



# A Hjelmslevian take on substance and structure: focusing *mere* and *merely*

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# 1. Introduction

# 1.1. Saussure

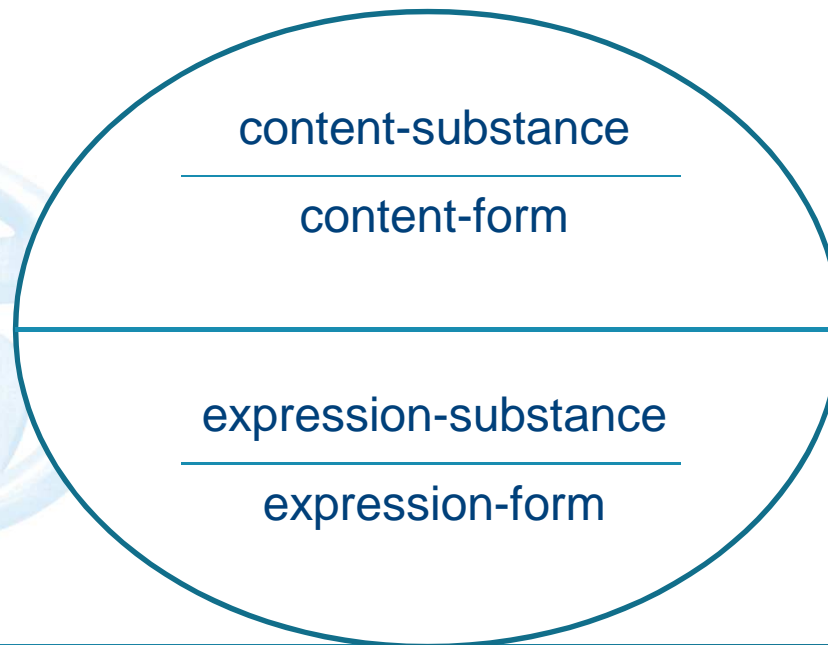
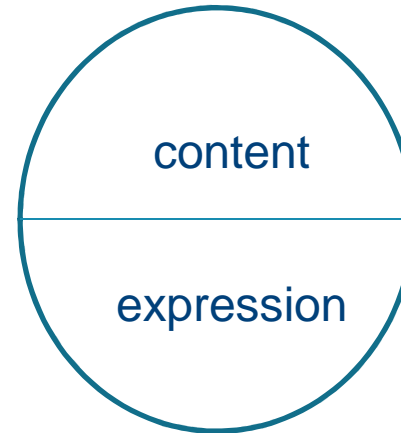
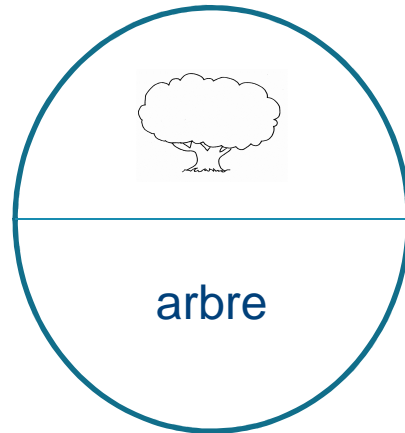
- Saussure's (1972) view of the linguistic sign:
  - pairing of expression and content
  - relation between expression and content as arbitrary
  - what is expression-side of linguistic sign?
- in early Transformational Grammar:  
tenet of arbitrary relation between *grammatical* structure and meaning attributed to Saussure
- BUT: exegeses of Saussure by Thibault (1996) and McGregor (1997) claim he did not view relation between (lexico)grammar and meaning as arbitrary, only that between lexicogrammar and phonology (exception: phonaesthesia)  
⇒ expression-side of linguistic sign = *phonological* form

## 1.2. Hjelmslev

Hjelmslev (1943) **re-interprets & enriches** Saussure's view of the linguistic sign:

- **'expression'** plane divides into (cf. Taverniers 2008)
  - 'expression-substance' ~ phonetic substance
  - 'expression-form' ~ phonological structures
- **'content'** plane divides into
  - 'content-substance' ~ semantic substance
  - 'content-form' ~ lexicogrammatical structures
- distinction between semantic purport and coded meaning
  - **semantic purport**: meaning that is inter-translatable between languages
  - **coded meaning**: specific to each language system with its own linguistic signs

# 1.2. Hjelslev



content-purport

expression-purport

## 1.2. Hjelmslev

Hjelmslev (1943) **re-interprets & enriches** Saussure's view of the linguistic sign:

- semantic purport, or content-purport
  - = that factor of the content of a sign which is common to different languages (Taverniers 2008: 15)
  - = 'intertranslatable' meaning
  - = 'unformed purport' that can be extracted from translation equivalents in different languages
  - = coded into specific content-substance by language-specific content-form, lexicogrammatical structures of a language (Thibault 1996)
    - ⇒ syntagmatic structures contribute to coded meaning of each language

## 1.2. Hjelmslev

- ‘meaningfulness’ of form

cf. Bolinger’s (1968: 27) programmatic tenet:

“a difference in form spells a difference in meaning”

- Principle of NO Synonymy of Grammatical Forms

(a.o. Givon 1985; Kirsner et al. 1985; Haiman 1985; Halliday 1985, 1994; Langacker 1987, 1991; Shaumyan 1987; Wierzbicka 1988; MacWhinney 1989; Goldberg 1995; McGregor 1997)



# 1.3. Theoretical preliminaries

- Goldberg (2002): semantic generalizations to be drawn from surface forms:
  - views surface forms as strings of grammatical classes + specific lexical items
  - rejects principle that paradigmatic alternations are semantically revealing (contra Whorf 1956, Gleason 1966, Levin 1993, etc.)
- we follow McGregor (1997: 47): **syntagmatic structure is meaning-making**:
  - different *types* of syntagmatic (e.g. dependency) relations between units discernable by analysis ( $\neq$  mere linear contiguity between categories) are “semiotically significant”
  - paradigmatic relations fundamental to identification of grammatical units



# 1.4. Focusing adjectives and adverbs

- Test case for semiotic approach: 2 lexicogrammatical structures:

- (i) NP with focusing adjective
- (ii) phrase/clause/predication with focusing adverb

- (i) *I have avoided with great care in writing this play the introduction of what is commonly called mere poetry, and I imagine there will scarcely be found a detached simile or a single isolated description (CLMET 2)*
- (ii) *But the final refinements are arrived at by a system of averaging, and even then present us with a stretch of time as a margin of error. Here error is merely a conventional term to express the fact that the character of experience does not accord with the ideal of thought. (CLMET 3)*

## 1.4. Focusing *mere* and *merely*

- ascribed a 'reductive' meaning in OED
- can both express (König 1991, Nevalainen 1991, Davidse et al. 2010):
  - exclusive categorial focus ('only', 'nothing other than')
  - exclusive scalar focus ('only', 'nothing more than')
  - particularising focus ('just', 'nothing but')
  - inclusive scalar focus ('even')

## 1.4. Focusing *mere* and *merely*

- **Exclusive focus**

- ***Exclusive scalar focus*** ('only', 'nothing more than')

Is this absurd quarrel at an end? Have they made it up? Love. Oh! a *mere* bagatelle, Sir, these little fracas among the better sort of people never last long (CLMET3.0, 1-57)

In my not so humble opinion the Fergie-loves-Johnny tale would go for £400,000, the Johnny and Fergie versus Buckingham Palace story a *mere* £75,000. (WB)

As the same charge is made by the apothecary, whether he attends the patient or *merely* prepares the prescription of a physician, ... (CLMET3.0, 2-147)

We must arrest our friend, nay, even him who is *merely* our fellow-creature, with a strong arm, when we see him hovering on the brink of a precipice (CLMET3.0, 2-104)

