

**CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF ENGLISH SYNONYMOUS
ADVERBS: *ACTUALLY*, *LITERALLY*, AND *REALLY***

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Abstract

Using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and 100 tokens of each adverb as data, this study compares the similarities and differences of the adverbs *actually*, *literally*, and *really*, three synonymous adverbs, which have obscure meanings due to their complex functional and syntactic usage patterns. The comparison among three sources (i.e. dictionary, reference grammar books and analysis of this study) is made in respect of the adverbs' functional implication, positional distribution in sentence structure.

The findings reveal similarities and differences in all aforementioned respect of the three adverbs. The results also suggest the need of a perusing method in the study of synonymous adverbs.

Keywords: Synonymous adverb, Functional implication, Sentence positional distribution, Corpus-based approach.

1. Introduction

The ability to recognize and use words in the way that native speakers use is arguably the most important language competence of all. Teachers of a second language should, therefore, enhance the ability of their students to think analytically about the necessary target words. Although there appears to be teaching techniques for teachers to improve their students' vocabulary knowledge, there seems to be a number of students who still have difficulty using synonymous words appropriately; for example, they use *decrease* in place of *reduce* in any context, or vice versa.

Difficulty in using words that have similar meaning appropriately can be commonly seen in non-native speakers of a target language. Words that have similar meaning, or synonyms, do not actually have exactly the same meaning, but rather have different meaning, often too subtle to be seen. Chomsky (1986, as cited in Taylor 1995, p.18)

admitted that it is not easy to distinguish the differences of a pair of synonyms. Therefore, it is very unlikely that users, especially non-native speakers of English, can see hidden meanings of a pair of synonyms.

To better see a word's information (e.g. words' meanings and usage), foreign language users would normally consult reference sources, in order to use words more appropriately. A dictionary is arguably the most widely used reference for the form, meaning, and usage of words; however, dictionaries would not capture the full nature of a language as used by its community of speakers since they have limited space and capacity. According to Hank's (2008) remarks, dictionary makers choose only important words and present only their frequently-seen features in dictionaries. Therefore, others language sources may be useful for learners who want to know any other features not included in the dictionaries.

Apart from a dictionary which provides information such as meanings, synonyms, antonyms and example sentences, many research studies found that established corpora also provide a great amount of language data, more conducive to language learning, teaching and researching (O'Keefe, McCarthy & Carter, 2007). With adequate knowledge and training, corpora users may be able to employ the corpora as their tools for learning a language, preparing a language lesson, and doing a research study (op. cit.,). There are, generally, two kinds of approaches on corpus studies, which are a corpus-based and a corpus-driven approach. According to Römer (2005), corpus-based study is employed when a researcher has a set of hypotheses, as opposed to a corpus-driven study, which is employed when a researcher does not have a hypothesis but does have a general curiosity or a need to formulate a general finding or to see a tendency of a phenomenon.

There have been a number of corpus-based studies of synonymous words, showing that corpus-based analysis provides insightful data and information to better discriminate synonyms in several respects. For example, Phoocharoensil (2010) used a corpus to investigate five near synonymous verbs: *ask*, *beg*, *plead*, *request* and *appeal*, comparing their linguistic features (i.e. meanings, connotations, collocations, grammatical patterns, formality, and dialects) between data that was obtained from dictionaries and a corpus. This study found that the synonymous verbs cannot be used interchangeably in every context. The abovementioned linguistic features, e.g. connotations, collocation, grammatical patterns etc., can be used to differentiate the examined synonyms.

As discussed above, the word parts nouns, verbs and adjectives have received greater attention from researchers, quite unlike the word part, adverbs. A search of the literature revealed few studies which paid particular attention to synonymous adverbs; for example, the study of Liu and Espino (2012), in which a corpus-based behavioral profile (BP) approach was employed to examine meaning and usage differences among *actually*, *genuinely*, *really*, and *truly*, through examining collocation, positional distributions, and distributions across registers of the adverbs.

