



ALL ADVERBS FUNCTION AS ADVERBIALS BUT NOT ALL ADVERBIALS ARE ADVERBS: A SYNTACTIC AND FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between adverbs and adverbials has long been obscured by traditional grammatical descriptions that fail to differentiate clearly between lexical category and syntactic function. In many pedagogical contexts, any expression modifying a verb or clause is labeled an “adverb,” resulting in terminological confusion and analytical inaccuracy. This article re-examines the issue from a modern linguistic perspective and argues that adverbs and adverbials operate on two distinct planes of grammatical organization. An adverb is a member of a word class defined by morphological and distributional properties while an adverbial is a functional element within clause structure that may be realized by a wide range of forms including adverbs, noun phrases, prepositional phrases, finite clauses and non-finite constructions.

Using insights from structural grammar, functional linguistics and corpus-based analysis, this article demonstrates that the relationship between the two is non-reciprocal: while every adverb has the potential to function adverbially, many adverbials do not contain adverb at all. Reliable examples from contemporary English illustrate how circumstantial meanings like time, place, manner, cause and condition are more frequently expressed through phrasal and clausal constructions than through single-word adverbs. The study aims to highlight the theoretical significance of maintaining the form–function distinction for proper syntactic description and argues that collapsing the two categories leads to oversimplified grammatical models. Finally, this paper explores pedagogical implications, proposing that English grammar instruction should emphasize structural awareness rather than suffix-based identification, thereby contributing to clearer grammatical theory and more effective language teaching.

1 Introduction

One of the underlying insights of modern linguistics is the distinction between form and function. However, this distinction is frequently blurred in the teaching and analysis of English grammar, especially regarding the concepts of adverbs and adverbials. Traditional grammar often defines adverbs as “words that modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs,” and then extends the label to any expression answering questions like how, when, or where. Such definitions, while pedagogically convenient, obscure a critical grammatical reality: adverbs are forms; adverbials are functions. Failure to recognize this difference leads to: Misclassification of sentence elements, overreliance on the -ly suffix, difficulty in analyzing complex sentences and inaccurate grammatical pedagogy. This article argues that a clear separation between lexical category (adverb) and syntactic role (adverbial) is momentous for exact linguistic analysis and effective language teaching. It aims to explore the non-reciprocal relationship between adverbs and adverbials, illustrating that while all adverbs can function as adverbials, many adverbials do not contain the components of adverb at all.

2 Literature Review

The distinction between adverbs as a lexical category and adverbials as a syntactic function has been widely discussed in English grammar research. Early structuralist approaches, such as Fries (1952), emphasized the positional and distributional properties of words to define grammatical categories, highlighting the need to identify both word classes and their functional roles in a sentence.

Biber et al. (1999) and Quirk et al. (1985) extended this distinction, demonstrating that adverbs, often identified morphologically by the suffix -ly, are only a subset of elements capable of performing adverbial functions. Temporal, causal, and manner meanings, for instance, are frequently conveyed through prepositional phrases (in the morning), noun phrases (last week), or clauses (when the lecture ended), not merely through single-word adverbs.

Crystal (2003) and Downing & Locke (2006) highlighted pedagogical consequences, noting that overgeneralization of adverbs based on morphology leads to misclassification, terminological confusion, and difficulty in teaching accurate sentence analysis. Functional grammar frameworks, particularly

Halliday & Matthiessen (2014), interpret adverbials as circumstantial elements encoding experiential information.

Huddleston & Pullum (2002) emphasized the non-reciprocal relationship: all adverbs may function adverbially, but not all adverbials are adverbs.

Corpus-based evidence from Biber et al. (1999) and Carter & McCarthy (2006) confirms that native English usage often relies on phrasal and clausal constructions to express meanings traditionally associated with adverbs.

Greenbaum (1996) and Leech & Svartvik (2013) discuss the pedagogical implications, advocating for instruction that differentiates form from function, enabling learners to analyze and produce complex sentences more effectively.

In fine, the literature consistently establishes that adverbs and adverbials operate on distinct grammatical planes, forming a theoretical and practical basis for advanced syntactic analysis and pedagogy.

3 Adverbs as a Lexical Category

An adverb is defined primarily by morphology and distribution rather than function.

3.1 Characteristics of Adverbs

- Often formed with the suffix -ly: quickly, carefully
- May appear as simple forms: now, here, well
- Can modify verbs, adjectives, other adverbs, or entire clauses
- Function as the head of an adverb phrase
- Exhibit positional mobility within a sentence

Examples:

- Anisha spoke **politely**.
- Afif is **very** intelligent.



- We **often** travel.

These examples illustrate that adverbs are identifiable based on lexical properties, irrespective of the function they perform in a sentence.

4 Adverbials as a Syntactic Function

Adverbials are clause elements, not word classes, that provide circumstantial information about an action or state.

