CHAPTER 1

THE ADVERB MERELY RECONSIDERED: FOCUS, INTENSIFICATION AND SEMANTIC SHIFT IN PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH VARIATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The lexeme *merely* has arisen scholarly interest primarily from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives, specifically in its role as a focusing adverb associated with focus and background partition. The current study presents a comparative analysis of the search term *merely* across three Present-Day English (PDE) variations based on International Corpus of English (ICE), taking stock of its functioning and convergent and divergent features of the language unit usage in British, American and Canadian English. The choice to examine the three PDE varieties is justified by their emergence during XVIII and XIX centuries as the language variations influenced by contact with other languages and evolving independently over time[1]. Such developments may not be crucial, as the English language got normalized already in the XVII century, nevertheless a slight grammatical and semantic shift can testify to the fact that the languages variations have more divergent features as has been expected.

In accordance with the entries from OED[2] *merely* is used to express 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. The major meanings of *merely* indicate that it can be either used as a focusing adverb (*solely, purely, exclusively*, etc.) or as an intensifier (*actually*). These two types of adverbial senses are oftentimes hard to distinguish therefore focusing on their major characteristics is presented further in the article.

[1] Dillard J. Towards a social history of American English. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015. 313 p.
[2] Oxford English Dictionary (OED). Oxford, 2023. URL: https://www.oed.com (Reference date: 24.01.2025).

1. Literature review

1.1. A focusing adverb or merely an intensifier?

Focusing adverbs (FAs) are 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[3]. In the framework of alternative semantics[4], FAs are categorized based on their function, presupposition, and descriptive context, typically serving as comment or response to the Current Question[5] [6]. Their interpretation is closely connected with the truth conditions associated with the sentence presupposition[7], which allows distinguishing their two main types: restrictives (which include exclusives and particularizers) and additives (both scalar and non-scalar). FAs are particularly positionally versatile, as they can associate with all types of syntactic phrases – noun phrases (NPs), verb phrases (VPs), adjective phrases (AdjPs), and prepositional phrases (PPs), while their major function can be defined as focus markers[8] [9]. To put it differently, FAs stress on the most semantically significant elements in a sentence, operating not only at a local but also at a broader discourse level[10]. This interaction ties directly into the sentence information structure (IS), aligning with how focus and background information is distinguished. Their syntactic flexibility reflects the speaker's intent to highlight contextually relevant alternatives in order to support their communicative goals. For example:

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

(2) These columns have no function and are <u>merely</u> **decorative.**

Examples (1)-(2) evidence that adverb *merely* in Present-Day English is associated with restrictives (exclusives and particularizers), which are

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[3] Quirk R., Greenbaum S., Leech G., Svartvik J. A comprehensive grammar of the English language. London: Longman, 1985. P. 604.

[4] Beaver D. Sense and sensitivity: How focus determines meaning / B. Clark. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. P. 251.

[5] Coppock E., Beaver D. Principles of the exclusive muddle. *Journal of semantics.* 2014. № 31 (3). P. 371–432.

[6] Wiegand M. Exclusive morphosemantics: Just and covert quantification. *West Coast Conference in Formal Linguistics (WCCFL) 35.* (Sommerville April 28–30, 2017). Somerville, 2018. P. 419–429.

[7] König E. Syntax and semantics of additive focus markers from a cross-linguistic perspective: A tentative assessment of the state of the art. *Focus on additivity: Adverbial modifiers in Romance, Germanic and Slavic languages* / In A.-M. De Cesare & C. Andorno. Amsterdam, Philadelphia, 2017. P. 23–43.

[8] Andrushenko O. Integrated methods for studying focusing adverbs in modern and historical English corpora. *Innovative pathway for the development of modern philological sciences in Ukraine and EU countries.* Riga: Baltija Publishing, 2022. P. 26–54.

[9] Andrushenko O. Particularizing focus markers in old English: Just a case of adverb polysemy? *Lege artis. Language yesterday, today, tomorrow*, 2023. № 8 (2), P. 2–14.

[10] De Cesare A.-M. Defining focusing modifiers in a cross-linguistic perspective. A discussion based on English, German, French and Italian. *Adverbs – Functional and diachronic aspects* / K. Pittner, D. Elsner, F. Barteld. Amsterdam, Philadelphia, 2015. P. 47–81.

identified on the basis of their influence on the truth condition, excluding all further alternatives[11]. To distinguish exclusives another feature comes into play: scalarity[12]. Exclusives can be scalar (2) and covey the meaning that there is only one item is possible on the alternative scale.

