

A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF MINIMIZERS IN BRITISH SPOKEN DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

Intensifiers are among the most widely used adverbs in spoken discourse, and the study of intensifiers or degree adverbs has been a popular topic in English linguistics (Bolinger (1972), Backlund (1973), Leech and Svartvik (1975), Quirk et al. (1985), Allerton (1987), Lorenz (2002), Biber et al. (2002), and Huddleston & Pullum (2002)). However, a close look at the literature on intensifiers reveals that the vast majority of the previous research focuses on one specific type, i.e. ‘amplifiers’ (cf. Peters 1992; Lorenz 2002; Méndez-Naya 2003, among others), while other subcategories of intensifiers distinguished in the standard grammar of English have received little attention. To the best of my knowledge downtoners have been assessed only to a very limited extent in British and American English conversation. Thus, this research paper is an attempt to address this gap in the literature, by focusing on one of the neglected subcategories, viz. minimizers. Specifically, the research aims at providing a comprehensive account of the syntactic and semantic features of minimizers and their functional distribution in British English conversation. The study follows the methodology of corpus linguistics. The data are collected from the spoken texts of The International Corpus of English, the British component (henceforth ICE-GB) which contains a million words from 200 written and 300 spoken English texts, and is broadly representative of British English. The International Corpus of English Utility Program (ICECUP III) is used to build subcorpora according to the syntactic variables of our choice in this study, viz, the frequency of downtoners, their functional distribution and their collocational patterns. The ICECUP III is used throughout the research for obtaining and analyzing the data through a qualitative- quantitative mixed-methods approach. The results of the analysis reveal that in terms of frequency, the occurrence rate of minimizers in British conversation is markedly low, ie, they are used quite less frequently than other downtoners. Also, among all other minimizers, *at all* has the highest frequency of use in British conversation. The results of the analysis of the functional distribution of minimizers demonstrate that *at all* is most often used as sentence adverbial, while the others are used mainly as modifiers.

KEYWORDS: Intensifiers, downtoners, minimizers, corpus-studies.

1. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1.1 Intensifiers

Downtoners is a subclass of intensifiers. The term intensifier (also called degree adverb) is defined by many linguists to refer to a class of adverbs which have a heightening or lowering effect on the meaning of another element in a sentence. (Bolinger: 1972, p.17; Biber et al.:1999, p.554; Quirk et al.: 1985, p.589). There has been a number of classifications of intensifiers described most comprehensively by Bolinger (1972), Backlund (1973), Leech and Svartvik (1975), Quirk et al. (1985), Allerton (1987), Klein (1998), Lorenz (1999) and Biber et al. (2002). Generally speaking, a distinction is drawn between amplifiers which indicate a relatively high point

on an intensity scale and downtoners which indicate a low point on that scale. According to Biber et al. (1999, p.554), amplifiers/intensifiers are degree adverbs that increase the intensity of the modified item. In contrast, diminishers/downtoners are degree adverbs that decrease the effect of a modified item (to some extent),

Quirk et al. (1985) classify intensifiers into amplifiers and downtoners. Amplifiers are divided into maximizers which occupy the upper extreme of the degree scale, and boosters which display a high degree but without reaching the extreme end of the scale. On the other hand, downtoners are subdivided into four categories: approximators, compromisers, diminishers and minimizers.

INTENSIFIERS

AMPLIFIERS

Maximizers (e.g. completely, totally, absolutely)

Boosters (e.g. very, so, really)

DOWNTONERS

Approximators (e.g. almost, nearly, virtually)

Compromisers (e.g. more or less, kind of, rather)

Diminishers (e.g. partly, merely, slightly)

Minimizers (e.g. hardly, barely, scarcely)

Fig. (1): Subtypes of intensifiers (adapted from Quirk et al. 1985, p.590)

Quirk et al. s' classification of intensifiers outlined above is based on the nature of the intensifying force of the items, and the various categories are presented as interrelated within the overall scale structure. However, his model has been widely appreciated in related literature as various of the previous studies on intensifiers adopts Quirk et al. s' classification like Alshaar, 2017; Ebeling & Ebeling 2015; Yang, 2014; Yang, 2014; Wittouck, 2011; Ita Otrubčiaková, 2011; Nevalainen & Rissanen, 2002; and many others. Therefore, the classification of Quirk et al. will be adopted throughout this research.

