

On the Modifying Powers of Adverbs

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ABSTRACT

The present paper subjects to scrutiny the claim of a minority of linguists that adverbs are capable of modifying nouns, taking into account both widely accepted dictionary definitions and the views of a number of authorities on the matter.

KEYWORDS

adjective, adverb, modifier, subjunct, substantive, verb

1. INTRODUCTION

1-1 General Introduction

In a previous paper¹, I investigated the specific case of a word ostensibly serving as an adjective, but, upon closer examination, revealed to be functioning adverbially, and, in a subsequent paper², a similar case of misidentification concerning a common structural pattern. On this occasion, I intend to broaden the field of consideration yet again to investigate, as a matter of general principle, the modifying powers of the adverb, examining specifically – and, I trust, refuting – the notion prevalent among certain linguists that adverbs can ever modify substantives.

1-2 Survey

A sensible starting point would clearly be to consider what definitions of ‘adverb’ are offered, both by general reference sources and by guides to grammar and usage. By far the most commonly employed wording is that to be found on London University’s *Internet Grammar of English*³:

Adverbs are used to modify a verb, an adjective, or another adverb...

definitions identical, or near-identical, to which are provided by the Capital Community College Foundation⁴, Lester & Beason⁵ (p.12), Gucker⁶ (p.64), Strumpf & Douglas⁷ (p.112), LoveToKnow Corporation⁸, Chalker & Weiner⁹ (p.13), the New Shorter Oxford¹⁰ (p.32) and Chambers¹¹ (p.18).

This basic, standard definition is marginally expanded in terms of possible objects of adverbial modification by Downing & Locke¹² (p.503) to include clauses, and by Collins¹³ (p.21) and Longman¹⁴ (p.14) to include whole sentences*¹.

However, the assertion, or even suggestion, that adverbs are capable of modifying nouns is conspicuous by its absence from every one of the above sources, and, indeed, this will readily be seen to be the case by anyone who cares to consult, with regard to this issue, the vast majority of currently available reference literature, whether in print or online.

2. INVESTIGATION

Dissenting voices concerning the modificatory capacities of adverbs are indeed few and far between, but at least one, Geoffrey Pullum, is worthy of note, since he is among the contributors to a popular and relatively compendious reference grammar¹⁵. Another is a recently developed grammar website that appears to be dedicated to performing a root-and-branch re-analysis of many accepted syntactic concepts.

It is on these two that I intend to focus, scrutinizing the examples that, they assert, exemplify the modification of nouns by adverbs, and seeking to show that each of these can in fact be rationalized by a variety of, on occasion surprisingly simple, means, all entirely consonant with the traditional acceptance of the term 'adverb' (as clarified in 1-2 above), classifying them into four types, as follows:

Type A: the adverb in question is actually modifying an ellipted verb.

Type B: the adverb in question is functioning as an indirect modifier to a VP, e.g. in the role of adverbial subjunct (as defined by Quirk et al.¹⁶, p.566-568).

Type C: the adverb in question is actually modifying an adjective.

Type D: a word generally accepted as capable of functioning as an adjective is being needlessly misidentified as an adverb.

First, then, let us consider examples of adverbs supposedly modifying nouns*² furnished by Pullum¹⁷, appending for each a classification in accordance with the schema outlined above and, as the case requires, one or two additional observations:

[1] *I express my profound disappointment at the government's refusal **yet again** to*

take the high road and bring forth a motion to allow parliament to sit in committee of the whole.

Classification: Type A. The refusal in question is *being met with* once again, and it is the implicit VP to which the adverb phrase ‘yet again’ relates. *³ (We might even be tempted to speculate that the writer of [1] has simply made an accidental, and possibly ill-advised, substitution of a common noun for a gerund, and would have expressed him-/herself more felicitously by saying “at the government’s *refusing* yet again...”, whereby ‘yet again’ would quite properly be modifying an element that is, at least partially, verbal.)

[2] *The NHS and other health organisations **internationally** clearly need methodologies to support benefit analysis of merging healthcare organisations.*

Classification: Type A. Implied: “health organisations *operating* internationally...”

[3] *The unique role **globally** of the Australian Health Promoting Schools Association, as a non-government organization specifically established to promote the concept of the health promoting school, is described.*

Classification: Type A. Implied: “unique role *considered* globally...”

[4] *These major strides forward have been accomplished due to the support **financially** of the local community.*

Classification: Type A. Implied: “support *provided* financially...”

[5] *Obtaining the information requested would entail the scrutiny **individually** of nearly 1,500 written answers. . .*

Classification: Type A. Implied: “scrutiny *carried out* individually...”

[6] *The argument **collectively** of these media moguls was “efficiency”...*

Classification: Type A. Implied: “argument *viewed* collectively...”

[7] *...the opinion **generally** of the doctors who appeared at the hearing was that each day of delay would further endanger the child.*

Classification: Type B. ‘Generally’ falls into the Quirkian category of focusing subjunct, an

adverbial, characterized by extreme mobility within its clause, which tends to be placed closest not to its VP (here ‘was’) but to the particular clause-element with respect to which the assertion of the predicate is limited. Thus the writer of [7] is saying simply: “the opinion of the doctors was, *in the main*, that each day...”.

Now, let us turn our attention to examples*⁴ supplied by the XTAG Research Group¹⁸⁾:

[8] ***Approximately*** *thirty people came to the lecture.*

Classification: Type C. Adverb ‘approximately’ modifies determinative *adjective* ‘thirty’.