Although the study discussed the similarities and differences of the meanings and usages of the aforementioned synonymous adverbs between the two sources (i.e. first, the descriptions from reference grammar books and dictionaries, and, second, the description from the analysis of the study), the study still suggests the need for further research to be conducted relating to areas that this study left unexamined, for example other functions of the adverbs and other synonymous adverbs, e.g. *literally*, which some dictionaries define it as a synonym of *really*, *actually*, *truly*, *plainly* etc. The word *literally* is interesting for the two reasons. First, recently, it has been widely used in spoken language as an intensifier, intending to convey figurative sense, which is opposite to what it conveyed before. Second, although some pragmatic and semantic research studies have been carried out on the semantic change of the word *literally*, there is no single corpus-based study that has investigated what influence impacts on meanings of the word.

To this end, this study, therefore, adopts a corpus-based approach to examine synonymous adverbs: *actually*, *literally* and *really*, as it is motivated by the fact that (i) the words *really* and *actually* are important as they are in a list of 3000 communication words (LDOCE5) and very little is known about the word *literally* (ii) there is a notorious elusiveness and variability of the meanings and sentence positions of the individual adverbs, (iii) the criterion that Liu (2012) used to extract the data from COCA in their study, to the researcher's point of view, is debatable, and (iv) the precision of information about the use of the adverbs in current reference materials (e.g. dictionaries and reference grammar books) is still doubtful.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Definitions of Synonym

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD8, 2010), *a synonym* is a word or expression that has the same or nearly the same meaning as another in the same language (e.g. *big* and *large* are synonymous). However, there can hardly be a complete synonym in English, one which can completely replace another without affecting the meaning in a particular context (Chung, 2011). DiMarco, Hirst, and Stede (1993) remarked that the meanings of synonymous words vary according to their connotations, implications and registers.

It appears that non-native speakers of a target language tend to fail to realize the fact that synonyms have subtle differences, and vary in meaning and usage according to their linguistic and non-linguistic contexts.

2.2 The Definitions of Adverb

According to Greenbaum (1996), adverbs belong to more than one subclass. In the example, the word *very* in "*very large*" or, "*very carefully*" functions as a premodifier with an intensifying function only. The word *too* in "*too small*" or, "*too quickly*" functions as a premodifier with an intensifying function as well, but when the word *too* appears at the end of a sentence in "*The food was good, too*", it then functions as

an adverbial not a modifier, which has a different meaning (i.e. in addition). According to the above phenomenon, when the position of the adverb (*too*) changes, its meaning also changes. This kind of phenomenon has been cited by a number of linguists. Hoey (2005), for example, pointed out that in conveying a certain meaning, words seem to favor or avoid certain positions in sentences or texts.

Morphologically, adverbs also vary in form. Quirk et al. (1985) ascertained three types of adverbs, which were; simple (e.g. *well*, and *only*), compound (e.g. *somehow* and *somewhere*), and derivational or the ones that are derived from adjective or participle adjective (e.g. *oddly* and *interestingly*). The derivational type represents the largest group of adverbs and the three adverbs in this present study belong to this type.

This present study focuses only on the adverbs when they function as adverbial. There are four grammatical functions proposed by Quirk (1985) to distinguish functions of adverbs, which are conjunct, adjunct, disjunct and subjunct.

2.2.1 Conjuncts

According to Quirk et al. (1985), adverbs that are conjuncts, or conjunctive adverbs, are logical connectors that generally provide a link to a preceding sentence or clause, as exemplified by the word *therefore* in the following COCA's example:

[a] It's also possible she has a structural abnormality of the uterus. She *therefore* needs hormonal investigations and possible imaging and genetics. [COCA: 'PracticeNurse',2012]

In a more comprehensive description, Quirk et al. (1985) remarked that conjuncts have a relatively detached and *superordinate* role, as compared with other clause elements. In considering conjuncts, it is found that it is necessary to look beyond the particular grammatical unit in which they appear. Conjuncts are, thus, related to the speakers' comment in their assessment of how they view the connection between two linguistic units, ranging from sentence level to single-clause level, as exemplified by the phrase *in addition* in Quirk et al. (1985), p. 632.

[b] The candidate has written a successful, lengthy, popular, and *in addition*, highly original novel.

2.2.2 Adjuncts

According to Quirk et al. (1985), adverbs that are adjuncts are more integrated into sentences or clause structures, as exemplified by the word *forward* and *eventually* in the following COCA's example:

[c] ... The words of known songs are readily available in the reading corner and children look *forward* to completing their tasks, so they can read through the lyrics of favorite songs...