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.[13]. Quirk et al. [14] state that this class of adverbs expresses the semantic role of degree and has an expressive meaning being the indexical of the speaker's personal evaluation. Intensifiers represent a varied and ever-changing set taking an intermediate position between lexis and grammar[15]. They serve to "convey the degree or the exact value of the quantity expressed by the item they modify"[16], adjust the intensity of word meanings and can also highlight the sentence focus (usually emphatic). As an intensifier *merely* has a heightening, maximizing effect[17], and as exemplified in sentence (3) conveys such meaning as "absolutely, entirely; quite".

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

1.2. Merely: a historical perspective

Investigating functions of *merely* in English diachronically using the data from two corpora, the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English* and the *Penn-Helsinki Corpus of Early Modern English*, Ghesquiere[18] notes that the Middle English lexeme is recorded in texts from the 12th–15th centuries (4), originating from the French adjective *mier*, and may graphically coincide with adjectives during the subsequent period of language development. The explanation for this can be found in Middle English: adverbs are formed from adjectives using the suffix *-e*, which is reduced in the process of language

[11] König E. Syntax and semantics of additive focus markers from a cross-linguistic perspective: A tentative assessment of the state of the art. *Focus on additivity: Adverbial modifiers in Romance, Germanic and Slavic languages* / In A.-M. De Cesare & C. Andorno. Amsterdam, Philadelphia, 2017. P. 26.

[12] De Cesare A.-M. On 'additivity' as a multidisciplinary research field. *Focus on additivity: Adverbial modifiers in Romance, Germanic and Slavic languages* / A.-M. De Cesare, C. Andorno. Amsterdam, Philadelphia, 2017. P. 1–22.

[13] Crystal D. *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language.* Cambridge: CUP, 2018. P. 198.

[14] Quirk R., Greenbaum S., Leech G., Svartvik J. A comprehensive grammar of the English language. London: Longman, 1985. 1779 p.

[15] Römer-Barron U., Schulze R. Exploring the lexis–grammar interface. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009. 321 p.

[16] Méndez-Naya B. Special issue on English intensifiers. *English language and linguistics*, 2008. № 3 12 (02). P. 213.

[17] Ghesquiere L. Intensification and focusing: the case of *pure(ly)* and *mere(ly)*. *Exploring intensification: synchronic, diachronic and cross-linguistic perspectives* / M. Napoli, M. Ravetto. Amsterdam, Philadelphia, 2017. P. 33–54.

[18] Ghesquiere L. Intensification and focusing: the case of *pure(ly)* and *mere(ly)*. *Exploring intensification: synchronic, diachronic and cross-linguistic perspectives* / M. Napoli, M. Ravetto. Amsterdam, Philadelphia, 2017. P. 33–54.

development, as well as with the suffix *-li(ly)*[19]. *Moreover, another potential source of the adverb development may be the Old English form mære, mere* (Middle English *mere*), which has such meanings as "glorious, illustrious, noble, great, beautiful, fair."[20].

(4) Þe ledez of þat lyttel toun wern lopen out for drede || Into þat malscrande mere. "… nothing more than merely bewildering"

Sentence IS: [CP[TP[at, give-active][DP[Þe ledez of þat lyttel toun] [TP [*v*P[VP[wern lopen] [PP [out for drede]] [inf, new][PP[Into þat malscrande mere]]

The people of that little town wore spiders out for dread into that merely bewildering.

The people of that little town wore spiders to be more horrible, merely to bewilder. (Purity, a Middle English poem, Clessess (Nero A.10: 991).

In Early Modern English the form with *-ly* suffix dominates and is represented by 4,192 tokens in the EEBO Corpus. See Fig. 1.

SECTION	ALL	1470s	1480s	1490s	1500s	1510s	1520s	1530s	1540s	1550s	1560s	1570s	1580s	1590s	1600s	1610s	1620s	1630s	1640s	1650s	1660s	1670s	1680s	1690s
FREQ	4192	0	7	9	11	4	20	42	47	37	46	71	121	62	70	87	27	120	90	383	382	641	905	1010
WORDS (M)	755	0.7	3.7	2.0	1.3	0.9	3.0	7.1	8.7	7.2	16.1	26.9	32.0	24.1	40.0	42.9	38.6	42.8	47.1	99.5	63.5	74.6	92.6	79.7
PER MIL	5.55	0.00	1.89	4.52	8.54	4.23	6.57	5.92	5.40	5.13	2.86	2.64	3.79	2.57	1.75	2.03	0.70	2.80	1.91	3.85	6.02	8.59	9.77	12.67
SEE ALL SUB-SECTIONS AT ONCE																								

Fig. 1. The distribution of *merely* in EEBO

The search term is already actively used in written records starting from the 1490s, with the frequency of 4.52 occurrences per million words reaching 8.54 occurrences in the subsequent period. Other significant time spans for a substantial increase in the *merely* use are the 1500–1550s, followed by a sharp decline in its application – only to see a resurgence in textual corpora beginning in the 1660s. In the EEBO corpus, *merely* is recorded as an adverb indicating manner (5), which meaning is rather derived from the Old English form *mære, mere*.