[9] ***Practically*** *every person in the theater was laughing hysterically during that scene.*

Classification: Type C. Adverb ‘practically’ modifies determinative *adjective* ‘every’.

[10] ***Only*** *John’s crazy mother can make stuffing that tastes so good.*

Classification: Type B. ‘Only’ is another type of focusing subjunct. The assertion of the predicate is limited to the NP *John’s mother* (or, to put it another way, she can accomplish the feat described *in such a way as no one else can.*) *⁵

[11] ***Relatively*** *few programmers remember how to program in COBOL.*

Classification: Type C. Adverb ‘relatively’ modifies determinative *adjective* ‘few’.

[12] ***Not*** *every martian (sic.) would postulate that all humans speak a universal language.*

Classification: Type C. Negative adverb ‘not’ modifies determinative *adjective* ‘every’.

[13] ***Enough*** *money was gathered to pay off the group gift.*

Classification: Type D. ‘Enough’ is universally recognized as an adjective as well as an adverb (e.g. *Websters* ¹⁹⁾, p.754, among numerous other standard works of reference that could be cited), here qualifying the noun ‘money’.

[14] ***Quite*** *a few burglaries occurred in that neighborhood last year.*

Classification: Type C. Adverb ‘quite’ modifies determinative *adjectival*^{*6} ‘a few’.

[15] *I wanted to be paid **double** the amount they offered.*

Classification: Type D. Adjective ‘double’ (*Websters* ¹⁹, p.677) is qualifying NP ‘the amount’.

[16] *Taking the day off was **quite** the right thing to do.*

Classification: Type B. ‘Quite’, here meaning ‘completely’, functions as a subjunct^{*7}, specifying *the extent to which* it was the right thing to do.

3. CONCLUSION

When reckoning the grammatical classification of a word or phrase that appears at first glance to be deviating from the norm (as may be the case with some of the adverbs examined above), as great as the temptation may be to believe that we have stumbled on a grammatical truth heretofore hidden from the rest of the world, it behooves us to ask ourselves one very simple question: is it likely that a fundamental property of that form-class (in this case, the supposed ability of adverbs to modify nouns) has gone undetected for centuries, that countless grammarians before us have simply been blind to something of which only we have been privileged to be made aware? Or, alternatively, if, as here, the cited examples all seem to be of relatively recent origin, is it probable that the English language has, again quite unbeknown to virtually every academic authority in the world, undergone so radical a transformation in the last few decades as for an entire class of words to have suddenly acquired previously unheard-of syntactic powers?

Having hopefully rejected such questions as being hardly worthy of an answer, we should then ask ourselves whether it is, in fact, not considerably more probable that what may appear to constitute an anomalous set of grammatical relations can be explicated entirely within universally accepted analytical parameters, perhaps with reference to phenomena no more puzzling, extraordinary or obscure than simple ellipsis.

FOOTNOTES

^{*1} The existence of the sentence adverbial, such as ‘strangely’ in

The lights were on but, strangely, they found nobody at home.

patently not in any sense modifying the *manner* in which they found things but simply commenting on the strangeness of the *content* of the latter part of the sentence, is sufficiently well-known to represent no more than a passing, minor elaboration to the general, standard definition as provided in the above-cited authorities, and is well-documented in such widely respected works as Quirk et al.¹⁶⁾ (p.612-631), whilst not a single instance is cited of an adverb modifying a noun.

*2 The bold type in these examples is mine.

*3 Neither here nor elsewhere in this paper do I necessarily intend my suggested ellipses to be any more than just that – suggestions. In this particular case, no especially suitable alternative readily presents itself, the word ‘refusal’ being an abstract noun that, despite constituting an action, cannot naturally be said to *happen*, *occur* or indeed to *do* very much at all. In others, a number of equally suitable synonyms could quite easily be cited, the adoption of any one of which would, however, have no material bearing upon our argument, since all such alternatives would be *verbs*, and it is their membership of the form-class ‘verb’, rather than the precise identity of that which incidentally realizes that function in any given case, that is at issue. These ellipted elements should therefore be treated simply as *notionally* absent, rather than as specific words of which it could ever be proved that they were somehow carelessly ‘forgotten’ or ‘overlooked’ by the speaker.

*4 The bold type in these examples is theirs.

*5 Cf. e.g.

John’s crazy mother can make only stuffing that tastes so good.

in which the scope, or focus, of the limitation realized by ‘only’ has shifted from the subject NP to the object NP, changing the meaning to (considerably less complimentary) “John’s crazy mother can make stuffing taste good *in such a way as she cannot do with regard to any other food.*”

*6 I draw the standard distinction here between ‘adjective’ (i.e. *single word* serving an adjectival function), and ‘adjectival’ (its phrasal equivalent): ‘a few’ naturally originated as a noun phrase, but has acquired holistic properties identical to that of any simple adjective. However, for the purposes of our argument, the difference between ‘adjective’ proper and ‘adjectival’ is of no more than passing interest.

*7 I.e. a fully-fledged sentence element, to be distinguished – technically, at least – from the use of the same adverb in [14], where it serves simply as an internal constituent of an adnominal phrase.

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(和文要旨)

副詞の修飾能力について

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本論考の目的は、広く認められる辞書的な定義や権威のあるいくつかの見解を考慮した上で、副詞が名詞を修飾し得るとする少数の言語学者の主張を精査することである。