[COCA: 'GeneralMusicToday', 2012]

[d] They *eventually* brought enough pressure to bear that the military rulers promised to restrict military trials only to crimes of "thugery"... [COCA: 'Christian Science Monitor', 2012]

2.2.3 Disjuncts

According to Quirk et al. (1985), disjuncts have a more peripheral relation in the sentence. Disjuncts semantically express an evaluation of what is being said with respect either to the form of communication or to its meaning. There are two main classes of disjuncts that are *style disjuncts* and *content disjuncts*.

Style disjuncts typically modify the whole clause or expression and are less integrated into the clause they modify; they are rather set off from the rest of the sentence by a pause in spoken language and by commas in writing, as exemplified by the word *honestly* in the following COCA's example:

[e] ..." *Honestly*, if it were me, I'd want to be put out. I'd be afraid of moving, you know? " [COCA: 'Scrapbook of secrets', 2012]

Content disjuncts make observations on the actual content of the utterance and its truth conditions, as exemplified by the word *technically* in the following COCA's example:

[f] Privacy rules, which vary from site to site, *technically* render a lot of data inaccessible: Facebook's terms of use limit the extent to which outside groups can mine the site. [COCA: 'Mother Jones', 2012]

2.2.4 Subjuncts

In Quirk et al. (1985), subjunct category has subtle manners yet important. Subjuncts are similar to adjuncts in that they are relatively integrated within the structure of the clause. Below, the two widely used examples in Quirk et al. (1985, p.569) are offered for the purpose of illustrating the differences between adjuncts and subjuncts.

[g] He spoke *kindly* to the new students.
[h] Will you *kindly* take your seat?

The word *kindly*, in example [g], performs a function of *adjunct of manner*, adding a shade of meaning to the verb 'spoke'. On the other hand, the word *kindly* in example [h], does not add any meaning to the verb phrase 'take' because it sounds odd that anyone will sit in a kindly manner. Hence, the word *kindly* in example [h] actually means 'Please be kind'.

2.3 Existing Description of the Examined Adverbs

2.3.1 Descriptions from dictionaries

As the researcher has reviewed two learners' dictionaries and thesauri, these provided the shared basic definition for the adverbs in question, that is to say, they are used to emphasize fact, truth, and reality. Each adverb is defined by using other adverbs in the set or by other adverbs' adjectival roots.

For example, the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 5th ed. (LDOCE5,2005)* defines the word *literally* as meaning "used to emphasize that something, especially a large number, is actually true". The word *actually* was defined by using the *really*, as in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 8th ed. (OALD8, 2010)* "used in speaking to emphasize fact or a comment, or that something is really true". Likewise, the *Webster's New World Dictionary & Thesaurus 1997* provides the word *really* and the word *actually* as synonymous words of *literally*.

The evidence here shows that the dictionaries define synonymous examined adverbs with other adverbs in the set and even though they provide somewhat useful information about varieties of meanings, they do not provide enough information, for example, about collocates of each examined adverb.

In illustrating that *literally* has shades of meaning—emphasizing truth that may seem surprising, OALD8 provides an example sentence for this meaning: '*There are literally hundreds of prizes to win.*' LDOCE5, on the contrary, does not provide such a shade of meaning, even though example sentences given are also related to such meaning: '*The Olympic Games were watched by literally billions of people.*'

2.3.2 Descriptions from reference grammar books

Although more helpful than thesauri in terms of availability of word's usage and collocation information, LDOCE5 seems to be less helpful than several grammar reference books in comparison, particularly, Greenbaum's (1969, 1996) and Quirk's et al. (1985), which provided discussion of the various meanings and functions of *actually*, *literally* and *really*

The first discussion is about the words' functions of the two adverbs, *actually* and *really*. They may be used as content disjunctive adverbials (Greenbaum 1969, 1996, Quirk et al. 1985) to state the sense in which the speaker judges what he says to be true or false. They also may be used as subjunctive adverbials to add reinforcing effect on the truth value of the clause or part of the clause to which they apply; unless the part of the clause is "gradable" (Quirk et al. 1985). To illustrate this point, Quirk et al. 1985 exemplified three sentences as follows;

- [i] He *really* may have injured innocent people.
- [j] He may *really* have injured innocent people.
- [k] He may have *really* injured innocent people.

