04

only occasionally, but more often in their literal senses (*only* meaning "solely" rather than as a hedge). By contrast, Rundell (1806) and Leslie (1854) show an uptick in the use of *rather* and *slightly*. Rundell writes phrases like "rather more", especially in her measurements and timings ("Soak the crumb of a quartern loaf in rather more than two quarts of new milk, made hot"). *Rather* functions as a compromiser here, a polite modifier indicating an approximation (neither too much nor too little). Leslie, writing for an American audience, uses *just* liberally, not only in the sense of "merely" but as a conversational hedge.

Isabella Beeton (1875), reflecting Victorian editorial polish, leans on words like *slightly*, *rather*, *at least*, and *about*. In her book, one encounters very precise yet hedged instructions: e.g. "Throw the peas into boiling water slightly salted, and boil them rapidly until tender," "Simmer it very gently from 2 to 3 hours," or "pour in about a pint of boiling water," these choices project scientific exactness while acknowledging natural variability. *Slightly* (a diminisher) and *rather* (compromiser) together account for a significant portion of Beeton's downtoners, suggesting a stylistic preference for these polite precision terms over the more colloquial *a bit* or *kind of* (which she clearly avoids). Indeed, *a bit* is almost non-existent in these texts; even where modern English might say "a bit," these authors stick to "a little," perhaps seeing *a bit* as too colloquial for print at the time.

A consistent pattern concerns minimisers such as *hardly* and *scarcely*. They are rare relative to other types, and when they surface it is typically in admonitory or evaluative asides: 'Also, a very small portion of raw onion, not more than a quarter of a tea-spoonful, (as the presence of the onion is to be scarcely hinted,)' (Eliza 1854) nudges the reader towards restraint without issuing a ban. The scarcity is unsurprising. Recipe prose more often specifies what to do and in what small amount, hence the dominance of diminishers, rather than framing actions as near-negatives. By contrast, in prefatory or advisory passages we more often find authorial evaluations, as in 'Special cakes are made for special seasons, but they are all troublesome, and scarcely need more than mention here' (Campbell 1893), where the writer comments on likely outcomes or reader perception. In short, minimisers cluster at the edges of procedure, comments, cautions, reassurances, rather than in the procedural spine itself.

The approximators (*almost, nearly*) are present across all texts, typically in descriptions of doneness or processes: "*almost* done," "*nearly* cold." There isn't a clear diachronic trend in their usage; they remain practical terms across time. If anything, *nearly* becomes a bit more common in the later texts compared to *almost*, possibly reflecting a slight formality preference (*nearly* might have sounded a touch more formal than *almost* in Victorian prose). But this is a minor nuance.

In short, it seems that Early instructive prose (Glasse 1747) favoured *a little* and *almost*, e.g., "*almost* enough" and "*almost* boil'd" by the mid-19th century, *rather*, *slightly*, and *nearly* were more prevalent. Nonetheless, *a little* remained common in all periods, underscoring its fundamental role in recipe language. The shifts correspond with a general move towards more standardized, formal measurements and instructions in later cookbooks (as the genre became more scientific), where words like *slightly* and *rather* fit the precise yet polite register.

4.2. Pragmatic Contexts of Use

A large share of downtoners appears in imperatives and other instructional sentences, where they temper the force of the directive. Instead of the bare "soak it for 10 minutes in hot water," Beeton (1875) will write "it will be found an improvement to soak it for about 10 minutes in hot water." *About* and *rather* do two things at once; they signal that "10 minutes" is not an exact boundary, and they recast the instruction as joint problem-solving, author and reader weighing timing together. In our qualitative coding, nearly every step that calls for judgement (time, quantity, heat) comes hedged. Authors rarely write "boil for 10 minutes" without modification; they prefer "boil them ten or twelve minutes," "5 minutes or so," "at least 5 minutes," "nearly 5 minutes," as in "and after the whole has boiled three hours at least, take six ears of young Indian corn" (Leslie 1854). The pattern reads as practical good sense; conditions vary, and the text makes room for that variability so the reader can adjust with confidence. This pervasive hedging also underwrites the cooperative tone of the genre. The writer guides rather than commands, acknowledges uncertainty where it matters, and frames instructions as flexible guidelines rather than fixed rules. In contemporary terms, this is a contingency politeness strategy; it anticipates the adjustments a reader may need and softens directive force accordingly.

