

A Corpus-Based Study of Synonymous Intensifiers: *Absolutely, Totally, Completely*

Yu Cao

*School of General Education, Xi'an Eurasia University, Xi'an, Shaanxi 710065, China
caoyu@eurasia.edu.cn*

ABSTRACT

Differentiation of synonyms will help language learners to use synonyms more appropriately and understand them correctly, and also facilitating smooth communication process. As an approach to intensify. Intensifiers also effect the tone and expression of the speakers, and aroused the research interest of many scholars in recent decades. This passage sums up the previous studies, and also conducted a research through BNC about three intensifiers that have identical meaning in dictionary: *totally, completely, absolutely*. After analysing, the research found out the difference and featured patterns of the three synonymous intensifiers in the aspect of degree of formality, collocation and semantic prosody. Hopefully this thesis will shed light on the learning of language learners and reduce the elements that cause communication failure.

Keywords: *Intensifier, synonymy, corpus, collocation, semantic prosody*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. What is synonym?

The term synonym is originated from Greek and is used to refer to the "sameness of meaning" between two words, which means they convey same or similar meanings [1]. English is abundant with near-synonyms, because meaning of its words keeps changing throughout its history, and word borrowed from other country abundant its vocabulary but also create synonyms with vague differences. It is an important and intriguing linguistic phenomenon both for semanticist and language learners [2], because they are not completely interchangeable, and to differentiate and use the synonyms properly are one of the major difficulties of English language acquisitions, and will affect greatly on the accuracy of English language output.

1.2. The Importance of Intensifiers

Intensifiers is another important language phenomenon that need language learners to pay attention. Through the history of semantic change, intensifiers constantly stand in need of replacement, their intensifying force is worn down and as adverbs of degree, many had lost its independent meaning. For example, very lost its independent meaning "truly", though sometimes the meaning is still shown in its adjective usage, e.g. "the very heart of the matter" and "the very thought of you" [3] Intensifiers like "very" now are used to draw attention, add exaggeration, and promote a particular interest, and somehow be generally considered as synonyms that serves the same function. However,

previous study has shown that intensifiers such as 'very, so, really' that is delexicalized and intensifiers which embedded to a particular lexical item (usually in forms of adjective) functions differently from each other [4]. They further pointed out that delexicalized intensifiers used in a general way, while adverbial intensifiers, such as perfectly, completely and highly are marked to occur with particular collocation, and overtly to describe the sentence evaluation and depicting writer's attitude [5]. Therefore, it is important to look into the semantic prosody and collocations adverbial amplifiers for they convey different attitude thus could cause communication failure if misuse them. By searching adverbs with '-ly' on BNC, we can easily see that intensifiers have taken a large proportion, among which ***absolutely, completely and totally*** were chosen because of their relative frequency within the group of -ly adverbs, their special syntactic behavior, and the lack of previous contrastive studies. By looking up the Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary, it can be seen that these three words seems to be absolute synonyms and totally interchangeable: the explanation of '*absolutely*' is "*completely, totally*" and the explanation for *totally* is *completely*, and there is no way to differentiate them by its apparent semantic meaning. Therefore, collocations and semantic prosody of each word became important aspects to look into in the study of synonymous differentiation. This research mainly focuses on the differentiation of the three synonymous intensifiers, their frequency, semantic prosody and collocations will be discussed and will be conducted by the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The corpus BNC (British National Corpus) will be employed, after analysing the research result, how it would affect our communication will also be discussed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ON SYNONYMS AND INTENSIFIERS

There are many previous studies about near-synonymy differentiation at both abroad and at home.

Kennedy [6] and Partington [2] have done a lot of corpus-based researches about distinguishing synonyms. Kennedy have made a lot of detailed analysis about between and thorough. In addition, Partington analysed a group of synonyms set in, come out, occur, happened, and take place in 1998 by corpus linguistic, compared with his hypothesis that all of the semantic prosody of the words and phrases will be negative, the result shows come out does not appear to have any preferences. These researches further illustrated the importance of corpus linguistic.

With the development and wider use of corpus linguistic, a variety of notable findings was also found by researchers in China. Liu & Zhang [7] explore some systematic and efficient ways of analysing synonyms based on semantic theories. Scalar analysis, grammatical analysis, interchange ability analysis, juxtaposition, morphological analysis and etymological analysis was proposed as the research method should be used. They also claimed that with corpus-based approach, synonyms can be differentiated by: their distributions among different registers; their significant collocates, and the MI score and t score between synonyms and their collocates; their collocational behaviours and semantic prosodies with regard to certain colligational frameworks.