(5) The blod renneth merely throughe the vaynes of the body (Here begynneth Dyfference Astron. sig. Biii, 1555, OED) – **manner**

Moreover, the adverb could be frequently used as a focusing adverb, as illustrated in sentence (6).

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[19] Andrushenko O. Exclusive adverbials in Middle English. *Proceedings of the international scientific conference "Topical issues of science and education"* (Warsaw, 17 June 2017). Warsaw, 2017. P. 5–13.

[20] Andrushenko O. Merely: exploring intensification and focusing (a corpus-based study). *International scientific and practical conference "Applied linguistics-3D: Language, IT, ELT"* (Zhytomyr, 26–27 May, 2025). Zhytomyr, 2025. URL: https://conf.ztu.edu.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/76.pdf.

(6) Their gouernment is meerely tyrannicall: for the great Turke is so absolute a Lord [etc.] (R. Johnson tr. G. Botero *Trauellers Breuiat* 40, OED, 1601) **focusing adverb.**

As shown in the study of the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English*[21], *intensification for merely* is a marginal function, documented only in texts from the 1570–1640s and 1710–1780s. Analyzing the meaning of *merely* in the EEBO corpus across four subperiods (1470s–1500s; 1500s–1550s; 1550s–1600s; 1600s–1690s), the previous studies of Late Middle English evidence that *merely* is used to indicate manner in 33.87% of examples, while in later periods, this usage decreases to 8.93% by the 1600–1690s. In contrast to this the focusing exclusive function becomes dominant[22]. The intensifier function of *merely* is firstly observed in the records of 1500s, gradually increasing its representation in the texts of 1600-1690s reaching 5.08% (Table 4.6).

Table 1

Meanings of *merely* in the EEBO corpus

Subperiod	Examples	Manner adverb	Intensifier adverb	Exclusive adverb
1470s–1500s	16	33.87%	--	66.13%
1500s–1550s	124	23.91%	2.02%	74.07%
1550s–1600s	337	14.93%	3.06%	82.01%
1600s–1690s	894	8.93%	5.08%	85.99%

Typically, the exclusive *merely* precedes the element it modifies, with exceptions in only 1.51% of cases. The adverb appears exclusively in SVO word order constructions, and its position in the sentence can be characterized as flexible. The primary word order patterns include: SVO *merely* (7), SV *merely* O(X) (8), and S *merely* V(O)(X).

(7) # quintus mucius augur seuola / this was his name / whiche was wonte to telle many thynges merely (Cicero, Marcus Tullius. Laelius de amicitia. English, 1481

(8) ut hit was a commune sayenge with hym y suche altercacyons were for a logition and not merely for a phylosophre (Here is co[n]teyned the lyfe of Iohan Picus, EEBO, 1525).

Since the form *merely* stems from adjectives of different origins, which graphically coincided in Middle English, the correlation between

[21] Ghesquiere L. Intensification and focusing: the case of *pure(ly)* and *mere(ly)*. *Exploring intensification: synchronic, diachronic and cross-linguistic perspectives* / M. Napoli, M. Ravetto. Amsterdam, Philadelphia, 2017. P. 33–54.

[22] Andrushenko O. Grammaticalization pathways of focusing adverbs purely and merely (history and present). *Scientific herald of International Humanitarian University. Series Philology*. 2024. № 66. P. 9–13.

the two meanings of the adverb (manner and focusing exclusive) is not particularly informative in terms of the development of different adverbial functions. However, it is worth noting that its usage as a focusing adverb gradually increases in Early Modern English texts, unlike its function of indicating the manner of action. The intensifier sense of the adverb develops from the exclusive adverb as it acquires a scalar "tinge". Thus, the grammaticalization pattern of the lexeme can be represented as follows: **adjective → manner/focusing adverb → focusing adverb → intensifier adverb**.

The preliminary findings of earlier English language periods are crucial for analysis the adverb in three language variations since Early Modern English can be considered a starting point for all three language variations regarding their independent development and can shed the light on some convergent and divergent peculiarities in terms of its functions, as well as, collocational differentiations in British, American and Canadian English.

2. Methods

The research is primarily based on three PDE language subcorpora of International Corpora of English (British, American and Canadian). This allows conducting the comparative analysis and finding the common ground between the records of XX-XXI cen. English texts. The study of *merely* in Present-Day English is made on the basis of ICE-Britain, containing 500 files, 1,061,264 tokens; ICE-Canada consisting of 506 texts, and ICE-USA represented by 401 texts, 434,336 tokens. 33620 types. Each ICE corpus is subdivided into subsections that follow the common design, represented in Table 2[23]. Therefore, the texts selected are similar in genres and structure ensuring greater compatibility among the data.