In both [i] and [j] *really* is a pure emphazier, and can be content disjunctive adverbial, whereas in [k] is not. It is because the implication of *really* in [k] is of a high degree of injury as well as the assertion of certainty, the word *really* in [k] is considered as a subjunctive adverbial.

According to Quirk et al. (1985), meanwhile, the last adverb *literally* may, on the one hand, be used as a style disjunctive adverbial to make the respect of the phrases or clauses be more explicit. On the other hand, *literally* plays a role as a disjunct with intensifying function.

Moreover, Quirk et al. (1985) remarked that the word *literally* is truly used as a subjunctive adverbial to merely emphasize the truth of the communication or draw attention to the hyperbolic language used to describe it.

[l] The police *literally* left no square inch unexamined.

Example [l] illustrates that speaker used the word *literally* for the purpose of making the expression more fascinating whereas the word *literally*, in the expression, must be perceived by its basic meaning.

In addition, Greenbaum (1969) however provides crucially important information about preferred positions which majority of style disjuncts take, stating from his intuition and a handful data from the ‘Survey’ corpus-driven study, that generally disjuncts seem to favor initial position in a sentence. Unfortunately, there has not been found even an example sentence justifying such description but there has been found an example sentence of *literally* in a final position instead:

[m] Later, when it was learned that the NLC had been restored, the crowds shouted for joy, *quite literally*. [ST 23/4/67:6,3, as cited in Greenbaum 1969, p.82]

Apart from initial position, according to Quirk et al. (1985), a few style disjuncts, (e.g. *literally*) can also appear in a verbless question, as analogically exemplified by the following example of a sentence that includes *seriously*, another style disjunct:

[n] A: I’m going to resign.
B: *Seriously?* (“Were you speaking seriously when you said that?”)

A further example contains the content disjunct *really*;

[o] A: I’m going to resign.
B: *Really?* (“Is that so?”)

Although these descriptions provide the researcher with some valuable information about the examined adverbs, they still are inadequate in a few important ways. **First**, there has not been found specific frequency information of the various functions and sentence positions of the adverbs from such reference books. Instead there stated uncertain words to describe the uses of the adverbs, e.g. “maybe”, “may” and “intuitively”. Therefore, they fail to provide information about which semantic

function(s) are the most frequently used with each adverb. Based on corpus evidence, this study may help fill in this knowledge gap. **Second**, there has not been found information regarding words' families (adjectives, adverbs, or verbs) that the adverbs modify/ intensify usually. This study, therefore, may reveal frequent types of adjectives, adverbs, or verbs that the adverbs usually modify/ intensify. **Finally**, this study is expected to provide the missing body of knowledge that would help better understanding the adverbs and, hopefully, use them more appropriately. Moreover, it is hoped that this study would provide a better guideline for future research which aims to investigate other adverbs or even explore the same adverbs more thoroughly.

3. Methodology

3.1 Materials

The frequency information and some concordance tokens in this study were taken from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which consists of 520 million words plus, composing language data from 1990 to 2015, equipped with querying features. The reasons that the researcher chose COCA is that first, it does not only provide the biggest resource in size and most recent language data free of charge, but also has, to the researcher himself, the most user-friendly query features which allow extracting multi-aspects of the examined adverbs.

In comparing the adverbs' meanings and functions from COCA, information relating to such aspects is taken from LDOCE5 as a reference source for word information,

Reference grammar books in this study are Greenbaum (1969, 1996) and Quirk et.al. (1985).

3.2 Procedures

This study is an exploratory research in which the 100 tokens of each adverb are used for investigating the synonymous words in three aspects: collocation, positional distribution, distribution across genres.

The senses of meanings of the word provided in the dictionary were discussed with its descriptions provided in the reference sources.