1.2 Downtoners

According to Quirk et al. (1985), downtoners "have a generally lowering effect, usually scaling downwards from an assumed norm" (p.445). They express a moderate, slight, or just perceptible degree of qualities that scale down the effect of the item they modify. Quirk et al. (1985) classify downtoners into four classes:

a. Approximators: They usually express approximation to the force of the modified item, while indicating that the item concerned expresses more than is relevant. They include *almost, nearly, virtually, all but, practically* and *as good as*. Semantically, approximators imply "a denial of the truth value of what is denoted by the verb." (p.599):

1. He was *almost* killed. (but he wasn't killed)
2. He was *nearly* two miles away. (the distance wasn't two miles exactly)
3. I have almost finished this book. (I haven't finished yet)

In all the examples above, the use of the approximators imply a denial of what is mentioned by the modified elements.

b. Compromisers: Compromisers have a slight lowering effect, calling into question the appropriateness of the item concerned. They

signal a degree of inaccuracy regarding the value of the modified item. They include *rather, quite, pretty, fairly, enough, sufficiently, more or less, kind of* and *sort of*:

4. I am *kind of* hungry.

5. I am *rather* hungry.

In saying either of these, the speaker does not deny the state of being hungry. But the implication is that 'I might go as far as to say 'I am hungry'.

c. Diminishers: Diminishers scale downwards and mean 'to a small extent'. Quirk et al (1985) distinguish two subcategories of diminishers: *expression diminishers* and *attitude diminishers* (p.598). *Expression diminishers* usually indicate a partial realization of the force of the item modified. They include *mildly, partially, slightly, somewhat, in part, to some extent, in some respects, a bit, and a little(bit)*:

6. We know them *slightly*.

7. I *partly* agree with you.

8. They have always *mildly* disliked him.

Attitude diminishers, on the other hand, signal the limitedness of the force of the item modified. They include simply, only, merely, and just

9. I was *only* joking.

10. She will *just* be out for a few minutes.

11. It was *merely* a matter of finance.

d. Minimizers: They usually indicate the meaning "not to any extent". The following examples are from Quirk et al. (1985):

12. She scarcely knows me (- in fact she doesn't know me).

13. I can barely understand him (- in fact I can't understand him).

In both examples, the use of the minimizer implies a full denial of the truth value of the

modification. A detailed discussion of Minimizers is presented in the subsection 1.3

To conclude this section, it is important to note that downtoners as a subclass of intensifiers have the same syntactic and semantic functions of other intensifiers. syntactically they either serve as modifiers or adverbials. Semantically, when downtoners are used as modifiers they usually locate the modification at a relatively low point on a general scale of gradability. In other words, they have a gradable function. However, when they are used as adverbials they often indicate a sense of imprecision and the expressions serve as hedges (Biber et al, 1999, p.44).

1.3 Minimizers

Minimizers usually indicate the meaning “not to any extent”. Quirk et al. (1985) divide them into two groups: *negatives minimizers* and *nonassertive minimizers* (p.598). Negative minimizers include *barely, hardly, little and scarcely* which are negative in meaning, and are, therefore, not used in negative sentences:

14. She *scarcely* knows him.

Hardly and scarcely mean ‘almost not at all’ or ‘only just’. Hardly is much more common than scarcely in spoken discourse, and scarcely is more formal: These adverbs usually come in mid position, between the subject and main verb, after the modal verb or first auxiliary verb, or after main verb be. In more formal styles, they usually come in front position and invert the subject and verb:

