

Sentence adverbials: Defining the research object and outlining the research results

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Abstract

The aim of this contribution – functioning as preface to the special issue of *Linguistik online* entitled *Formal and functional perspectives on sentence adverbials in the Romance languages and beyond* – is to give a general overview of its research object and agenda. We start by providing a morpho-syntactic definition of the category of adverbials and then present a functional classification of these expressions, paying particular attention to the category of sentence adverbials. After having clarified the research object of this special issue, we present the content of the ten contributions collected, by identifying the lines of analysis which they address.

1 Introduction: defining adverbials

As shown in a series of seminal pragmatics studies written in the 1960s (cf. Austin 1962; Benveniste 1966; Searle 1969), naturally-occurring human communication cannot be understood as a mere exchange of information related to events happening in a real or in an imaginary world, such as in ex. (1) and (2):

1. Mr. Green is under arrest.
2. I know Mr. Green.

In speaking or writing, we also convey information regarding the very process of communicating, the ways we position ourselves towards others, how our text or discourse ought to be decoded etc. Importantly, these pieces of information are generally not expressed by the main building blocks of a sentence, i. e. the verb and its arguments, functioning syntactically as subject, direct object and/or complements, and semantically as agent, patient, beneficiary, instrument etc. Instead, they are conveyed by what we can define as accessory, marginal or satellite sentence constituents (Dik et al. 1990 on the basis of Dik 1989; Nølke 1990, 1993; Prandi 2007; Prandi/De Santis 2011). Consider the information in bold in (3) and (4):

3. **Allegedly/Surely/Unfortunately**, Mr. Green is under arrest.
4. I know Mr. Green **well**.

Following *inter alia* the French and Anglo-American linguistics tradition, we will call these optional sentence constituents *adverbials* (cf. Greenbaum 1969, 2000; Nølke 1990, 1993; Nøjgaard 1992, 1993, 1995; Hasselgård 2010; Maienborn/Schäfer 2011). The term “adverbial” refers more specifically to a syntactic (or grammatical) function. As a result, adverbials enter into the same paradigm as the other syntactic functions, i. e. the subject, object (direct, indirect etc.), predicative complement etc. Table 1 provides an overview of the most important syntactic functions included in the paradigm.

Subject
Objects (direct, indirect, prepositional)
Predicative
Locative
Time
Adverbial
[...] ¹

Table 1: Syntactic functions

With respect to the other syntactic functions listed in Table 1 (i. e. the subject, object of transitive verbs etc.), which are syntactic arguments, adverbials form a group of constituents that can be defined by a negative syntactic feature: they represent a non-argumental syntactic function (cf. Ackema 2015: 248; Hole 2015: 1286–1287 and the discussion in these two studies). As a result, they are both non-selected (vs selected) and optional (vs compulsory) sentence constituents. As far as the first property is concerned, adverbials differ from arguments, which undergo two types of restrictions (Nølke 1993: 76): a verb selects the case and semantic type of its arguments. Adverbials, by contrast, are neither morpho-syntactically nor semantically selected by the main verb (Jacobs 1994).

As optional syntactic constituents, adverbials can generally be omitted without giving rise to an ungrammatical sentence (cf. Greenbaum 2000: 56; Ackema 2015: 263). The main test we can use to determine whether we are dealing with an adverbial or with a constituent associated to another type of syntactic function is the omission test. Only if a sentence constituent can be omitted without becoming ungrammatical is it an adverbial, as the examples in (5) and (6) show.

5. a. ***Frankly/Truly/Funnily***, I don't know.
b. I don't know.
6. a. He answered ***frankly/truly/funnily***.
b. He answered.

¹ This paradigm possibly includes other syntactic (or grammatical) functions: the *complemento d'agente* ‘agent complement’, such as *la guerra fu vinta dai francesi* ‘the war was won by the French’ (Salvi 1988: 68; Salvi/Vanelli 2004: 43; Ackema 2015: 255 refers to this argument as “by-phrase”) and the *complemento simmetrico* ‘symmetrical complement’, such as *Giovanni tratta la vendita con Maria* ‘John handles the sale with Mary’ (Salvi 1988: 67). Note that Maienborn/Schäfer (2011: 1391) also refer to the predicate as a syntactic function.

On the same grounds, expressions such as the ones in bold in (7a) and (8a) can be ruled out as adverbials because the corresponding sentences in (7b) and (8b) are grammatically ill-formed (they lack one argument of the verb: the subject and a prepositional object respectively).

7. a. **That sunny day** saw the beginning of the most miserable period of my life.
b. *saw the beginning of the most miserable period of my life.
8. a. The problem lies **in the date of the trip**.
b. *The problem lies.