The senses of meaning with example sentences were, then, categorized into an adverbial function, which seems sensible. The procedures of the study were divided into three phases: data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation. In the data collection phase, word information was explored, drawn and then tabulated. In the data analysis phase, word frequencies were analyzed, in respect of sentential distribution, turning them to percentages. In the data interpretation phase, the frequencies of words in each table were compared and contrasted with that of the dictionary and the reference materials. Moreover, some interesting data were raised to rephrase and discuss to exemplify their intended meanings.

3.3 Data Collection

To collect the data, the researcher first explored meaning and positional distributions of *literally*, *really* and *actually* from LDOCE5, and then he used query functions from COCA to extract data according to aforementioned aspects.

To extract positional information, there exist a ‘List’ bar as a query feature on the COCA page, one just simply inputs a detail, for example ‘, not really.’ into a box underneath the ‘List’ bar, and lastly clicks ‘Find matching strings’. In COCA, ‘, not really.’ is interpreted as a string of two words and two punctuation marks, sequentially combined as stated, which means the phrase *not really* appearing at the end of a sentence.

3.4 Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the researcher observed positions of each word from the entire COCA data. Meanwhile, the researcher deduced distributional patterns from the observation and presents them in tabular form, comparing with that obtained from the dictionary and refereces.

4. Findings and Discussion

Table1 *Distribution of the Positions of the Adverbs in Sentences*

	<i>Initial position:</i> (%)	<i>Medial position:</i> (%)	<i>Final position:</i> (%)	<i>One-word question:</i> (%)	<i>one-word sentence:</i> (%)	<i>Other:</i> (%)	<i>Total</i>
<i>Actually</i>	7699 (5.24)	4766 (3.24)	2705 (1.84)	1 (0)	53 (0.04)	131795 (89.64)	147019
<i>Really</i>	2626 (0.73)	6175 (1.71)	5470 (1.51)	7 (0)	2351 (0.65)	344973 (95.40)	361602
<i>Literally</i>	232 (1.27)	899 (4.92)	301 (1.65)	8 (0.04)	230 (1.26)	16618 (90.87)	18288

From Table1, initial position is the most preferable choice for the disjunct, *actually*. While the medial position is the position of choice for the disjunct, *literally*, the final position is similarly preferable for all three adverbs. The position ‘one-word question’ is preferable for none of the adverbs, while ‘one-word sentence’ position is more preferable for the word *literally* than the other two. The adverbs *really* and *literally* seem to be accepted in usage at any position, except a one-word question, as evidenced by their similar percentage in all positions. It is obvious that *really* is very likely to favor the ‘one-word sentence’ position, as its raw frequency is highest in number, approximately 10 times larger than that of *literally* and more than 40 times larger than that of *actually*.

Regarding disjunct adverbials, the results reveal that there is only adverb - *actually* - that obviously is preferred in the initial disjunctive position, which is remarkably similar to what the reference book have remarked: Greenbuam (1969, p.85) “... generally a disjunct adverbial seems to favor initial position in a sentence”.

Table 2 A Summary of Percent of Grammatical Functions Each Adverb Fits

Examined adverbs	Grammatical functions			
	Adjunct	Subjunct	Disjunct	Conjunct
Actually	NA,	39 ^a	50 ^a	11 ^c
Really	NA,	61 ^a	39 ^a	NA,
Literally	29 ^b	36 ^a	35 ^a	NA,
Total	29	136	124	11

Note.

^a Grammar reference materials, LDOCE5 and the analysis of this study have descriptions of the adverbs in this category.

^b Grammar reference materials does not have descriptions of the adverb(s) in this category, but LDOCE5 and the analysis of this study has.

^c Grammar reference materials and LDOCE5 do not have descriptions of the adverb(s) in this category but the analysis of this study has.

Table 2 shows a summary of the adverbs' senses analyzed from perusing 100 tokens of each word, and they were categorized in order of grammatical functions. This result indicates that three examined adverbs are used chiefly for emphasis purposes, and are used partly for assertion purposes. Table 2 also shows that conjunct adverbial probably is an additional grammatical function of the adverb *actually*.

Evidently, the adverb *really* is different from the adverb *actually* in few respects. The adverb *really* mainly functions as a subjunct adverbial, as in [p], while the adverb *actually* as a disjunct adverbial, as in [g].