The corpus creators chose the texts that date from 1990 or later. The extracts of the spoken and written parts are selected in accordance with age differentiation (aged 18 or above). The extracts represent the speakers who are educated through the medium of English, and were either born in the country in whose corpus they are included, or moved there at an early age[24].

The retrieved sentences with *merely* are further analyzed with the help of #LancsBox software package, which allows visualizing the data and calculate the concordance of lexical units under analysis by means of the following packages: KWIC, Words, GraphColl, etc.[25]

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[23] Scheuben F. The international corpus of English (ICE). MunichL GRIN Verlag, 2006. 23 p.

[24] Scheuben F. The international corpus of English (ICE). MunichL GRIN Verlag, 2006. 23 p.

[25] Brezina V., Weill-Tessier P., McEnery T. #LancsBox 5.x and 6.x [software], 2020. URL: http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/lancsbox (Reference date: 21.06.2022).

Table 2

ICE Corpora Structure

***Spoken* (300)**		
Dialogues (180)	Private (100)	Face-to-face conversations (90) Phonecalls (10)
	Public (80)	Classroom Lessons (20) Broadcast Discussions (20) Broadcast Interviews (10) Parliamentary Debates (10) Legal cross-examinations (10) Business Transactions (10)
Monologues (120)	Unscripted (70)	Spontaneous commentaries (20) Unscripted Speeches (30) Demonstrations (10) Legal Presentations (10)
	Scripted (50)	Broadcast News (20) Broadcast Talks (20) Non-broadcast Talks (10)
***Written* (200)**		
Non-Printed (50)	Student Writing (20)	Student Essays (10) Exam Scripts (10)
	Letters (30)	Social Letters (15) Business Letters (15)
Printed (150)	Academic Writing (40)	Humanities (10) Social Sciences (10) Natural Sciences (10) Technology (10)
	Popular Writing (40)	Humanities (10) Social Sciences (10) Natural Sciences (10) Technology (10)
	Reportage (20)	Press news reports (20)
	Instructional Writing (20)	Administrative Writing (10) Skills/hobbies (10)
	Persuasive Writing (10)	Press editorials (10)
	Creative Writing (20)	Novels & short stories (20)

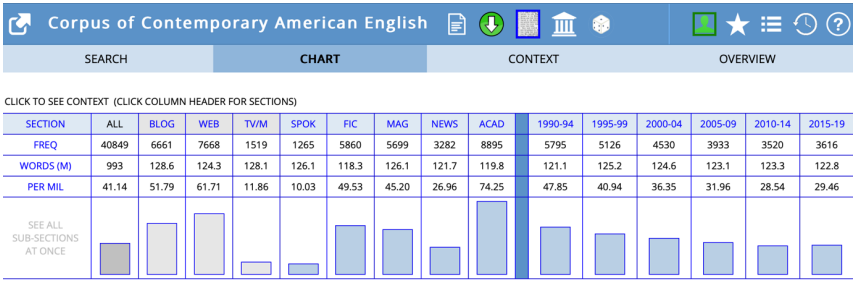
To support some statistical data with reference to the lexeme distribution in other corpora the analysis is supplemented by search term allotment in COCA, BNC and Strathy. These corpora are used to compare some rough figures since they differ in length and time-frames, however they may be representative of the general tendencies in the language taking into account the larger dataset (from 50 million words Strathy to 1 billion – COCA).

To obtain more accurate data of the adverbial *merely* allotment the manual analysis of ICE Corpora is additionally conducted due to the stylistic similarity of the abovementioned corpora.

3. The Results

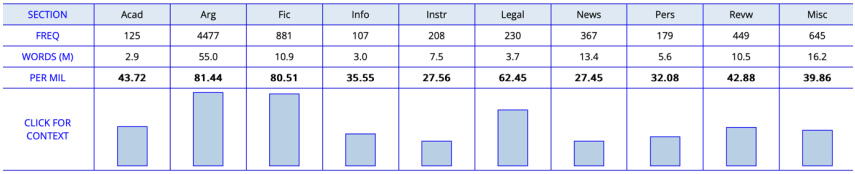
The analysis of ICE Corpora shows that the search term *merely* is not widely spread in the texts pertaining to low-frequency words. Thus, it occurs 84 times (0.821 per 10k) in ICE-GB in 72 out of 500 texts, in ICE-USA its frequency is even lower: 29 times (0.668 per 10k) in 23 out of 401 texts; in ICE-CAN the search term is registered 26 times (0.232 per 10k) in 23 out of 506 texts. The low representation figures require verification in the support corpora to determine whether this tendency is observed in other larger text collections.

In COCA (Fig. 2) the lexeme is registered 40843 times per 1 billion words with a low usage index of 0.40843 per 10k. The analysis of styles indicates that it is more representative in the academic style (74.25 per million words) and somewhat lower frequency figures characterize its usage on the web (61.71 per million words), specifically in argumentative essays and fiction (See Fig. 3).