Functionally, adverbials are traditionally understood as constituents that specify the circumstances in which an event/state takes place. These circumstances include time, location and manner. The information encoded by adverbials, however, is semantically and functionally much more varied. Adverbials can also convey the manner in which the speaker perceives or evaluates the event denoted by his/her utterance; they put cognitive constraints on how the addressee needs to answer a question; they set criteria on the ways a text ought to be encoded and decoded as regarding its form and meaning etc. In example (9), for instance, we find adverbials denoting not only time (*when Stocking goes to places such as Afghanistan; first; for years; in July*), location (*in the community; there; on the head*) and manner (*as an “honorary man”*), but also a condition (*if I’m going to a village*), a cause (*because I am a woman*), a manner of speaking (*frankly*) and a quantity (*much more*).

9. **When Stocking goes to places such as Afghanistan**, she says, she’s seen **as an “honorary man”**. **“If I’m going to a village**, I **first** meet the men's shura [council]. **And because I am a woman**, I was allowed to sit with the woman's shura. **Frankly**, sitting down with the women you find out so much about what is going on **in the community**. **For years** I have been going to [the World Economic Forum at] Davos and actually the men **there** are **much more** likely to pat me **on the head**.” [...] **In July**, the UK government withdrew aid from Malawi, accusing the country of economic mismanagement and human rights abuses (corpus CONTRAST-IT; theguardian.com, 01.09.2011; emphasis added)

As can be observed on the basis of the adverbials in bold in ex. (9), this category can be realized by a variety of morpho-syntactic expressions: adverbs (see *frankly; actually; first*), prepositional phrases (*on the head; for years; in July*) and clausal phrases (*if I’m going to a village; because I am a woman*). While adverbials can be realized by constituents having a variety of morpho-syntactic forms (adverbs, prepositional phrases, finite, non-finite and verbless clauses etc.; cf. Hasselgård 2010: 14), they are often simply realized as adverbs. Conversely, while adverbs typically function as adverbials, and are thus optional in the sentence structure, they can also function as arguments (or complements), for instance as subject predicatives (as in *we’re outside* vs **we’re*), or as parts of constituents (such as degree adverbs: *She sleeps very/rather/extremely late*). It should also be noted that there is no one-to-one mapping between the form of an adverb and its syntactic function. For instance, the Italian adverb *qui* can function either as argument of the verb (as in *abito qui* ‘I live here’/**abito* ‘I live’; *sono qui* ‘I am here’/**sono* ‘I am’) or as adverbial (as in *ti aspetterò qui/ti aspetterò* ‘I will wait for you here/I will wait for you’).

This special issue is devoted to a specific subset of adverbials, namely the ones operating at the level of the sentence, called “sentence adverbials” (henceforth SAials). While SAials realized as adverbs are claimed to be rare in most languages possessing adverbs (Haspelmath 2001: 16544), it is generally admitted that this class is particularly developed in the European languages. Specifically, their great elaboration is considered to be a peculiarity of the written European varieties (Ramat 1994). According to the study of Ramat/Ricca (1998: 244), devoted to sentence adverbs in 41 European languages, “[c]ommenting, epistemic, evaluative, illocutive and argumentative strategies are typical of languages and cultures that have a long rhetorical and literary tradition”.

2 Sentence adverbials: A functional classification

Although operating at the sentence level and being therefore homogeneous in terms of their scope, SAials subsume a heterogeneous group of forms, which differ in respect to their syntactic (i. e. the sentence slots in which they can occur; see ex. 10 vs 11), semantic (i. e. the meaning conveyed; see ex. 12) and pragmatic features (i. e. their information properties and discourse functions; cf. on this topic, for example, Sarda et al. 2014). Adverbs such as French *franchement*, *vraiment*, *naturellement*, *probablement* etc. (and their equivalent forms in other languages²) comment on, and evaluate, as well as qualify the proposition expressed in a sentence. Overall, their role is not to represent events or states happening in the world but rather to convey the speaker’s stance on them. Thus, they can be associated with the interpersonal rather than the representational level of meaning (Ramat/Ricca 1998).

10. **Franchement**, je n’en sais rien.

‘Frankly, I have no idea.’

11. Je ne sais rien, **vraiment**.

‘I have no idea, really.’

12. **Malheureusement/Probablement/Sagement**, il a répondu.

‘Unfortunately/Probably/Wisely, he answered.’

