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Master thesis

The use of absolute adjectives with degree adverbs in 19th and 20th century English /

Upotreba apsolutnih pridjeva sa prilozima za stepen u engleskom jeziku 19. i 20. vijeka

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACAD   academic
Acc.   accusative
adj.   adjective
ADV   adverb
adv.   adverb
advt   advertisement
ch.   chapter
COCA   Corpus of Contemporary American English
COHA   Corpus of Historical American English
Dat.   dative
dat.   dative
et al.   "the others"
fem.   feminine
FIC   fiction
Gen.   genitive
hon.   honorable
ibid   "in the same source"
Instr.   instrumental
L.   Latin
Lat.   Latin
MAG   magazine
Masc.   masculine
MOV   movies
Neut.   neutral
NEWS   newspaper
NF   non-fiction
Nom.   nominative
NWO   The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research
OE   Old English
OALD   *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*
OED   *Oxford English Dictionary*
para.   paragraph
PDE   Present-Day English
pref.   prefix
SAMUELS   Semantic Annotation and Mark-Up for Enhancing Lexical Searches
sg.   singular
SPOK   spoken

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I INTRODUCTION

The thesis will deal with the use of absolute adjectives with degree adverbs in nineteenth and twentieth-century English.

The first part of the thesis will give us a brief overview of the history of adjectives through all three phases of the English language: Old English (c. 450 – 1100), Middle English (1100 – 1500), and Modern English (1500 – present day). Social and historical changes will also be described through each phase because each change affected the language and thus the adjectives. The essential characteristics of adjectives are described through declension, word formation, and comparison.

The second part of the thesis deals with prescriptive and descriptive attitudes towards grammar in general, explaining the differences in their approaches and their advocates. The eighteenth-century grammarians are considered to belong to the prescriptive tradition. However, some of them could be predecessors of linguists as we know them today, but this could be said only about the grammarians who were "inquisitive about language, investigated and published on language, and tried to answer the questions of their day about language" (Chapman, 2008: 35). Writing of grammars was not the cause for the breach between grammarians and linguists but grammarians' complacent views on language and their satisfaction to just pass on "the received wisdom of the earlier grammarians" was the reason, according to Chapman (2008: 35).

Through this part, I will touch upon the beginnings of English grammar, starting from those grammar books based on the Latin language, introducing the idea of an English Academy and its advocates. Then the short descriptions of the prominent grammar books and usage guides will be presented in order to explain the aims of the 18th-century grammarians giving insight into their audience and why their publications were successful.

The research part of the thesis will cover the meanings of absolute adjectives as non-gradable adjectives and their origins, their extended meanings as gradable adjectives, and their use with degree adverbs. The adjectives and their meanings will be checked in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (2000), *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1992) as well as in the online versions of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (https://www.ahdictionary.com/) and *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* (https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com).

In the first part of the research, I will research the use of absolute adjectives based on the British and American usage guides and grammars of the 19th and 20th centuries. The research will show the attitudes and opinions of the authors about this particular group of adjectives and whether they relied on the views of the 18th-century grammarians. Then I will analyse a selected group of absolute adjectives with a selected group of degree adverbs based on the online corpora: Hansard, COHA, and COCA. The research will show if the advice from the usage guides and grammars has been followed in practice.

II HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Historical background

Different political, social, and economic forces influence a language. They can be seen in every aspect of a language, i.e., in the number of its speakers, their spread, the meanings of words, the accents, and the grammar structures.

Many political and social events from the past affected the English people, and all of them had an effect on their language. Today's English language reflects those changes and many centuries of development. As Baugh and Cable (2005: 13) state, "the diversity of cultures that find expression in it is a reminder that the history of English is a story of cultures in contact during the past 1,500 years". Significant events in English history contributed to the development of the language in one way or another: the Roman Christianizing of Britain, which brought England into contact with Latin civilization, made additions to the vocabulary; the Scandinavian invasions resulted in the mixture of the two peoples as well as their languages; the Norman Conquest made English the language of the lower classes while the nobles used French. When English regained supremacy as the language of all the population, no matter the class, its form and vocabulary were quite different from the language of 1066. The development of England as a maritime power, the expansion of the British Empire, the growth of commerce, industry, science, and literature under the rule of Queen Elizabeth I also had an impact on the language itself.

The history of the English language is divided into three main periods: Old English (450 - 1150), Middle English (1150 - 1500), and Modern English (since 1500) (Baugh and Cable, 2005: 46). This part of the thesis will provide a historical overview of the development of adjectives through these periods.

According to *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, an adjective is "a word that describes a person or thing, for example *big*, *red* and *clever* in *a big house*, *red wine* and *a clever idea*". Adjectives modify nouns and "denote properties – most centrally in the domains of size, shape, colour, worth, and age […] physical properties like hardness and heaviness, human tendencies like kindness and cruelty, properties like speed of movement, and so on" (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002: 527-528).

2.2. Old English

The first Indo-European language spoken in England was the Celtic language, which had two divisions, "the Gaelic or Goidelic branch and the Brythonic branch" (Baugh and Cable, 2005: 39). Latin was introduced to Britain when Britain became a province of the Roman Empire and was spoken there for about four centuries (Baugh and Cable, 2005: 39). But it did not replace the Celtic language completely because only the members of the upper classes and some inhabitants in the towns used it.

Differences between Old English and Modern English can be seen in spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. According to Baugh and Cable (2005: 49), "the vocabulary of Old English is almost purely Germanic […] An examination of the words in an Old English dictionary shows that about 85 percent of them are no longer in use", which means that one cannot read texts written in Old English and understand them.

Still, the most prominent difference concerns grammar since Modern English is an analytic[1] and Old English a synthetic language[2]. This means that nouns, adjectives, and verbs had inflections in Old English, although the inflections of verbs were less elaborate than those of nouns and adjectives. "Theoretically, the noun and adjective are inflected for four cases in the singular and four in the plural, although the forms are not always distinctive, and in addition, the adjective has separate forms for each of the three genders" (Baugh and Cable, 2005: 50).

2.3. Adjective in Old English

There were no analytical formations, and different forms were made by inflections, suffixes, and sound interchange. There were two declensions and two degrees of comparison (comparative and superlative). Adjectives agreed with the nouns they modified in number, gender, and case:

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[1] In linguistic typology, an **analytic language** is a language that primarily conveys relationships between words in sentences by way of *helper* words (particles, prepositions, etc.) and word order, as opposed to using inflections (changing the form of a word to convey its role in the sentence) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Analytic_language.

[2] **Synthetic language**, any language in which syntactic relations within sentences are expressed by inflection (the change in the form of a word that indicates distinctions of tense, person, gender, number, mood, voice, and case) or by agglutination (word formation by means of morpheme, or word unit, clustering) https://www.britannica.com/topic/synthetic-language.

the gender of a noun is recognisable from the form of the pronoun or adjective which is in "congruence" with it. Lat. *dominus* "lord" and *agricola* "farmer" are masculine, because an adjective referring to the nouns will take the "masculine" form (*dominus, agricola bonus* "good farmer"), whereas *domina* "lady" and *fagus* "beech tree" are feminine (*domina, fagus alta*) (Bammesberger, 1992: 48).

They had the same categories as nouns did ("number - the singular and the plural; gender - masculine, neuter and feminine; case - 4/5 (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative and partly instrumental)" (Verba, 2004: 54) although there were some adjectival categories. All of these features will be dealt with in more detail in the next part of the thesis.

2.3.1. Declension

Adjectives inherited a twofold declension from Proto-Germanic, usually called the strong and the weak adjective declension. Which declension an adjective was to follow was syntactically determined. This means that an adjective was not weak or strong because the noun it modified was weak or strong. Adjectives did not agree with nouns in this respect because they sometimes took inflection from pronouns, and they could also keep a separate instrumental case inflection in the singular form only. The term "adjective" was also used for numerals and quantifiers in Old English grammar (Hogg, 1992: 138-139).

Baugh and Cable (2005) explain that the weak declension is used when a demonstrative or a personal pronoun accompanies the adjective, or a noun in the genitive case no matter where the adjective is (before or after the noun). The adjective is declined strong when it is not so accompanied or is preceded by an adjective of quantity or number. "Thus we have in Old English *gōd mann* (good man) but *sē gōda mann* (the good man)" (Baugh and Cable, 2005: 52).

		Masc.	Fem.	Neut.	Masc.	Fem.	Neut.
		STRONG DECLESION			**WEAK DECLENSION**		
Singular	N.	gōd	gōd[12]	gōd	gōd-a	gōd-e	gōd-e
	G.	gōd-es	gōd-re	gōd-es	gōd-an	gōd-an	gōd-an
	D.	gōd-um	gōd-re	gōd-um	gōd-an	gōd-an	gōd-an
	A.	gōd-ne	gōd-e	gōd	gōd-an	gōd-an	gōd-e
	I.	gōd-e		gōd-e			
Plural	N.	gōd-e	gōd-a	gōd		gōd-an	
	G.	gōd-ra	gōd-ra	gōd-ra		gōd-ena *or* gōd-ra	
	D.	gōd-um	gōd-um	gōd-um		gōd-um	
	A.	gōd-e	gōd-a	gōd		gōd-an	

Facsimile 1. The forms of the nominative singular masculine in the strong and weak declensions in Baugh and Cable (2005: 52).

When we talk about strong adjectives, we can say they declined as strong nouns following the declension in nouns for each gender, "if masculine, *as*-plurals, if neuter, *u*-plurals and if feminine, *a*-plurals" (Hogg, 1992: 139).

	Masculine	Neuter
Nom.	sum	sum
Acc.	sum*ne*	sum
Gen.	sumes	sumes
Dat.	sum*um*	sum*um*
Instr.	sume	sume

Facsimile 2. The declension of the singular forms of *sum* "some" in Hogg (1992: 139).

As Hogg (1992: 139) explains, "the accusative masculine inflexion has the distinctive *-ne* shape which we shall later see in pronouns, […] and the dative singular inflexion too was borrowed from the pronominal declensions". The declension of feminine forms is even more simple (Nom. *sumu*, Acc. *sume*, Gen. and Dat. *sumre*), and there is no separate instrumental inflection (Hogg, 1992: 140).

	Masculine	Neuter	Feminine
Nom.	sum*e*	sumu	suma
Acc.	sum*e*	sumu	suma
Gen.	sum*ra*	sum*ra*	sum*ra*
Dat.	sumum	sumum	sumum

Facsimile 3. The declension of the plural forms of *sum* "some" in Early West Saxon in Hogg (1992: 140).

The dative and genitive inflections were the same for all the genders. The masculine *-e* became standard for the nominative and accusative forms of all the genders later on. By the eleventh century, gender distinctions survived in some strong adjectives only in the oblique cases of the singular (Hogg, 1992: 140).

The weak adjective forms were identical to the *n*-declension nouns with only two differences, as noted by Hogg (1992: 140-141):

> Firstly, although the genitive plural of all forms ought to be *-ena*, this ending, frequent in Early West Saxon, was often found elsewhere as *blindra*, with the inflexion of the strong adjective. Secondly, from Early West Saxon on there was an increasing tendency to change the dative plural ending from *-um* to *-an*. This could well be the result of a sound change, for it was eventually found in all examples of the inflexion.

2.3.2. Word building

Since the Old English vocabulary was flexible, many prefixes and suffixes were used to make new words from the old ones or to modify or extend their meanings. Kastovsky (1992: 389-391) mentions some of the prefixes and their meanings together with the examples of adjectives: *-bære* ("productive of, having, carrying", e.g., *æppelbære* "applebearing", *atorbære* "poisonous", *cornbære* "corn-bearing" etc.), *-cund* ("of the nature of, originating from", e.g., *engelcund* "angelic", *gastcund* "spiritual", *godcund* "divine" etc.), *-fæst* ("having, characterised by, being", e.g., *arfæst* "virtuous", *blædfæst* "glorious, prosperous", *domfæst* "just, renowned" etc.), *-ig* ("characterized by, having", e.g., *adlig* "sick", *blissing* "joyful", *blodig* "bloody", *untrymig*

"infirm", *þystrig* "obscure, dark" etc.), *-ol* ("being, prone to", e.g., *deopþancol* "contemplative", *gearoþancol* "ready-witted", *heteþancol* "hostile" etc.), *-weard* ("-wards", e.g., *æfterweard* "following", *heononward* "transitory, going hence", *norþe(e)weard* "northward" etc.), and *-wende* ("conducive to, consisting of", e.g., *halwende* "healthful", *hatwende* "hot", *lufwende* "amiable" etc.).

-ede (is related to Participle II suffix -d):
hōcede (hooked), *ðrīhēafdede* (three-headed)
-en: ȝylden (golden), *wyllen* (woolen), *hǣðen* (heathen)
-feald: maniȝfeald (manyfold), *ðrīefeald* (threefold)
-full: sorhfull (sorrowful), *carfull* (careful), *sinnfull* (sinful)
-iȝ: hāliȝ (holy), *mistiȝ* (misty), *busiȝ* (busy), *dysiȝ* (foolish, now dizzy), *syndriȝ* (sundry, separate)
-ihte: ðyrnihte (thorny), *stǣnihte* (stony)
-isc: enȝlisc (English), *Bryttisc* (British), *folcisc* (popular), *mennisc* (human)
-lēas: ȝelēaflēas (unbelieving), *slǣplēas* (sleepless), *griðlēas* (defenceless)
-līc: frēondlīc (friendly), *luflīc* (full of love), *ȝēarlīc* (yearly), *dēadlīc* (deadly), *ǣnlīc* (unique), *eȝeslīc* (terrible), *ȝerisenlīc* (cheerful), *ȝodcundlīc* (divine), *ȝrimlīc* (grim), *heofonlīc* (heavenly), *hrēowlīc* (grievous), *cūðlīc* (certain)
-sum: sibbsum (peaceful), *hīersum* (obedient)

Facsimile 4. Some suffixes and adjective examples mentioned in Verba (2004: 97).

Verba (2004) says that adjective-forming suffixes were very rarely added to adjective-stems "but form adjectives that represent some quality in relation to some notion which is expressed in a noun or a verb" (Verba, 2004: 97).

Kastovsky (1992: 372-374) also points out some compound combinations with adjectives such as noun + adjective (e.g., *eagsyne* "visible to the eye", *ellenrof* "famed for strength", *æcræftig* "learned in the law"), adjective + adjective (e.g., *ealmihtig* "almighty", *felafæcne* "very treacherous", *healfdead* "half-dead", *widmære* "far-famed"), noun/adjective + present participle (e.g., *anbuende* "dwelling alone", *gramhycgende* "hostile", *welwyrcende* "doing good"), noun/adjective + past participle (e.g., *æhtboren* "born in bondage", *heofoncenned* "heaven-born").

2.3.3. Comparison

There were two degrees of comparison (comparative and superlative), and only qualitative adjectives could be compared. The suffixes *-ra* and *-ost/-est* were added to the stem of the adjective, e.g., "*earm, earmra, earmost* "poor, poorer, poorest'" (Hogg, 1992: 141). The number of syllables in the adjective did not matter with this rule.

If sometimes the suffixes came from earlier **-ira, *-ist*, the comparative and superlative forms went through the process of *i*-mutation (Hogg, 1992: 141).

eald – ieldra – ieldest (old)
stronȝ – strenȝra – strenȝest (strong)
lonȝ – lenȝra – lenȝest (long)
ȝeonȝ – ȝinȝra – ȝinȝest (young)
feor – fierra – fierrest (far)

Facsimile 5. Examples of *i*-mutation of a root vowel in Verba (2004: 55).

"The remains of the mutated vowel now may be found only in two adjectives: *old* (*older/elder*) and *far* (*further/farther*)" (Verba, 2004: 55).