SECTION	ALL	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD	1990-94	1995-99	2000-04	2005-09	2010-14	2015-19
FREQ	40849	6661	7668	1519	1265	5860	5699	3282	8895	5795	5126	4530	3933	3520	3616
WORDS (M)	993	128.6	124.3	128.1	126.1	118.3	126.1	121.7	119.8	121.1	125.2	124.6	123.1	123.3	122.8
PER MIL	41.14	51.79	61.71	11.86	10.03	49.53	45.20	26.96	74.25	47.85	40.94	36.35	31.96	28.54	29.46

Fig. 2. The distribution of merely in COCA

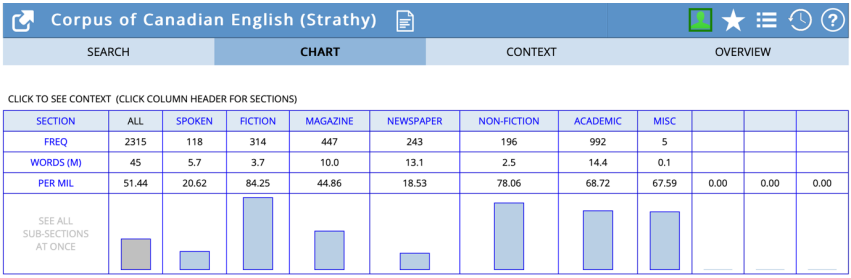


SECTION	Acad	Arg	Fic	Info	Instr	Legal	News	Pers	Revw	Misc
FREQ	125	4477	881	107	208	230	367	179	449	645
WORDS (M)	2.9	55.0	10.9	3.0	7.5	3.7	13.4	5.6	10.5	16.2
PER MIL	**43.72**	**81.44**	**80.51**	**35.55**	**27.56**	**62.45**	**27.45**	**32.08**	**42.88**	**39.86**
CLICK FOR CONTEXT										

Fig. 3. The distribution of merely in web subcorpus (COCA)

In Corpus of Canadian English (Strathy) the number of hits with *merely* makes 2315 per 50 million (0.463 per 10k) with the lexeme prevailing in fiction (84.35 per million words) with somewhat lower figures for non-fiction, academic

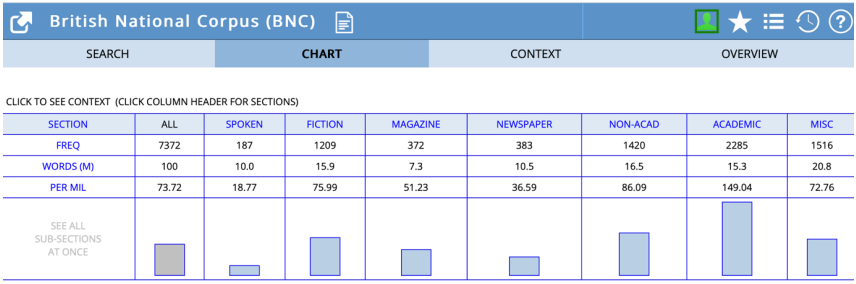
style and miscellaneous. Interestingly, the word has the lowers frequency of usage in newspaper and spoken styles, viz. 18.53 and 20.62 occurrences per million words respectively (See Fig. 4).



SECTION	ALL	SPOKEN	FICTION	MAGAZINE	NEWSPAPER	NON-FICTION	ACADEMIC	MISC			
FREQ	2315	118	314	447	243	196	992	5			
WORDS (M)	45	5.7	3.7	10.0	13.1	2.5	14.4	0.1			
PER MIL	51.44	20.62	84.25	44.86	18.53	78.06	68.72	67.59	0.00	0.00	0.00

Fig. 4. The distribution of merely in Corpus of Canadian English

The results for BNC indicate that the lexeme is registered 7373 times per 100 million words (0.7373 per 10k) with its prevalence in academic style amounting to 149.04 per mil. words (See Fig. 5). Therefore, the supporting corpora also prove that *merely* is more regularly used in the British variation of the English language, which is initially observed in ICE Corpora.



SECTION	ALL	SPOKEN	FICTION	MAGAZINE	NEWSPAPER	NON-ACAD	ACADEMIC	MISC
FREQ	7372	187	1209	372	383	1420	2285	1516
WORDS (M)	100	10.0	15.9	7.3	10.5	16.5	15.3	20.8
PER MIL	73.72	18.77	75.99	51.23	36.59	86.09	149.04	72.76

Fig. 5. The distribution of *merely* in BNC

The collocates with *merely* in the right and left periphery in all three ICE corpora are calculated based on the following collocation frequency: (01 – Freq (5.0), L5-R5, C: 5.0-NC: 5.0). Figures 6-8 show the top most frequent collocates in ICE-GB, ICE-USA and ICE-CAN.