15. Scarcely had I got myself comfortable and closed my eyes when I heard the sound of the alarm.

Nonassertive minimizers, on the other hand, include *in the least, at all* and *a bit* which are usually used in negative clauses, as in:

16. They don’t support her *at all*.

17. We don’t mind *in the slightest*.

18. I don’t like his attitude *a bit*.

At all is most commonly used in questions and negative sentences. In questions, *at all* means “even a little”, “in any way” or “even slightly”. It usually comes at the end of the question or sentence:

19. Anybody have any problem *at all*?

20. Does it hold any attraction for you *at all*?

21. I feel sick. I’m not hungry *at all*.

1.4 Previous Studies

The following section reviews previous research on downtoners. The purpose of the review is to identify the gaps in the literature on

this topic, and also to identify those aspects in my research which deviate from the previous studies.

To start with, Ita Otrubčíaková (2011) in her unpublished MA thesis studies downtoners from a semantic point of view. She focuses on the meaning and uses of four downtoners quite, rather, fairly and pretty. The investigation is carried out with the help of British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The researcher examines the usage of the four downtoners and their collocations with various adjectives. The researcher argues that these adverbs, according to their dictionary definitions, share virtually the same conceptual meaning when they serve as intensifiers. She also discusses the general frequency of the mentioned downtoners in the BNC and in the COCA arguing that British English speakers tend to use these downtoners more often than their American speakers.

Graeme Kennedy (2003) in his article "Amplifier Collocations in the British National Corpus: Implications for English Language Teaching" examines how adverbs of degree tend to collocate with particular words in the 100-million-word British National Corpus and points to some possible implications for English language teaching. The study throws light on the nature and scope of collocational bonding between words, showing how each amplifier collocates most strongly with particular words having specific grammatical and semantic features.

Terttu Nevalainen and Matti Rissanen (2002) in their article "*Fairly pretty or pretty fair? On the development and grammaticalization of English downtoners*" discuss the adverbialization of two almost synonymous modern-day English intensifiers: *pretty and fairly*. Through electronic corpora, a quantitative analysis of their history is given following the framework of adverb functions proposed by Quirk et al. The results show that, though having shared meanings and largely synonymous as moderators in present-day, *fairly and pretty* underwent rather different processes of adverbialization. The researchers’ findings are set against a wider framework of grammaticalization.

Angeliki Athanasiadou (2007) in an article titled "On the Subjectivity of Intensifiers" aims to show the semantic development of particular intensifiers. The researcher also characterizes a gradation of subjectivity with reference to the development of intensifiers in English. The

researcher discusses how the polysemy of intensifiers with subjective meanings come into existence as well as their use and purpose. The research is a synchronic description but also reflects diachronic findings.

Biber et al. (1999) study downtoners as a subclass of degree adverbs, they do not provide any formal semantic classifications of downtoners, but they, briefly in less than a page, draw a distinction between those downtoners which primarily modify intensity and others that primarily mark imprecision or estimation (hedgies). They provide few examples which illustrate their points.

A closer look to the literature on downtoners reviewed in this section, reveals that previous studies of intensifiers have almost exclusively focused on amplifiers, while downtoners in general and Minimizers in specific have been assessed only to a very limited extent. The study of Minimizers' functional distribution and the collocational patterns in which they co-occur in spoken discourse are briefly addressed in the literature, and it is largely based on very limited data. The aim of our study is to broaden current knowledge of these areas of Minimizers which have been overlooked by research in the field.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Data collection

The data are collected from the spoken corpus of the ICE-GB, which is composed of 300 texts from different categories, such as face-to-face conversation, classroom lessons, broadcast discussions and interviews, commentaries, legal presentations and broadcast talks and news. The participants are mainly native speakers of British English language.

