

CARMEN MAÍZ AND JORGE ARÚS
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
Departamento de Filología Inglesa I

TOWARDS A DIACHRONIC STUDY OF MODAL ADVERBS: A CASE STUDY OF *CERTAINLY*

1. INTRODUCTION

Modality is undoubtedly one of the most widely studied issues in English as illustrated by the extensive bibliography devoted to this topic and exemplified by already classical studies such as those published by Coates (1983), Perkins (1983), Palmer (1990), Westney (1995), Bybee and Fleischman (1995) or Papafragou (2000), as well as more recent compilations of works on the subject, such as Facchinetti, Krug and Palmer (2003), Facchinetti and Palmer (2004) and Marín Arrese (2004), among many others. The study of modality has concentrated not only on modal auxiliaries but also on other modal expressions such as modal adverbs. Furthermore, much more recent studies about modal adverbs such as those published by Hoyer (1997) or Downing's (2001) detailed work on *surely* illustrate the fact that these adverbs are still a matter of high interest among linguists and deserve further and deeper analysis. Nevertheless, these studies have mainly focused on synchronic aspects while for the most part neglecting the diachronic evolution of modal adverbs; i.e. the way in which modal adverbs have adopted new meanings or different nuances of meaning while others have been progressively abandoned.

The present paper is aimed at analysing a particular case within the group of modal adverbs: *certainly* and its diachronic evolution from the 19th century onwards. In doing so, we will be working within the well-established tradition of the study of modal adverbs while adopting a diachronic point of view. It should be pointed out, however, that this study presents a preliminary analysis which forms part of a more extensive project including both larger amounts of text and other modal adverbs¹.

The paper is divided into four main sections. The following section focuses on the description of the corpus used for the analysis. Section three briefly revises the most important theoretical aspects concerning both modality and modal adverbs. Section four presents the analysis of the data as well as a suggested classification based on previous studies and on the data proper before reaching our concluding section.

2. CORPUS OF DATA

Taking Simpson and Weiner's 1991 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED henceforth) as one of its points of departure, the present study is based on a corpus consisting of approximately 713,000 words and including six different novels from the 19th century onwards.² The corpus includes three 19th century novels, namely Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* (1882) and three contemporary novels, namely Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1993), Marian Keyes' *Sushi for Beginners* (2000) and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), which constitute a sample of present-day English. The selection of the novels has been mostly arbitrary and based on the availability of electronic copies.

It should be pointed out that although all the examples are to be found in written texts, a great deal appear in dialogues between the different characters. Although we are well aware that these dialogues may not exactly reflect naturally occurring spoken discourse, this should not affect the present analysis, since our aim is not to analyse the differences between written and spoken English or between the different varieties of English regarding the use of *certainly* but to observe its diachronic evolution while contrasting the examples from the 19th century with contemporary ones.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In general terms, the use of modal verbs and other expressions conveying modality, e.g. modal adverbs, is a powerful tool in English for addressers (speakers or writers) to modify their declarative clauses and thus include different nuances of meaning by conveying a particular attitude towards what is being communicated (Carretero *et al.* 2007). Modality can be quite an elusive concept to define as Palmer (1990) points out. The following definition by Downing and Locke, however, captures some of the features traditionally associated with modality "as a semantic category which covers such notions as possibility, probability, necessity, volition, obligation and permission" (1992: 382 and 2006: 380).

More concretely, it is possible to distinguish four main types of modality (Carretero *et al.* 2007):

- (i) "Epistemic modality concerning different degrees of probability."
- (ii) "Deontic modality: concerning different degrees of obligation."
- (iii) "Dynamic modality: concerning different degrees of predisposition (ability-tendency)."
- (iv) "Boulomaic modality: concerning different degrees of volition/wish."

Modal verbs are probably one of the most important ways to express modality in English, although non-factual verbs are frequent too, e.g. *I suppose*, *I believe* and especially *I think* (Kärkkäinen 2003). Modality can also be expressed by other means such as modal adjectives, e.g. *possible* or *likely*, modal nouns, e.g. *chance*, *likelihood* or *probability* and modal adverbs such as the one under analysis in the present paper: the epistemic adverb *certainly*.

With regard to the meaning of *certainly*, the *OED* (1991: vol. xvii, page 1052), which dates the first written record back to the year 1300, lists four main entries, namely³:

- (i) “in a manner that is certain; in a way that may be surely depended on, with certainty.”
- (ii) “without fail, unfailingly, infallibly.”
- (iii) “with subjective certitude, with assurance, surely.”
- (iv) “parenthetically, or as an assurance or admission of the truth of an assertion as a whole.”