As collocational networks show *merely* is represented in ICE-GB by the greater number of collocates amounting to 25 different variants, while in ICE-USA they reach 10 units and in ICE-CAN *merely* is found only in 9 collocates (See: Tables 3-5). The most recurrent collocates with merely in all three language

variations are *the, of, to, not, a, it*. In ICE-GB *merely* most regularly collocates with *he, was and but*, which is not registered in two other language variations. Specific collocates with *merely* for ICE-CAN are *is and are* and for ICE-USA they are *as and or* ICE-CAN and ICE-USA have also common collocates with *merely* (e.g. *that*), which are not registered among ICE-GB examples. From this can be assumed that ICE-USA and ICE-CAN are demonstrate a greater similarity in terms of common collocates with *merely*.

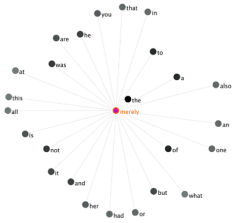


Fig. 6. Collocation network: *merely* in ICE-GB

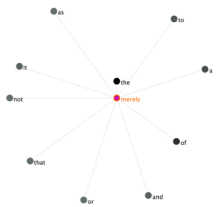


Fig. 7. Collocation network: *merely* in ICE-USA

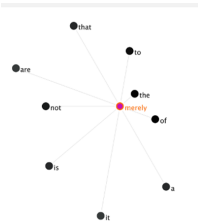


Fig. 8. Collocation network: *merely* in ICE-CAN

Table 3

Collocates of the search term *merely* in ICE-CAN

ID	Position	Collocate	Stat (Freq)	Freq coll	Freq corpus
1	R	the	10	10	54524
2	R	of	9	9	27722
3	M	to	8	8	27973
4	L	not	7	7	4655
5	R	a	6	6	25876
6	L	that	6	6	15758
7	L	is	6	6	11439
8	L	are	5	5	5113
9	L	it	5	5	12196

Table 4

Collocates of the search term *merely* in ICE-USA

ID	Position	Collocate	Stat (Freq)	Freq coll	Freq corpus
1	M	the	24	24	24762
2	R	of	12	12	13830

Continuation of table 4

ID	Position	Collocate	Stat (Freq)	Freq coll	Freq corpus
3	R	a	8	8	9284
4	R	to	7	7	11634
5	R	and	6	6	11918
6	L	it	6	6	2819
7	L	that	5	5	4872
8	L	as	5	5	3035
9	L	not	5	5	1733
10	L	or	5	5	2202

Table 5

Collocates of the search term *merely* in ICE-USA

ID	Position	Collocate	Stat (Freq)	Freq coll	Freq corpus
1	R	the	44	44	117838
2	R	of	24	24	61306
3	R	a	22	22	45516
4	R	to	22	22	52378
5	L	not	18	18	7832
6	L	was	18	18	18472
7	L	and	16	16	55822
8	L	he	16	16	12506
9	R	but	14	14	8652
10	L	it	14	14	16610

The collocates analysis of ICE Corpora has required to verify the data based on supplementary corpora: COCA, BNC and Strathy. Thus, three language variations share only 5 top-20 most frequent collocates: *because not, serve, reflect, smile* (Cf. Figures 9-11). Canadian (Strathy) and American (COCA) variations have also 5 common collocates, that are not registered in British variation (BNC): *than, smile, curious, try and provide*. At the same time, texts in BNC and COCA, as well as BNC and Strathy have only 3 common top 20 collocates with *merely*: CAN-GB: *content, intend, become*. GB-USA: *nod, shrugged, serve*. These observations prove that American and Canadian variations are more similar in terms of collocates than the British language variation.

The distribution of *merely* in terms of its functioning is varied in ICE corpora. Thus, the lexeme can be used as exclusive descriptive (9), exclusive scalar (10), particularizer (11) and intensifier adverb (12).

(9) Instead, he **merely** asked sarcastically (ICE-CAN) (**descriptive**).

Corpus of Canadian English (Strathy)

SEARCH | FREQUENCY | CONTEXT

ON CLICK: CONTEXT TRANSLATE (UK) ENTIRE PAGE GOOGLE IMAGE PRON/VIDEO

HELP	RE-USE WORDS	FREQ	ALL	%	MI
1	NOT	357	204834	0.17	4.22
2	THAN	72	77241	0.09	3.32
3	BECAUSE	40	51980	0.08	3.04
4	SERVE	8	3990	0.20	4.42
5	TRYING	8	9367	0.09	3.19
6	WANTED	8	9821	0.08	3.12
7	SMILED	7	880	0.80	6.41
8	CURIOUS	7	930	0.75	6.33
9	INDIVIDUAL	7	9353	0.07	3.00
10	REFLECT	6	3046	0.20	4.40
11	TOLERATED	5	204	2.45	8.04
12	IMPLIED	5	655	0.76	6.35
13	REFLECTS	5	1576	0.32	5.09
14	STOREY	5	2050	0.24	4.71
15	INTENDED	5	2657	0.19	4.33
16	FORMAL	5	2808	0.18	4.25
17	WISH	5	3431	0.15	3.96
18	BECOMES	5	3826	0.13	3.81
19	PROVIDING	5	4272	0.12	3.65
20	CONTENT	5	5351	0.09	3.32