## 1.4. Focusing *mere* and *merely*

- **Exclusive focus**

- ***Exclusive categorial focus*** ('only', 'nothing other than')

Is it a book of *mere* facts concerning journeys and expenditure, and so on, or a book of thoughts?' 'Well, to tell the truth, it is not exactly either. ...'It contains, I suppose, your developed thoughts in embryo? 'Yes.' (CLMET3.0, 3-241)

The fine for admission into the Turkey company was formerly twenty-five pounds ... Nobody but *mere* merchants could be admitted; a restriction which excluded all shopkeepers and retailers. (CLMET3.0, 1-51)

... the Utrecht and the Gelykheid, were used as temporary receiving ships for newly raised men. The names on their lists are, therefore, *merely* those of men who were passed on to other ships, in whose muster-books they appeared again. (CLMET3.0, 3-240)

Thus the bees worked on opposite sides of the wall of wax, until eventually the cells on both sides were completed in all their wonderful regularity and harmony of arrangement, not *merely* as regards those standing side by side, but also as regards those which were upon the other side of their pyramidal base. (CLMET3.0, 3-240)

## 1.4. Focusing *mere* and *merely*

- **Particularising focus** ('just', 'nothing but')

"As Plato had said, "'twas to no purpose for a sober-minded man to knock at the door of poesy," ... That was consistent with his sympathetic belief in the capability of *mere* impetuous youth as such. (CLMET3.0, 3-238)

the threatened attack as well as the pretended apprehension of an engagement had been contrived for the *mere* purpose of testing her courage. (CLMET3.0, 2-172)

we have exchanged realities for appearances, and have lost all pleasure, *merely* for pleasure's sake. (CLMET3.0, 1-88)

that it is our own pride, which makes us so much displeas'd with the pride of other people; and that vanity becomes insupportable to us *merely* because we are vain. (CLMET3.0, 1-32)

## 1.4. Focusing *mere* and *merely*

- **Inclusive scalar focus** ('even')
  - minute focus value evokes all less surprising values
  - logically strongest claim true in least number of cases

To those who have never known bright days, the *mere* sight of a happy face is as it were a revelation and inspiration in one. (CLMET3.0, 3-217)

how **even** the slightest negative nuance in the financial press -- that a chain 's performance is slipping, say, or the *mere* mention of words like 'ailing' -- is enough to stampede them into rash, short-term judgements that might prove unwise in the longer term. (WB brbooks)

I shall now write a play without dresses at all, A plan, which I'm sure will be perfectly new. Yet opposed to convention, why *merely* the mention Of a thing so immodest will startle a few (CLMET3.0, 3-333)

I have never been able to write anything funny about that dinner; it depresses me to this day, *merely* thinking of it. (CLMET3.0, 3\_285)

## 2. Corpus study on *mere* and *merely*

## 2.1. Corpus data

- Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English (PPCME2)
- Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English (PPCEME)
  
- Corpus of Late Modern English Texts (CLMET3.0)
- Wordbanks Online – brbooks section

} exhaustive  
extractions

} random samples  
of 200 for each  
period in the  
corpus





## 2.2. Structure of discussion

- Section 3: For all datasets of **focusing** *mere* and *merely*:
  - 3.1: identify commonalities of focusing uses in terms of pragmatic focus types
    - ⇒ basis for *generalizations* relating to ‘purport’:  
‘intertranslatability’ between different structures in one language
  - 3.2: identify differences between focusing structures of *mere* and *merely* with reference to different units between which syntagmatic relation obtains
    - ⇒ basis for characterizing *differences* in coded meanings
- Section 4: For all datasets of **all uses** of *mere* and *merely*:
  - sketch development of focusing structures from semiotic perspective