In turn, the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (1987: 222) also includes the prototypically epistemic meaning in its first entry: “something that is certainly true is true without any doubt” but it provides a more specific definition when considering other uses of the modal adverb, namely:

- (i) “to emphasize that you feel strongly about what you are saying.”
 - a. “to emphasize that you agree with a particular statement, idea or theory that has just been stated or discussed.”
 - b. “to say enthusiastically that you will do something you have been asked to do (i.e. it is a synonym of ‘of course’)”
- (ii) “when answering a question in a strong way. If used together with the negative ‘not’, then it can also express annoyance.”

In our study, the categorization of the different uses of *certainly* will prove to be more in the line of this latter classification as will be seen in the next section. This classification will be then followed by the analysis of its diachronic evolution by focusing on three main aspects:

- a. appearance of new uses (if any).
- b. disappearance of uses (if any).
- c. frequency of use in the different periods under analysis.

4. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Although the number of works consulted so far makes any interpretation highly tentative, a number of patterns stand out which deserve our attention. We must start by pointing out the wide range of meanings of *certainly* identified among the 248 instances of the adverb found. This is not surprising since, as seen above, the literature on modality reflects the polysemous nature of modal elements in general and of *certainly* in particular. We start by showing, in table 1, the seven uses of *certainly* suggested by close examination of the data handled. The categorization of the different uses is based on aspects such as the co-text in which the examples appear, both at sentence and discourse level. As shown, those seven uses can be grouped under four larger categories – ultimately reducible to two, i.e. *epistemic proper* and *other epistemic* – which brings our classification closer to what is found

elsewhere in the literature. Thus, besides the prototypical⁴ epistemic use of the adverb under consideration, the two meanings as response in adjacency pairs, for instance, remind of the *OED*'S claim that *certainly* "often...conveys a strong assent or affirmative reply, as in 'you were present?' 'Certainly.' 'Can you recommend him?' 'Certainly'" (1991: 1052). The difference is that here we make a further distinction between replying to a question or responding to a statement, in which case the adverb stands for a short answer of the kind *I do* or *it is*, and assenting to a request, where it is more similar to *of course*.

Uses: general classification	Uses: more delicate classification	Uses: most delicate classification	Examples
Epistemic proper			"Mr. Langdon," Fache said, „ certainly a man like yourself is aware that Leonardo da Vinci had a tendency toward the darker arts. (DV)
Other epistemic uses	Response in adjacency-pair	To requests	'Can I have a word?' 'Certainly' (SB)
		To questions or statements	'Do you call it an interest?' 'Certainly' (PL)
	Booster	Emphasis on commitment	'And I certainly never shall give it' (PP)
		Emphasis on truth-value	<i>Her sixty-year-old body did not awake as fast as it used to, although tonight's phone call had certainly roused her senses. (DV)</i>
	Agreement	Real	'It's a very fine country on the whole... I certainly feel more at home...' (PL)
		Concessive	'You ought certainly to forgive them as a Christian, but never to admit them in your sight.' (PP)

Table 1: Uses of *certainly* in our corpus⁵

Our corpus-based classification is also reminiscent of other works in the literature regarding *certainly* as a booster (after Holmes 1982: 18), where its uses to emphasize commitment on the part of the addresser as well as on truth value closely resemble the analyses by Hoye (1997: 121, 157, respectively). Finally, Wierzbicka makes the claim that *certainly* on occasions “is used to agree, or to partially agree, with what has been said before” (2006: 205). Our interpretation differs in that Wierzbicka identifies this use only in sentence-initial position, whereas our data show that this meaning may occur with clause-internal *certainly*. The use of the adverb to express concessive agreement in our classification corresponds with Hoye’s recognition of concessive *certainly* (1997: 191), typically followed by *but* (see also *OED* 1991: 1052; Downing 2001: 275).

Table 2 shows the frequency of the different uses of *certainly* in the six novels consulted. The data seem to point to a wider range of meanings exploited in the earlier works, i.e. *Wuthering Heights*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. In these, the adverb *certainly* is found in all of the uses specified in table 1, save for concessive meaning in *Wuthering Heights* and response to requests in *Pride and Prejudice*. Conversely, the three contemporary novels under scrutiny seem to disregard the use of *certainly* to express commitment, concessive meaning or as a response in an adjacency pair of either kind. Although the lack of concessive *certainly* in these novels has as a by-product that the structure *certainly...but* ceases to appear, there still seems to be a concessive flavour of sorts in example (1), from *Sushi for Beginners*, although we take the adverb in this example to have a primarily emphatic meaning. This, incidentally, points to a pervasive phenomenon in the use of *certainly*: it often is hard to ascertain to which of the categories from table 1 it corresponds; different shades of meaning may intertwine to result in a complex category. This is particularly true regarding agreement and emphasis, as shown in (2) and (3), where both features appear to be present simultaneously; *certainly* in these examples seems to emphasize the truth-value not only of the elements next to it but also of preceding discourse.