Fig. 9. Collocation network for *merely* in Strathy (top 20)

Corpus of Contemporary American English

SEARCH | FREQUENCY | CONTEXT

ON CLICK: CONTEXT TRANSLATE (UK) ENTIRE PAGE GOOGLE IMAGE PRON/VIDEO

HELP	RE-USE WORDS	FREQ	ALL	%	MI
1	NOT	5539	4686331	0.12	3.84
2	THAN	1007	1476138	0.07	3.05
3	TRYING	236	328990	0.07	3.12
4	BEYOND	114	123647	0.09	3.49
5	NODDED	109	30871	0.35	5.42
6	POINTING	105	24772	0.42	5.69
7	STATING	78	10198	0.76	6.54
8	CURIOUS	76	26493	0.29	5.12
9	SHRUGGED	71	12860	0.55	6.07
10	ASKING	66	90457	0.07	3.15
11	SMILED	61	33891	0.18	4.45
12	REFLECT	57	33836	0.17	4.36
13	REFLECTS	54	17604	0.31	5.22
14	SERVE	54	77321	0.07	3.09
15	REPEATING	53	8242	0.64	6.29
16	SERVES	52	28880	0.18	4.45
17	PROVIDING	49	50206	0.10	3.57
18	SYMBOLIC	48	11511	0.42	5.66
19	DECORATIVE	46	4681	0.98	6.90
20	EXPRESSING	46	9853	0.47	5.83

Fig. 10. Collocation network for *merely* in COCA (top 20)

British National Corpus (BNC)

SEARCH | FREQUENCY | CONTEXT

ON CLICK: CONTEXT | TRANSLATE (UK) | ENTIRE PAGE | GOOGLE | IMAGE | PRON/VIDEO

HELP	RE-USE WORDS	FREQ	ALL	%	MI
1	NOT	1260	447618	0.28	4.20
2	BECAUSE	157	99494	0.16	3.36
3	NODDED	25	4569	0.55	5.16
4	SERVED	24	6184	0.39	4.66
5	REFLECT	18	3760	0.48	4.97
6	SMILED	18	6864	0.26	4.10
7	CONFIRMED	16	4758	0.34	4.46
8	CONTENT	16	5946	0.27	4.13
9	SUFFICIENT	15	5827	0.26	4.07
10	REFLECTS	14	2115	0.66	5.43
11	INTENDED	14	7409	0.19	3.62
12	SHRUGGED	13	2094	0.62	5.34
13	INDICATE	13	3988	0.33	4.41
14	REPRESENT	13	4478	0.29	4.24
15	SERVES	12	1701	0.71	5.53
16	REFLECTED	12	3882	0.31	4.34
17	INVOLVES	12	4071	0.29	4.27
18	SEEKING	12	4558	0.26	4.10
19	REQUIRES	12	5170	0.23	3.92
20	BECOMES	12	7567	0.16	3.37

Fig. 11. Collocation network for *merely* in BNC (top 20)

(10) The spokesman insited that it was **merely** a joke (ICE-USA) (**exclusive**).

(11) You have to openly confront these ideas and not **merely** pretend that they don't exist (ICE-GB) (**particularizer**).

(12) After surviving both Stalin and Hitler they must have found these endlessly repeated performances **merely** trivial and banal (ICE-CAN) (**intensifier**).

The data indicate that with reference to different functions of *merely* 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 samples. In all three language variations the lexeme is predominantly used for focusing exclusive scalar identification, reaching 87.5% in ICE-GB, however its number is considerably lower in ICE-USA and ICE-CAN: 68.97% and 65.39% respectively. Focusing particularizer function of *merely* is more characteristic of ICE-USA and ICE-CAN, reaching 24 and 23% respectively, while such function in ICE-GB is twice lower 11%. Interestingly, that ICE-CAN samples demonstrate the abundance of intensifier-*merely* instances, which is atypical of ICE-GB and ICE-USA. However, when compared three language variations it might be admitted that the functions of *merely* are more similar in ICE-USA and ICE-CAN in terms of their percentile distribution.