### 3. Focusing *mere* and *merely*

### 3.1. *Pragmatic focus types of mere and merely*

## 3.1.1. Pragmatic focus types of *mere*

	deg mod / foc	foc: part	foc: part / excl: scal	foc: excl: scal	foc: excl: scal/ cat	foc: excl: cat	foc: incl	total
<b>1500-1570</b>	2 66,7%	1 33,3%						<b>3</b>
<b>1570-1640</b>	3 75,0%			1 25,0%				<b>4</b>
<b>1640-1710</b>	5 33,3%	3 20,0%		6 40,0%		1 6,7%		<b>15</b>
<b>1710-1780</b>	12 7,2%	23 13,8%		93 55,7%	4 2,4%	34 20,4%	1 0,6%	<b>167</b>
<b>1780-1850</b>	9 5,1%	16 9,1%	7 4,0%	109 61,9%	8 4,5%	24 13,6%	3 1,7%	<b>176</b>
<b>1850-1920</b>	5 2,9%	22 12,9%	1 0,6%	116 68,2%	2 1,2%	12 7,1%	12 7,1%	<b>170</b>
<b>1972-2004</b>	5 2,6%	20 10,5%		150 78,9%		10 5,3%	5 2,6%	<b>190</b>

## 3.1.2. Pragmatic focus types of *merely*

	foc /deg mod	foc: part	foc: excl: scal	foc: excl: scal/cat	foc: excl: cat	foc: incl	
<b>1500-1570</b>			1 33,3%		2 66,7%		<b>3</b>
<b>1570-1640</b>	1 12,5%	1 12,5%	3 37,5%		3 37,5%		<b>8</b>
<b>1640-1710</b>			6 100,0%				<b>6</b>
<b>1710-1780</b>		40 20,4%	117 59,7%	3 1,5%	32 16,3%	4 2,0%	<b>196</b>
<b>1780-1850</b>	1 0,5%	18 9,0%	141 70,5%		36 18,0%	4 2,0%	<b>200</b>
<b>1850-1920</b>	4 2,0%	22 11,0%	131 65,5%	3 1,5%	30 15,0%	10 5,0%	<b>200</b>
<b>1972-2004</b>		12 6,0%	155 77,5%	2 1,0%	27 13,5%	4 2,0%	<b>200</b>

## 3.1.3. Pragmatic focus types compared

- *Mere* and *merely* are very similar in terms of **content-purport**:
  - same range of pragmatic focus types
  - comparable development in terms of proportions of different focus types
  - within the different focus types, similar preferences for specific types of collocations and meanings



## 3.1.3. Pragmatic focus types compared

e.g. particularizing *mere* and *merely* favour 'purport' semantics of 'cause' :

*mere*: transitive agent, circumstances expressing cause, pred NP with lexical nouns such as *motive*, *reason*, *result*, etc.

e.g. *we wait for their Discovery till mere chance shall place them before us*  
(CLMET3.0, 1\_15)

*it is too vehement and acrimonious to be the mere result of publick spirit* (CLMET3.0, 1\_27)

*merely*: *because*-clause, PPs with *for*, *on account of*, etc.

e.g. *vanity becomes insupportable to us merely because we are vain*.  
(CLMET3.0, 1-32)

*Ironically enough, he had once been jealous of me, merely for being friendly with his then girlfriend*. (WB)

## 3.1.3. Pragmatic focus types compared

- *Mere* and *merely* are very similar in terms of **content-purport**:
  - same range of pragmatic focus types
  - comparable development in terms of proportions of different focus types
  - within the different focus types, similar preferences for specific types of collocations and meanings
  - adjectival realizations can typically be paraphrased using the adverbial structure

e.g. *Was he, then, a mere acquaintance, or one that you knew fairly well?* (WB)

*it made no difference whether that person was their friend or merely an acquaintance.* (WB)

*'There is only one Creator and we merely mix the elements He gives us.' 'That mere mixing', "says P. L. Travers in *The Interviewer*, ... shows us our essential place in the process.* (WB brbooks)



