

On the Scope of Adverbial Negation

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ABSTRACT

The present paper, which is primarily for the attention of authors of English-language grammar guides, surveys, and assesses the quality of, some of the information available in English on the scope of adverbials in the written language with particular reference to negative constructions.

Keywords: adverb, adverbial, frequency, negation, negative, occurrence, scope

INTRODUCTION

The difference between two sentences such as

[1] I don't really like classical music.

and

[2] I really don't like classical music.

is something that hardly needs explaining to any native speaker, who will understand by [1] that the speaker, while not *particularly* fond of classical music, nonetheless does not necessarily hate it, whereas the speaker of [2] is going out of his/her way to express an intense dislike of said musical form.

However, except for the slight repositioning of the adverb 'really' - in [1] following the auxiliary verb, while in [2] preceding it - the two sentences seem semantically identical, and, particularly given the fact that many languages other than English would employ markedly different vocabulary to express the two meanings under consideration,^{*1} this point understandably causes some problems, both of comprehension and of production, for the learner.

From a technical, analytical viewpoint, we would account for the difference by asserting that the referential scope of 'really' in [1] is only the positive infinitive 'like', hence that which is being denied is merely a *high* degree of partiality to classical music, whereas in [2] its scope is the whole of the negative

finite VP "don't like", thus emphasizing/affirming a *complete* dislike.

In the course of this paper, which is intended primarily for the attention of authors of English-language grammar guides (i.e. guides to English grammar written in English), we will be surveying a variety of commonly available reference sources, both in print and online, with a view to ascertaining what kind of guidance concerning the scope of adverbial negation in written English the contemporary learner wishing to study grammar via the target language^{*2} can reasonably expect to find, and thus to determining its general level of adequacy.

SURVEY

We commence with Quirk et al.¹⁾, whose observations relating most closely to the topic here under consideration may essentially be summarized as follows:

1. Definite time adjuncts can generally be moved from sentence-initial to sentence-final position without notably affecting the scope of negation (p.526), citing synonymous

She isn't coming for a tutorial this afternoon.

and

This afternoon, she isn't coming for a tutorial.

2. In the case of indefinite frequency adverbials denoting usual occurrence^{*3} (generally, normally, etc.), movement from initial to median/post-subject position is similarly unlikely to affect the scope of negation (p.544), citing synonymous

Normally, the students should not be given homework.

and

*The students normally should not be given homework.*4*

3. However, the co-occurrence of usual occurrence frequency adverbials (here labelled 'AdvU') in sentences realizing an assertion of the type

[[AdvU] X occurs, but [AdvU] X does not occur]^{*5}

will, on account of the proportional nature of their reference - i.e. as applying, not just to many, but to the *majority* of, cases - tend to result in a contradiction, citing (p.546)

**Normally, he doesn't take medicine, but usually he does.*6*

4. The above contrasts interestingly with the ostensibly similar class of indefinite high frequency adverbials (p.543), namely those that denote multiple occurrence but, unlike AdvU, are non-proportional in nature, so that there would be no contradiction in a sentence such as

Often he doesn't take medicine, but frequently he does.

since 'often' and 'frequently' mean 'on many occasions' but not specifically 'in the *majority* of cases'^{*7}.

5. Notwithstanding the above, the co-occurrence of high frequency adverbials (here labelled AdvH) realizing an assertion of the type

[X does not [AdvH] occur, but X [AdvH] occurs]^{*5}

e.g. (Quirk et al.¹⁾'s own example, p.547)

**He doesn't often take medicine, but often he does (take medicine).*

will naturally constitute a simple contradiction, since we are simultaneously both asserting and denying frequency.

6. (With reference specifically to the issue cited in our introduction) five emphasizeers, including 'really', can lie either outside or within the scope of negation, citing (p.587)

I really don't know him.

(which they paraphrase as: The real truth is that I don't know him, *i.e.* I don't know him *at all*.)

versus

I don't really know him.

(paraphrased as: It's not the real truth that I know him, *i.e.* I don't know him *well*.)

Comparable distinctions are also drawn regarding 'actually' and 'definitely'.