[p] ... real reform-minded, have been met by great resistance from Syriza. So it was *really* interesting to hear Mr. Varoufakis speak about reform. Nobody has an idea of what... [CNN,2015]

[q] Since I'm not about to waste a beautiful morning like this one by brooding about breast cancer, I ask her, " Do you want to take a walk? " The question interrupts her monologue. " I've got to exercise these old bones, " I tell her. *Actually*, I'm not that old. I'm in my seventies. It's just an expression. [Virginia Quarterly Review, 2015]

The adverb *literally* can function evenly both as a disjunct adverbial and a subjunct adverbial. The reference materials did not provide a clear and numerical description of the adverb *literally*, as opposed to this study. One interesting finding from the analysis is that 29 out of 100 tokens of the adverb *literally* functions as an adjunct adverbial, which supports what the dictionary has stated, as in [r].

[r] Students can practice oral and aural transmission with the use of gu-em presented under Western notation in the example of chil-chaе in Figure 7. Gu-em are Korean verbal syllables of music, and it *literally* means "mouth tone." Gu-em is an effective tool to aid learners in memorizing music...

The most interesting finding is that the adverb *actually* probably functions as a conjunct adverbial, as evidenced by 11 out of 100 occurrences, as in [s]

[s] AP: I can't remember a time when I wasn't a writer. That doesn't mean I always wanted to be an author when I grew up; *actually*, I wanted to be a doctor. [JAdolAdultLiteracy', 2015]

In response to research question: 'What are the similarities and differences of the three synonyms: *actually*, *literally* and *really* in respects of sentence's positions and collocations?', most of the analysis indicated that of all three adverbs, the adverbial *actually* appears in most parts of a sentence, as opposed to the adverbial *literally*.

For example, when the word *literally* functions as a disjunct adverbial, it tends to prefer other positions (27%) than the prescribed positions (8%) (i.e. initial, medial, final, one-word question, and one-word sentence), whereas the word *really*, when a disjunct, tends to prefer the prescribed positions (39%). The words *literally*, *really* and *actually* share the similar preference to other positions, when functioning as subjuncts, 31%, 29%, 39% respectively, as shown in Table 3

Table3 A Summary of Sentence Distribution in Relation to Grammatical Functions

Grammatical functions	Initial disjunctive position	Medial disjunctive position	Final position	One-word question	one-word sentence	Other positions
Subjunct	5 ^R 5 ^L	0	22 ^R	0	5 ^R	39 ^A 29 ^R 31 ^L
Disjunct	16 ^A 4 ^L	16 ^R 12 ^A	9 ^A	12 ^R	11 ^R 4 ^L	13 ^A 27 ^L
Adjunct	0	8 ^L	0	0	0	21 ^L
Conjunct	11 ^A	0	0	0	0	0

Note. ^A represents percent that belongs to the word *actually*.

^R represents percent that belongs to the word *really*.

^L represents percent that belongs to the word *literally*.

5. Conclusion

This present study investigated the similarities and differences of the three adverbs *actually*, *really*, and *literally* in respect of sentence positions, collocations, and formality of the contexts in which each adverb appears. Moreover, this present study compared the information from the analysis with that from the dictionary and reference grammar books. The discussions in chapter 4 can bring about conclusions of this present study as follows:

The adverbs *actually*, *really*, and *literally* are near synonyms, rather than perfect or absolute synonyms

The recommendations developed from insight of the study, are presented below for future studies.

1. It is suggested that more tokens from various positions in a sentence to be perused are investigated. The more the number the more evidence to emerge.
2. It is suggested that more varieties of English be investigated.
3. Type of verb collocates should be taken into investigation.
4. Exact positions of the examined adverbs in category 'Other positions' should be taken into investigation (e.g. preceding or following a verb)

The study has found that the examined synonymous adverbs are not perfect synonyms. They share the same central meanings but behave differently when in different contexts (i.e. linguistic contexts and non-linguistic contexts). Since non-native speakers of English are very unlikely to be adequately exposed to natural spoken language in which these three adverbs tend to be used, they are in need of help from their teachers in grasping the hidden meaning of an expression. Teachers could make good use of COCA in their lesson, by, for example, bringing a real excerpt of interview that COCA provides to teach their students. Explanation on what the punctuation in that excerpt means are needed.

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