As an important part of adverbs, intensifiers were used to express different degree intensify which can affect and works as a representation of communication and interaction skills. The most rapid and the most interesting semantic developments in linguistic change are said to occur with intensifiers, and this part of grammar has always undergone meaning shift [8]. Ito and Tagliamonte [9] conduct a research about really and very, two commonly used intensifier and attested that very is most commonly used by older speakers, while really increased dramatically among the youngest generation. They also discussed how intensifiers are used differently among different gender and education level. In the end They drew a conclusion that "The variation in intensifier use is a strong indicator of shifting norms and practices in a speech community. In China, Chen Jiangsheng [10] conducted researched on adj-intensifiers in Chinese non-English major's writing. Wang Haihua and Chen Guohua [11] investigated in the writing language of Chinese language learners in high school students, non-English major students, and English major students respectively and find out that high school students in China tend to overuse "so, very and very much" but underuse adverbial intensifiers like badly, deeply and greatly. And among these three types of student, non-English major college students showed the lowest accuracy. Therefore, it is important to look at the adverbial intensifiers we tend to underuse and misuse to give a hint about English language learning.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

Since intensifiers is an important language phenomenon, and the usage of the intensifier synonyms are hard to differentiate merely by dictionary. To explore the accurate usage of the most frequently used intensifiers will not only explore its differentiation, but also give us implications on teaching the language. Therefore, the research questions can be stated as followed:

What is the frequency of the usage of the intensifiers: absolutely, completely and totally in BNC? How are they used in different domain?

How to differentiate the three synonymous intensifiers in terms of their frequency, semantic prosody and collocations?

3.2 Research Tools and Data Analysis

The corpus chosen in this essay is BNC. BNC is a powerful corpus that have 100 million words' data mainly for British English from late 20th century, its component including written corpus and spoken corpus.

As is mentioned by Biber et al. [12], the corpus-based approach depends on both quantitative and qualitative analytical technique. Quantitative analysis is used for the statistics retrieved from the corpus, and the purpose of it is to reveal the authentic usage to ensure objectivity. In the meanwhile, qualitative technique is adopted to analysing the distribution. This study will also be adopted sketch engine as an instrument to analysis frequency and collocation for it provides objective and convincing result for each node word.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Frequency Analysis for Totally, Completely and Absolutely

By using word list function of sketch engine, we can get all of the words with suffix "-ly" behind. Among these words, it can be clearly seen that, completely, totally, and absolutely are of very high frequency.

BNC consist of 10% of spoken language and 90% written language. By examine the register distribution of each word, we can find out that, in the subcorpus of spoken language, absolutely get the highest hits (1889), which take up 159.68per million words, followed by completely (822 hits, 69.49 per million) then totally (802 hits, 67.80 per million). In comparison with the distribution of written subcorpus (see Table 4.1), it can be clearly seen absolutely which only got 37.7 per million words in frequency, was much more frequently used in spoken language, Totally also distributed more frequently in spoken language (67.80

per million) compared with the distribution in written language(48.74 per million), but unlike absolutely, the statistic difference didn't show a huge gap. However, the word completely shows an almost balanced figure in distribution (69.49 per million in spoken corpus, 74.90 per million in written corpus), with slightly higher figure in written language.

Table 1 Register distribution of totally, completely, absolutely in written and spoken subcorpus

lemma	frequency	Subcorpus of spoken language		Subcorpus of written language	
		Frequency	Per million	frequency	Per million
totally	5693	802	67.80	4891	48.74
completely	8339	822	69.49	7517	74.90
absolutely	4672	1889	159.68	3783	37.7

The table have showed us that absolutely is mostly used in our daily life and it is the most informal language, while totally is also mostly used in daily conversation, but the degree of formality is a little higher than absolutely, and completely is the most formal word among the three and can be both used in written and spoken language.

4.2. Collocations and Semantic Prosodies for Totally, Completely and Absolutely

As stated above, habitual collocation usually showed the underlying meaning of a word, revealed the relations between the words. Corpus provide a useful tool to collect the data of concordance and classify them. Using corpus can make us clearly see the common collocated pattern of

the synonyms and give us a summary of different kind of collocation.

The node word selected are all adverbial intensifiers derived from its adjective form. By using sketch engine to examine the collocation of the root words absolute, total, complete, it can be seen that absolute have a clear negative semantic prosody for it usually being used to modify words with negative meaning, for example "nonsense, rubbish, disgrace, discretion". However, the semantic prosody of total is relatively neutral, for its prominent collocation are vocabularies related to statistics and finance, e.g. population, number, amount, etc. While as complete is also a relatively neutral word which modifies both derogatory terms (e.g. fool, idiot, breakdown, waste, mess, etc) and commendatory terms (e.g. surprise, freedom, confidence), therefore it is relatively neutral word compared to absolute.