Comparing adjectives using *more* and *most* was rare, and it usually appeared in late texts of the Old English period. "A further type of formation is seen in the superlative of locational adjectives, e.g., the points of the compass, where a new ending *-mest* was used, e.g., *norðmest* "northmost". Such forms can be found in Ælfric's *Grammar*, e.g., ÆGr 240.2 *innemest* "inmost", but in late texts the suffix became identified with *mǣst* "most" and was so respelled" (Hogg, 1992: 141).

Four adjectives made their comparative and superlative forms by adding the suffixes to the stems of other adjectives, and they had suppletive degrees of comparison (Verba, 2004: 56).

ȝōd – betera – betst, sǣre, sǣest (good)
yfel – wiesra – wierest (bad)
mycel – māra – mǣst (much)
lȳtel – lǣssa – lǣst (little)

Facsimile 6. Examples of suppletive comparison in Verba (2004: 56).

2.4. Middle English

Move from Old English to Middle English started with the Norman Conquest of 1066. The Normans decided to continue to use their own language picking up some knowledge of English gradually. French remained the language of the upper classes for 200 years after the Norman Conquest. Although at first it was spoken just by those of Norman origin, things started to change through intermarriages and when English people realized it was to their advantage to learn a new language while mingling with the ruling class. This ethnic distinction between who spoke which language was lost and became largely social. English remained the language of the masses, and it was likely that the members of the upper classes would have come into contact with it and acquire some knowledge, which happened by the end of the twelfth century. By then, we had people who could speak both languages.

All of these changes affected English, its grammar and the vocabulary. From once a highly inflected language, English changed into a highly analytical one. The most significant change was the loss of inflections. The endings which were used to mark distinctions of number, case, and gender with nouns and adjectives were so altered in pronunciation that they started to lose their distinctive form. They were reduced, simplified, and then completely disappeared from the language (Verba, 2004: 118). Many Old English words were lost, and many French and Latin words were added to the language.

2.5. Adjective in Middle English

The adjective in Middle English was much simplified. Case and gender inflections were lost for adjectives since nouns did not have the category of gender any longer. Adjectives did not agree with nouns in case. Adjectival inflections had no functional load because the nouns no longer supported adjectives. According to Fischer (1992: 222), "problems only arose where these endings *were* functional, as was still the case to some extent in the weak/strong distinction, but especially when adjectives were used substantially, without a head word".

The levelling of inflectional changes was due partly to the process of analogy and partly to phonetic changes, which were simple yet far-reaching (Baugh and Cable, 2005):

The earliest seems to have been the change of final -*m* to -*n* wherever it occurred, i.e., in the dative plural of nouns and adjectives and in the dative singular (masculine and neuter) of adjectives when inflected according to the strong declension. Thus *mūðum* (to the mouths) >*mūðun*, *gōdum*>*gōdun*. This -*n*, along with the -*n* of the other inflectional endings, was then dropped (**mūðu, *gōdu*). At the same time, the vowels a, o, u, e in inflectional endings were obscured to a sound, the so-called "indeterminate vowel," which came to be written *e* (less often *i, y, u,* depending on place and date). As a result, a number of originally distinct endings such as -*a, -u, -e, - an, -um* were reduced generally to a uniform -*e*, and such grammatical distinctions as they formerly expressed were no longer conveyed. Traces of these changes have been found in Old English manuscripts as early as the tenth century. By the end of the twelfth century they seem to have been generally carried out. The leveling is somewhat obscured in the written language by the tendency of scribes to preserve the traditional spelling, and in some places the final *n* was retained even in the spoken language, especially as a sign of the plural (Baugh and Cable, 2005: 147).

Nominal plural endings -(*e*)*s,* and also –(*e*)*n* in the south were sometimes added in Early Middle English. In their plural and singular forms, these adjectives could not distinguish human from the non-human, which was the reason for the development of another system. The system developed started to use prop words such as *man/men, thing*(*s*), and later also *one*. When the noun (phrase) is used generically, referring to the whole class (*the poor, the blind, the fabulous,* etc.) is the only case in which a substantival adjective remains possible in Present-Day English (Fischer, 1992: 222).

Gauan gripped to his ax, and gederes hit on hyȝt…/ Let hit doun lyȝtly lyȝt on *þe naked*,/ Þat *þe scharp* of þe schalk schyndered þe bones.

(*Gawain* 421–4)

'Gawain took hold of his axe, and lifted it up high … let it come down deftly on the naked [flesh] so that the sharp [axe] of the man cleaved the bones.'

Facsimile 7. Examples of some substantival adjectives in Fischer (1992: 223).

Towards the end of Early Middle English, these adjectives became a stylistic device used especially in alliterative poetry (Fischer, 1992: 223).

The plural form had the only remaining ending, "the ending *-e* and the remains of the weak declension, the weak form (the one preceded by an article) *-e young kniht/the younge kniht*, *younge knihtes/the younge knihtes*" (Verba, 2004: 121).

The French language influenced word order; therefore, the post position of the adjective entered the English syntax especially if the adjective is a French loanword:

(1) "weel she soong the service *dyvyne* (she sang very well at divine service)

a mantel *roialliche* (a royally mantle)

with eyen *narwe* (with narrow eyes)" (Verba, 2004: 142).

2.5.1. Declension

Old English had the system of two adjective declensions, strong and weak, which underwent a two-stage restructuring in Middle English partly because of the sound change and partly because of the analogy process, as stated earlier. As Lass (1992) states, there are some examples of the strong declension endings in earlier texts, e.g., "Laȝamon's *æt ...are chirechen* "at a church" (*are* < OE *ān-re,* strong fem. dat. sg. of *ān* "one")" (Lass, 1992: 115). But as Middle English was going through changes, the strong/weak opposition decayed, the article and the adjective lost their case and gender markings.

The nominative singular was used for all the cases of the singular and the nominative of the plural for all the cases of plural, both in strong and weak declensions. Therefore, Baugh and Cable (2005) explain that the result was that in the weak declension, there was no longer a difference between the singular and the plural because both ended in *-e* (*blinda>blinde* and *blindan>blinde*). This was also applied to the adjectives of strong declension whose singular ended in *-e*. This ending was often "without distinctive grammatical meaning and its use was not governed by any strong sense of adjectival inflection" (Baugh and Cable, 2005: 148).

By Chaucer's time, the zero/*-e* distinction was sensitive to two parameters: "'definiteness" and number. The definite form in *-e* usually occurred after determiners (*the cold-e steele, this good-e wyf),* in vocatives (*fals-e mordrour),* and in attributive plurals, whether prenominal (*the long-e nyghtes*) or post-nominal (*shoures sot-e* "sweet showers"). Endingless forms occurred in singular predicate adjectives (*it was old),* after indefinite determiners (*a good wyf, many a fals flatour),* and in other positions without a determiner (*as hoot he was as...*)" (Lass, 1992: 115-116).

In Late Middle English, this system was used with monosyllabic adjectives, and the adjectival -*e* was variable (Lass, 1992: 116).

2.5.2. Word building

Verba (2004) mentions some "new coinages with former adjective suffixes such as *-ede, -ihte, -iȝ, -en, -isc, -sum, -feald, -full, -leas, -lic* (now *-ed, -y, -en, -ish, -som, -fold, -ful, -less, -like/ly*), *fulsome* (fulsom), *folish* (foolish), *tenfold*, *foryetful* (forgetful), *estatlich* (stately), *asshy* (ashy), *estatlich* of manere (stately of manner)" (Verba, 2004: 150).

As Burnley (1992: 443) says, "compound adjectives include a type in which the first of two adjectival elements modifies a second, making fine distinctions in sense impressions", as in the examples *icy-cold, red-hot*, *lukewarm*, *light-green*, *brown-blue*.

Some combinations that existed in Old English, e.g., the combination noun + past participle like *goldhroden* "adorned with gold", did not appear in Middle English before the fourteenth century when they became productive once again (*moss-grown, woe-begone, moth-eaten, book-learned, wind-driven*) (Burnley, 1992: 443-444).

> Adjectival compounds formed with the past participle as head also include a type in which the determiner is an adjective or an adverb. Most extant examples date from the fourteenth century, but the major productivity of this pattern belongs to the later sixteenth century: *new-born*, *high-born*, *free-born*, *new-sown*, *hard-set*, *free-hearted* (Burnley, 1992: 444).

2.5.3. Comparison

Comparison in Middle English was pretty much the same as in Old English with slight modifications. Lass (1992: 116) states that "old umlauted comparatives and superlatives (*long/leng-er, -est, strong/streng-er, -est,* etc.)" were retained until quite late. There were also some length alterations as in *greet/grett-er* "great".

The modern rule of adjectives with more than two syllables taking analytic comparison (*more beautiful, **beautifuller*) was perhaps established in Late Middle English. However, the possibilities Adj-*er* ~ *more* Adj were still used throughout the seventeenth century (Lass, 1992: 116).

Some adjectives kept a mutated vowel from Old English:

(2) "*old - elder - eldest*

long - lenger - lengest

strong - stregner -strengest" (Verba, 2004: 122).

Some preserved suppletive degrees of comparison:

(3) "*good - bettre - best*

evil (bad) - werse - werst

muchel - more - most, mest

litel - lasse - lest" (Verba, 2004: 122).

Some adjectives, those of foreign origin amongst them, used the adverbs *more* and *most*, which were used more later:

(4) "*Moore delicaat, moore pompous* of array,

Moore proud was nevere emperour than he... (There never was an emperor more delicate, more pompous in clothing and more proud...)" (Verba, 2004: 122).

2.6. Modern English

Modern English started around 1500, and this transition from Middle English to Modern English was also marked by different changes in the country's political, religious, and cultural life, as was the case with the two previous phases in the history of the English language. The main changes that affected the language itself were "the printing press, the rapid spread of popular education, the increased communication and means of communication, the growth of specialized knowledge, and the emergence of various forms of self-consciousness about language" (Baugh and Cable, 2005: 187).

We can see that most of the grammatical forms had been formed by that period. Many phonetic changes had already been introduced to the language. Words did not belong to strict grammatical categories so that people could use them more freely. Hence, adjectives were used as adverbs, nouns, or verbs; nouns could be verbs. It seems that English did not have grammar at the time, or it was considered unsystematized. With many variations in grammatical usage, even educated people did not know what was deemed correct and what was deemed to be incorrect. They often turned to the Latin language as a source for proper grammar usage, "a man like Dryden confessed that at times he had to translate an idea into Latin in order to decide on the correct way to express it in English" (Baugh and Cable, 2005: 241).

To fix and protect the language, educated people in England published prescriptive grammars, different dictionaries of correct English, etc., with established grammar rules and the received standard in pronunciation.

2.7. Adjective in Modern English

The adjective in Modern English lost all the remaining endings. The most important feature of Modern English adjective is comparison.

According to Lass (2000: 155), after the Middle English reduction in inflectional endings, only in the London standard the opposition bare stem versus stem-{e} could be found. By the fifteenth century, this inflection could be found just in archaic use in verse. The genitive plural inflection {-er} remained in specific registers, as well.

Lass (2000) also states that plural {-s} survived well into the sixteenth century in legal phrases like *heires males* and especially with the French adjectives in post-nominal position. "But as a general rule adjective inflection was gone by the later fifteenth century" (Lass, 2000: 155).

Due to French and Latin influence, the post-nominal position of the adjective was more spread in the sixteenth century than in late Modern English and was used more than today. Those combinations contained a borrowed adjective, and the expression was often connected with French or Latin:

(5) "Whiche they call *a tonge vulgare and barbarous* (More *Complete Works*: VI 333)" (Rissanen, 2000: 208).

The combination adj. + noun + *and* + adj. where both adjectives modify a noun was found in Early Modern English texts:

(6) "and will make of the [=thee] *a greater nacion and a mightier* than they ([HC] Tyndale Numbers 14.12)" (Rissanen, 2000: 209).

Rissanen (2000: 209) also points out some other possible positions of the adjective with determiners:

1. the adjective can precede the possessive pronoun:

(7) "*good my Lord* (sayd he) I hope you know... ([HC] Perrott 37)";

2. the indefinite article usually follows an adjective preceded by *so/as* or *too*:

(8) "*Too low a Mistres* for *so high a seruant*. (Shakespeare *Two Gentlemen of Verona* II.iv)";

3. the absence of the article is exceptional:

(9) "I mocke at death With *as bigge heart* as thou (Shakespeare *Coriolanus* III.ii)".

2.7.1. Word building

When entering a language, words can retain their original form, or they can change. The process of adaption meant several different things, according to Baugh and Cable (2005: 209):

1. cutting off the Latin ending (*exotic* from *L. exotic-us*);

2. changing the Latin ending *-us* to *-ous* (*conspicu-us>conspicuous*) or replacing it with *-al* (*external* from *L. externus*);

3. turning the ending *-bilis* to the English (or French) ending *-ble* (*considerable* from *L. considerabilis*).

Verba (2004) says that adjective suffixes that were used then were of native (*-y: healthy, brassy; -ful: delightful, grateful*) as well as of borrowed origin. The suffix *-able/-ible* became a part of the English language in Middle English but was hardly used with the stems of native English origin. Early Modern English shows some flexibility in its use with stems of either origin (*disputable, charitable, deniable, bearable*) (Verba, 2004: 194-198).

Prefixation existed in Modern English as well. The negative prefix *un-*, which is the equivalent of "*not*", is one of the most productive and active among native prefixes (*unfortunate, unapproachable, unaccented*) (Verba, 2004: 194).

2.7.2. Comparison

Baugh and Cable (2005: 226) state that there had been two ways of comparison (with the endings *-er* and *-est* and with the adverbs *more* and *most*) since the Old English phase but with more variation in their use.

Denison (1999: 128) also mentions two types of comparison, "**syntactic comparison** for both comparative *more narrow* and superlative *most evil*, while **morphological comparison** will cover both regular *narrower, happiest* and irregular *better, worst,* and the like".

"A rule of thumb for PDE is that monosyllabic adjectives and disyllables, especially those with primary stress on the first syllable, usually allow - and may require - morphological comparison, while others prefer syntactic comparison" (Denison, 1999: 128).

Lass (2000: 155) states that "the following synthetic or morphological strategies were inherited from Middle English:

(i)   *Suffixation*   *fair, fair-er, fair-est*, etc.
(ii)   *Umlaut + Suffix*   *old, eld-er, eld-est*, similarly for *long, strong*.
(iii)   *Length-alteration + Suffix*   *great, grett-er*, i.e. /gre:t, gret-/, etc.
(iv)   *Suppletive stem + Suffix*   *good, bett-er, be-st, bad, wor-st* (*worse* < OE *wyrsa* is
                                                     unsegmentable)".

Lass (2000: 156) further explains that

[t]ypes (ii–iv) were lexically restricted; (i) was the commonest (and only productive) one. But later Middle English also had a syntactic (analytic) comparison, usually *more* adj./*most* adj.; this gradually more productive, and eventually ended up nearly in complementary distribution with suffixation. There was also some cliticisation of

most onto adjective or adverb bases, especially in items with a locative or sequential sense: *fore-most, hind-most*, etc.

According to Lass (2000: 156), the umlaut forms of *elder, -est* survive the longest while umlauted *strenger, lenger* remained into the sixteenth century.

Verba (2004) points out the forms *elder/older, eldest/oldest,* and *further/farther, furthest/farthest* as those distinguished in use and explains that "older forms *elder, eldest* are used to denote relations within a family and *further/furthest* are used in relation to time whereas *farther/farthest* to distance. In Shakespeare's times this not yet is firmly established, and we may encounter such uses as […]

(10)   You wrong me every way; you wrong me, Brutus;

I said, an *elder* soldier, not a better:

Did I say "better"? (*Julius Caesar*)

I am a soldier, I,

Older in practise, abler than yourself

To make conditions, (ibid)" (2004: 173).