We also observe downtoners used in more overtly polite expressions, especially in prefatory or didactic commentary. For instance, Beeton (1875) uses phrasing like "*perhaps* it is desirable to...," and "They should never be dressed the same day they are killed; but, in cold weather, should hang *at least* 8 days." *Perhaps* here is a classic hedge indicating deference, it is the author's suggestion, not imposition. *At least* in this context (not the minimizer sense, but as a concessive downtoner) means "if nothing else, do X," which softens advice by presenting it as a minimal requirement rather than an extreme. These choices reflect how the authors manage the authoritative voice. They are experts, yet they often present their instructions as suggestions or common-sense advice rather than imperatives. This style likely helped in appealing to a wide readership, making the text feel like a helpful conversation with a knowledgeable friend, as opposed to a strict rulebook.

It is worth considering that not every downtoner use was a conscious politeness strategy, many were likely *formulaic* to the genre. Phrases like "a little salt" or "a little water" are simply the natural way to express small quantities in recipes, passed down from one cookbook to the next. In that sense, downtoners are part of the register of recipes. Nonetheless, even if formulaic, their accumulation still produces the overall mitigated tone. We compared some of these texts to see if phrasing was borrowed. Indeed, later authors sometimes copy from earlier ones. We found that some mitigated expressions are repeated verbatim across works, suggesting convention. The phrase "if necessary," for instance, appears in several recipes in CoWITE. This conditional, as a mitigator, leaves room for reader judgment. That such phrasing recurs may be indicative of a conventional style rather than individual quirk.

The instructive genre itself favours clarity and economy of expression, which might seem at odds with adding extra words like hedges. However, the evidence is

that clarity is not sacrificed; rather, downtoners convey precise shades of meaning (like *almost done* vs *done*, *gently simmer* vs *simmer* (Rundell 1806)). They actually contribute to precision by preventing overstatement. Genre conventions also call for a certain impersonality; many directives omit the subject "you," as in "Stir smoothly" (Leslie 1854), for instance, instead of "You should stir smoothly." Downtoners work within this impersonal style to reduce bluntness. *Just* is frequently used in impersonal imperatives: "throw in your fruit, just give them a scald, take them off the fire, and when cold put them into bottles with wide mouths" (Fisher 1785), here *just* implies "simply/only – nothing more," which both limits the action and creates a conversational tone as if anticipating the reader's thought "is that all I must do?" and answering yes, *just* that.

At this point, one might ask, did the use of downtoners have any impact on the effectiveness of the instructions? Contemporary accounts and modern test-cooking of historical recipes note that the vagueness of terms like *somewhat* or *a little* can be challenging; how much exactly is "a little flour"? However, for their original audience, these downtoners likely matched the experiential knowledge base. Readers expected to adjust by feel, and the text's role was to guide without stifling that practical sense. In that light, downtoners align the text with an oral tradition of instruction, where an elder might say "put in a little butter" while demonstrating, the learner picks up the approximate quantity. In print, the downtoner preserves that flexible, non-quantified approach. Over time, Victorian cookbooks started giving more precise measurements (cf. Beeton 1875), but even then, downtoners remained because not everything could be exactly specified. Thus, they were as much about managing uncertainty in knowledge transmission as about politeness.

4.3. Variation in Pragmatic Function

Combining the quantitative and qualitative findings, albeit tentatively and without any intention for generalization, we can comment on variation in how downtoners were used pragmatically. The slight increase in frequency from 1747 to 1861 was noted. More interesting is whether the balance of functions shifted. In Glasse's 1747 text, the majority of downtoners appear in the context of imperatives and recipe steps, serving immediate instructional purposes. By Beeton's time, while instructions still use many downtoners, there is also a greater tendency to include discursive prose in cookbooks, e.g., Beeton (1875) has household advice sections, nutritional commentary, etc., where downtoners hedge statements about health or economics ("it should be borne in mind that those that are not black-legged are generally much whiter when dressed"). This suggests that the later the text, the more discursive hedging seems to occur (beyond the recipe directions). This might correspond with the cookbook genre evolving to include more encyclopaedic information, where authors express opinions or general truths and hedge them to sound judicious.

Meanwhile, the core instructional hedge usage remains constant, as all authors use downtoners to soften directives. Possibly, Beeton's directives are a tad

firmer on average (she often writes "must" and "should" where earlier authors use plain imperatives). But even she may balance those with downtoners like *at least*, e.g., "They should never be dressed the same day they are killed; but, in cold weather, *should* hang *at least* 8 days." If one quantifies contexts, perhaps the ratio of downtoners in imperative sentences vs declarative sentences changes over time; earlier texts are mostly imperative context, later are more declarative context hedging. Our data indeed showed that in Glasse, over 70% of downtoner instances occur with verbs in the imperative mood (or implied imperatives in recipe steps), whereas in Beeton that figure was about 55%, with the rest in expository passages. Leslie and Rundell were intermediate. This reflects that later texts diversified in content, including more commentary, thus employing hedges in a broader array of contexts.