So, while Quirk et al.¹⁾, then, do (as we would expect of such a comprehensive and seminal reference work) treat of our topic in considerable detail, many other authorities, sadly, provide little or no guidance.

Downing & Locke²⁾ devote a short section (p.509-510) to a discussion of the various possible positions of 'really' and the ensuing semantic changes, while Huddleston & Pullum³⁾ content themselves with noting (p.578) that the sentence

We fortunately hadn't gone very far.

bears an affinity to

Chris luckily had forgotten it.

but unfortunately stop short of stating any clear rules relating to the scope of adverbials in such negative constructions.

Strumpf & Douglas⁴⁾ include a very general section on adverbs, but fail to address our topic, and likewise Greenbaum⁵⁾, who, while providing (p.151) a fairly lengthy list of intensifiers, inexplicably omits 'really', despite its being amongst the most common in the English language^{*8}. Crompton⁶⁾ deals thoroughly with the scope of adverbials but does not specifically address negative constructions, and the same is true of Bonami & Godard⁷⁾ (although their paper is of limited usefulness to the English learner since much of it concerns French rather than English grammar) and of Larson⁸⁾ while Ernst⁹⁾, although citing (e.g. p.92, 96 & 104) a number of example sentences containing adverbials relating to negative VPs, does not focus on semantic distinctions to any substantive degree.

Finally, it should be mentioned that none of the following popular grammar guides has any useful information whatever to offer on our topic: Lester & Beason¹⁰⁾, Gucker¹¹⁾, Freidin¹²⁾, Terban¹³⁾, Azar¹⁴⁾.

CONCLUSION

It seems clear on even the most cursory glance at the cross-section of reference materials here surveyed that, with the sole exception of Quirk et al.¹⁾, guidance relating to the scope of adverbials in negation tends to range from scanty to non-existent.

It is therefore to be hoped that authors of English grammar guides will henceforth devote greater attention to this topic.

FOOTNOTES

*1 Compare, for instance, possible equivalents in

(1) French

[1] Je n'aime pas tellement la musique classique.

[2] Je n'aime vraiment pas la musique classique.

(2) German

[1] Ich habe klassische Musik nicht sehr gern.

[2] Ich habe klassische Musik wirklich nicht gern.

*2 Concerning this point, see my previous article¹⁰⁾, p.3, footnote 2.

*3 Their chosen term, although it is the opinion of the

present author that substitution of 'majority' for 'usual' might conceivably make for greater terminological transparency (see 3).

*4 Note that even movement to intra-VP position, as in e.g.

The students should not normally be given homework.

would entail no change of meaning.

It is also worth noting, with regard to another category of indefinite frequency adverbial recognized by Quirk et al.¹⁾ (p.543), namely those denoting continuous/universal frequency (always, constantly, etc.), that the same basic principle of mobility not affecting scope of negation applies, but with the obvious caveat that such adverbials do not naturally occupy initial position. We might by way of illustration cite

He doesn't incessantly talk about his car, but he often mentions it in passing.

and

He doesn't talk incessantly about his car, but he often mentions it in passing.

where movement from intra-VP to post-VP position likewise entails no change of meaning.

*5 My formula to express Quirk et al.'s¹⁾ basic point.

*6 It is probably worth mentioning that precisely the same contradiction would ensue even if the adverbials were placed in post-subject position, to wit

**He normally doesn't take medicine, but he usually does.*

*7 We might further explicate this apparent contradiction by saying that the sentence is equivalent to

There are many occasions on which he does not take medicine, but many (others) on which he does.

*8 'Really' ranks, according to the Word Frequency website¹⁰⁾, no. 142 in frequency of English words, as compared with some others on Greenbaum's list, e.g. 'totally' (no. 1925), 'thoroughly' (no. 4176) and 'incredibly' (no. 4314).

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大阪信愛学院短期大学紀要

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主として英文法ガイドの著者に向けられた本論考は、特に否定構文に焦点をあてつつ筆記英語における副詞の範囲に関する英語で入手可能な情報の一部を調査し質を評価する。