2.2 Instrument

The International Corpus of English Corpus Utility Program (ICECUP III) is used to build subcorpora according to the syntactic variables of our choice in this study, namely, the frequency of minimizers, their functional distribution and their collocational patterns. ICE-GB is fully tagged and parsed so by using the analysis software ICECUP, we can extract in a rather precise manner the sentences containing minimizers in the sub-corpus.

2.3 Procedures of Data Analysis

The analysis software ICECUP III is used throughout this research for obtaining and analyzing the data. The data were analyzed through a mixed-methods approach. The quantitative data provides counts and

percentages for the frequency of minimizers in the data, the frequencies of their functional distribution and the frequencies of their most common collocates in the spoken data throughout the corpus. The software ICECUP III also provides qualitative data, which are used for describing the functional distribution of minimizers and the semantic restrictions on their co-occurrence with other items in British spoken discourse.

After starting the ICECUP software, the program would display the map of the corpus which is organized according to the written and spoken text categories. For the extraction of any of the minimizers investigated in the research, we used the text fragment query button. The text fragment query can search for tags as well as words. In the text fragment we could type the word or a group of words that we desire to explore. First we entered the word (eg. *hardly*) in the dialog box of the text fragment. Then we introduced a tag by pressing the button marked "Node" (' or <Alt>+'N') in the text fragment box. Since this is a parsed corpus, we referred to the grammatical function that was assigned, as well as the category of text unit elements through typing a specification of the node between the brackets, using the "<function>, <category> (<features>)", as in (word+<CATEGORY(feature)>). In this way the software program will extract all the occurrences of the searched word according to the categorical and functional features specified in the text fragment. Within the query of text fragment, we could identify the syntactic structure of each sentence and specify the modified item by clicking the functions, categories, and features buttons located on the menu bar and then pressing the expand focus button to reveal more syntactic tags around the neighboring word (a minimizer). The same results could also be obtained by using the text fragment query, In which, firstly, we typed the word (a minimizer) in the dialog box of the text fragment search window, secondly we pressed the node button and specified the exact detail (category and features) of the node by typing the codes directly into the dialog box, thirdly we clicked the node button for the second time and inserted the exact category code of the modified item that followed the search word (a minimizer), as in *hardly*+<ADV(inten) <ADJ>, then we ticked the preselected subset at the button of the text fragment search, and in the final step we clicked OK to start the search. In this way, the ICECUP

will extract and identify the syntactic function and the frequency of the search word (a minimizer) as modifier of the selected category. In the sections that follow, we will explore the frequency and the functional distribution of English minimizers in the spoken discourse in ICE.GB.

3. RESULTS OF DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Frequency of Downtoners in ICE.GB

The overall analysis of downtoners in the spoken corpus of ICE.GB consisted of (5,588) tokens.. The frequencies of the four types of downtoners in the ICE.GB are as in Table 1 below:

Table (1): Cross-tabulation of downtoners frequency in ICE.GB

Types of downtoners					
English Spoken Discourse				Total	
	<i>Diminishers</i>	<i>Compromisers</i>	<i>Approximator</i>	<i>Minimizers</i>	
Count	3,123	1,970	266	229	5,588
% percentage	55.8%	35.2%	4.7%	4.0%	

The counts for each type in table 1 above indicate that diminishers seem to be quite overpowering in the spoken register of that corpus as their frequency (55.8%) is higher than the frequencies of all other downtoners combined. Compromisers come second with a frequency of use (35.2%), while the occurrence rates of approximators (4.7%) and minimizers (4.0%) are markedly low.