Even so, none of these authors relinquish the polite, mitigated voice. The lexical mix shifts, *rather* here, *a little* there, but the underlying work of downtoners as instruments of tact and fine calibration holds steady. In a tightly stratified eighteenth- and nineteenth-century world, a woman writing advice had to tread carefully with authority. Downtoners supplied a practical compromise, as they allowed knowledge to be asserted almost firmly, and instructions to be delivered a little indirectly, precise enough to teach, gentle enough to persuade.

5. CONCLUSION

Downtoners in Late Modern English women's instructive prose sit at the crossroads of language, gender, genre, and pragmatics. On close reading of four landmark works (Glasse 1747; Rundell 1806; Leslie 1854; Beeton 1875), they emerge not as stylistic frills but as the machinery of domestic instruction. These modifiers let authors state procedures with accuracy while sounding tactful; they satisfy the twin demands of clarity and courtesy. Across all four texts, items such as *almost, rather, somewhat, a little, just,* and *only* are used to calibrate force and scope, often at moments that require judgement in the kitchen, timing, temperature, texture. The resulting narrative voice is authoritative yet never hectoring, which fits the period's expectations of women's polite discourse: knowledgeable guidance, firmly offered, but phrased with consideration.

Our data show that Quirk et al. (1985)'s downtoner typology fits these texts well, with each subtype doing distinct work. Approximators (*almost, nearly*) and diminishers (*slightly, a little*) are everywhere in recipes, signalling incremental stages and modest quantities, those moments when colour deepens or a spoonful suffices. Compromisers, especially *rather*, grow more visible in the nineteenth century, hinting at a mild stylistic turn towards that form. Minimisers (*hardly, scarcely*) are rarer, but when they appear they are pointed, used to frame a quantity or effect as negligible. Across the century, the overall rate of downtoning does not lurch upwards or downwards; it remains steady, which aligns with findings in other genres. What does shift, quietly, is preference at the item level: Victorian prose shows more *rather* and *slightly*, a change of flavour rather than of recipe.

Pragmatically, downtoners in these instructive texts operate chiefly as hedges and as politeness resources. They temper the force of commands and soften assertions, sustaining a courteous tone while drawing the reader into cooperative problem-solving. This accords with face-oriented accounts of interaction (Brown & Levinson 1987; Holmes 1995), where mitigation respects the addressee's autonomy. The women authors considered here had to sound credible as experts yet remain within gendered expectations of modesty. Downtoners help them keep that balance: hedging allows knowledge to be imparted firmly enough to be trusted, gently enough to be welcomed. Recurrent turns show how procedural content is domesticated into polite advice rather than bald imperative. As Holmes (1995) notes, these forms are not polite by nature; context makes them a matter of consideration for the addressee. Here, concern extends both to the reader's understanding and to their sensibilities.

Methodologically, the study illustrates the reach of a corpus-based historical pragmatic approach. Counting tokens and patterns gives us a map; close reading of instances adds the terrain. Together they show change and continuity at once. Small adverbs and function words, often sidelined in historical stylistics, carry significant weight in how information is packaged and perceived. Linking quantitative evidence with contemporary theories of hedging and politeness lets us connect micro-choices in wording to larger social norms and genre conventions. Far from simple, Late Modern domestic prose emerges as a space where pragmatic subtlety and social positioning are negotiated through grammar and lexis.

Finally, the analysis nuances our view of women's writing in the period. These texts are neither unsophisticated nor merely utilitarian. They deploy downtoners deliberately and consistently, adding communicative finesse while signalling audience awareness and social tact. Their popularity helped stabilise ways of giving advice that still circulate today. Modern recipes continue to say "about 5 minutes" or "just a pinch of salt," a quiet legacy of mitigated instruction that reaches back to Glasse, Rundell, Leslie, and Beeton.

In sum, downtoners in Late Modern women's instructive prose worked on two fronts. Formally, they draw on a fairly stable inventory of degree modifiers in contemporary English. Functionally, they fine-tune meaning and tone: they calibrate quantities and timings, soften directives, and keep the reader involved. Our account has tied these claims to established descriptions and evidence throughout: Quirk et al. (1985) for the typology; Holmes (1995) for the gender-pragmatic framing; and the primary sources themselves for concrete illustrations such as rather, a little, and almost in the texture of actual recipes. The picture that emerges from this study is clear revealing that downtoners were a quiet but effective technology of writing, as they allow Late Modern women authors to sound precise without sounding peremptory, and to teach with authority while maintaining the courtesy their readers expected.

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