## 3.1.3. Pragmatic focus types compared

- *Mere* and *merely* are very similar in terms of **content-purport**:
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  - adjectival realizations can typically be paraphrased using the adverbial structure

⇒ **“Intertranslatability”** between two distinct structures or content-forms

3.2. *Differences between  
focusing structures of  
mere and merely*

## 3.2.1. Representational vs. interpersonal modifiers

- McGregor (1997): **syntagmatic structure is meaning-making**:  
different *types* of syntagmatic relationships between units at heart of semiotic relation between coding form + coded meaning
  - structural analysis of (i) descriptive and (ii) focusing uses of *mere* – *merely*
    - (i) þey herden a **mer** vois & a smal, as of a child, seyinge ‘Amen’. (OED, c1390)
    - (ii) It was 1977: Mrs Thatcher was **mere** leader of the Conservative opposition at the time. (WB)
    - (i) Soch other moral Lernyngs, as are **merely** deryved out of Scripture. (OED, a1556, Cranmer) (‘without admixture’, ‘purely’)
    - (ii) I didn't say we were hushing anything up. I **merely** wondered whether you could prove your extraordinary suggestion. (WB)
- ⇒ two **different types of modification**, which code different types of meaning: **representational** vs. **interpersonal**  
(Halliday 1970, cf. Hengeveld 1989)

## 3.2.1. Representational vs. interpersonal modifiers

### A) Dependency relation

- **structural** relation involves **inequality**:
  - (dominant) head vs. dependent
  - head determines distribution of entire unit
- **semantic** assembly is **compositional**, yielding **representational** meaning

e.g. relation between descriptive modifier *mere* and head noun, e.g. *mer vois*

meaning: subtype of voice, viz. 'pure voice' (Langacker 1991: Ch. 1)

relation between verb and manner modifier, e.g. *merely deryved*

more delicately characterized act, 'derive purely' (McGregor 1997:125)

## 3.2.1. Representational vs. interpersonal modifiers

a mer vois



merely deryved



## 3.2.1. Representational vs. interpersonal modifiers

### **B) Interpersonal scoping relation** (McGregor 1997: 209ff)

- ‘specific syntagmatic combinatoric coding specific meaning type’
- **structurally**, binary relation between scoping element and unit in its scope
- **semantically, non-compositional** assembly:

interpersonal meaning ‘overlays’ scoped-over representational material

e.g. relation between focusing modifier and its domain

*Mrs Thatcher was **mere** leader of the Conservative opposition (WB)*

*I didn't say we were hushing anything up. I **merely** wondered whether you could prove your extraordinary suggestion. (WB)*

interpersonal meaning: Sp positions scoped material as (lower) value in implied categorial contrast or at end of scale

## 3.2.1. Representational vs. interpersonal modifiers

Mrs Thatcher was **mere** leader of the Conservative opposition

I **merely** wondered whether you could prove your extraordinary suggestion.

## 3.2.2. *Mere* and *merely* as interpersonal modifiers

### 3.2.2.1. NP structure with focusing adjective

English NP accommodates elements of structure that interpersonally modify ‘type specifications’ chosen, i.e. noun + descriptive modifiers (Langacker 1991)

- a *so-called* leader, an *alleged* victim  
“framing” use, “throws doubt on its appropriateness as a designation of the referent entity” (McGregor 1997: 266-267)
- a *sort of* holiday, a *kind of* linguist (Denison 2002, Keizer 2007)  
qualifying construction used to refer to ‘possible’, ‘arguable’, or ‘peripheral’ member of class designated by N2



## 3.2.2. *Mere* and *merely* as interpersonal modifiers

### 3.2.2.1. NP structure with focusing adjective

English NP accommodates elements of structure that interpersonally modify ‘type specifications’ chosen, i.e. noun + descriptive modifiers (Langacker 1991)