However, it can be seen from the collocations of absolutely, totally and completely that they have clearly different semantic prosodies with their root words, which indicates adverbial intensifiers doesn't necessarily share the semantic prosody of its roots and the semantic prosody maybe changed during the derivation and long-term use.

Adverbs are most frequently used to modify adjectives and verbs, and to reveal the pattern of its collocation, the study selected 20 words which are of highest frequency or highest MI score to compare and analyse. First introduced to corpus analysis of lexis by Church & Hank [13], mutual information (MI) score, "compares the probability of observing x and y together (the joint probability of observing x and y independently (chance)." an MI score around 0 may indicate that the two words do not collocate, while a score more than show that collocation is significant that the two words do often co-occur. The frequency and MI score can complement each other in better identifying the words habitually co-occur but have a low frequency in general.

Table 2 Adjective Collocation of Totally, Completely, Absolutely.

Totally		Completely		Absolutely	
Co-occurrence frequency	MI-Score	Co-occurrence frequency	MI-Score	Co-occurrence frequency	MI-Score
different	unfazed	different	inelastic	right	fagged
new dependent wrong	unsuited	new	unselfconscious	sure	fabulous
unacceptable	unprepared	lost	disorientated	clear	diabolical
inadequate	illegible	free,	re-arranged	necessary	flabbergasted
unexpected	unprovoked	wrong	legless	essential	ravenous
destroyed	uncharacteristic	destroyed	self-taught	certain	knackered
committed	impractical	clear	southbound	brilliant	gorgeous
unsuitable	misconceived	dry	mystified	delighted	sacrosanct
unaware	devoid	independent	valueless	wonderful	abysmal
unnecessary	unsuitable	unaware	unruffled	vital	spotless
independent	nonplussed	alone	sequenced	free	ludicrous
lacking	illogical	safe	dumbfounded	true	thrilled
separate	unconnected	empty	watertight	marvellous	frightful
blind	unacceptable	hidden	unmodified	fine	ravishing
free,	groundless	unknown	unprovoked	perfect	devastated
irrelevant	symmetric	irrelevant	uninterested	ridiculous	disgusted

unknown	untrue	open	guttled	gorgeous	horrendous
alien	disorientated	satisfied	reworked	correct	free
	deafened	happy	revamped	terrified	immaculate
	oblivious	innocent	shameless	fantastic	livid

The table above illustrates that the most frequently used adjective collocations

(the adjective that the adverbs modify most frequently) sorted by frequency and MI score of these three words. By checking the adjectives that have highest co-occurrence frequency of totally, we can at least see 7 out of 20 words with negative connotation in its collocations that is most frequently used (e.g. wrong, unacceptable, inadequate, destroyed, unsuitable, unnecessary), therefore it is clear that totally is more frequently collocate with word with negative connotation therefore have a negative semantic prosody. In addition, when compared with the collocations that have the highest MI score of totals, 16 out of 20 words possess negative affixes like un-, il-, dis-, non-, -less.

When sorted by frequency, we can see that totally and completely have very similar collocations that in these 20 words selected, they shared 10 same collocations, which shows high similarity between this two near-synonymous. However, unlike totally, the collocation frequently occurs together with completely seem to have both positive (e.g. satisfied, happy, innocent) and negative meaning (wrong, lost, destroyed) but words with positive meaning only take a small proportion therefore completely also have a negative semantic prosody. The similarity between completely and totally can also be shown in the collocations sorted by MI score. Even though the words are different, we can also see that it is frequently collocate with word with negative affixes just like totally. In addition, the MI score collocation of completely also showed that it also frequently collocates with words with prefix re-.

When look at the collocation of absolutely, it shows a very different pattern from totally and completely. The adjectives that most frequently collocate with absolutely are of clear positive connotation, like right, sure, necessary, essential, certain, brilliant, delighted, wonderful, etc. But when looking at the adjectives sorted by MI score, we can also see many words with negative connotations on the list, for example: fagged, fabulous,

diabolical, flabbergasted, ravenous, knackered, gorgeous, abysmal, ludicrous, etc. Therefore, we can tell form its collocation that absolutely also possess a neutral semantic prosody. However, unlike completely which collocates with a lot of words with neutral connotation, it can be seen that absolutely tend to co-occur with adjectives that have clear positive or negative connotation.

