

Hongyin Tao
University of California, Los Angeles
tao@humnet.ucla.edu

“So You Can Do a Lot of Things with a Corpus? Oh, Absolutely!” – An Essay on Frequency Effects on Meaning and Structure of Language

This paper reports some corpus-based findings on the use of one of the so-called maximizer adverb(ial)s, ‘absolutely’, in spoken American English (AmE). Even though British English has been found to use ‘absolutely’ more frequently than does AmE (Biber et al. 1999), ‘absolutely’, I will show, exhibits a number of interesting patterns of use in AmE that are significant for our understanding of both adverb(ial)s in discourse in particular and frequency effects on meaning and structure of language in general.

Some of the interesting, if not puzzling, properties of ‘absolutely’ in discourse can be described as follows. While ‘absolutely’, like other amplifiers, is expected to be used as a modifier operating on an adjectival element (e.g. ‘absolutely *gorgeous*’, ‘absolutely *no problem*’) and to intensify the qualities expressed in it (Quirk et al. 1985, Paradis 1997, 2000), in dialogic discourse the adverb(ial) is often used not only without an overt adjectival element, but that it is frequently used by a different speaker (the respondent) and that its meaning can be clearly understood to have a positive connotation. This is illustrated by the following extract from a PBS interview with the soprano Renée Fleming (RF).

PBS: Was it a big learning process doing that recording session, with the playbacks, saying "We like this, but we could do this better," or, "We could change it and do it this way?"

RF: Oh, absolutely, also because it was one of my earliest recordings, and in fact in every recording, and in every performance, and every opera production, I learn something, ... (www.pbs.org)

Thus, with an amplifier “(oh) absolutely” alone, and without a meaning specifying adjectival such as ‘correct’ or ‘true’, we can still understand RF’s response to be unequivocally a positive answer to the question raised by the interviewer.

In this paper I try to solve this puzzle by analyzing data from a number of AmE corpora (MICASE, SPAE, and SBCSAE). I propose that the usage patterns reported above can be attributed to at least three interacting factors: 1) the frequent co-occurrence of ‘absolutely’ with a semantically positive adjectival element in discourse; 2) the frequency effect of 1) on the mental lexicon; and 3) the preference for positive faces (Brown and Levinson 1978) and the resultant alignment of maximizers with positive adjectivals, as opposed to relativizers with negative adjectivals, in certain conversation interactive contexts. My study shows that an integration of corpus linguistic methods with discourse pragmatic considerations can provide a powerful tool which helps deepen our understanding of the dynamic nature of the meaning and structure of language.