We propose to include focusing adjectives in this category:

occupy same element of structure in NP with comparable interpersonal meaning, relating to ‘type specifications’

e.g. *Thatcher was mere leader of the Conservative opposition at the time.*

→ type specifications framed as low value on scale

## 3.2.2. *Mere* and *merely* as interpersonal modifiers

### 3.2.2.1. NP structure with focusing adjective

- **Structurally,**
    - focusing adjective not ‘part’ of type specifications or determiner
    - interpersonal modifier ‘scopes over’ representational material
    - always **pre-**posed to scoped-over units
    - in older stages of English: scopal domain:
      - noun + descriptive modifiers (! **semantic** scope may be more narrow)
      - nominalizations (semantically, SoA ‘telescoped’ into NP)
- e.g. *the late war will come to seem a **mere** affair of **outposts*** (CLMET3)  
*"They are almost all," he says, "upon **mere** **family and personal** matters* (CLMET3)  
*the Natives had attacked us for **meer** **landing** without taking away one thing*  
(CLMET1)

## 3.2.2. *Mere* and *merely* as interpersonal modifiers

### 3.2.2.1. NP structure with focusing adjective

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  - focusing adjective not ‘part’ of type specifications or determiner
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  - always **pre-**posed to scoped-over units
  - in older stages of English: scopal domain:
    - noun + descriptive modifiers (! **semantic** scope may be more narrow)
    - nominalizations (semantically SoA ‘telescoped’ into NP)

in Present-day English: also narrow scope over quantifier only

e.g. *The flight was three hours late (well, a **mere** **three** hours, thought Taggart, a bagatelle, really.)* (WB)

## 3.2.2. *Mere* and *merely* as interpersonal modifiers

### 3.2.2.1. NP structure with focusing adjective

- **Primary semantic/pragmatic effect:**

categorization, labelling, stylistically marked designators, ad hoc descriptions

e.g. *mere worms and grovellers* as we are (CLMET3)

*If he were a mere blockhead* (CLMET2)

*the Clergy, among whom are ... mere Commons in Curates' frocks* (CLMET2)

*now the wealth did not weigh on me: now it was not a mere bequest of coin* (CLMET2)

*Marat is no phantasm of the brain, or mere lying impress of Printer's Types* (CLMET2)

*something more than mere ipse dixit* (CLMET1)

has led to fixed collocations such as *mere mortals*, *a mere man*, etc.

## 3.2.2. *Mere* and *merely* as interpersonal modifiers

### 3.2.2.2. Focusing adverb

- **Structurally,**
  - interpersonal modifier ‘scopes over’ representational material
  - much freer in its syntagmatic possibilities than focusing adjective:
    - can occur in all positions of ‘focusing subjuncts’ (Quirk et al 1985:604f)
    - BUT: not in front of noun or quantifier in NP: \**a merely leader*, \**a merely three coins*



## 3.2.2. *Mere* and *merely* as interpersonal modifiers

### 3.2.2.2. Focusing adverb

e.g. *As the same charge is made by the apothecary, whether he attends the patient or merely prepares the prescription of a physician, ...* (CLMET3.0, 2-147)

*vanity becomes insupportable to us merely because we are vain.* (CLMET3.0, 1-32)

*it depresses me to this day, merely thinking of it.* (CLMET3.0, 3\_285)

*we ... have lost all pleasure, merely for pleasure's sake.* (CLMET3.0, 1-88)

*merely the mention Of a thing so immodest will startle a few* (CLMET3.0, 3-333)

*him who is merely our fellow-creature* (CLMET3.0, 2-104)

*it was a merely formal protestation* (WB)

*Would it be courageous not to answer it, or merely foolhardy?* (WB)

