

MERELY: EXPLORING INTENSIFICATION AND FOCUSING (A CORPUS-BASED STUDY)

The paper analyzes the adverbial functions of *merely* in three Present-Day English (PDE) variations (British, American and Canadian) based on International Corpus of English (ICE) attempting to investigate convergent and divergent features of its functioning in the language variations with a particular focus on its major collocates and part of speech distribution. Based on the fact that grammatical features are insignificantly affected in the language varieties, the investigation attempts to prove that there can be notable changes between them when it comes to part of speech distribution of the same lexico-grammatical unit.

Entries from OED indicate that *merely* can have the following senses: a) without admixture or qualification; purely; exclusively; b) without the help of others; solely; c) absolutely, entirely; quite, altogether; d) without any other quality, reason, purpose, or view; e) as a matter of fact, actually [12]. Thus, its major meanings show its functioning either as a focusing adverb (*solely, purely, exclusively, etc.*) or an intensifier (*actually*). These two types of adverbial senses are oftentimes hard to distinguish, hence the major differential characteristics need further clarification with regard to focusing and intensifier identification.

Focusing adverbs (FAs) were firstly singled out by the authors of “*A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*”, who define them as a class of words that aim at highlighting the essence of the utterance [13, p. 604]. In alternative semantics [3, p. 251] they are identified based on their functions, presupposition and descriptive content, serving a comment or an answer to the Current Question [6; 15]. The meaning of FAs can be described with reference to effect on the truth condition of sentence presupposition [9]. Taking this into account this class of adverbs is subdivided into restrictives (exclusives and particularizers) and additives (scalar and non-scalar).

The peculiarity of restrictives allows them to correlate with all types of XPs, i.e., NPs, VPs, AdjPs and PPs functioning as focus indicators [1; 2]. In other words, FAs highlight the most meaningful sentence elements functioning not only on a “local”, but also on a “global” level [8] interacting with the information structure (IS) of the sentence and correlating with the allotment of focus and background components of the sentence [9]. Their varied positions in the clause aligns with the aim of the speaker who chooses relevant alternatives to introduce one’s own arguments, e.g.:

(1) *I wasn't complaining, I merely **said** that I was tired.*

(2) *These columns have no function and are merely decorative.*

Adverb *merely* in Present-Day English is associated with restrictives (exclusives and particularizers), which are identified on the basis of their influence on the truth condition, excluding all further alternatives [9, p. 26].

The term intensifier refers to “a class of adverbs which have a heightening or lowering effect on the meaning of another element in a sentence”, e.g. *very, terribly, just, etc.* [7, p. 198]. In accordance with Quirk et al. [13] intensifiers express the semantic role of degree and have an expressive meaning being the indexical of the speaker’s personal evaluation [5]. Intensifiers serve to “convey the degree or the exact value of the quantity expressed by

the item they modify” [10, p. 213]. They adjust the intensity of word meanings and can also highlight the sentence focus (usually emphatic). As an intensifier *merely* has a heightening, maximizing effect [11], and its meaning in example (3) can be interpreted as *absolutely, entirely; quite*.

(3) *It's merely impossible to do it.*

The current research, as highlighted above, is primarily based on 3 PDE ICE language corpora: British (ICE-GB), American (ICE-USA) and Canadian (ICE-CAN). This allowed conducting the comparative analysis and finding the common ground between the records of XX-XXI cen. English texts. The corpora have been selected due to their relevance in time frames, similar genre distribution, and length. The latter has the following characteristics: ICE-GB (500 files, 1,061,264 tokens), ICE-CAN (506 texts, 1,119,892 tokens) and ICE-USA (401 texts, 434,336 tokens).

The retrieved sentences with *merely* are analyzed with the help of #LancsBox software package, which allows visualizing the data and calculating the concordance of lexical units under analysis by means of the following packages: KWIC, Words, GraphColl, etc. [4]. Apart from automated analysis the manual analysis of ICE Corpora is additionally conducted to obtain more accurate data of *merely* allotment in texts.

The study of ICE Corpora has shown that the search term is not widely spread in the texts and belongs to low-frequency words. Thus, *merely* occurs 84 times (0.821 per 10k) in ICE-GB in 72 out of 500 texts, in ICE-USA its frequency is even lower: 29 times (0.668 per 10k) in 23 out of 401 texts; in ICE-CAN the search term occurs 26 times (0.232 per 10k) in 23 out of 506 texts. The further research is based on the collocates frequency with *merely* in all three ICE corpora, which calculated based on the following formula: 01 - Freq (5.0), L5-R5, C: 5.0-NC: 5.0. As collocational networks show *merely* is more frequently used in ICE-GB and is represented by the greater variety of collocates, which amount to 25 different variations, while in ICE-USA they only reach 10 items and in ICE-CAN *merely* is represented by 9 collocates. The most frequent collocates with *merely* in all 3 varieties are *the, of, to, not, a, it*. In ICE-GB *merely* most typically collocates with *he, was and but*, which is not registered in two other variations. Specific collocates with *merely* for ICE-CAN are *is and are*. For ICE-USA they are *as and or*. ICE-CAN and ICE-USA have also a common collocates of *merely*, which are not registered with ICE-GB samples. From this can be assumed that ICE-USA and ICE-CAN demonstrate a greater similarity of *merely* usage.

The distribution of *merely* regarding its part of speech allotment is not evenly represented in ICE corpora. Thus, the lexeme can function as an exclusive descriptive, exclusive scalar, particularizer and intensifier. The data indicate *merely* in its descriptive identification is sporadically observed only in ICE-USA amounting to 3.45%, however this is not characteristic of ICE-GB and ICE-CAN tokens. In all three language variations the lexeme is predominantly applied for focusing exclusive scalar identification, reaching 87.5% in ICE-GB. The number of such usages is considerably lower in ICE-USA and ICE-CAN reaching 68.97% and 65.39% respectively. Focusing particularizer function of *merely* is more characteristic of ICE-USA and ICE-CAN, amounting to 24% and 23% respectively, while such instances in ICE-GB are twice lower, viz. 11%. Interestingly, that ICE-CAN samples demonstrate the abundance of intensifier-*merely* illustrations, which is atypical of ICE-GB and ICE-USA. Indicative is, however, that the part of speech distribution of the lexeme is more similar in ICE-USA and ICE-CAN (See: Table 1) when comparing the three language variations.

A Part of Speech Distribution of *merely* in ICE Corpora

<i>merely</i>	<i>exclusive/descriptive</i>	<i>exclusive/scalar</i>	<i>particularizer</i>	<i>intensifier</i>
ICE-USA	3.45%	68.97%	24.13%	3.45%
ICE-CAN	0%	65.39%	23.07%	11.54%
ICE-GB	0%	87.5%	11.11%	1.39%

Therefore, the study has indicated that the meaning of *merely* significantly differentiates in three major English language variations when it comes to its non-dominant functions. ICE-USA and ICE-CAN show the greater convergence of the functions of the adverb unlike ICE-GB. The further investigation of this phenomenon requires the analysis of larger corpora, i.e. COCA, BNC and Strathy to prove the preliminary observations.

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