

A corpus-based approach to the pragmatics of -ly adverbs in history texts

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Abstract

This paper explores authorial stance as expressed by the use of diverse -ly adverbs in the *Corpus of History English Texts* (CHET), one of the subcorpora of the Coruña Corpus. There seems to be widespread agreement that adverbials stand as one of the grammatical categories that most clearly contribute to the expression of interpersonal meanings (Hoye, 1997; Biber and Finegan, 1988). The adverbs, object of this study, have been referred to as certainty adverbs (Aijmer, 2008; Koutsantoni, 2004), epistemic stance adverbs (Conrad and Biber, 1999) evidential modal adverbs (Alonso-Almeida, 2012; Simon-Vandenberg and Aijmer, 2007) and boosters (Hyland, 2000). I will describe their use by eighteenth and nineteenth century writers of history texts in order to characterize them in terms of authorial presence. I will show that, depending on the context, they may fulfill several pragmatic functions. Some of these are indicating different degrees of authorial commitment or detachment towards the information presented, persuasion or politeness, among others. The paper is structured as follows: first section offers a description of the Corpus of History English Texts. After that, I present the theoretical framework of stance and also comment on earlier literature on adverbials. Then, I analyse the findings and comment on some relevant examples to illustrate how some -ly adverbs work in the corpus. Finally, the conclusions derived from this study are offered. Regarding methodology, I have used the *Coruña Corpus Tool* for quantification and text retrieval. Afterwards, manual analyses have been performed as well in order to check stance adverbs' functions in context. This tool simplifies the research to be done and the use of this tool combined with manual analysis is useful to obtain more accurate results.

Keywords: pragmatics; corpus linguistics; scientific register; adverbs; Modern English

1. Introduction

The present paper is a contribution to the study of pragmatics from a historical dimension. My intention is to describe the use and functions of adverbs ending in *-ly* in the *Corpus of History English Texts* (henceforth CHET), a subcorpus of the *Coruña Corpus of English Scientific Writing* (henceforth CC). CC comprises excerpts taken from technical and scientific texts in a time dimension of two centuries, i.e. 1700-1900. This corpus complements in many ways other historical corpora in the domain of the scientific register, e.g. *Middle English Medical Texts* (MEMT) and *Early Modern English Medical Texts* (EMEMT). My survey of *-ly* dialects is carried out within the context of corpus linguistics methodology, as I shall explain below, in order to retrieve and excerpt relevant data for analysis and categorization. The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I offer the theoretical framework for the analysis of the adverbs found in CHET; therefore, the concepts of stance and modality along with a definition of the adverb category are presented. In the next section, I describe the corpus and the method of inquiry. Subsequently, the discussion of findings is given, and this section is followed by the conclusions drawn from the present study.

2. Adverbs and stancetaking

Adverbs can be considered as a quite heterogeneous grammatical category, and this aspect contributes to the difficulty in providing a clear definition of the category. Van der Auwera (1998), Haspelmath (2001) and Eisenberg (2013), among others, have made explicit reference to this heterogeneity, and they consider the grammatical category of adverbs:

- as being the “most problematic major word class” (Haspelmath, 2001, p. 16543),
- as being an “elusive” (1998, p. 3) part of speech, and
- as being sometimes “confusing” (2013, p. 212).

This lack of conceptual unity and the absence of a clear definition of this grammatical category and of its scope have led to treatment of the adverb category as an umbrella term for many words which, apparently, do not fit in other grammatical categories.

This can be understood also due to the diverse morphological structures that adverbs present; the different positions they can occupy into any clause, and the various syntactic functions they can play. This situation concerning the misclassification of several words as adverbs has been already highlighted by some scholars (cf. Huddleston and Pullum, 2002). Thus, it is common to find some words which appear to be an adverb from a formal point of view. This is especially true when the adverb and the adjective share the same graphic form, e.g. *truly*.

Adverbs are used as stancetaking devices. Stance relates to the expression of the speakers and writers’ “personal feelings, attitudes and value judgements, or assessments” (Biber et al., 1999, p.966). Some relevant works on the analysis of stance include Du Bois (2007) and Hyland and Tse (2005). Du Bois (2007, p. 163) refers to the “stance triangle” when analysing stancetaking in dialogic discourse. The

author points out that any act of stancetaking comprises three elements, namely (i) evaluation, (ii) positioning and (iii) alignment, which means that whenever we take a stance, we evaluate a certain object, and, at the same time, we position ourselves in an evaluative dimension with respect to that object; and finally, we also align ourselves with others. In other words, the stance triangle proposed by Du Bois emphasizes the interactional nature of stancetaking as it necessarily involves specifying (i) where the stancetaker and the subject to whom the stancetaking is targeted stand in relation to the object being evaluated, and (ii) where the two subjects stand in relation to each other.