4.1 Semantic Roles of Adverbials

- **Time:** yesterday, last year
- **Place:** in the room, to the field
- **Manner:** with care, in a polite way
- **Cause:** because he is tired
- **Condition:** if you read
- **Degree:** to a great extent

Unlike adverbs, adverbials are defined by what they do, not by their form. They may be realized by:

- **Adverbs**
- **Noun phrases,**
- **Prepositional phrases,**
- **Clauses (finite or non-finite)**

5 Structural Realizations of Adverbials

5.1 Adverbs as Adverbials

Viz:

- Salma whispered **softly**.
- Liton **quickly** finished his homework.
- They arrived **timely**.
- We **hardly** watch television.
- They **completely** forgot her.

5.2 Noun Phrases as Adverbials

Viz:

- Daizy met her **last Monday**.
- Setu stayed **three nights** at the hotel.
- They travelled **every summer**.
- We spent **the afternoon** in the park.
- Shamima worked **a long shift** yesterday.

5.3 Prepositional Phrases as Adverbials

Viz:

- The cat is sleeping **under the sofa**.
- She spoke **with great confidence**.
- Ripon arrived **after the lecture**.
- We sat **beside the window**.
- They walked **along the riverbank**.

5.4 Clausal Adverbials

Viz:

- I will call you **when I arrive home**.
- The lady smiled **because she was pleased with the result**.
- They cancelled the picnic **since it was raining**.
- He stayed indoors **although the sun was shining**.
- We postponed the meeting **until the manager returned**.

5.5 Non-Finite Constructions as Adverbials

Viz:

- **To finish the project on time**, he worked sincerely.
- **Walking through the park**, she enjoyed the fresh air.
- **Having completed the course**, they celebrated.
- **To avoid traffic**, he left early in the morning.
- **Sitting near the fireplace**, they read their books quietly.

6 The Non-Reciprocal Relationship

Adverbs and adverbials share a hierarchical, non-equivalent relationship:

All adverbs can function as adverbials. But many adverbials do not contain an adverb

Logically:

Adverbs \subset Adverbials

The notation Adverbs \subset Adverbials indicates that adverbs form a subset within the broader category of adverbials. An adverb is a lexical word class (e.g.,

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nicely, very, there), on the other hand, an adverbial is a syntactic function in a sentence. All adverbs can function as adverbials because they modify verbs, adjectives, clauses, or other adverbs.

However, not all adverbials are adverbs; noun phrases (last night), prepositional phrases (in the room), and clauses (when he arrived) can also function as adverbials. So the set of adverbs is included within the larger functional category of adverbials.

7 Functional Flexibility in English

English syntax allows stylistic and functional variation:

Viz:

- We met **yesterday**. (adverb)
- We met **in the morning**. (prepositional phrase)
- We met **when the meeting ended**. (clause)

Such flexibility enables:

- Stylistic variation
- Information structuring
- Economy of expression

It highlights the importance of recognizing functional roles over mere morphological markers.

8 Pedagogical Implications

8.1 Problems in Traditional Teaching

- Overreliance on -ly as an adverbial marker
- Mislabeling phrases or clauses as adverbs
- Weak sentence-analysis skills

8.2 Recommended Approach

Effective instruction should:

- Teach form vs. function explicitly
- Encourage structural analysis rather than suffix-based identification
- Present adverbials as clause elements realized through diverse structures
- Use authentic examples from contemporary English
- Promote syntactic awareness and advanced writing skills

This approach strengthens learners' analytical ability and understanding of English grammar in both theoretical and applied contexts.

9 Theoretical Significance

The adverb–adverbial distinction exemplifies a broader linguistic principle: grammatical form and grammatical function are independent dimensions. Recognizing this independence allows linguists to:

- Precisely analyze clause architecture
- Explain variation in modification
- Integrate syntax and semantics
- Model real language use rather than simplified abstractions

It provides a framework for accurate grammatical description, functional analysis and pedagogical innovation.

10 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that conflating adverbs and adverbials obscures the essential distinction between form and function, as highlighted in the introduction. Traditional approaches often mislabel any modifier of a verb or clause as an adverb, leading to terminological confusion and oversimplified models. By analyzing adverbs as a lexical category and adverbials as a syntactic function, this article confirms that all adverbs function as adverbials, but not all adverbials are adverbs. Adverbs are defined by their morphological and distributional properties while adverbials are functional components realized through words, phrases and clauses. Maintaining this form–function distinction is crucial for: Accurate grammatical description – preventing misclassification and enabling precise syntactic analysis. Effective pedagogy – improving learners' comprehension, sentence analysis and writing skills. Modern linguistic theory – aligning with corpus-based, functional approaches to English grammar. A grammar that distinguishes clearly between adverbs as words and adverbials as clause elements resolves terminological confusion and provides a framework for analyzing, teaching and understanding English in its full patterns and functional richness.



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