To further investigated the listed collocations, we filtered out the overlapping collocation listed above and have them classified into four categories: 1) evaluative adjective, 2) emotional adjective, 3) measure adjective. It can be seen from the table that most adjectives collocated with these three intensifiers are adjectives about evaluations. Except from that, completely can also be used to modify measurement and objective descriptions like empty, dry, southbound, etc, and also emotions like happy. While absolutely also frequently collocate with adjectives that express personal feelings and emotions, for example, delighted, thrilled, terrified, livid, etc. Which echoed and explained why completely appears frequently in text of pure science, and absolutely appears more in imaginative text.

Table 3 Classification for Adjective Collocation of Totally, Completely, Absolutely

Totally (38 different adjectives)	Completely (40 different adjectives)	Absolutely (39 different adjectives)
evaluative adjective 38	evaluative adjective 33 measure adjective 6 emotional adjective 1	evaluative adjective 36 emotional adjective 4

Adverbs are also used to modify verbs. To investigate in the verbs that collocated with these three intensifiers, the study also listed out the top 10 verbs that is most frequently co-occur or have the highest MI score with these three intensifiers. The result can be seen below.

Table 4 Collocation of Verbs for Totally, Completely, Absolutely.

Totally		Completely		Absolutely	
Co-occurrence frequency	MI-Score	Co-occurrence frequency	MI-Score	Co-occurrence frequency	MI-Score
be	dehumanize	be	refitted	be	corrupt
have	exonerate	have	redesign	have	bleed
can	eclipse	change	refurbish	look	adore
become	refute	go	overhaul	refuse	loathe
feel	obliterate	forget	eradicate	feel	forbid
agree	baffle	ignore	outclass	know	worship
against	bereft	disappear	outplay	do	refuse
change	disregard	cover	renovated	love	cease
forget	ignore	fail	misread	keep	love
remain	overshadow	become	heal	agree	hate

Except for the semantic prosody indicated, we can also see that, among these three intensifiers, each of them has more specific preference over the verbs it collocate with. From the 20 collocations listed of totally, we can see 3 words indicate change/remain of state, e.g. change, become, remain; 3 collocations illustrate the attitude of approve/disapprove: agree, against, refute; and 6 verbs indicate the meaning of losing certain quality, e.g. dehumanize, exonerate, eclipse, obliterate, bereft, overshadow.

However, when looking at the collocation of completely, verbs with affix re- appeared to be the common pattern, and 5 out of 20 verbs have the denotation of "anew", e.g. refitted, redesign, refurbish, renovated, heal. And collocations like overhaul, outclass, outplay also showed that completely also usually co-occur with word possessed the meaning of "exceed" and "beyond". What's more, completely also shared a lot of similarities with totally for sharing 6 same collocations out of 20 different verbs, and completely also can collocate verbs with verbs indicated change of state, and disappearing of certain quality.

Still, just like the collocation of adjectives of the three intensifiers, absolutely also appeared to be very different from totally and completely that shared only 2 collocations with completely and 4 with totally. What's more, we can clearly see the pattern that absolutely tend to collocate and intensify verbs about personal feelings and emotions, e.g. feel, love, hate, loathe, adore.

5. CONCLUSION

As stated above, synonymy and intensifiers are both important language phenomenon to look into, and because many intensifiers have already lost its original meaning, some of them are easy to be considered as synonyms. The intensifiers we selected in this thesis seems to be absolute synonyms in the dictionary. However, by using corpus to further exam, we can easily see the differences lie in the three synonyms.

Firstly, it can be seen from the frequency analysis that, completely is the most frequently used intensifiers among the three words overall. But looking at the relative frequency in written and spoken corpus respectively, we can see completely is the most formal word that both frequently used in written and spoken language, while totally and absolutely are more often used in spoken language. If we ranked these three intensifiers from the highest to the lowest formality, the result will be completely > totally > absolutely.

Secondly, from the collocations of the three intensifiers we can also conclude that totally, completely have clear negative semantic prosody and they both tend to collocate with words that have negative affix, and absolutely have a neutral semantic prosody, and tend to co-occur with adjectives that have very clear positive or negative connotation.

Thirdly, it can be also easy to conclude from the adjective collocation that they all often collocate with evaluative adjectives. However completely often collocate with measure adjectives that give an objective description,

while absolutely tend to collocate with adjectives that express attitude and emotions.

The verbal collocation of the three intensifiers were also be analysed. Totally often collocate with verbs that with the sense of losing/disappearing of certain qualities, completely comparatively more frequent collocate with the meaning of "anew" and "exceed", while absolutely collocate more often with verb about emotion and feelings. Therefore, this study gives a method about how to differentiated intensifiers that appear to have same meaning. The corpus-based study method may could be applied in English language teaching. The notion of collocation and semantic prosody could also be introduced in the learning process. Hopefully by this method, English language learners can use synonymous intensifiers more accurately, and better communication can be achieved.

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