Minimizers present the lowest frequency of use amongst all other classes of downtoners. They have only 229 tokens in the data which account for 4.0% of the total frequency of downtoners in ICE.GB. The data in Table (2) below displays the frequencies of the individual members within that class:

Table (2): The Frequency of Minimizers in ICE.GB

Minimizers	Frequency	
	In No	Percentage %
At all	184	3.2%
Hardly	32	0.7%
Scarcely	6	0.1%
Barely	4	0.07%
Little	3	0.05%
In the slightest	0	0.0%
Total	229	4.0%

The data in the table above show the strong prevalence of *at all* over the other members in this class of downtoners. In fact, *at all* occurs three times as often as all other minimizers together as it makes 80.3% of their total frequency in the spoken register of ICE.GB. *Hardly* comes second in the list with a frequency of 13.9%, followed by *scarcely* which has a frequency of 2.6%, and *barely* (1.7%). The least frequently used minimizer in this group is *little*

(1.3%), while *in the slightest* comes at the end of the list with zero tokens.

3.2 The Functional Distribution of Minimizers in ICE.GB

The computational analyses of the data regarding the uses of minimizers in the spoken discourse in ICE-GB provided important information concerning their functional distribution. Table (3) below provides the results of the analysis for their functional distribution:

Table (3): The functional Distribution of Minimizers in ICE.GB:

Grammatical pattern	Mod Adv	Mod Adj	Mod V	Mod NP	Mod Pron	Mod Prep	Mod CL	Adverbial
At all	0.4%	4.3%	0%	0.8%	0%	8.2%	0%	66.3%
Hardly	0.4%	1.7%	7.4%	3.0%	0%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%
Scarcely	0%	0.8%	0.8%	0%	0.4%	0.4%	0%	0%
Little	0%	0%	0.4%	0%	0.0%	0%	0.8%	0%
Barely	0%	0.4%	0.8%	0.4%	0%	0%	0%	0%

When considering the data in Table 3 above, it is noticeable that *at all* is used at a remarkably high frequency as sentence adverbial (66.3%), and at markedly lower percentages as modifier of prepositions (8.2%), adjectives (4.3%), noun phrases (0.8%), and of adverbs (0.4%):

- As sentence adverbial:

23. Haven't you got any more glass out there *at all* (S1A-007 083)

24. But I've actually done that in front of people and they can't cope with it *at all* (S1A-013 140)

-As a modifier of preposition:

25. There's no weapons here of course *at all on show today* (S2A-019 072)

As modifier of adjective:

26. I'm not *at all depressed* (S2B-009 109)

-As a modifier of noun phrase

27. The victims began to lose consciousness after twelve to twenty minutes which was not *at all the drawn-out agony* which the Roman executioner sought (S2B-028 053)

-As a modifier of adverb

28. I don't think it'd go down *at all well* (S1B-021 042)

The minimizer *hardly*, on the other hand, occurs, at varying percentages, as modifier of verb and its predicate (6), adjective (7), noun phrase (8), adverb (9), preposition (10) and as a sentence adverbial (11)

29. I mean you can *hardly ask* for it back (S1A-007 078)

30. These laments are *hardly new* (S2A-039 099)

31. It's *hardly a children's song* of innocence (S2B-027 058)

32. I did buy you know a bunch of roses but *hardly ever* a great big thing like like uh a ribbon and sheet is it really (S1A-019 127)

33. Honest, it's *hardly worth the breath* I shouldn't have thought somehow (S1A-069 185)

34. We never use any of them *hardly* (S1A-019 109)

The other members of the class of minimizers, *scarcely*, *little* and *barely*, are used significantly less than *at all* and *hardly* in the spoken register. In those limited number of occurrences, they are used mainly as modifiers of verbs:

35. And u had *scarcely heard* about confirmation then (S1B-041 120)

36. And before President Gorbachev had *barely set* foot back on Soviet soil the Sojuz group had passed a vote of no confidence in him. A decision to gather a petition to call an emergency session of Congress of People's Deputies the only body that has the power to oust him as President (S2B-040 061)

37. Those uhm a little look like the double snake of the medicine.

The minimizers *scarcely* and *barely* also occur as modifiers of adjectives (38, 39), while *little* is used as modifier of a clause (40, 41):