SAials can be related to different functional or semantic layers of the utterance. Following other proposals made in the literature (cf., among others, Zampese 1994 and Prandi 2007 for Italian; Dik et al. 1990 and Hengeveld 1997 on English; Ramat/Ricca 1998 in a typological perspective), two levels of operation for SAials can be distinguished (see Table 2 below: the proposition and the illocution) and hence two macro-classes of SAials, to which we refer as SAials₁ and SAials₂: (i) the first class operates at the level of the propositional content and codifies information related to the denotational meaning of a proposition; (ii) the second class operates at the level of illocution and codifies information related to the speech act performed by the utterance. Each of these layers can be further divided. As far as SAials related to illocution are concerned, we can distinguish SAials₂ codifying the manner of speaking (*frankly, I have no idea*) from SAials₂ codifying the form of the speech-act (*briefly, I have no idea*).

² On *-mente*-derived adverbs in Italian, French and Spanish, cf. De Cesare/Albom/Cimmino (2017).

Syntactic domains of incidence	Semantic and functional domains of incidence	Semantic and functional categories: two main classes of SAials and subclasses
Extra-clausal	Text	Discourse / Logical connectives
	Illocution	Sentence Adverbials₂ - manner of speaking (ex. 10) - form of the speech act (ex. 14)
	Proposition	Sentence Adverbials₁ - evaluatives (<i>unfortunately</i> in ex. 12) - modals (<i>probably</i> in ex. 12) - oriented towards a participant (<i>wisely</i> in ex. 12)
Intra-clausal	Predication	Predication adverbials ³ - scene-setting (time and place) - domain
	Predicate	Predicate adverbials - manner (ex. 4 and 11)

Table 2: Multilayered model for a classification of adverbials (based on De Cesare 2016 and 2018)

In the literature, the distinction between SAials₁ and SAials₂ is generally made on the basis of a battery of diagnostic tests, which highlights the syntactic and pragmatic properties of these forms. Their different degree of integration in the clause, for instance, is generally shown by the possibility of occurring (i) before a clefted constituent and (ii) in concomitance with different speech acts (assertion vs question). The following examples demonstrate that SAials₂ (such as It. *brevemente*) are less integrated in the clause than SAials₁ (such as It. *probabilmente*): SAials₂ cannot occur in front of a clefted constituent (see ex. 13 vs 15), which means that their scope cannot be restricted to one part of the proposition; by contrast, they can occur in front of a question (see ex. 14 vs 16), which highlights the fact that they do not show restrictions in terms of the speech act with which they combine and thus that they operate at the level of illocution.

13. *È **brevemente** lei che aveva ragione.

*‘It is *briefly* her that was right.’

14. **Brevemente**, aveva ragione lei?

‘*Briefly*, was she right?’

³ Note that in Ramat/Ricca (1998: 192), what is called here *predication adverbials* (following Dik et al. 1990) is referred to as *event adverbs*. In line with what we propose in Table 2, this group also includes a subclass of domain adverbs, which is in fact quite a challenging class. It is sometimes considered to be a subclass of sentence adverbs or to belong to both predication and sentence adverbs (on this issue, cf. Ramat/Ricca 1998: 193; for details on this class, see Glübl in this issue as well as De Cesare et al. in press).

15. È **probabilmente** lei che aveva ragione.
‘It is *probably* her that was right.’
16. ***Probabilmente**, aveva ragione lei?
*‘*Probably*, was she right?’

3 A special issue on sentence adverbials: Research agenda

This special issue on SAials in the Romance languages and beyond includes ten contributions, appearing in alphabetical order as follows:

1. Emma Álvarez-Prendes (Universidad de Oviedo), Uses and properties of some adverbs in contemporary French and Spanish: *honnêtement* and *sérieusement* vs. *honestamente*, *seriamente* and *en serio*
2. Sonia Gómez-Jordana (Complutense de Madrid), A diachronic analysis of *visiblement/visiblemente*: contemporary false-friends
3. Klaus Gröbl (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München), On the rise of domain adverbials in Italian: the history of the *-mente parlando* construction
4. Gerda Haßler (Universität Potsdam), Evidential and epistemic sentence adverbs in Romance languages
5. Martin Hummel (Universität Graz), Romance sentence adverbs in *-mente*: Epistemic mitigation in synchrony and diachrony
6. Francesca La Forgia (Università degli Studi di Bologna), Epistemic, evaluative, speech act adverbs and Italian political language
7. Ignazio Mauro Mirto (Università degli Studi di Palermo), The hidden side of adverbs
8. Paola Pietrandrea (Université de Tours and CNRS, LLL, UMR7270), Epistemic sentence adverbs, epistemic complement-taking predicates and epistemic pragmatic markers
9. Gianluca Pontrandolfo (Dipartimento di Scienze Giuridiche, del Linguaggio, dell’Interpretazione e della Traduzione, IUSLIT, Università degli Studi di Trieste), Sensibly and appropriately the judge considered... A corpus-based study of sentence adverbs in judicial language
10. Corinne Rossari (Université de Neuchâtel), The representation of modal meaning of French sentence adverbs in a qualitative and quantitative approach