Lass (2000: 156) writes that the suppletives are more or less as they were, and Verba mentions the use of some suppletives in Shakespeare:

(11)   "Where love is great, the *littlest* doubts are fear (*Hamlet*)

Some word there was, *worser* than Tybalt's death,

That murder'd me (*Romeo and Juliet*)" (Verba, 2004: 174).

Denison (1999: 128) points out that syntactic comparison expanded at the expense of the morphological one. He explains that Elizabethan playwrights preferred morphological comparison with polysyllabic adjectives, which is now considered incorrect, e.g., *beautifulst.* Barber (1976: 202) also gives some examples of this use in Shakespeare (*rascalliest*) and Milton (*difficultest*), amongst others.

Both kinds could be combined in Early Modern English (*most fairest, most unkindest*) (Denison, 1999: 128). Baugh and Cable (2005: 226) say a double comparative and superlative was frequent in Shakespeare's works, and Barber (1976: 202) claims that double comparatives "are not confined to the drama: they are common in our period, both in verse and prose". Verba agrees with both and gives some more examples from Shakespeare:

(12)   "To vouch this, is no proof,

Without *more wider* and more overt test (*Othello*)

This was *the most unkindest* cut of all (*Julius Caesar*)" (Verba, 2004: 174).

According to Verba (2004: 174), Shakespeare also used the so-called synchronic variation of forms applying both types of comparison to adjectives:

(13)　　　　"And with the *deepest* malice of the war […]

But no *more deep* will I endart mine eye (*Romeo and Juliet*)" (Verba, 2004: 174).

Lass (2000: 156) says that "modern standard comparison is based on the following principles:

(i)　　Monosyllabic bases take suffixes : *bigg-er*, *bigg-est*, etc. Periphrasis is usually not available (**more big), though there are exceptions, e.g. when two adjectives are predicated of a single head (*more dead than alive*). Suffixed participles must take periphrasis (**smashed-er).

(ii)　　Disyllables preferentially take suffixes, though periphrasis is available for many (*hairy*, *hairi-er*/*more hairy*). Some suffix(oid)s however require periphrasis: e.g. *-ish* (**greenish-er), *-est* (**honest-er), *-ous* (**grievous-er), *-id* (**rigid-er), as well as *-less*, *-ful*, and some others. Participles cannot be suffixed (**hidden-er). This may be a function of the somewhat ambiguous status of the comparative and superlative endings, somewhere between inflections proper and derivational affixes. (The former are normally terminal in the word: *care-less-ness-es*.)

(iii)　　Trisyllabic and longer forms take periphrasis (**beautiful-er, **religiouslyer); hence the comic effect of Alice's "curiouser and curiouser'".

This usage was not standard until the later eighteenth century, and analytic and synthetic comparisons were just alternatives. Many grammarians of the seventeenth century like John Wallis and John Cooper agreed that there were no restrictions whatsoever; comparative and superlative were formed by adding *-er/-est* to the base, respectively, and by periphrasis, as well (Lass, 2000: 157).

Present-Day English and Early Modern English both have the same two ways of comparison, but Present-Day English follows the strict rules of use, whereas in Early Modern English, they were free in variation. Barber (1976) says that present-day usage is complicated and is changing. However, it still can be said that "we use *-er/-est* with monosyllables, and *more/most*

with polysyllables, while disyllabic adjectives fall into two groups, some being compared one way and some the other" (1976: 201).

III PRESCRIPTIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE APPROACHES

3.1. Prescriptive approach

"*Prescriptivism* is an approach, especially to grammar, that sets out rules for what is regarded as correct in language" (McArthur, 1992: 286).

When Dryden, Defoe, and Swift proposed the establishment of an English Academy and all those authors decided to publish their grammar books and usage guides, which will be mentioned in more detail later in the thesis, their only goal was to stop language changes. That need to regulate language led to the rise of institutionalized prescriptivism in the eighteenth century and the standardisation of language.

For Milroys (1985: 27), the standardisation process of English goes through seven stages: (1) selection, (2) acceptance, (3) diffusion, (4) maintenance, (5) elaboration of function, (6) codification, and (7) prescription.

One variety of a language is usually chosen as a standard. An Academy would have selected a language variety as a model and imposed a set of rules on the language speakers. The London variety was chosen as a model following *consensus eruditorum* since it "became the standard of education, government, and business, and it was also the dialect of better-educated and more affluent speakers throughout the Anglosphere" (Pinker, 2014, ch. 6).

Görlach (2000: 483) presents the common opinion of the time, as expressed by George Puttenham, on the sub-types of Southern English that should be avoided:

> namely the language of:
> (a) the people in the "marches and frontiers" and "port townes" (because of language mixing)
> (b) the universities (because of Latinate diction)
> (c) rural areas
> (d) the lower classes ("of a craftes man or carter, or other of the inferiour sort") regardless of region
> (e) the old poets ("for their language is now out of vse with vs")
> (f) "Northern-men . . . beyond the riuer of Trent" (because even the language of the well-educated of this region shows some interference from the northern dialect)".

In the second phase, the variety should be accepted by influential people of the time, which was the case with the London variety because the correct forms were "those that happened to be

used in the dialect spoken in the region around London when written English first became standardized several centuries ago" (Pinker, 2014, ch. 6).

Then, language was diffused geographically and socially by different means such as the education system, official papers, etc. (Pilliére and Lewis, 2018, para. 7). Curzan points out that "the standard variety must be maintained […] through the elaboration of function" and is used "for a wide range of written registers and spoken purposes, thereby developing the required vocabulary and stylistic devices" (2014: 29).

The next phase is codification which is accomplished by producing grammar books, dictionaries, and other usually prescriptive resources. According to Tieken-Boon (2008: 1), from a linguistic perspective, codification is characterised as "the laying down of the "laws" of the language, i.e. the rules of usage and the definitions and pronunciation of the items in the lexicon, in grammars and dictionaries for the benefit of the common user" and it was "well underway by the eighteenth century and can be traced back at least a century earlier" (Tieken-Boon, 2020; as cited in Curzan, 2014: 30). The last stage, i.e., the prescription stage, is characterised by the production of style guides and usage guides.

The process of standardisation has prescription as its final phase. The standardisation is an ongoing process, which did not end with its final phase since English is not a dead language. The language is still changing, and Curzan (2014) argues that the prescriptivism goals are not solely to stop changes. When talking about fixing language, she points out two aims of prescriptive efforts: "to resist language change and preserve an older and/or standard form that is seen as fully adequate if not superior" and "to improve upon the language, either by introducing new forms or distinctions or by proposing a return to older, more conservative forms" (Curzan, 2014: 3).

Curzan (2014: 24) provides four strands of prescriptivism with different aims:

- *Standardizing prescriptivism,*
- *Stylistic prescriptivism,*
- *Restorative prescriptivism,*
- *Politically responsive prescriptivism.*

Standardizing prescriptivism aims to promote standardization and standard usage as well as stabilizing spelling, which means

that spelling requires less prescriptive attention in usage guides; learning standard spelling is inextricably intertwined at this point with learning to read and write. As a result, most overt prescriptive efforts from the eighteenth century onwards have focused on "correct" word meanings, grammatical elements of word and sentence formation, and punctuation – and in some cases pronunciation, although speakers seem to allow a good deal of variation in pronunciation within "unstigmatized" language use (Curzan, 2014: 29).

Stylistic prescriptivism focuses on formal written usage with standard usage. It is about "a nicety that distinguishes those who "know better" from those who don't, but it does not distinguish standard English speakers from nonstandard English speakers", and the rules are about style of "creating effective, aesthetically pleasing, appropriate to context (in this case formal contexts) usage" (Curzan, 2014: 33).

Restorative prescriptivism seems to overlap with the first and the second strand of prescriptivism. Still, the aim of this strand is "to restore older forms or meanings" and "seem not to enforce standards or privilege stylistically preferred options. They advocate older forms that are neither standard nor preferred" (Curzan, 2014: 37).

Politically responsive prescriptivism aims "to promote inclusive, nondiscriminatory, politically correct, and/or politically expedient usage" (Curzan, 2014: 24).

The nineteenth century is described as a period "when prescriptivism was at its height" (Mugglestone, 2006; as cited in Tieken-Boon, 2008: 6) due to the large number of grammars produced.

3.2. Descriptive approach

"*Descriptivism* is an approach that proposes the objective and systematic description of language, in which investigators confine themselves to facts as they can be observed" (McArthur, 1992: 286).

When linguistics as a scientific discipline came to life, the descriptive approach to the English language became more prominent, and the gap between this approach and the prescriptive one became more apparent. According to Curzan (2014), descriptive approaches

attempt to capture the range of ways that speakers of a language communicate with each other using systematically constructed, meaningful utterances, which are "well-formed" because they follow the systematic patterns of the grammar of that variety

of the language and speakers accept them as possible utterances, not because they necessarily correspond to the standard variety of that language (2014: 18).

Linguists are aware of the social power and importance that comes with the standard variety, and they do not say that one should talk and write however one wants. Curzan (2014) points out that nonstandard varieties are entirely legitimate. Still, speakers and writers should master standard English so they can use it in situations when that will be expected of them.

3.3. Prescriptivism vs. descriptivism

McArthur (1992) explains in *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* what descriptive and prescriptive grammars are:

> A *descriptive grammar* is an account of a language that seeks to describe how it is used objectively, accurately, systematically, and comprehensively. A *prescriptive grammar* is an account of a language that sets out rules (*prescriptions*) for how it should be used and for what should not be used (*proscriptions*), based on norms derived from a particular model of grammar. […] Prescriptive grammars have been criticized for not taking account of language change and stylistic variation, and for imposing the norms of some groups on all users of a language. They have been discussed by linguists as exemplifying specific attitudes to language and usage. Traditional grammar books have often, however, combined description and prescription (1992: 286).

Although prescriptivism is considered a "bad guy" or the "threatening Other" by linguistics (Cameron, 1995; as cited in Curzan, 2014: 12), it is well-received by the public in comparison to descriptivism. When it comes to the proper use of the language, it seems that people usually turn to experts without training in linguistics as Curzan claims that people no matter their education level are "more inclined to listen to self-proclaimed prescriptive language experts like Lynne Truss, Ellie Grossman, and William Strunk and E. B. White, than to linguists" (2014: 171). She thinks that linguists should try to reach a "linguistically informed prescriptivism", which accepts the standard variety and helps people master it while teaching formal registers but not dismissing the nonstandard varieties at the same time.

Curzan and Pinker agree that prescriptivists and descriptivists should be and are on the same side because they "believe in the value of the standard language, and both have their personal

likes and dislikes about language usage" (Curzan, 2014: 176), and it does not mean that "if one kind of grammarian is right then the other kind of grammarian is wrong" (Pinker, 2014, ch. 6).

Pinker (2014) suggests that usage rules are "*tacit conventions*" or agreements where everyone can make the same choice. Therefore, according to him, idioms, word senses, and grammatical constructions that English speakers coin are captured by linguists in "'descriptive rules'—that is, rules that describe how people speak and understand" and those less natural conventions used by a certain group of people such as people in government, business, academia or journalism are "'prescriptive rules'—rules that prescribe how one *ought* to speak and write in these forums" (2014, ch. 6).

Although Pinker (2014) believes that prescriptive rules are desirable and even indispensable in some fields of writing despite being a descriptive linguist himself, he points out that there are some prescriptive rules not worth keeping because many "originated for screwball reasons, impede clear and graceful prose, and have been flouted by the best writers for centuries" (2014, ch. 6). This does not automatically mean that descriptivists aim to abolish all the rules and standards of good writing.

But how come we have rules, which prescriptivists say we should follow and descriptivists are more liberal about? How do we know what the grammar of the English language is or should be? Why are there some words and phrases or grammatical structures thought of as "bad English"? What is "good English"? Why do people have this need to speak correctly?

IV THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH GRAMMAR

4.1. English grammar based on Latin

It all started with giving the English language the role of an official language and choosing a standard dialect. English was considered unworthy and somewhat "rude", having a low status compared to Latin, Greek, and French until the middle of the sixteenth century (Curzan, 2014: 5). It was not used so much in literature and academic work and was not getting any grammatical attention.

In the early works, there were no attempts to describe English structures, so William Bullokar's *Brief Grammar for English* (1586), the first English grammar book published, was modeled on the Latin grammar *Rudimenta Grammatices* by William Lily because classical languages such as Greek and especially Latin were considered superior to English. Therefore, English grammar books were influenced and based on Latin. According to Görlach (2000: 482), the grammarians of the time also thought the structure of all languages was basically identical; hence, the tradition of basing grammar books on the Latin ones.

As English started to expand and become more eloquent, something changed in attitudes toward English. It replaced Latin and French in many domains. It became important in the literature area. Some English authors borrowed French, Latin, and Italian words to embellish it, while others opposed this. With all of this happening, it seemed English was also ungovernable, so Görlach (2000: 482) describes it in the period of the Renaissance as "lacking norms in spelling, pronunciation, morphology and syntax", and "considered to be largely irregular and, many would have claimed, incapable of being reduced to a proper system and orderliness". English scholars felt the need to fix and stabilize the language.

4.2. The idea of an English Academy

Since there were no language authorities concerned with English in those times, the Royal Society proposed establishing some kind of a language committee that would have been in charge of language usage. The proposals for an academy were based on the Italian *Accademia della Crusca* and the French *Académie française*. The advocates of the idea of forming an English

Academy were John Dryden, Jonathan Swift, and Daniel Defoe, amongst others. What they wanted was to stop changes happening to the language and regulate the language.

Defoe's *An Essay Upon Projects* (1697) showed his interest in correcting and fixing the English language so that "no further changes would mar the language" (Curzan, 2014: 71). He thought the French Academy was the best model to base an English academy upon because he considered the English language "a Subject not at all less worthy the Labour of such a Society than the *French*, and capable of a much greater Perfection" (Defoe, 1999: 89). The purpose of an Academy would have been "to encourage Polite Learning, to polish and refine the *English* Tongue, and advance the so much neglected Faculty of Correct Language, to establish Purity and Propriety of Stile, and to purge it from all the Irregular Additions that Ignorance and Affectation have introduc'd" (Defoe, 1999: 91).

Swift wanted to standardize and fix the English language in his *Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712) because he thought "that it is better a Language should not be wholly perfect, than that it should be perpetually changing" (1712: 31). He was afraid that all the changes made to the language would cause a problem of understanding the authors of the previous times. For him, the best English language was from the start of Queen Elizabeth I's reign until the beginning of the Civil War in 1642. He accused "the Poets, from the Time of the Restoration" of spoiling the language by abbreviating the words to fit their verse and those who were of the opinion "to spell exactly as we speak" (1712: 21). Those who would improve the English language would have the French "to imitate where these have proceeded right, and to avoid their Mistakes" (1712: 30).

Although an English Academy was never realized, most probably because of the death of Queen Anne in 1714, who had been a potential patron of the project, "private individuals took it upon themselves to produce the type of reference work that would have been the main product of an English Academy, a normative grammar of English" (Tieken-Boon, 2020: 16). "This type of reference work" meant grammar books, usage guides, and dictionaries that had been created as one way to regulate the language with their prescriptive approach and energy.

Grammarians started to diverge from Latin rules while describing English structures as Ben Jonson had done in his *English Grammar* (1640) or John Wallis in *Grammatica linguae Anglicanae* (1653). The grammar books were published for the use of foreigners or schools as books to base the study of Latin on. Most of the English syntax of the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries did not have a parallel in Latin structures anymore. Latin influence had started to lessen, and it disappeared by the time of the Restoration. Still, the eighteenth-century grammarians kept their prescriptive approach as Baugh and Cable (2005: 262) state, "to prescribe and to proscribe seem to have been coordinate aims of the grammarians".