Biber et al. (1999) consider the term *stance* to be a superordinate, which covers not simply the senses speakers want to convey, but also the propositional content. The linguistic elements which can convey stance are numerous, but I only focus on adverbs in this paper. Biber et al. (1999) make a distinction between three main groups of adverbs: (i) circumstance adverbs, i.e. *here, now*; (ii) linking adverbs i.e. *nevertheless, moreover, additionally*; and (iii) stance adverbs, which are categorized as and defined, thus:

Epistemic stance adverbials and attitude stance adverbials both comment on the content of a proposition. Epistemic markers express the speaker’s judgment about the certainty, reliability, and limitations of the proposition; they can also comment on the source of the information. Attitude stance adverbials convey the speaker’s attitude or value judgment about the proposition’s content.

Epistemic stance adverbials (Biber et al., 1999, p. 59-60) can entail a large number of meanings such as:

- Doubt and certainty, e.g. *perhaps, probably*.
- Actuality and reality, e.g. *actually, in fact, really*.
- Source of knowledge, e.g. *apparently, evidently, according to*.
- Limitation, e.g. *in most cases, typically, mainly*.
- Viewpoint or perspective, e.g. *in my opinion, from my perspective*.
- Imprecision, e.g. *kind of, roughly*.

Those stance adverbs can be used to indicate the authors’ attitude and certainty towards their propositions. The adverbs object of the analysis carried out here fall within this category. Examples are *apparently, fairly* and *possibly*. The forms *fairly* and *possibly* indicate a low level of authorial commitment to text content by presenting information with doubts and hesitancy. On the other hand, adverbs such as *apparently* can be classified as perceptual evidential adverbs, as they indicate that the evidence the author has for the content he/she expresses has been obtained through the senses.

3. The corpus and the method

The Coruña Corpus of English Scientific Writing currently includes three subcorpora: the first subcorpus compiled was *The Corpus of English Texts on Astronomy* (CETA), the second one was *The Corpus of English Philosophy Texts* and *The Corpus of English History* is the third subcorpus, and it covers the late Modern English period. This last

subcorpus is precisely the one I use for the purpose of this study. The first text in CHET dates back to 1704, and the last text in CHET dates back to 1895. New patterns of thought, and new methodological procedures based on observation started to be common practices after the seventeenth century, and all this is reflected in technical and scientific texts. As regards the genres represented in CHET, there are samples of articles, essays, lectures, textbooks and treatises written by both male and female authors. CHET includes ca. 400.000 words. Each of the texts compiled in this subcorpus covers around 10.000 words. The distribution of words per century is well balanced, 201,794 of the words compiled belong to the eighteenth century, and 202,823 belong to the nineteenth century.

My analysis of the texts has been done electronically by means of the *Coruña Corpus Tools*. I interrogate the corpus using the string *ly/ly* to obtain cases of adverbs ending in *-ly*, e.g. *amicably, beautifully, chiefly, impressively, legally, recently, sagaciously, unintentionally*. The examples retrieved from the corpus are organized according to the five broad adverbial groups: *circumstantial, stance, degree, focusing, and connective* (after Downing, 2015). In those cases where there is either graphemic or spelling variation, examples are conflated and counted together, as this variation has not proven distinctive from a semantic standpoint. Statistics are given in the form of raw material and percentages, as the present study does not seek to compare results from a gender or genre perspective.

4. Analysis and discussion of findings

The analysis of the corpus reveals 4237 cases of *-ly* adverbs, which I have grouped into Downing's big five adverb categories, as given in Table 1:

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF -LY ADVERB CATEGORIES IN CHET; RAW NUMBERS.				
circumstantial	stance	degree	focusing	connective
1727	991	617	764	138

Circumstantial adverbs comprise those forms expressing space, time, manner and domain. In other words, this group includes those adverbs indicating information concerning *where, when* and *how*. This group is characterized by its semantic heterogeneity, as pointed out in Aarts (2018, 44), and so it includes examples as varied as the following: *rarely, wonderfully* and *yearly*. CHET exhibits instances of this entire category, although forms are other than *-ly*. For this reason, the subcategory of *space* indicating *position, direction* and *distance* is not included in the present inventory of forms and discussion, as the analysis of data has not retrieved any single case showing *-ly*. Examples of this category are the following, indicating time, frequency, and duration:

- (1) They agreed that the speaker should communicate the circumstance to a few members who might be confidentially entrusted: the result was, that committees were **immediately** sent by the assembly to many towns in the province, in a cautious, guarded manner, to require the stocks of powder on hand in their several magazines (hist 1805 Warren).

- (2) Bad as the situation of the owners of the castle during their captivity appeared to be, it must be confessed it was in many respects far better than that of the town's people. The castle, being head-quarters, was **regularly** supplied with provisions, drawn from the plunder of the country; and the presence of the French officers, added to the large family always resident in it, left little room for intruders from the rebel army (hist 1800 Stock).
- (3) The Generalife was a part of the town famous for its gardens, and as being the burial-place of the kings. The partisans of the two monarchs were **perpetually** skirmishing with each other, and much of the best blood in Grenada was shed in these unnatural combats, while the troops of Castile were ravaging the country up to the very gates (hist 1828 Callcott).