38. With the ink *scarcely dry* on the United Nations Charter signed by the Great Powers in nineteen forty-five, the States and the Soviet Union began a menacing nuclear-tipped arm race (S2B-034 004)

39. What had plunged all these people into a state *barely distinguishable* from death was the side-effects of encephalitis from which they'd all suffered in the nineteen twenties (S2B-033 099)

40. Well its extraordinary how *little they succeed* if that's what they set out to do (S1B-024 098)

Interestingly, the minimizers *in the slightest* and *in the least* have no tokens in the ICE.GB data, which indicates that they are not used by British speakers in conversation.

3.3 Minimizers' Collocations in Spoken Discourse

Generally speaking, the co-occurrence of minimizers with adjectives, adverbs and verbs is

less frequent in the ICE-GB data than other intensifiers. The data on their co-occurrence with adjectives show that the minimizers *at all* and *scarcely* collocate with both gradable descriptive adjectives and non-gradable absolute adjectives.

Hardly and *barely* collocate only with gradable descriptive adjectives. The most commonly used adjectives with minimizers are given in the list below:

<i>Minimizers</i>	<i>Gradable</i>	<i>Non-gradable</i>
1. <i>At all</i>	Depressed Bothered Clear Surprised	Implausible Sure Possible ---
2. <i>Scarcely</i>	Dry	Concealed
3. <i>Hardly</i>	Likely New Surprising	--- --- ---
4. <i>Barely</i>	Distinguishable	---

The analyses of the data also reveal that minimizers are the least commonly used as modifiers of adverbs among downtoners. There are only two occurrences in which the minimizer *at all* co-occurs with the manner adverb *well*, and *hardly* with the time adverb *ever*:

As for the collocation of minimizers with verbs, the minimizer *hardly* has the highest frequency. It co-occurs with activity, mental, communicative, occurrence and existence verbs. *Scarcely* and *little* co-occur at rather low frequencies with mental verbs, while *barely* modifies activity and aspectual verbs:

<i>Minimizers + Verbs</i>	<i>Minimizers + Verbs</i>
1. <i>Hardly</i> Ask Avoid Knew Talk See Changed	2. <i>Scarcely</i> Knew Heard 3. <i>Barely</i> Finished Set

It is to be noted, however, that the limited number of the tokens for minimizers' co-occurrences with verbs, adjective and adverbs in the data do not suggest strong collocational bonds.

4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to provide a comprehensive account of the syntactic and semantic features of minimizers and their frequency and functional distribution in British English conversation. In terms of frequency, the occurrence rate of minimizers (4.0%) in ICE.GB is markedly low, which indicates that in spoken discourse, they are used quite less frequently than other downtoners. Also, among all other minimizers, *at all* has the highest frequency of use in British conversation, followed by *hardly*, *scarcely* and *barely* at markedly lower

frequencies, while the compromiser *in the slightest* has no tokens in the ICE.GB data which indicates that it is not used in spoken discourse.

The results of the analysis of the functional distribution of minimizers in the spoken corpus of ICE.GB demonstrate that *at all* is most often used as sentence adverbial, and far less often as modifier of prepositions, adjectives, noun phrases, and of adverbs. As modifier of adjectives, it collocates with both descriptive gradable adjectives and the absolute non-gradable adjectives. The minimizers *hardly*, *scarcely* and *barely* occur less commonly than *at all* as modifiers of adjectives, and they mainly modify descriptive gradable adjectives.

As modifiers of adverbs, minimizers are used quite less often than other downtoners in British conversation. Regarding verb modification, *hardly* has the highest frequency among minimizers, and it most often modifies

communicative verbs, and less often mental, activity, occurrence and existence verbs. Furthermore, the minimizers *at all*, *hardly* and *barely* are used for the modification of noun phrases, and *scarcely*, at a low frequency, is the only minimizer used as a modifier of pronoun.

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