The eighteenth-century grammar was inherited from Early Modern English, and it was ordered but with a system that was not always so logical. Writers of the period, when discussing the state of the English language, would mention "the problem of the two opposed principles of reason and usage, preferring the one or the other, or looking for compromises between them" (Görlach, 2000: 484).

4.3. The rise of usage guides and grammars, their audience and success

Since there were no professional linguists yet and no established academy, the language authority was given to "language mavens" who gained the power through the publication "creating grammar books and style guides; editing books and dictionaries; opining on language in newspaper columns" (Curzan, 2014: 5). Tieken-Boon states that "authoritative English dictionaries, grammars and, indeed, usage guides were published […] by whoever felt inclined or entitled to write one" (2020: 7), meaning you did not need to be a linguist to write these types of books.

The Bridging the Unbridgeable project[3] analysis shows that most usage guides writers are/were teachers and writers, then linguists followed by lexicographers and the rest of the categories.

The authors whose books will be mentioned below belonged to diverse backgrounds at the start of their careers: Samuel Johnson was a writer, Priestley a chemist, Lowth a Bishop of Church of England, Baker a hack writer, Murray a lawyer and Fisher an author and grammarian. According to Tieken-Boon (2020), usage guides came to be written by linguists as well, but

> [h]istorically speaking, the usage guide originated as a text type produced by non-specialists who gave linguistic advice to the general user; in other words, they resulted

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[3] A research project, financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), which ran at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics between August 2011 and December 2016. It principal investigator was professor Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, and its full title was Bridging the unbridgeable: linguists, prescriptivists and the general public. The primary aim of this project is to bridge the gap between the three main players in the field of prescriptivism: linguists, prescriptivists (as writers of usage guides) and those who depend upon such manuals, the general user. https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/about/

from private enterprise rather than from any kind of institutional prescriptivism by which a particular norm of correctness would be imposed upon users (2020: 42).

The middle class in the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century wanted to be accepted by the higher social classes, and the language was a crucial asset to achieve that; as Read explains, "their search for betterment included the study of grammar" (1939: 536). People back then used the language for social advancement but at the same time felt the so-called linguistic insecurity[4]. To get rid of it, they bought usage guides that provided them with advice on how to use language properly and correctly. So, these usage guides and grammars were published although the authors were not linguists because publishers saw them as "a marketable product" (Tieken-Boon, 2020: 7), which is true even nowadays when we have access to online usage advice.

Usually, the authors would not specify their intended readers as can be seen in Baker's book where he had written, "I flatter myself my Performance may be of some use" (1770: iii); some might be more explicit as Lowth, who had been focused on practice, and explained his book was meant for "the learner, even of the lowest class" and for those who were interested in the system of the language and who wanted to study it more deeply "will find it fully and accurately handled […] in a Treatise intitled HERMES, by JAMES HARRIS Esq." (1763: xvii), or Priestley who wrote it was "to the use of schools" because it was "a much larger work upon this subject" (1768: v). For his new edition of Fowler, Burchfield says it is meant "to guide readers to make sensible choices in linguistically controversial areas of words, meanings, grammatical constructions, and pronunciations" (Burchfield, 1996; as cited in Tieken-Boon, 2020: 46).

More recent descriptions of usage guides and their audience come from Weiner, who says a usage guide is "as broad as the English language, covering spelling, punctuation, phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexis, and involving sociolinguistic considerations" and audience "are native speakers or advanced learners" of English. In contrast, Busse and Schröder describe it as being neither a grammar book nor a dictionary but with the characteristics of both "an integrative all-in-one reference work […] that bridges the traditional divide between a grammar and a dictionary" and audience as "educated lay people" (Wiener, 1988; Busse and Schröder, 2009; as cited in Tieken-Boon, 2020: 43).

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[4] *"Linguistic insecurity is the anxiety or lack of confidence experienced by speakers and writers who believe that their use of language does not conform to the principles and practices of standard English. The term *linguistic insecurity* was introduced by American linguist William Labov in the 1960s."* https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-linguistic-insecurity-1691235

4.4. The eighteenth-century grammar books

The eighteenth-century grammar books were published for the use of English speakers, and they were not a means to learn other languages as had been before. The following grammar books and usage guides determined the standards of the language with their normative view of the language and popularity at the time and some even beyond. They taught their readers that it was possible to climb social ladders through the use of language. They were available to most of the readers.

1. *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) by Samuel Johnson
2. *The Rudiments of English Grammar* (1761) by Joseph Priestley
3. *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) by Robert Lowth
4. *Reflections on the English Language* (1770) by Robert Baker
5. *A Practical New Grammar with Exercises of Bad English or an Easy Guide to Speaking and Writing the English Language Properly and Correctly* (1753) by Anne Fisher
6. *English Grammar, Adapted to the Different Classes of Learners* (1795) by Lindley Murray

4.4.1. *A Dictionary of the English Language* **(1755)**

Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) is not just a dictionary that offers us the meanings of the words, but a dictionary of quotations from other writers, with a short grammar of English in its Preface and is considered an anthology of English literature. In the Preface to his dictionary, he talked about the disadvantages of the English language and the great and challenging work he had ahead of him:

> When I took the first survey of my undertaking, I found our speech copious without order, and energetick without rules: wherever I turned my view there was perplexity to be disentangled, and confusion to be regulated; choice was to be made out of boundless variety, without any established principle of selection; adulterations were to be detected, without a settled test of purity; and modes of expression to be rejected or received, without the suffrages of any writers of classical reputation or acknowledged authority (1825: 1).

He did not use the work of living authors in order not to be misunderstood as partial to them. He collected "examples and authorities from the writers before the restoration, whose works I regard as *the wells of English undefiled*, as the pure sources of genuine diction" (1825: 8). It is evident that Johnson also wanted to fix the English language with his work and "put a stop to those alterations which time and chance have hitherto been suffered to make in it without opposition" and he believed that his dictionary "can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay" (1825: 10), which the language changes were to him, but soon he realized that the language change was inevitable.

4.4.2. *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762)

Robert Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) could be considered the predecessor of prescriptive grammar books. It was brief and logical and written under Harris's *Hermes* (1751) influence regarding universal grammar. Lowth himself, in the Preface to his book, said that English had flourished in many fields in the last two hundred years except in the field of grammar:

> It hath been considerably polished and refined; its bounds have been greatly enlarged; its energy, variety, richness and elegance, have been abundantly proved […] in verse and in prose, upon all subjects, and in every kind of style […] it hath made no advances in Grammatical accuracy" (1763: v).

He thinks that Swift was right in his *Proposal* and that his complaint was justified, although nothing had been done for the establishment of an Academy, according to Lowth.

People took for granted the knowledge and skill of the language, neglected grammar, and thought themselves able "to go on without rules, and we do not so much as suspect, that we stand in need of them" (1763: x). He reduced the language to a system of uniform rules by improving and correcting, not describing.

He chose to use the works of well-known deceased authors because they "cannot be recommended as models of accurate style" (1763: xi). Those mistakes he had found in those works he used as the examples of bad usage in English in the form of footnotes in his book because they showed "that our best Authors have committed gross mistakes, for want of a due knowledge of English Grammar" (1763: xii). He would use these footnotes to show the incorrect usage and explain his rules by pointing out "the necessity of the Study of Grammar in our own Language"

(1763: xii) since grammatical correctness was to be obtained only following the rules of correct usage. The correctness was judged by his own rules, which he derived from Latin, and sometimes was going against established usage. Thus, he even advised authors "to consider this part of Learning as an object not altogether beneath their regard" (1763: xiii) because even the greatest of them were not immune to committing grammatical errors.

We can see that Lowth was open-minded to comments and suggestions of his readers after his first edition because he "hath endeavored to weigh their observations without prejudice or partiality; and to make the best use of the lights which they have afforded him" (1763: xviii) in order to improve the next edition of his book. The reason for this book was to lay down the rules, show through the examples what was right and what was wrong, to be studied at schools, and facilitate the learning of other foreign languages.

4.4.3. *The Rudiments of English Grammar* (1761)

Priestley's *Rudiments of English Grammar* (1761) was a very successful grammar book reprinted for over fifty years. It was intended as a school grammar book, evident from its subtitle, *Adapted to the Use of Schools.* He was more tolerant of established usages than Lowth and tended toward a more descriptive approach. He argued against grammar books that were still based on Latin grammar because the English structures were not the same as the Latin ones and because it was not possible for those Latin terms to "have entered into the head of any man, who had not been previously acquainted with Latin" (1772: vii). He regarded an Academy "not only unsuitable to the genius of a *free nation*, but in itself ill calculated to reform and fix a language" (1772: xix; as cited in Chapman, 2008: 34).

Priestley did not intend his grammar to be based on an upper-class norm but on the well-educated middle class one as he points out in Preface "a competent knowledge of our own language being both useful and ornamental in every profession, and a critical knowledge of it absolutely necessary to all persons of a liberal education" (1772: xx). Straaijer, in his article *Codification of correctness: normative sources for Joseph Priestley's grammar* (2016), says that "Priestley's grammar is usually seen as one of the very few descriptive English grammars in the predominantly prescriptive eighteenth century".

He used the works of his contemporaries and pointed out the correct and good use of English and which things should have been avoided. While writing his grammar, he used the grammar part of Johnson's *Dictionary*, whose rules and observations he would adopt and mention in his book and sometimes disagree with, as well. He acknowledged Johnson's influence in the editions of 1761 and 1768 (Straaijer, 2016), "my acknowledgements to Mr. *Johnson*, whose admirable dictionary has been of the greatest use to me in the study of our language" (1772: xxiii). He provided only generic examples of good usage in the first edition, excluding the examples of bad use "an Appendix would have been made of examples of *bad English*; for they are really useful" but avoided them because "they make so uncouth an appearance in print" (1772: xxii).

Lowth's grammar book influenced his second edition of *The Rudiments of English Grammar*, and he referenced it although he disagreed with him on some specific points. Despite this, according to Straaijer (2016), "Priestley took Lowth's grammar more seriously than others. He certainly thought very highly of Lowth's grammar", and it also "was more prominent and enjoyed a better critical and popular reception than Priestley's own".

The 1768 edition had more errors and incorrect usage examples than the 1761 edition with references to established living authors (Straaijer, 2016). He realized that grammar books with such examples had not been less respected because of it:

> I think there will be an advantage in my having collected examples from *modern writings*, rather than from those of Swift, Addison, and others, who wrote about half a century ago, in what is generally called the classical period of our tongue. By this means we may see what is the real character and turn of the language at present; and by comparing it with the writings of preceding authors, we may better perceive which way it is tending, and what extreme we should most carefully guard against (Priestley, 1772: xi).

Straaijer (2016) points out that the 1768 edition had more normative, proscriptive, and prescriptive comments than the 1761 edition, and "in this area, Priestley was influenced by Lowth as well". He thought that grammarians had a wrong method of fixing the language, i.e., that "a language can never be properly fixed, till all the varieties with which it is used, have been held forth to public view" (1772: xvii) and "we need make no doubt but that the best forms of speech will, in time, establish themselves by their own superior excellence" (1772: xix; as cited in Hodson, 2008: 179).

4.4.4. *Reflections on the English Language* (1770)

Baker's *Reflections on the English Language* (1770) might be the first usage guide on English. Baker expressed his concern about the methods of teaching languages. He thought of them as unpleasant, painful, and completely wrong since the students did not know anything when they left the school. While working on the book, Baker did not consult any grammar books, saying his work was entirely his. It is a collection of comments about what he considered misuses without any authority to support his *ipse dixit* pronouncements. His circle of friends and acquaintances were not interested in English, so he could not borrow books nor could he buy them because he had not been wealthy enough (Tieken-Boon, 2008: 17). He did not encounter Johnson's *Dictionary* "till a few Days ago, when, observing it inserted in the Catalogue of a Circulating Library[5] where I subscribe" (1770: v) before publishing his book.

Although he lacked formal education, he himself pointed out, "I am entirely ignorant of the Greek, and but indifferently skilled in the Latin, where I can construe nothing but what is easy" (1770: ii), thinking that should not have been a problem (Tieken-Boon, 2020: 27). He used examples from the books of well-known authors to show the incorrect usage of the language and sometimes the improper language, as well, thinking even the best authors of the time were prone to making mistakes. As he said, he "have paid no Regard to Authority" and criticized the authors when he thought they "have departed from what I conceive to be the Idiom of the Tongue, or where I have thought they violate Grammar without Necessity" (1770: iv). He stated that "our Writers abound with Incorrectness and Barbarisms" and the cure for that was "the Establishment of an Academy of *Belles Lettres*" because he firmly believed that "the Academy of *Paris* has contributed not a little to the refining the French Tongue" (1770: xii).

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[5] "Such libraries served as an important social mechanism by which people like Baker were able to gain access to important publications which they could not afford to buy themselves and which contained the mainstream grammars of the period, thus enabling its members to educate themselves even if they were unable to buy the books" (Tieken-Boon, 2008: 17).

4.4.5. *A Practical New Grammar with Exercises of Bad English or an Easy Guide to Speaking and Writing the English Language Properly and Correctly* (1753)

Anne Fisher was probably the earliest published female author on English grammar, and as such, she addressed women in her book *A Practical New Grammar with Exercises of Bad English or an Easy Guide to Speaking and Writing the English Language Properly and Correctly* (1753), which was divided into four parts: Orthography, Prosody, Etymology, and Syntax. As a teacher, she was aware of the young learners' specific needs (Tieken-Boon, 2008: 146).

Fisher thought that separating English grammar from Latin grammar would improve English language education, and learning one's own mother tongue could improve one's learning of other languages. This is the opinion she shared with Priestley. She disagreed with those who thought that without learning Latin in peculiar, "we cannot arrive at a thorough Knowledge of English" (1778: vi).

She thought that a better way of learning the language was through practice than by rote model, and therefore, she adapted the book material to her students' understanding. The book contains rules and examples of bad English as well as exercises, which she considered "entirely new, […] never any Thing of the same Nature appearing in an English Grammar before" (1778: vi). The book was designed for easy use, to be "attainable to every Person of common capacity" (1778: vii) who could be easily taught English without previous knowledge of any other languages. She recommended her book to those "Masters" who taught English grammar although "ignorant of it themselves, or, at best, […] never get the Art of Teaching it to any Advantage to the Scholar" (1778: viii) because of her own teaching methodologies described in the book, which she herself found successful (Rodríguez-Gil, 2008: 155).

4.4.6. *English Grammar, Adapted to the Different Classes of Learners* (1795)

Murray's *English Grammar, Adapted to the Different Classes of Learners* (1795) was probably the most popular and most reprinted grammar book during the nineteenth century. Lyman (1922) gives "a very conservative estimate of the total number of Murray's grammars, including his own and his followers' before 1850, is 200 editions, totaling between 1,500,000 and 2,000,000 copies" (Lyman, 1922; as cited in Read, 1939: 535).

Murray's associates founded a school for girls in York, and he recommended including the study of the English language in the course. Since the teachers who taught there felt incompetent in this field and whom he himself instructed, it was suggested that he should write an English grammar book (Read, 1939). He, at first, hesitated out of two reasons: he considered himself "not competent to compile a Grammar for publication" and "the London Committee have employed some person on this business who is now engaged in it" (Frank, 1795; as cited in Read, 1939: 528). He was writing a more accessible grammar book for the use of the reader stating "the Complier of this work […] has studied to render his subject sufficiently easy, intelligible, and comprehensive" (Murray, 1805: 3). He desired to help those teachers in the school in York and try to regulate and fix language pointing out the right and the wrong in linguistic matters (Read, 1939).