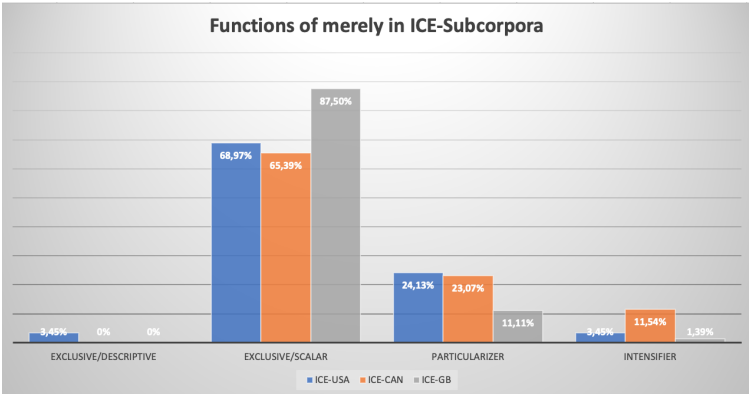


Fig. 12. Functions of *merely* in ICE-Corpora (USA, CAN, GB)

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.

The word order (WO) patterns with *merely* in the text of ICE corpora reveal that the adverb precedes the XPs it refers to, and its post-positioning is not registered. The dominant WOs with the adverb are as follows: ICE-CAN: S(v)V merely→X (57.69%), S(v) merely→VX (42.31%); ICE-USA: S(v)V merely→X (55.17%), S(v) merely→VX (41.38%), merely→SVX (3.45%); ICE-GB: S(v)V merely→X (73.17%), S(v) merely→VX (25.61%), merely→SVX (1.22%). Hence, taking into account the percentage distribution texts from ICE-USA and ICE-CAN show the greater similarity in terms of major word order patterns with the adverb under investigation. The further study of this phenomenon requires the analysis of larger corpora, i.e. COCA, BNC and Strathy to prove the preliminary observations.

CONCLUSIONS

The corpus-based study of the adverb *merely* across three language variations of Present-Day English confirms several significant findings regarding both its historical development and contemporary functioning. The lexeme *merely* continues to perform a dual function in PDE: primarily as a focusing adverb, particularly as an exclusive, and more marginally as an intensifier. This reflects a continuation of historical trends already observed in Early Modern English, where the exclusive use gained prominence and the intensifier role only began to emerge.

Despite its infrequent usage across all three ICE corpora, *merely* maintains stylistic significance, especially in academic style. This is confirmed by its relatively

higher frequency in academic texts in larger corpora (COCA, BNC, Strathy). The British variation demonstrates the highest frequency of *merely* use, both in ICE-GB and in BNC, supporting the view that it remains more entrenched in British English tradition. American and Canadian English, while showing broadly similar patterns of use, reflect slightly greater convergence in terms of collocates. In British English, *merely* co-occurs with a broader range of words, indicating higher syntactic flexibility. While Canadian and American data show more limited collocational ranges, with notable overlaps between them. This reinforces the hypothesis that North American varieties are more convergent in their usage of *merely*. The data suggest that in PDE, *merely* is increasingly reflecting a shift toward intensifier use in certain contexts. However, its role as a focusing exclusive remains semantically dominant.

This study contributes to understanding the dynamics of semantic change, grammaticalization, and regional variation in English adverbs. *Merely* exemplifies how historical residues coexist with contemporary shifts in function and usage, reflecting both continuity and innovation in language. Further studies could expand the analysis to spoken corpora or investigate sociolinguistic factors affecting the adverb's distribution and interpretation.

SUMMARY

The article explores the use of the adverb merely from both historical and contemporary linguistic perspectives, highlighting its functions as a focusing adverb and an intensifier in Present-Day English (PDE). Based on the data from the International Corpus of English (ICE) for British (GB), American (USA), and Canadian (CAN) English, the study examines how merely is distributed, used, and collocated across these varieties. Historically, the adverb evolves from Middle English and Early Modern English, where it primarily functions as a manner adverb before shifting toward a focusing exclusive and eventually acquiring an intensifier role. The research traces this grammaticalization pattern and highlights the scalar and restrictive features that characterize its modern usage.

In PDE usage, corpus analysis reveals that merely is a low-frequency word in all three English variations, with its highest usage found in British English and its most common application in academic texts. Collocational analysis across ICE-GB, ICE-USA, and ICE-CAN demonstrates that while British English shows a broader range of collocates, American and Canadian English exhibit greater similarity in their use of the lexeme. Supporting corpora such as COCA, BNC, and Strathy confirm these tendencies, indicating is less often observed in spoken or newspaper texts. Overall, the study suggests that despite its low frequency, merely retains important semantic distinctions that reflect both convergent and divergent developments in Present-Day English

variations. The data suggest that in PDE, *merely* is increasingly demonstrating a shift toward intensifier use, however, its role as a focusing exclusive remains dominant.

The research contributes to understanding the dynamics of semantic change, grammaticalization, and regional variation in English adverbs. *Merely* exemplifies how historical residues coexist with contemporary shifts in function and usage, reflecting both continuity and innovation in language.

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