### 3.2.2. *Mere* and *merely* as interpersonal modifiers

	VP	VP+ compl	ing	ing+ compl	dep clause	PP	NP	pred NP	AP	pred AP	
<b>1500-1570</b>					1 33,3%	1 33,3%	1 33,3%				<b>3</b>
<b>1570-1640</b>		1 12,5%				3 37,5%	1 12,5%	2 25,0%		1 12,5%	<b>8</b>
<b>1640-1710</b>					1 16,7%	5 83,3%					<b>6</b>
<b>1710-1780</b>		1 0,5%	1 0,5%	1 0,5%	48 24,5%	88 44,9%	1 0,5%	23 11,7%	12 6,1%	21 10,7%	<b>196</b>
<b>1780-1850</b>	3 1,5%	49 24,6%		13 6,5%	31 15,6%	36 18,1%	6 3,0%	46 23,1%	7 3,5%	8 4,0%	<b>199</b>
<b>1850-1920</b>	7 3,6%	53 27,0%		5 2,6%	23 11,7%	25 12,8%	21 10,7%	28 14,3%	18 9,2%	16 8,2%	<b>196</b>
<b>1972-2004</b>	14 7,0%	76 38,0%	2 1,0%	10 5,0%	14 7,0%	15 7,5%	9 4,5%	48 24,0%	4 2,0%	8 4,0%	<b>200</b>

## 3.2.2. *Mere* and *merely* as interpersonal modifiers

### 3.2.2.2. Focusing adverb

- Typically precedes, but can also follow the scoped-over element  
e.g. *This Frenchman 's a friend of yours?" `No. An acquaintance **merely**. (WB)*  
*No, I don't choose to do it in the sense you mean; choosing from a whole world of professions, all possible. It was by the constraint of accident **merely**. (CLMET3.0, 3-241)*

	1500-1570	1570-1640	1640-1710	1710-1780	1780-1850	1850-1920	1972-2004
<b>preposed</b>	1 33,3%	8 100,0%	6 100,0%	194 99,0%	191 96,0%	192 98,0%	199 99,5%
<b>postposed</b>				2 1,0%	8 4,0%	4 2,0%	1 0,5%



## 3.2.2. *Mere* and *merely* as interpersonal modifiers

### 3.2.2.2. Focusing adverb

- Typically precedes, but can also follow the scoped-over element
  - ! *vagueness* in terms of scopal domain, particularly in ‘medial’ position (Quirk et al. 1985:605; Nevalainen 1991)
  - context may provide clues, but can be disambiguated only by prosody

e.g. / **merely** *added this new score to his account.* (CLMET3.0, 3-291)

/ **merely** *added* *this new score to his account.*

/ **merely** *added* **this new score** *to his account.*

by contrast, scopal domains involving clauses mostly clear

e.g. *she seemed to talk* **merely** *because conversation was a conventional requirement of society* (CLMET 3)

## 3.2.2. *Mere* and *merely* as interpersonal modifiers

- **Primary pragmatic effect:**

construe discursive relations between predications and propositions such as (Tognini-Bonelli 1993)

- contrast

e.g. *That must be the reason why you're a top secretary with an inflation-proof pension, and I'm merely a humble head of department.* (WB)

*Such a view, however, presupposes that his role was merely to trick his people, and so subjugate them, with the aid of magic . Our own researches suggest the contrary. The clever-man 's essential role was one of spiritual healing, the easing of tribal tensions*

- specification

e.g. *Once he attacked Russia he was finished -- the British army merely had to mop him up at Waterloo.* (WB)

*feeling it merely as something hanging over them, with nothing definite about it, it seemed almost like a threat* (WB)