The general aim of this special issue is to shed new light on SAials by analyzing this category from different angles (both diachronic and synchronic) and in different languages (Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, English, German and Russian). Since the category adverbial is quite broad from a morpho-syntactic point of view, special attention is paid to derived adverbs, i. e. to the lexical items ending with a suffix marking this word class: French *-ment*-adverbs (*probablement* ‘probably’, *vraiment* ‘truly’); Italian and Spanish *-mente*-adverbs (It. *probabilmente*, Sp. *probablemente*; It. *veramente*, Sp. *verdaderamente*); English *-ly*-adverbs (*probably*, *truly*) and so forth.

The contributions collected in this issue foster a better understanding of a range of semantic, syntactic, morpho-syntactic, and pragmatic phenomena related to SAials. Specifically, the contributions included in this issue deal with one or more of the following aspects:

1. the historical development of SAials: Gómez-Jordana traces the development of two semantic and functional false friends, namely Fr. *visiblement* and Sp. *visiblemente*; Gröbl presents a detailed analysis of the origins and spread of the It. adverbial construction ‘*-mente parlando*’ (involving a *-mente*-derived adverb and the gerund), which underwent a peculiar development: before becoming domain adverbials they were used as speech act adverbials; Hummel focuses on *epistemic mitigation* and shows that this pragmatic function is linked to general pragmatic processes (such as *subjectivization* and *politeness*) and developed for a wide-range of Romance modal adverbials related to the epistemic domain;
2. the syntactic, semantic and/or pragmatic properties of SAials: based on a series of linguistic tests, Álvarez-Prendes proposes a contrastive analysis between French *honnêtement* and *sérieusement* and their Spanish counterparts; Haßler devotes an important part of her corpus-based contribution to the sentence distribution of evidential and modal adverbials in French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese as well as German and Russian; taking a more grammatical and theoretical approach on SAials, Mirto describes the predicative nature of three types of sentence adverbs, in particular by taking into account the argument structure of the adjective on which these adverbs are based;
3. the comparison between SAials and other semantically and functionally similar linguistic means: Pietrandrea focuses on modal-epistemic sentence adverbs and other modal epistemic expressions and shows that adverbs perform a different function; specifically, unlike complement-taking predicates, they express a non-addressable epistemic evaluation of their scope and, unlike pragmatic markers, they serve to qualify (rather than negotiate) the epistemic evaluation of their scope; Rossari proposes a qualitative and quantitative analysis of French modal-epistemic sentence adverbs and other epistemic-conveying expressions (specifically the future tense and the modal verbs *pouvoir* ‘can’ and *devoir* ‘must’), by taking into account the collocates of the modal sentence adverbs in different types of data and with the aim of presenting a model designed to capture modal meaning transmitted by lexical and grammatical expressions;
4. the use of SAials in different language varieties, genres and registers: La Forgia describes the functions of different categories of Italian *-mente* adverbs in political speech, specifically in the parliamentary speeches delivered at the Chamber of Deputies and shows that they serve a variety of purposes (they contribute to building the argumentation, handling agreements and disagreements, and supporting or rejecting opinions), while Pontrandolfo’s contrastive corpus-assisted study, devoted to derived sentence adverbs in Italian, Spanish and English judicial discourse, investigates the general hypothesis that the attitude of judges shouldn’t appear in their writings since they are supposed to be impartial and represent the *bouche de la loi*.

The output of this issue is of interest to diverse fields of linguistics and has significant practical and technical applications in the domains of language teaching, lexicography, translation studies and computational linguistics.

4 Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the colleagues who participated in this issue. We believe that, collectively, the research presented here greatly improves our understanding of SAials in the Romance languages and beyond. Specifically, it allows us to gain a deeper knowledge on the form, meaning, and function of Romance SAials realized as adverbs in different forms of discourse and text types.

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- 1) the peer-reviewed workshop entitled “Gli avverbi di frase in italiano contemporaneo: definizione, classificazioni, distribuzione, confronti”, organized in the frame of the 50th international conference of the Società di Linguistica Italiana, held in Milan on September 22, 2016.
- 2) the international conference “Linguistically knotty”: Current Issues on Sentence Adverbs, which took place at the University of Basel on January 19–20, 2017.⁴

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Corpus

CONTRAST-IT. <https://contrast-it.philhist.unibas.ch/en/corpora/contrast-it-corpus>.

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⁴ For details, see <http://hpsl-linguistics.org/1219>.

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