Stance adverbs are second in frequency in the texts collected in CHET after circumstantial adverbs. The subgroups of stance adverbs in this corpus are certainty/doubt, evidential, viewpoint, emphasis, judgement and attitude. Examples are the following:

- (4) The treatise then goes on to explain **conjecturally** the etymological meanings of the word *Senchus* and afterwards the technical law terms used in the work (hist 1839 Petrie).
- (5) They then moved for a *Cessation of Arms* but our Commissioners, having no power, replied, that if they went to *Boston* it might **probably** be granted (hist 1726 Penhallow).
- (6) Everything that could **possibly** be spared was set on fire, and soon after the ten thousand Greeks proceeded on their retreat (hist 1857 Sewell).

Degree adverbs are used to indicate grading. In CHET, I have identified degree adverbs of comparison, intensification, attenuation, approximation and sufficiency, as in the examples below:

- (7) Offers of peace were made, but they were rejected; for one of the points on which Lysander **mostly** insisted was, that the Long Walls, built by Themistocles, between Athens and Piræus, should be pulled down (hist 1857 Sewell).
- (8) No appearance indicating vegetation, or the slightest variation of surface which can **fairly** be ascribed to change of season, can anywhere be discerned (hist Herschel, 1833).
- (9) The motion was **slightly** objected to but carried without a division (hist 1802 Adolphus).

Focusing adverbs "are so called due to their association with another element in the clause, their focus, which is usually identified by means of prosodic prominence" (Cougil Álvarez, 2003, p. 301). In CHET, focusing adverbs of restriction are by far the most frequent. Examples of these adverbs in the corpus are *barely, exclusively, gradually, hardly, merely, nearly, only, partially, partly, scarcely, simply* and *singly*:

- (10) It was the opinion of many, that Henry, by **barely** assuming the appearance of martial resolution, might have prevailed in supressing the whole vigour of the insurrections (hist 1775 Anderson).
- (11) For in this Book, there's nothing has the least Tendency to Homage; **Only** there's a passing hint of a Rumor spread abroad by the Partisans of our Queen Mary (hist 1705 Anderson).

Connective adverbs ending in *-ly* in CHET are divided into sequence adverbs, conclusion adverbs and restating adverbs. Conclusion adverbs occur more often than the other two categories. Instances are given below:

- (12) The enclosure was immediately commenced, and, in a few days, in its first design, completed. **Subsequently**, Madame de Bullion's endowment took the form of a stone building outside the pickets, which, as the Hotel Dieu, retained its identity to within the last twenty years (hist 1887 Kingsford).
- (13) The ball passed into the cieling, where the mark of it is still apparent. **Lastly**, it was quite unsuitable to the spirit of these rustic warriors to keep their firelocks idle till they should come in sight of an enemy, when there were so many inferior animals on which they might be tried (hist 1800 Stock).
- (14) The character of Nevers was too well known to permit a doubt respecting the reality of this menace. **Consequently**, the *cortége* defiled without obstacle; and Nevers, bitterly mortified, but only the more confirmed in his allegiance to Henri IV., quitted Rome, and passing through Ferrara and Florence, repaired to Venice (hist 1860 Freer).

5. Analysis and discussion of findings

The analysis has revealed that circumstantial adverbs appear more frequently than any other category in CHET. The presence of this type of adjuncts is explained in the descriptive nature of history texts, in which richness of details are essential to vividly develop historical events, thus facilitating understanding. Stance and focusing adverbs together almost equal the number of circumstantial adverbs in this corpus. The use of these classes of adverbs pursues perspectivization of knowledge either by signaling specific attitudes and opinions, or by guiding the inferential processes by forcing particular readings of the texts through, for example, focusing adverbs. Some of these adverbs may be considered as disjuncts, as they do not seem to substantially modify either the meaning of the proposition or the event described. Degree adverbs seem also to indicate certain interpretations of the text. Intensification degree adverbs, for instance, are used either to downtone or to reinforce particular events or propositions.

Connective adverbs ending in *-ly* are by far the least frequent type attested in CHET, and sequence, conclusion, restating and reason adverbs in this broad category have been identified. The main function of these adverbs is to guide the understanding of the texts by indicating the logical connections in the form of conjuncts between ideas in the argumentative process or in the description of events. As happens with the majority of adverbs in *-ly*, the main intention for hedging claims seems to lie at the core of the use of these adverbials in order to avoid future academic criticism; either through cognitive elaboration of meaning through a more accurate inspection of evidences, or, perhaps, through the availability of new material that may contradict current data.

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