- (1) While Ashling *certainly* had bitchy thoughts, she rarely gave vent to them (SB).
- (2) It *certainly* went a long way toward explaining the captain’s suspicions about devil worship (DV).
- (3) ‘I hope you have destroyed the letter’[...] ‘The letter shall *certainly* be burnt, if you believe it essential to the preservation of my regard’ (PP).

Novel	Tokens	Ratio*	Epistemic proper	After requests	After questions / statements	Emphasis commitment	Emphasis truth-value	Agreement	Concessive
WH	16	1/4981	4	1	1	2	4	4	0
PP	72	1/1718	20	0	5	10	10	17	10
PL	114	1/1971	31	4	5	11	24	22	17
EP	1	1/83117	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
SB	7	1/6758	0	1	0	0	5	1	0
DV	38	1/4060	26	0	0	0	6	6	0

Table 2: Types and tokens of *certainly* in our corpus (*the ratio column indicates the total number of words per each occurrence of *certainly*; the higher the number after the slash, the lower the frequency of *certainly*).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND POINTERS TO THE FUTURE

Although the number and dialectal heterogeneity of the works so far inspected do not invite the elaboration of solid claims at this early stage, they do seem to hint at some tendencies that will be corroborated by the addition of other texts to our corpus, on which we are working at present.⁶ Notably, the data handled in this first approximation reveals that, among the seven meanings of *certainly*, three of them are the most constant across time, namely the prototypical epistemic meaning – the most abundant overall albeit not pervasive – and the uses of the adverb to show agreement or emphasis, when not both at the same time.

To conclude we can advance an interpretation of the results obtained: the most constant meanings of *certainly* – i.e. epistemic proper, emphasis on truth-value and agreement – are precisely the less dependent on turn-taking. Agreement is the most susceptible of the three to depend on a previous turn but it is often the case that the agreement is with something within the same turn, as in the example illustrating agreement in table 1. The other four meanings – i.e. emphasis on commitment, concession and the responses in the two types of adjacency pairs – are to be expected in conversation rather than in monologue; in fact they tend to appear in dialogical fragments of the novels studied. The fact that these meanings of the adverb occur mostly in the earlier novels may allow us to draw the conclusion that *certainly* has undergone some sort of specialization, its use having more of an intra-clausal than a discursive value, save for conversational agreement, i.e. agreement with a previous turn.

We will have to check in future work whether the scarcity of instances of *certainly* in the only Canadian novel, *The English Patient*, is symptomatic of a dialectal trait or simply of personal choice. In turn, the almost exclusive use of

certainly by Marian Keyes, author of *Sushi for Beginners*, as an emphaser of truth-value points to an idiosyncratic, rather than dialectal, use.

We should remind the reader at this point, though, that different meanings of *certainly* are often combined in a single use of the adverb, which allows for the epistemic meaning to be felt to a greater or a lesser degree on most occasions. We have to disagree with Wierzbicka (2006: 205), then, when she claims that when *certainly* is conversational it is not an epistemic adverb at all: borrowing the idea of prototype from Cognitive Linguistics, we can say that *certainly* has more or less prototypical epistemic uses, but the effect of its focal meaning –i.e. epistemic proper – is always felt. Figure 1 illustrates this point and serves as a wrap-up.