He gathered the material for his book from some authors as well as from his students. He followed Lowth, Sheridan, Johnson, Priestley, Walker, and some others he mentioned in his work (Read, 1939). It could be said that he used the opinions of the previous grammarians and shaped them into a unified system making a compilation which "must consist of materials selected from the writings of others"; he also says that "it is scarcely necessary to apologize for the use which the Complier has made of his predecessors' labours; or for omitting to insert their names" (Murray, 1805: 5). Still, he was attacked by some authors as unoriginal and therefore, the book should not be called "an English grammar" according to Lewis but "a collection of the opinions of different men of learning upon the English translations of the Latin grammar" (Lewis, 1821; as cited in Read, 1939: 529). He explained that his wish was "to promote, in some degree, the cause of virtue, as well as of learning" (Murray, 1805: 7) avoiding examples that might have had an improper effect and introducing those of moral and religious tendency.

V RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

5.1. Research corpora

The research corpora for the first part of the research are usage guides and grammar books from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries written by British and American authors. The books, which are used for this research, are those that were cited as important by some authors, whose books I read while working on this thesis. There are fourteen books from the nineteenth century and thirty books from the twentieth century written by both British and American authors. Most of the books were read online or downloaded from https://archive.org/.

The research corpora for the second part of the research are online corpora: *COCA: The Corpus of Contemporary American English* (http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/), *COHA: The Corpus of Historical American English* (http://www.english-corpora.org/coha/), and *The Hansard Corpus* (http://www.english-corpora.org/hansard).

5.1.1. British usage guides and grammars

The following British usage guides and grammars written in the nineteenth century are used:

1. *A Treatise on the Etymology and Syntax of the English Language* (1809), Alexander Crombie
2. *A Grammar of the English Language, in a Series of Letters* (1819 [1818][6]), William Cobbett
3. *An Introduction to English Grammar on Universal Principles* (1841), Hugh Doherty
4. *The Queen's English: Stray Notes on Speaking and Spelling* (1864), Henry Alford
5. *Bad English Exposed: A Series of Criticisms on the Errors and Inconsistencies of Lindley Murray and Other Grammarians* (1882), George W. Moon
6. *A New English Grammar, Logical and Historical* (1898 [1891]), Henry Sweet
7. *English Grammar, Past and Present* (1898), John Nesfield

The following British usage guides and grammars written in the twentieth century are used:

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[6] The publication years of the first editions are written in square brackets if those editions were not used in the research.

1. *The King's English* (1908 [1906]), Henry W. Fowler and Francis G. Fowler
2. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1927 [1926]), Henry W. Fowler
3. *An A.B.C. of English Usage* (1936), Henry A. Treble and George H. Vallins
4. *Good English: How to Write It* (1951 [1938]), George H. Vallins
5. *Grammar Without Tears* (1953 [1951]), Hugh S. Davies
6. *The Complete Plain Words* (1954), Ernest Gowers
7. *Fowler's Modern English Usage* (1965), Ernest Gowers
8. *Modern English Structure* (1969 [1965]), Barbara M. H. Strang
9. *Usage and Abusage: A Guide to Good English* (1972 [1942]), Eric Partridge[7]
10. *Guide to Patterns and Usage in English* (1975 [1954]), Albert S. Hornby
11. *The Oxford Guide to English Usage* (1983), Edmund S. C. Weiner
12. *Longman Guide to English Usage* (1988), Sidney Greenbaum and Janet Whitcut
13. *The Macmillan Dictionary of Current English Usage* (1995 [1962]), Frederick T. Wood, Roger H. Flavell, and Linda Flavell
14. *The King's English: A Guide to Modern Usage* (1997), Kingsley Amis
15. *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* (1998), Robert W. Burchfield

5.1.2. American usage guides and grammars

The following American usage guides and grammars written in the nineteenth century are used:

1. *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language* (1804 [1785]), Noah Webster
2. *English Grammar in Familiar Lectures* (1828 [1823]), Samuel Kirkham
3. *A Philosophical Grammar of the English Language* (1838), Joseph W. Wright
4. *The Grammar of English Grammars* (1851), Goold Brown
5. *The English Grammar: The English Language in Its Elements and Forms* (1851 [1850]), William C. Fowler
6. *Good English, or Popular Errors in Language* (1867), Edward S. Gould
7. *The Verbalist* (1891), Alfred Ayres

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[7] Although Eric Partridge was born in New Zealand, he is considered a New Zealand-British lexicographer. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_Partridge

The following American usage guides and grammars written in the twentieth century are used:

1. *English in Action* (1955 [1929]), Jacob C. Tressler and Henry I. Christ
2. *Current American Usage* (1962), Margaret M. Bryant
3. *Modern American Usage* (1966), Wilson Follett
4. *The Most Common Mistakes in English Usage* (1971 [1963]), Thomas E. Berry
5. *The Elements of Style* (1979 [1918]), William Strunk Jr. and Elwyn B. White
6. *American Usage and Style: The Consensus* (1980), Roy H. Copperud
7. *Paradigms Lost: Reflections on Literacy and Its Decline* (1981 [1980]), John Simon
8. *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* (1985 [1975]), William Morris and Mary Morris
9. *Line by Line: How to Edit Your Own Writing* (1985), Claire K. Cook
10. *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (1989 [1974])
11. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1992 [1969])
12. *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English* (1993), Kenneth G. Wilson
13. *Woe is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English* (1996), Patricia T. O'Conner
14. *The Wordwatcher's Guide to Good Grammar and Word Usage* (1998), Morton S. Freeman
15. *Sleeping Dogs Don't Lay: Practical Advice for the Grammatically Challenged* (1999), Richard Lederer and Richard Dowis

5.1.3. Online corpora

The Corpus of Contemporary American English (*COCA*) is the largest genre-balanced corpus of American English. The corpus contains more than one billion words of text (25+ million words each year from 1990-2019) from eight genres: spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, academic texts, and (with the update in March 2020): TV and Movies subtitles, blogs, and other web pages.[8]

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[8] Retrieved 6 August, 2021, from https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/.

The Corpus of Historical American English (*COHA*) is the largest structured corpus of historical English. COHA contains more than 475 million words of text from the 1820s-2010s (which makes it 50-100 times as large as other comparable historical corpora of English) and the corpus is balanced by genre decade by decade.[9]

Hansard Corpus (or collection of texts) contains nearly every speech given in the British Parliament from 1803-2005 (about 1.6 billion words total). The corpus was created as part of the SAMUELS project (2014-2016), which was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.[10]

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[9] Retrieved 6 August, 2021, from https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/.
[10] Retrieved 6 August, 2021, from https://www.english-corpora.org/hansard/.

VI EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The first part of the research will deal with the usage problem of modifying absolute adjectives as presented in the nineteenth and twentieth-century usage guides and grammar books. The second part will present the trends in their use with degree adverbs in online corpora.

6. ABSOLUTE ADJECTIVES

One of the characteristics of adjectives is their gradability, and we divide them into gradable and non-gradable adjectives. Gradable adjectives have the ability to express comparison, whereas non-gradable adjectives do not occur in comparative and superlative forms and should not be used with degree adverbs. Their meanings are considered absolute. However, a group of adjectives (*unique, perfect, equal, complete, total, infinite, impossible,* etc.) is used with degree adverbs, which prescriptive grammar considers incorrect usage.

Although they are considered non-gradable, linguists point out that they actually have several meanings. Therefore, some of these adjectives are modified with degree adverbs, and in practice, they are used as gradable adjectives and are considered standard English. It means that these adjectives have their generally accepted meanings when they are treated as non-gradable adjectives and extended meanings when they are treated as gradable adjectives as Huddleston and Pullum explain "the distinction between gradable and non-gradable […] applies to uses or senses of adjectives rather than to adjectives as lexemes" (2002: 532).

Linguists use the term *incomparable*[11] when talking about these adjectives, and Morris and Morris (1985: 596) believe that the term *uncomparable* would be a better choice since "incomparable" has the more common meaning of "matchless" and "unequaled".

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[11] 1. Being such that comparison is impossible; incommensurable. 2**.** So outstanding as to be beyond comparison; unsurpassed. https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=incomparable

6.1. Absolute adjectives as a usage problem

> Usage problems can be identified for all levels of language use – spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, grammar (syntax and morphology) and style. They are items of language that are perceived as problematical by the general public because they show variation in usage and therefore make people insecure about which variant to select (Algeo, 1991a; as cited in Tieken-Boon, 2020: 1).

As Tieken-Boon (2020: 39) states, usage problems come and go; some cease to be problematical, sometimes new usage problems appear, and some even date back to the eighteenth century. In the following part of the thesis, I will deal with absolute adjectives as one of the usage problems treated in usage guides and grammars.

This tradition of treating absolute adjectives as a usage problem started in the eighteenth century with Lowth, Priestley, and Murray, whose grammar books were mentioned in this thesis under *The eighteenth-century English grammar* section.

Lowth says that these adjectives "that have in themselves a superlative signification, admit not properly the superlative form superadded" (1763: 42) and as the example gives us adjectives *chief* and *extreme* in their superlative forms, *chiefest* and *extremest*, as he found them in some works of poetry. Although he calls them "improper superlatives", he allows their use but just in poetry.

Priestley's attitude towards these adjectives seems more tolerant than Lowth's, and he explains that "it is not uncommon to see the comparative or superlative of such words; being used, either thro' inadvertency, or for the sake of emphasis" (1772: 78) although they do not admit comparison. The examples he gives are *the chiefest, so universal,* and *the rightest*. Unlike Lowth, he also uses an adjective with a degree adverb to illustrate this usage problem.

Murray took the above-mentioned Lowth's remark and added a comparative form to it. The example sentences were taken from Priestley. He added two more adjectives to the list, *supreme* and *perfect*. Murray was against the usage calling the expressions in comparative and superlative "improper" and the phrases with a degree adverb *so* "incorrect". He explained that "*nearer* or *nearest* to perfect" (1805: 162-164) can be used, which the authors will mention later when explaining the usage.

Crombie (1809) explains that adjectives, which show the highest or lowest possible degree in their simple form, do not admit comparison and suggests using synonyms instead. He is also

against using all intensive words because the meaning of such adjectives "cannot be heightened or lessened" (1809: 106). Cobbett (1819: 114) agrees that the use of degree adverbs is a common error because they "convey the notion, that the quality or property expressed by the Adjective admits of degrees". Still, many authors compare absolute adjectives and the propriety or impropriety of that, as Brown (1851: 276) says, "is to be determined according to their meaning, and according to the usage of good writers, and not by the dictation of a feeble pedant, or upon the supposition that if compared they would form "*double superlatives*"".

6.2. Absolute adjectives in the British and American usage guides and grammars from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

Figure 1 shows how many usage guides and grammars address the problem of absolute adjectives in general. Out of a total of 44 titles, 34 (77 %) of them deal with the problem of modifying absolute adjectives, and 10 (23 %) do not mention it at all. 8 (18 %) of those that deal with this problem belong to the 19th century, and 26 (59 %) belong to the 20th century; 6 or 14 % not mentioning this usage problem are from the 19th century, and 4 or 9 % are from the 20th century.
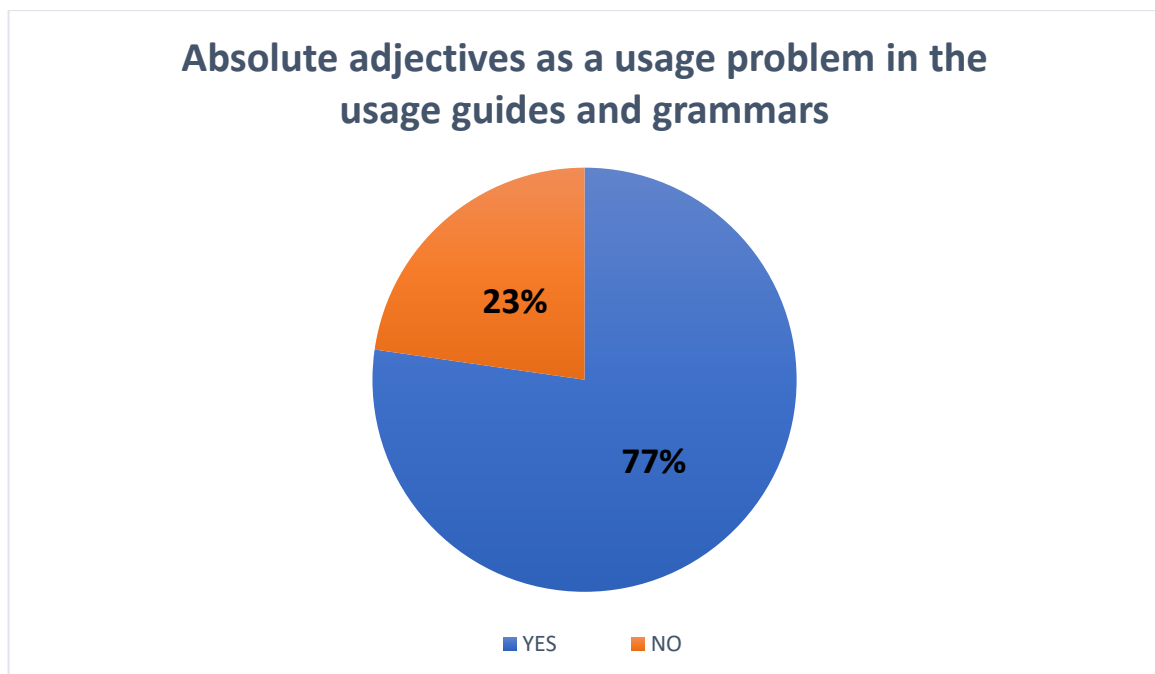
Figure 1. Absolute adjectives as a usage problem in the usage guides and grammars.

If we talk about the British and American usage guides and grammars separately, 15 (34 %) British usage guides and grammars mention absolute adjectives and 7 (16 %) do not, and 19 (43 %) American ones mention absolute adjectives, and 3 (7 %) do not as can be seen in Figure 2 below.
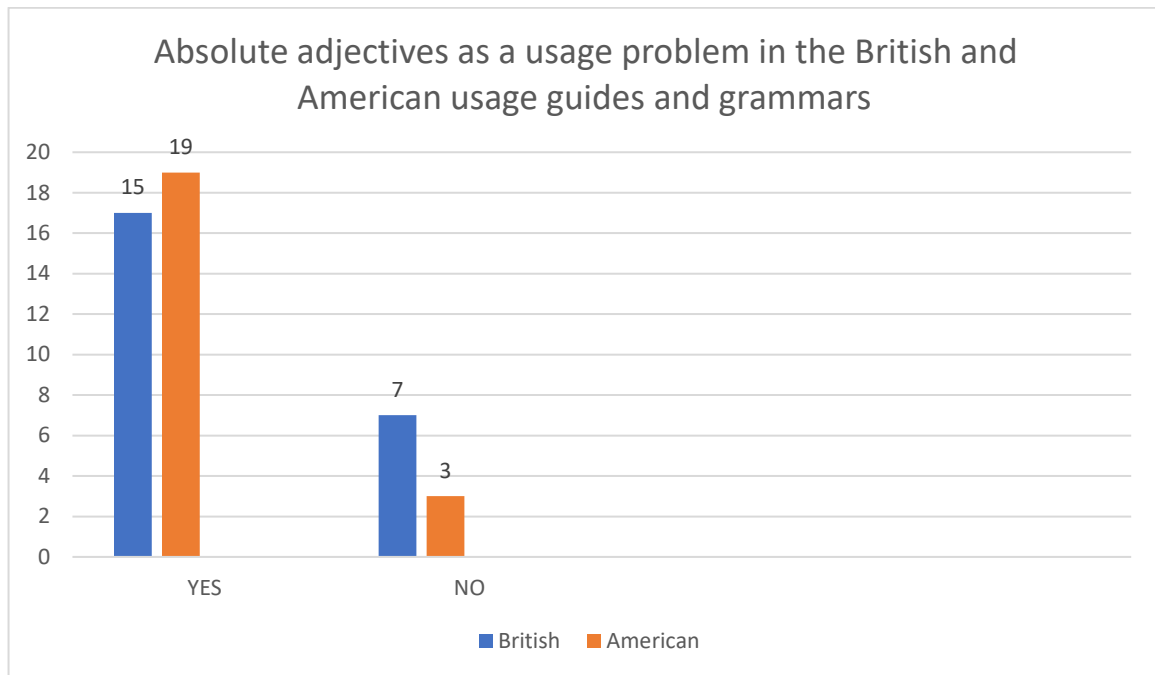
Figure 2. Absolute adjectives as a usage problem in the British and American usage guides and grammars.