## 4. Development of focusing structures

## 4.1. Development of focusing *mere*

	descr pred	descr mod	descr/ degree mod	degree mod	deg mod/ foc	foc	noun	unclear	
<b>1420-1500</b>	0,0%	1 50,0%	0,0%	1 50,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	2
<b>1500-1570</b>	1 6,7%	2 13,3%	0,0%	1 6,7%	2 13,3%	1 6,7%	8 53,3%	0,0%	15
<b>1570-1640</b>	0,0%	2 15,4%	0,0%	8 61,5%	2 15,4%	1 7,7%	0,0%	0,0%	13
<b>1640-1710</b>	0,0%	1 4,8%	0,0%	5 23,8%	5 23,8%	10 47,6%	0,0%	0,0%	21
<b>1710-1780</b>	0,0%	4 2,0%	1 0,5%	23 11,5%	12 6,0%	155 77,5%	3 1,5%	2 1,0%	200
<b>1780-1850</b>	0,0%	2 1,0%	0,0%	20 10,0%	9 4,5%	166 83,0%	2 1,0%	1 0,5%	200
<b>1850-1920</b>	0,0%	2 1,0%	0,0%	25 12,5%	5 2,5%	165 82,5%	3 1,5%	0,0%	200
<b>1972-2004</b>	1 0,5%	0,0%	0,0%	4 2,0%	5 2,5%	185 92,5%	4 2,0%	1 0,5%	200

# 4.1. Development of focusing *mere*

- Earliest uses:
  - Descriptive modifier uses  
e.g. *her grace was so mere* (PPCEME - E1 - P1 – 203.404)
  - Degree modifier uses  
e.g. *Nay, Evens, the famous man upon the Harp, having not his equal in the world, did the other day die for mere want.* (PPCEME - E3 – H,7,414.125)

Davidse et al. (2010): *descr mod mere* > *deg mod mere*  
similar development posited for *pure* and *sheer*


~ General pathway of change from descriptive to intensifying uses of adjectives

(a.o. Paradis 2000; Ghesquière 2010, 2014)

# 4.1. Development of focusing *mere*

- Focusing uses:
  - from very early onwards
  - at time of occurrence: uses vague between foc and deg mod reading  
e.g. *beauty, her bed-fellow, was bold to perswade her; and sleepy securitie, mother of all mischiefe - tut, her prayers was but meere prattle* (PPCEME – E2-P1,5.9)

Davidse et al. (2010):

 descr mod *mere*    ‘purity’, ‘unmixedness’ as quality  
foc *mere*            ‘focus only on’ in relation to other alternatives

**BUT:** OED: all at around the same time: mid 16<sup>th</sup> C  
no observable changes in the data

## 4.2. Development of focusing *merely*

	deg mod	foc /deg mod	foc: part	foc: excl: scal	foc: excl: scal/cat	foc: excl: cat	foc: incl	
<b>1500-1570</b>				1 33,3%		2 66,7%		<b>3</b>
<b>1570-1640</b>	1 11,1%	1 11,1%	1 11,1%	3 33,3%		3 33,3%		<b>9</b>
<b>1640-1710</b>				6 100,0%				<b>6</b>
<b>1710-1780</b>	4 2,0%		40 20,0%	117 58,5%	3 1,5%	32 16,0%	4 2,0%	<b>200</b>
<b>1780-1850</b>		1 0,5%	18 9,0%	141 70,5%		36 18,0%	4 2,0%	<b>200</b>
<b>1850-1920</b>		4 2,0%	22 11,0%	131 65,5%	3 1,5%	30 15,0%	10 5,0%	<b>200</b>
<b>1972-2004</b>			12 6,0%	155 77,5%	2 1,0%	27 13,5%	4 2,0%	<b>200</b>

## 4.2. Development of focusing *merely*

- In the data: the earliest attested uses of *merely* are focusing degree modifying slightly later and less frequent

**BUT:** OED: descriptive and degree modifier uses appear at around the same time: mid 16<sup>th</sup> C

focusing modifier uses some 30 years later

⇒ Interpersonal and representational uses of both *mere* and of *merely* all develop at around the same time: mid 16<sup>th</sup> C



## 4.3. Conclusion

- Boye and Harder (2007: 588):  
inherent **flexibility** to endow either unit of binary structure with primary (lexical) or secondary (grammatical) status
- *mere* and *merely*  
more or less from start (mid 16<sup>th</sup> C): flexibility of construing them as
  - representational (lexical) modifier:  
**integrating** with its head into **composite** representation
  - interpersonal (grammatical) modifier:  
**scoping over** representational material

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