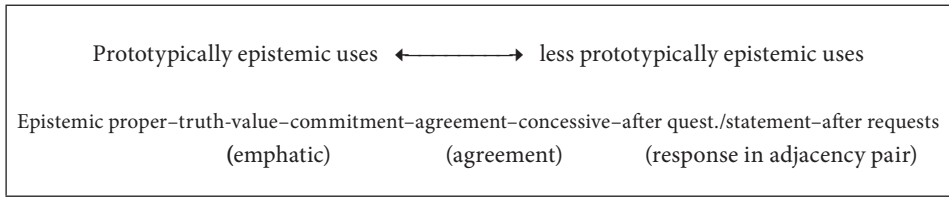


Figure 1: Degrees of epistemic meaning in the uses of *certainly*

- 1 We would like to thank our project colleagues Angela Downing, Marta Carretero and Juan Rafael Zamorano for their kind and insightful suggestions. Responsibility for mistakes remains exclusively ours.
- 2 We are well aware that two centuries may be considered a short time for a diachronic study. Our study starts with this short time span so as to identify general tendencies that can be later on validated – or discarded – by looking at older texts.
- 3 Non-epistemic meanings of *certainly* such as *exactly* do not appear in our corpus. We have, therefore, not included them in the present study.
- 4 By “prototypical” use, we are referring to the theory of prototypes, according to which a prototype is the core example of a category since it has all the defining features of this category. Less prototypical examples, therefore, are those that have just some of the features that define the category to which they belong.
- 5 The abbreviations in table 1 and elsewhere stand for the following titles: DV (*The Da Vinci Code*), SB (*Sushi for Beginners*), PL (*The Portrait of a Lady*), PP (*Pride and Prejudice*), WH (*Wuthering Heights*) and EP (*The English Patient*).
- 6 Pending quantification, we can anticipate that the data collected for the extension of our corpus seem to point in the same direction as those here presented.

REFERENCES

- Bybee, J. and S. Fleischman (eds). 1995. *Modality in Grammar and Discourse*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Carretero, M., J. R. Zamorano, J. Arús, F. Nieto, C. Alonso and A. Villamil. 2007. An Approach to Modality for Higher Education Students of English. *Proceedings of the IV ACLES Conference*. M. Genís, E. Orduna and D. García-Ramos, eds. Hoyo de Manzanares: Universidad Antonio de Nebrija, 91-101.
- Coates, J. 1983. *The Semantics of the Modal Auxiliaries*. London: Croom Helm.
- Downing, A. and P. Locke. 1992. *A University Course in English Grammar*. London: Prentice-Hall International.

- Downing, A. 2001. 'Surely you knew!': Surely as a marker of evidentiality and stance. *Functions of Language* 8, n. 2, 251-282.
- Downing, A. and P. Locke. 2006. *English Grammar: a University Course*. 2nd edition. London: Routledge.
- Facchinetti, R. and F.R. Palmer (eds). 2004. *English Modality in Perspective: Genre Analysis and Contrastive Studies*. Frankfurt an Main: Peter Lang.
- Facchinetti, R., M.G. Krug and F.R. Palmer (eds). 2003. *Modality in Contemporary English (Topics in English Linguistics 44)*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Holmes, J. 1982. Expressing Doubt and Certainty in English. *RELC Journal* 4.2, 9-28.
- Hoye, L. F. 1997. *Modals and Adverbs in English*. London: Longman.
- Kärkkäinen, E. 2003. *Epistemic stance in English conversation*. Pragmatics & Beyond New Series, 115.
- Marín Arrese, J. (ed). 2004. *Perspectives on Evidentiality and Modality in English and Spanish*. Madrid: Editorial Complutense.
- Palmer, F.R. 1990. *Modality and the English modals*. 2nd edition. London: Longman.
- Papafragou, A. 2000. *Modality: Issues in the Semantics-Pragmatics Interface*. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Perkins, M. 1983. *Modal Expressions in English*. London: Pinter.
- Simpson, J. A. and E.S.C. Weiner. 1991. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sinclair, J. *et al* (eds). 1991. *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*. London: Cobuild.
- Westney, P. 1995. *Modals and Periphrastics in English*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.
- Wierzbicka, A. 2006. *English, Meaning and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sources in our corpus

- Austen, J. 1813. *Pride and Prejudice*. London: Penguin.
- Brontë, E. 1847. *Wuthering Heights*. London: Penguin.
- Brown, D. 2003. *The Da Vinci Code*. London: Corgi Books.
- James, H. 1881. *The Portrait of a Lady*. London: Penguin.
- Keyes, M. 2000. *Sushi for Beginners*. London: Penguin.
- Ondaatje, M. 1993. *The English Patient*. London: Picador.

SUMMARY

TOWARDS A DIACHRONIC STUDY OF MODAL ADVERBS: A CASE STUDY OF *CERTAINLY*

There is extensive bibliography devoted to the topic of modality (Coates 1983; Palmer 1990; Kärkkäinen 2003 among others), including the study of modal adverbs illustrated by more recent studies such as Hoye (1997) or Downing (2002). The majority of these studies feature a synchronic rather than diachronic approach. To fill that gap, the current paper analyses the evolution of *certainly* from the 19th century to present-day English. The results presented in this study are but a preliminary stage of a more extensive project currently being carried out at the Universidad Complutense

de Madrid. As the analysis will show, there has been a progressive specialization of *certainly*, its use having more of an intra-clausal than a discursive value, save for conversational agreement, i.e. agreement with a previous turn.

KEYWORDS: modality, modal adverbs, diachronic analysis, *certainly*.