There are 7 British usage guides and grammars from the 19th century and 15 from the 20th century, and the same number are American in the research corpora. If we divide the usage guides and grammars according to the centuries when they were written and published and the authors' nationalities, we can see how many deal with this problem and how many do not from Figure 3 below. That would be 3 British ones (7 %) and 5 American ones (11 %) from the 19th century, and 12 British ones (27 %) and 14 American ones (32 %) from the 20th century dealing with the problem. There are 4 (10 %) British usage guides and grammars from the 19th century and 2 (6 %) American ones that do not deal with the problem as well as 3 (5 %) British usage guides and grammars and 1 (2 %) American usage guide from the 20th century.
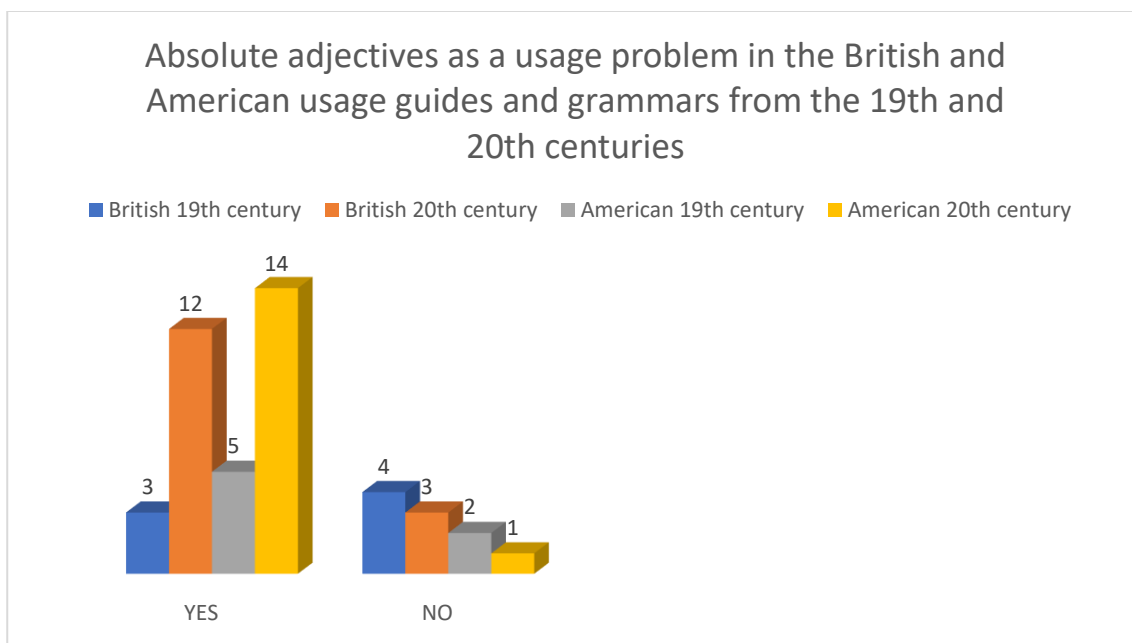
Figure 3. Absolute adjectives as a usage problem in the British and American usage guides and grammars from the 19th and 20th centuries.

As it can be seen from Figures 1, 2, and 3 and the numbers above, more American usage guides and grammars from the research corpora deal with absolute adjectives than the British ones no matter which century they were written in. The entries on absolute adjectives in the American usage guides and grammars from the nineteenth century are more extensive than the British ones. Both American and British usage guides and grammars from the 19th century usually deal with absolute adjectives in general, Brown's being the exception, which gives us special entries for a few adjectives. Most British and American usage guides and grammars from the 20th century provide a special entry for at least one adjective. Most authors consider absolute adjectives a significant usage problem (77 %), including it in their books.

6.3. Authors' treatment of absolute adjectives in the usage guides and grammars

Figure 4 presents the opinions of the authors on absolute adjectives expressed in their books. The opinions are divided into three groups: *vague* (the authors only support the gradability of certain absolute adjectives or with certain degree adverbs), *acceptable* (absolute adjectives should be modified, correct usage), and *not acceptable* (absolute adjectives should not be

modified, incorrect usage). Ten usage guides and grammars that do not mention absolute adjectives at all are excluded from the total number. Out of a total of 34 titles, 41 % or 20 of the authors think absolute adjectives should not be modified, i.e., the usage is *not acceptable* and, therefore, incorrect. There are 59 % or 14 of them who have a *vague* opinion, i.e., some adjectives can be modified with certain degree adverbs, but none of the authors or 0 % of them think the usage problem is *acceptable* and that absolute adjectives should be modified with degree adverbs.
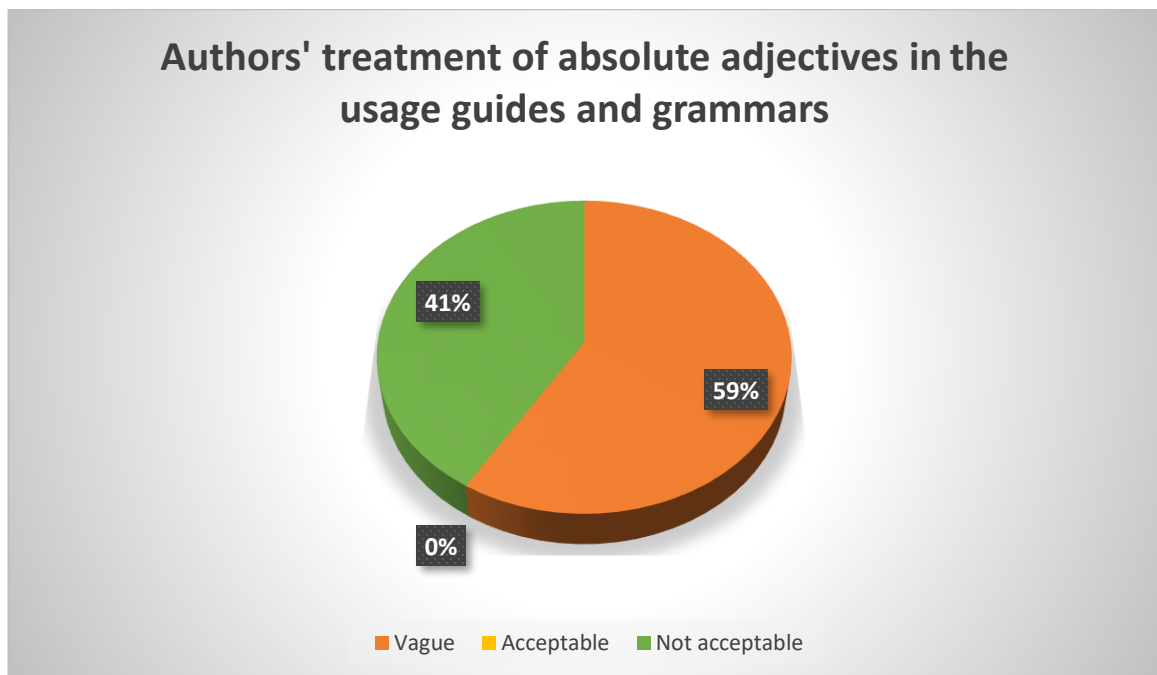
Figure 4. Authors' treatment of absolute adjectives in the usage guides and grammars.

If we compare British and American authors, we can see in Figure 5 that 9 (26 %) British authors find the usage *vague* (all of them are from the 20th century) and 6 (18 %) *not acceptable* (3 from each century). There are 11 (32 %) American authors who find the usage *vague* (2 authors are from the 19th century and 9 from the 20th century) and 8 (24 %) *not acceptable* (3 authors are from the 19th century and 5 of them from the 20th century).
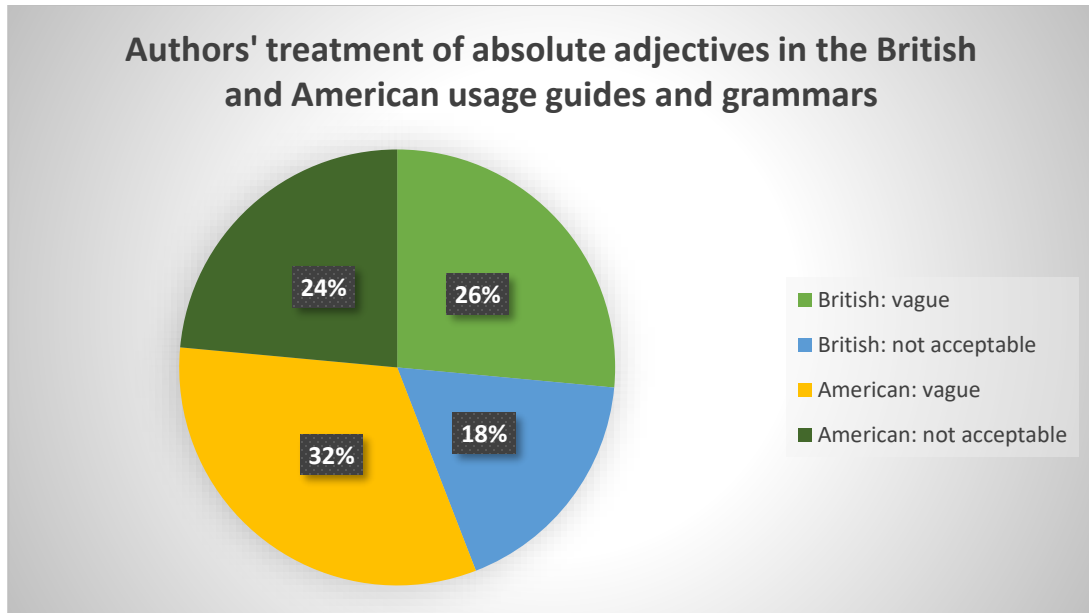
Figure 5. Authors' treatment of absolute adjectives in the British and American usage guides and grammars.

There are 26 % of British authors from the 20th century and 0 % from the 19th century who find the usage *vague,* and 9 % find it *unacceptable*. Also, 6 % of American authors from the 19th century and 26 % from the 20th century find the usage *vague,* and 9 % of them from the 19th century and 15 % from the 20th century find it *not acceptable*. This is presented in numbers in Figure 6.
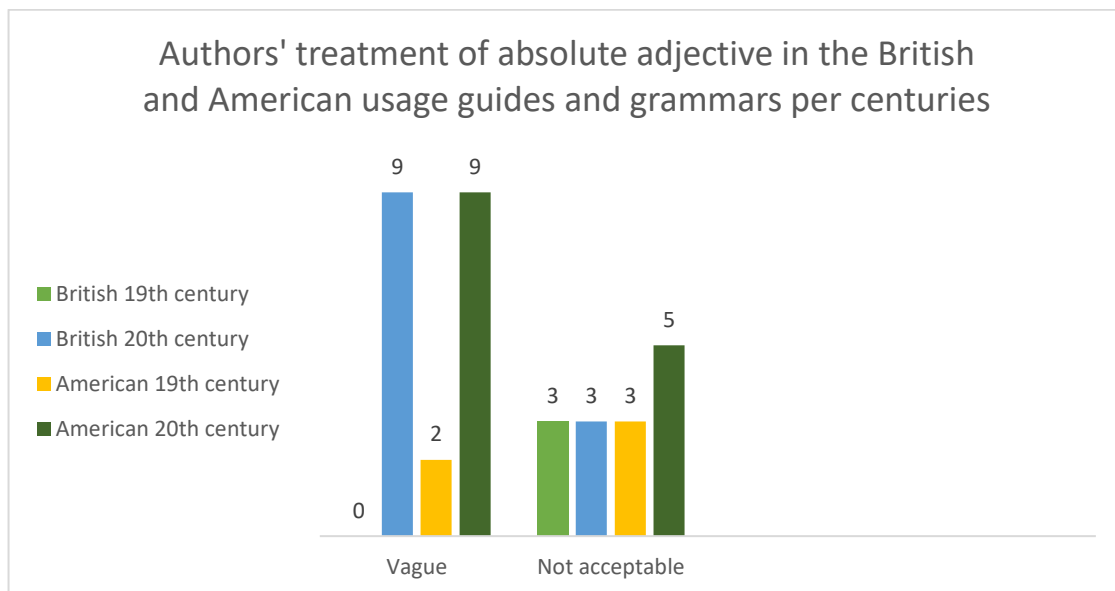
Figure 6. Authors' treatment of absolute adjectives in the British and American usage guides and grammars per centuries.

We can conclude that the nineteenth-century authors had a more prescriptive approach to this usage problem because their attitude was to memorize the correct usage and rote learn definitions and rules (*not acceptable* 18 %, *vague* 6 %). They were still following the eighteenth-century grammar books. Also, it seems that not many British authors from the 19th century concerned themselves with usage problems (3 British books out of 7 in this research corpora mentioned the usage problem of absolute adjectives whereas 5 American books out of 7 did the same). The authors mainly agree that absolute adjectives cannot be modified because their meaning already indicates "the highest or lowest possible degree" (Crombie, 1809: 205; W. C. Fowler[12], 1851: 214) and being in "the *superlative* degree" (Kirkham, 1828: 54). Brown (1851: 275) disagrees with Kirkham saying "nothing is really superlative, in English".

The twentieth-century authors had a more descriptive approach to the problem since 53 % of them expressed *vague* opinions and 23 % expressed *not acceptable* opinions towards the problem. Their focus was more on syntax. Most of the authors agree that some absolute adjectives can be modified with degree adverbs. For example, Strang (1969: 136) and Wood and Flavell (1995: 73) explain that absolute adjectives have an absolute meaning when unmodified but change it when modified. Cook (1985: 165) and Strang (1969: 136) believe that their meanings are even diminished when modified.

6.4. Adjectives treated as absolute adjectives in the usage guides and grammars

The authors of the usage guides and grammars would name some adjectives in their books while explaining the use of absolute adjectives. If they had a prescriptive approach, they would offer some adjectives, use them as examples of incorrect usage and call them absolute while explaining why they could not be modified with degree adverbs. If they belonged to a more descriptive group of authors, they would show through examples when those adjectives could be modified and pointing out those they also considered absolute ones.

