

The English [adverb-ly adjective] construction: Classification and distribution across corpora and registers

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We present a comprehensive analysis and classification of a construction consisting of an adverb ending in *-ly* originally derived from an adjective, plus an adjective as head of the phrase (e.g., *hilariously ridiculous*, *staggeringly incompetent*, *absolutely terrific*, *fiscally responsible* or *presumably deliberate*). The construction is interesting in that it allows for two adjectives to jointly contribute to evaluative meaning. We see this as a construction of particular significance in English and in certain registers, especially in reviews of films, books and objects of art.

Using a corpus-based methodology, we propose that the construction can be classified into different semantic subtypes. Based on analyses of hundreds of examples, we introduce the following classification, where Adj1 refers to the de-adjectival adverb ending in *-ly* (*hilariously*), and Adj2 to the head of the phrase (*ridiculous*).

- Reaction. Adj1 conveys the writer's reaction. Paraphrase: "It's Adj1 that it's so Adj2" (*strangely compelling*, *stunningly original*).
- Manner. The adverb conveys the manner of the action. Adj2 is typically de-verbal, a passive or present participle. "They did (=Adj2) it Adj1-ly" (*delightfully performed*, *patiently assembled*).
- Degree. Adj1 places Adj2 along a quantitative scale. Paraphrased as *very*, *very much* (*extremely difficult*, *deeply disturbing*).
- Focus. The Degree vs. Focus distinction comes from the Appraisal Framework (Martin & White, 2005). Adj1 highlights the appropriateness of Adj2, which tends to be non-scalar (*utterly ridiculous*, *genuinely terrific*).
- Topical. Adj1 sets the topic or frame of reference. Instances of this group are common in technical, bureaucratic and academic registers (*morally wrong*, *environmentally sound*).
- Time. Several classes, relating to frequency, relative timing or pace (*frequently cited*, *previously unknown*).
- Epistemic. Adj1 indicates how or with what certainty one knows that Adj2 (*potentially useful*, *seemingly effortless*).

Analysis of a variety of corpora suggest that the construction is a feature of sophisticated critical reviews. Corpora analyzed include: COCA, Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008-); CORE, Corpus of Online Registers of English (Biber, Egbert, & Davies, 2015); the Cornell Movie Database (Pang, Lee, & Vaithyanathan, 2002) and the Movie\$ corpus (Joshi, Das, Gimpel, & Smith, 2010).

In this presentation, we will introduce the classes, describe our corpus analysis, and the relative distribution of each type across different registers of English. The high frequency of certain types of adverb-adjective combination in some registers, but not others, suggests a discourse-functional explanation for the distribution.

References

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