What We Really Mean When We Say “Really”  
Dana Levine

The Phenomenon. I explore the various uses of the word really in standard American English. I comment on its multi-functionality and the different labels that can be used to describe this word based on those functions.

Within the paper, I explain the many functions to this word. One way in which native speakers use this word is as a pragmatic marker, and more specifically, an epistemic marker. Pragmatic markers are words or phrases that are “relatively syntax-independent and does not change the meaning of the sentence” (Moder and Martinovic-Zic 2004). An epistemic marker, and thus a deictic element, pointing to speaker certainty, whether a speaker knows a piece of information or not. It is also described as a speech act modifier. In this paper I will analyze whether it is a secondary or primary speech act. I will also test to see if really acts as an expressive according to Potts.

Methodology. A compilation of spoken utterances gathered from The Corpus of Contemporary American English reveals many purposes one has when choosing the word really to express a piece of information in an utterance. I will investigate whether it is a secondary or primary speech act based on whether it passes or flunks Bach’s IQ test, whether the contribution of really is crucial in a negated sentence, and whether its usage is critical in an indirect quotation.

Importance. In the past, the analysis of the word really has not been fully analyzed with a sufficient amount of empirical data. I will show its significance in spoken language and in what pragmatic categories it fits into.

Bibliography