Adjectives in Figure 7 show the frequency of their treatment in the usage guides and grammars. The authors either mentioned them under the entry of absolute adjectives or gave them a separate entry. We can see that most commented ones are *unique* (25) and *perfect* (23), then we

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[12] In order not to confuse him with Henry W. Fowler, the British author, I will use the initials of William C. Fowler when citing him.

have *complete* (11), *equal* (10), *dead* (9), *universal,* and *supreme* (8). Other adjectives in Figure 7 are *extreme* and *chief* (7), *full, absolute, impossible, eternal* and *essential* (6), *right, ideal, infinite, excellent* and *true* (5), and *empty* (4). Some adjectives have less than four comments and, therefore, are not presented in Figure 7. Those are *correct* (2), *entire* (3), *final* (3), *honest* (3), *inevitable* (2), *incessant* (2), *just* (3), *obvious* (3), *pure* (3), *real* (2), *simultaneous* (2), *straight* (3), *superior* (3), *total* (3), *utter* (3) and *wrong* (2). The adjectives mentioned just once are *atomic, blind, dumb, medical,* and *thorough.*
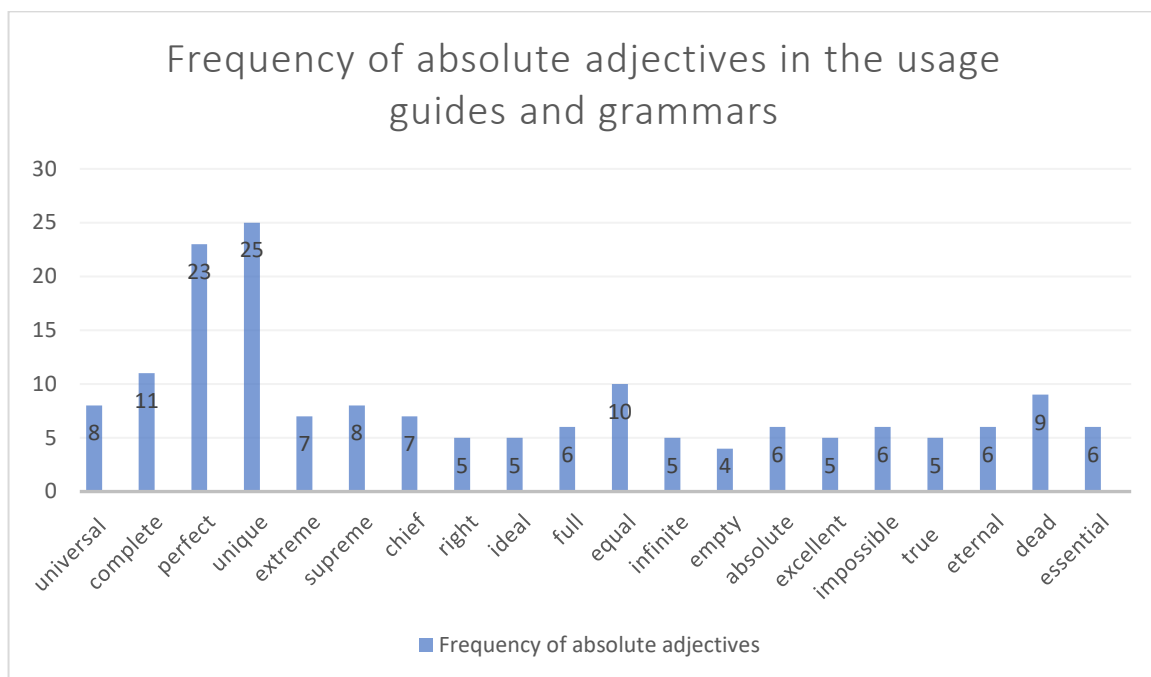
Figure 7. Frequency of absolute adjectives in the usage guides and grammars.

Some authors wrote the lists of the adjectives they considered absolute. The first author from the available corpora who compiled the list of 22 adjectives is Kirkham (1828: 54). Wright (1838: 51-52) wrote a list of 72 adjectives, and W. C. Fowler (1851: 214) added to his list two more adjectives than Kirkham, 24 of them. The most extensive one, with 80 adjectives, is Partridge's list (1972). These lists vary from one author to another, but most contain *unique, perfect,* and *complete*. These three adjectives are also the most used ones as examples in the usage guides and grammars, as shown in Figure 7.

absolute	indestructible		superlative
akin	inevitable		supreme
all-powerful (see separate entry)	inferior	There are many such ad-	sure (convinced)
basic	infinite	jectives in *in-*	torn
certain (sure, convinced)	innocuous		ultimate
chief	invaluable		unanimous
city	invulnerable		uncomparable (see separate entry)
comparative	irrefragable		unendurable
complete	main		uninhabitable
contemporary	major and *minor*		unique (see separate entry)
country	manifest		universal
crystal-clear	meaningless		untouchable
devoid	mortal (see separate entry)		and other *un-* adjectives
empty	obvious		utter, uttermost, utmost (q.v. at UTMO
entire	omnipotent		vital
essential	omniscient		void
eternal	pellucid		whole
everlasting	perdurable		worthless
excellent (see separate entry)	perfect		
fatal	possible (see IMPOSSIBLE)		
final	preliminary		
full	primary		
fundamental	primordial		
harmless	principal		
ideal (see separate entry)	pure		
immaculate	replete		
immortal	rife		
impossible — There are many such ad-	sacrosanct		
incessant — jectives in *in-*	senior and *junior*		
incomparable	simultaneous		
	sufficient		
	superior		

Facsimile 8. Partridge's list of absolute adjectives (1972: 76-77).

6.5. Adjectives modified with degree adverbs, correct or incorrect usage

Some authors showed correct and incorrect usage of absolute adjectives with degree adverbs through examples. In Table 1, we can see which adverbs were used to modify certain adjectives. The adverbials listed here are the ones the authors encountered in literature, media, spoken language, etc.

Table 1. The list of the degree adverbs used with absolute adjectives.

Degree adverbs	Absolute adjectives
so	universal, perfect, supreme, extreme, unique, essential
more	perfect, universal, honest, unique, infinite, entire, full, complete, dead, equal, excellent, impossible, superior, essential
most	perfect, universal, ideal, obvious, unique, simultaneous, entire, thorough, complete, equal, infinite, essential
very	right, wrong, unique, perfect, complete, equal, excellent, honest, correct, incorrect, essential
rather	unique, perfect, complete
quite	unique, excellent, perfect
almost	unique, infinite, perfect, simultaneous, equal
nearly	unique, infinite, perfect, simultaneous, equal
really	unique
surely	unique
perhaps	unique
absolutely	unique, perfect, essential
in some respects	unique
somewhat	unique
comparatively	unique
not quite	infinite, perfect, simultaneous, unique
less / least	complete, essential, unique, equal, perfect
exactly	equal
truly	unique
totally	unique
relatively	perfect

If we look at Figure 8, the adverbs that are used with most of the adjectives are *more* (17 % or 14 different adjectives), *most* (15 % or 12 adjectives), and *very* (14 % or 11 adjectives). The other adverbs shown here were used with fewer adjectives: *so* (7 % or 6 adjectives), *almost, nearly* and *less / least* (6 % or 5 adjectives), *not quite* (5 % or 4 adjectives), *rather, quite* and *absolutely* (4 % or 3 adjectives) and *really, surely, perhaps, in some respects, somewhat, comparatively, exactly, truly, totally* and *relatively* (1 % or 1 adjective).
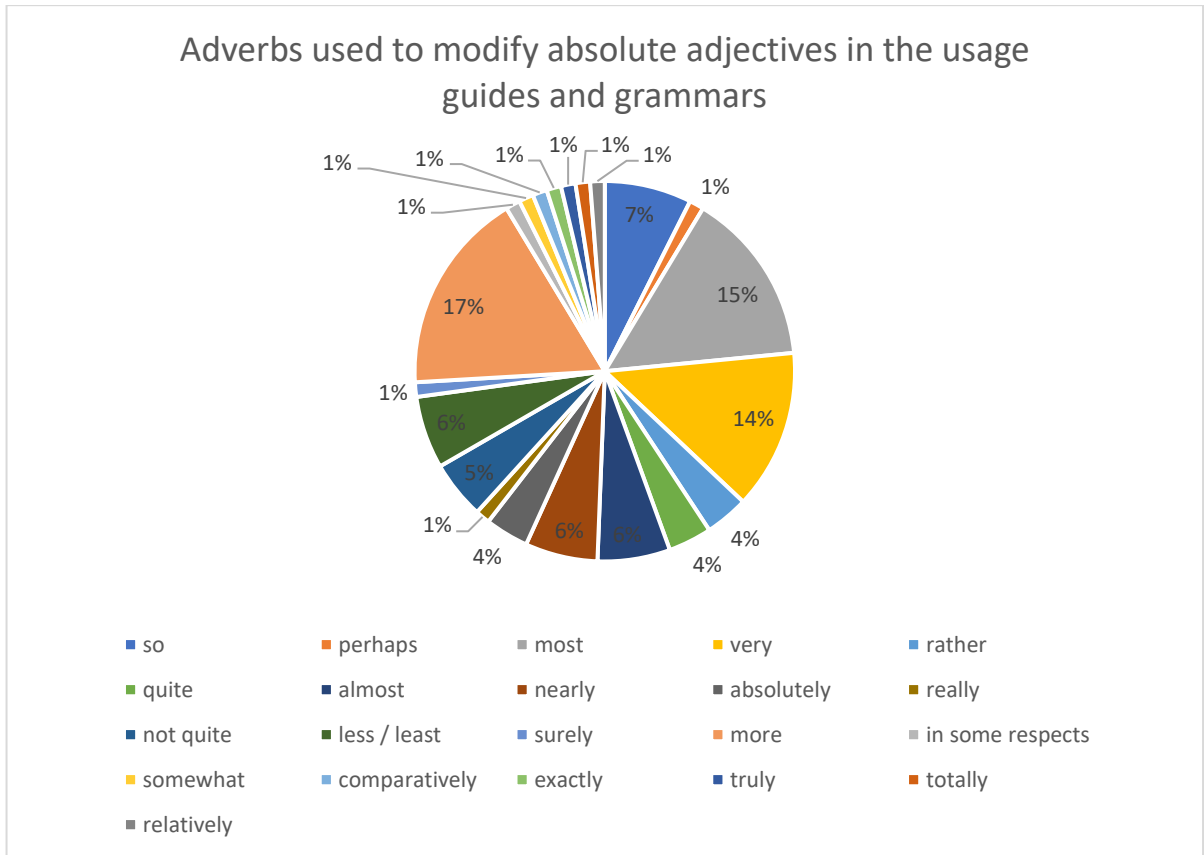
Figure 8. Adverbs used to modify absolute adjectives in the usage guides and grammars.

Most of the adjectives from Table 1 could not be used in the inflectional comparison forms, i.e., with *-er* or *-est* if they were to be compared. Thus, *more* and *most*, as the periphrastic form of comparison, are used the most with these absolute adjectives. Adjectives *full* and *dead* were

represented in the inflectional comparative form in these books and *chief, extreme* and *right*[13] in inflectional superlative form.

Looking at Figure 9, we can see that most adverbs used to show correct or incorrect usage of modified absolute adjectives were used with the adjective *unique* (19 adverbs). Then we have the adjective *perfect* (11 adverbs), *equal* (7 adverbs), *essential* (6 adverbs), *infinite* and *complete* (5 adverbs), *simultaneous* (4 adverbs), *excellent* and *universal* (3 adverbs), *honest* and *entire* (2 adverbs) and *supreme, extreme, ideal, full, dead, impossible, superior, obvious, thorough, right, wrong* and *correct / incorrect* (1 adverb).
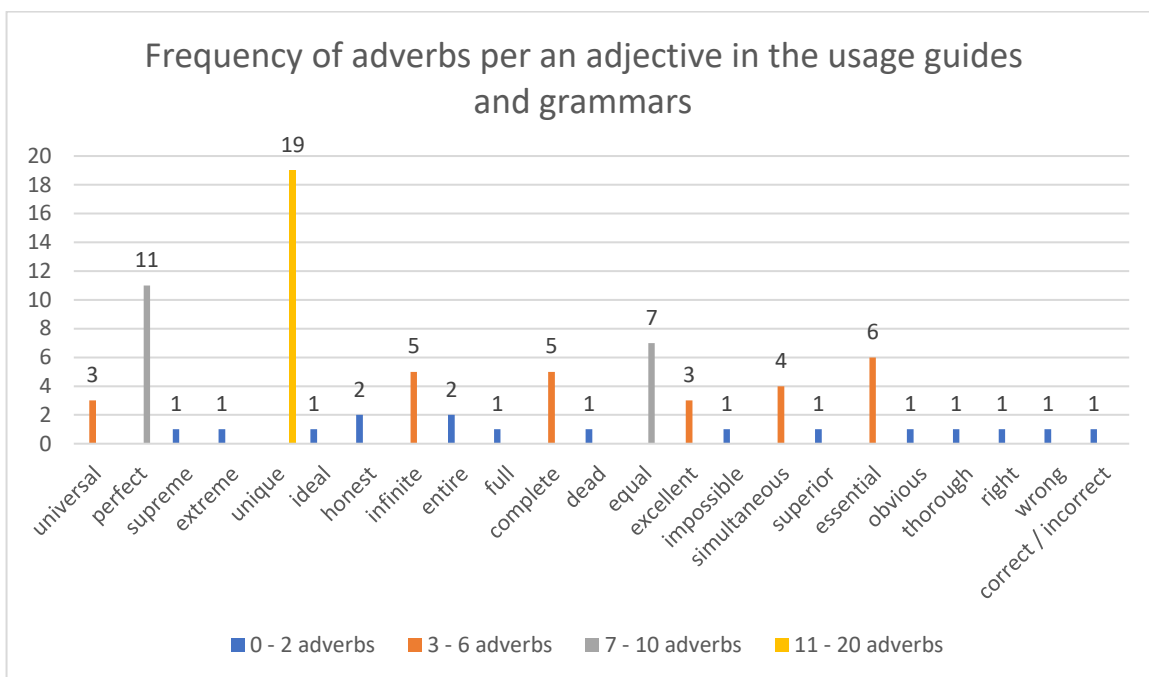
Figure 9. Frequency of adverbs per adjective in the usage guides and grammars.

We have seen in Figure 7 that *unique* and *perfect* were the most frequently mentioned adjectives in the usage guides and grammars. Figure 9 shows that these two adjectives were the most interesting ones for the authors to discuss since they pointed out their use with 19 and 11 adverbs, respectively. Although some adjectives are treated in the usage guides and grammars several times, there are slightly fewer examples with degree adverbs. The authors usually used the same ones, e.g., *complete*, *equal, dead, universal, supreme*. We do not have examples of the usage

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[13]According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, adjectives *full, dead* and *right* can have inflectional comparison (https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=full, https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=dead, and https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=right).

with degree adverbs for some adjectives, despite them being mentioned in the usage guides and grammars as presented in Figure 7, e.g., *eternal, absolute, empty*. The examples with *true* and *chief* are those of inflectional kind.

Table 2. Correct usage of absolute adjectives with degree adverbs in the usage guides and grammars.

Correct usage:

- perfect: so, very, nearly, almost, not quite
- unique: quite, almost, nearly, really, surely, perhaps, absolutely, in some respects, more, most, not quite
- infinite: nearly, almost, not quite
- simultaneous: nearly, almost, not quite
- full: more
- thorough: most
- equal: almost, exactly, more
- excellent: quite, more, very
- dead: more

Table 3. Incorrect usage of absolute adjectives with degree adverbs in the usage guides and grammars.

Incorrect usage:

- universal: so, more, most
- perfect: so, more, most, rather, very, not quite, relatively, quite, less
- supreme: so
- extreme: so
- honest: more, very
- right / wrong: very
- unique: rather, quite, almost, more, most, very, somewhat, comparatively, so, less
- ideal: most
- obvious: most

- infinite: nearly, almost, more

- simultaneous: most

- entire: most, more

- correct / incorrect: very

- complete: most, more, rather, very, less / least

- equal: very

- impossible: more

- superior: more

- essential: more, less, so

6.6. Treatment of particular absolute adjectives

As shown in Tables 2 and 3, some combinations of adverbs and adjectives belong to both categories of usage because some authors considered them correct and some incorrect. I will try to explain this more in the following part of the thesis.

6.6.1. Miscellaneous adjectives

Most adjectives which are less frequently mentioned in the usage guides and grammars and with a smaller number of degree adverbs are examples of unacceptable or incorrect usage of absolute adjectives according to the authors of the usage guides and grammars. These examples are *so / most / more universal, so supreme, so extreme, more / very honest, very right / wrong, most ideal, most obvious, most simultaneous, more / most entire, more impossible, more superior, very correct / incorrect,* and *more / less / so essential*. As the authors say, something is either correct or incorrect; it cannot be *very correct* or *very wrong*. A man is either honest or dishonest; he cannot be *more* or *very honest.* All of the above should be avoided, especially in writing, according to the authors.

Partridge (1972: 76) does not explain why he considers *nearly / almost / not quite simultaneous* a possible correct usage just like Greenbaum and Whitcut (1988: 154), who just say that *more full* and *more thorough* can be used, as well. There is a separate entry on *full* where they

treat it as an adverb, not an adjective (1988: 298). I have already hinted at *full* being allowed to have inflectional comparison, and W. C. Fowler cites Grant explaining that sometimes adjectives do not have the highest degree of quality when in positive case but express an approximation to that, therefore "when we say that one thing is fuller than another, we must mean that the one thing approaches nearer to fullness" (Grant, 1870; as cited in W. C. Fowler, 1851: 215).

6.6.2. *Complete*

Greenbaum and Whitcut (1988: 156) are against *more, most, very, rather,* and *less / least* with *complete* when its meaning is "total, whole" as in

(14)   "*a more complete silence*"

but approve of its use with *more* when it means "thorough"

(15)   "*a more complete study* of a subject".

Morris and Morris (1985) agree with Greenbaum and Whitcut on incorrect usage but also point out that *most, more* and *less* are acceptable in certain situations when "it is hard to define when something is actually *complete*" (1985: 128). According to *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (1989: 272), hereinafter referred to as *Webster's*, *complete* cannot be logically modified but is acceptable for many users as cited in the usage panels of Heritage from 1969 and 1982.

6.6.3. *Dead*

Dead is considered an absolute adjective and should not be compared or modified with degree adverbs. However, the construction *more dead* is mentioned in the usage guides and grammars. Wood, Flavell and Flavell (1995: 74) are against this usage, saying that one person cannot be *more dead* than another. Wilson considers it a cliché as in "*more dead than alive*" (1993: 124) and agrees with Morris and Morris (1985: 14) that this usage is restricted to casual speech on a conversational level and informal writing.

6.6.4. *Equal*

Greenbaum and Whitcut (1988) and Morris and Morris (1985) strongly disapprove of modifying *equal* in its literal sense with *more* and *very* because there cannot be any degrees in equality by giving the examples of the incorrect usage:

(16)   "*a more equal distribution of income*" (Greenbaum and Whitcut, 1988: 248-249)

(17)   "*a more equal distribution of wealth*" (Morris and Morris, 1985: 208).

Greenbaum, Whitcut, Morris and Morris explain this usage as "more equitable". *Almost* and *exactly* are acceptable.

Burchfield (1998: 257) defends *almost, less than, exactly,* and *not equal* as an idiomatic use. However, Burchfield (1998) and *Webster's* (1989) share the opinion about the use of *more equal* as being questionable and explain the meaning as "more nearly equal" as in the example:

(18)   "the American woman is not the same as other women […] she is freer because she is more equal" (Fairlie, 1976/1977; as cited in Burchfield, 1998: 257 and *Webster's*, 1989: 404).

Many authors refer to George Orwell's phrase, "all animals are equal, but some animals are *more equal* than others" (*Animal Farm*, 1945), which later writers often use.

6.6.5. *Excellent*

Although Greenbaum and Whitcut (1988: 257) say that there are no degrees in excellence, they agree that something can be *quite excellent* but not *more excellent* or *very excellent*. Burchfield (1998) agrees with this usage, as well. *Most excellent* is permissible "as an absolute superlative expressing merely a high degree" as in "*the Queen's most excellent Majesty*" (Greenbaum and Whitcut, 1988: 257) or as an "emphatic praise or approval (*most excellent brandy*)" (Burchfield, 1998: 272).

Morris and Morris (1985) do not think of *excellent* as a completely absolute adjective and even point out different degrees of excellence, e.g., in schools and colleges, "the student scoring 98 percent is more *excellent* than the one with 92 percent" (1985: 215).

6.6.6. *Infinite*

Partridge (1972) approves of *nearly, almost,* and *not quite infinite* but not of *more infinite.* For him, this is still an absolute adjective, which should not be debased "to equality with "(very) great" or "vast"" (1972: 157).

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1992), hereinafter referred to as *Heritage*, does not permit *nearly* and *almost* with *infinite* claiming "mathematically, infinity is not approached by degrees" (1992: 925). If the word is used metaphorically, modifying with adverbs is common.

6.6.7. *Perfect*

Most of the authors agree that perfection has no degrees and expresses completeness hence, e.g., a photo is perfect or not. Ayres (1891: 125) would say that *perfect* should logically be treated as an absolute adjective, and Gowers (1965) agrees and excludes *rather, very* and *more* in combination with *perfect.* Although he says, "one thing may be more nearly p. than another, says logic, but it cannot be more p.", he also points out that "logic is an unsure guide to usage" (1965: 445).

However, some authors argue that *perfect* can be modified with certain adverbs. Burchfield (1998) cites the *OED* when explaining this usage as "often used of a near approach to such a state [of complete excellence], and hence is capable of comparison" (the *OED*; as cited in Burchfield, 1998: 585).

Partridge (1972: 76, 233) accepts *nearly, almost,* and *not quite* with *perfect* but not *more, most* or *less / least*. Greenbaum and Whitcut (1988: 527) approve of *nearly perfect* and agree with Partridge's list of not acceptable adverbs adding *very* to it. Wood, Flavell and Flavell (1995) think *more perfect* allowable explaining that comparative here emphasizes the idea expressed by the absolute adjective:

    (19)   "We could not have had a *more perfect* day for the garden party" (Wood et al., 1995: 220).

Therefore, Burchfield (1998: 585) suggests modifying the *OED* rule saying that *perfect* is to be used as an absolute adjective in most circumstances but nonetheless to be allowed to have a comparative adjective or *very* as a modifier in rare occasions, even *almost* and *so*:

(20)   "she knew she had an *almost perfect* manner with subordinates" (West, 1977; as cited in Burchfield, 1998: 585).

The examples of comparative and superlative forms of *perfect* go back to the fourteenth century, so it is not clear why Murray (1805) added it to his list unless he followed Lowth's explanation of adjectives having superlative signification. Many grammarians and authors included the adjective into their own lists, following Murray's example. Bernstein (1965) and Simon (1980) believe that *perfect* should not be compared. Although there are authors against this usage, *perfect* can be compared and modified with a degree adverb because

> If we say, "This is *more perfect* than that," we do not mean that either is perfect without limitation, but that "this" has "more" of the qualities that go to make up perfection than "that"; it is *more nearly* perfect. Such usage has high literary authority (Fernald, 1946; as cited in *Webster's*, 1989: 7).

6.6.8. *Unique*

The Fowler brothers (1908: 58) commented on *unique* as an absolute adjective with no degrees of uniqueness. *Somewhat* and *rather* were pointed out as adverbs that could not modify this adjective and *almost* and *in some respects* as the ones that could go with *unique*. They were concerned that all the modifiers would change the meaning of the word *unique* and somehow weaken it. The examples they had found, they considered as solecisms[14], containing a self-contradiction:

(21)   "a *very unique* child, thought I" (Brontë; as cited in Fowler and Fowler, 1908: 59)

(22)   "thrills which gave him *rather* a *unique* pleasure" (Hutton; as cited in Fowler and Fowler, 1908: 59).

Some years later, it seemed that Henry Fowler (1927) started to change his mind about *unique*. For him, uniqueness is still "a matter of yes or no only; no unique thing is more or less unique than another unique thing, as it may be rarer or less rare" (1927: 680), but his list of adverbs

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[14]   A   nonstandard   usage   or   grammatical   construction.   Retrieved   August   19,   2021,   from https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=solecism.

that *unique* cannot tolerate (*more, most, somewhat, rather, comparatively, very*) and can tolerate (*absolutely, perhaps, surely, really, in some respects, nearly, almost, quite*) is more extensive. According to Mittins et al. (1970: 52), he even included "*nearly, almost, quite* that come dangerously close to the sense of degree". He believes such usage is nonsense, but one still used and written.

Vallins (1951: 195) considers that *almost unique* has "a kind of self-contradiction", while Wood and Flavell and Flavell (1995: 307) think it allowable. Strunk and White (1979: 62), O'Conner (1996: 87), and Lederer and Dowis (1999: 53) agree that there are no degrees of uniqueness.

Although many authors agree with Fowler, it must be pointed out that they have noticed and accepted that adverbs, which are not usually acceptable but are still used, change the meaning of *unique*. Freeman (1998: 269) believes that *unique* is weakened when modified with "*almost, perhaps* or *truly*".

Partridge (1972: 351-352) says that "there can be no qualification of the absolute without a contradiction of the quality which it asserts".

Greenbaum and Whitcut (1988: 738) suggest that *unique* is often used for "unusual" or "exceptional" and that combinations with *very, more, most, rather, somewhat* and *comparatively* should be avoided in formal writing whereas *quite, almost, nearly, more nearly, absolutely, perhaps* and *surely* can be used.

According to Burchfield (1998), when preceded by certain adverbs, *unique* is used in its weakened sense as "remarkable":

(23)   "almost the *most unique* residential site along the south coast" (advt in *Country Life*, 1939; as cited in Burchfield, 1998: 809).

There are four principal senses of how *unique* can be used in *Webster's* (1989: 928): "being the only one; sole, single" as the least common usage, "having no like or equal" when it can be modified with *almost* and *nearly*, "distinctively characteristic; peculiar", and its controversial sense sometimes meaning "unusual", sometimes "rare" and sometimes "distinctive".

There are authors such as Berry (1971: 30) who think *unique* should not have different meanings, i.e., "unusual", "strange", or "odd", since it "cannot be modified".

7. ONLINE CORPORA RESEARCH

Online corpora, Hansard, COHA, and COCA, will be used for this part of the research. The corpora cover the period from 1800 to 2019, but for the purposes of this thesis, the period from 1800 to 1999 will be used (Hansard from 1800 to 1999, COHA from 1820 to 1999, and COCA from 1990 to 1999). The following absolute adjectives, *unique, perfect, complete, equal,* and *excellent,* are chosen for more detailed online corpora research. Each adjective will be introduced with a definition from a dictionary to establish if they are considered absolutes or not and if they have extended meanings besides the generally accepted ones. The research will be based on the 100 most frequent degree adverbs used with the adjectives mentioned above. In order to get this data, "*ADV adjective*" (one of the above) will be entered into the search engine. Then, the list of the 20 most frequent degree adverbs taken from the corpora will be presented here. The search in Hansard also covers the 2000s because it does not allow the search for only the 19th and 20th centuries. Therefore, the number of occurrences in the 2000s will be deducted from the total number in each search. Hence, the ALL column in the Figures for Hansard will not match the number of occurrences listed in the text section of the thesis.

The first three degree adverbs on the list will be analysed with several more mentioned in the selected usage guides and grammars, which might be important and interesting. The analysis of the selected degree adverbs in combination with absolute adjectives will be presented in the following part of the thesis. The research will show the trends in the use of these adjectives with degree adverbs, i.e., how much and how often they are used in all the three corpora per decades. The analysis will also show which texts have the most examples of this usage and the differences between the two varieties, i.e., British and American. As the more formal one, Hansard will give us insight into the British Parliament speeches and COHA and COCA into the texts of different genres. COHA contains NF Books/Academic, Newspaper, Magazine, Fiction, and TV/Movies sections while COCA covers the Blog, Web, Spoken, Magazine, Newspaper, TV, Movies, Academic and Fiction sections. Through the research, I will try to compare the influence of prescriptive grammar on this usage.

com·plete

adj. **com·plet·er**, **com·plet·est**

1. Having all necessary or normal parts, components, or steps; entire: *a complete medical history; a complete set of dishes.*

2. *Botany* Having all principal parts, namely, the sepals, petals, stamens, and pistil or pistils. Used of a flower.

3. Having come to an end; concluded: *The renovation of the kitchen is complete.*

4.   a. Absolute; thorough: *complete control; a complete mystery.*

   b. Accomplished; consummate: *a complete musician.*

5. *Football* Caught in bounds by a receiver: *a complete pass.*

[Middle English *complet*, from Latin *complētus*, past participle of *complēre*, to fill out: *com-, intensive pref.*]

Usage Note: Although *complete* is often held to be an absolute term like *perfect* or *chief,* and supposedly not subject to comparison, it is often modified by words like *more* and *less* in standard usage. As far back as 1965, a majority of the Usage Panel accepted the example *His book is the most complete treatment of the subject.*[15]

Figure 10 shows the frequency of the 20 most used degree adverbs found in combination with the adjective *complete* in Hansard per decades. The total number of examples in Hansard for the combination of "ADV *complete*" is 14882. The three most common adverbs are *more* with a total of 2773 occurrences which is 19 %, *most* with 1925 occurrences or 13 %, and *almost* with 1713 occurrences or 11 %. *More* is used most in the 1870s and the 1880s (255 times), *most* in the 1880s (184 times), and *almost* in the 1960s (257 times). *Almost complete* is not detected in the 1810s.

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[15] Retrieved August 19, 2021, from https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=complete.

Hansard Corpus (British Parliament)   SEM

| SEARCH | FREQUENCY | CONTEXT | HELP |

ON CLICK: CONTEXT   TRANSLATE (BS)   GOOGLE   IMAGE   PRON/VIDEO   BOOK (HELP)

HELP		ALL	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
1	MORE COMPLETE	2805	30	27	48	118	132	168	190	255	255	191	222	225	177	223	130	94	94	64	84	46
2	MOST COMPLETE	1931	19	34	38	94	102	116	143	133	184	117	129	161	137	160	136	85	51	41	22	23
3	ALMOST COMPLETE	1781	2		1	3	6	8	13	21	36	36	53	78	83	135	186	253	257	218	183	141
4	YET COMPLETE	1350	1	1	2	8	5	8	13	24	57	59	101	121	68	106	113	128	129	123	132	107
5	AS COMPLETE	1148	12	10	20	62	46	68	53	59	93	47	72	120	65	89	64	54	59	46	36	37
6	SO COMPLETE	935	19	14	24	57	56	61	81	68	71	56	65	68	61	61	55	29	25	18	20	20
7	VERY COMPLETE	620	1	1		2	3	8	27	13	46	44	50	91	70	112	75	35	21	9	8	3
8	NOW COMPLETE	557		1	2	7	3	8	8	10	24	15	15	29	29	33	31	46	68	62	58	70
9	NEARLY COMPLETE	318	5	2		3	3	2	14	11	16	13	20	19	14	17	23	35	44	21	26	22
10	QUITE COMPLETE	277	1	1	2	4	1	4	3	8	13	21	16	48	20	42	23	15	27	4	16	5
11	PRACTICALLY COMPLETE	241						1		3	24	22	22	41	32	35	26	20	9	4	1	1
12	LESS COMPLETE	228			1	3	3	8	5	9	9	13	11	14	13	25	21	26	22	16	13	11
13	VIRTUALLY COMPLETE	218						1			3	2			3	7	14	23	42	41	52	23
14	FROM COMPLETE	164			1			2		7	6		5	3	2	7	22	13	15	17	24	25
15	ABSOLUTELY COMPLETE	152					2	2	1	11	18	19	25	8	12	8	17	16	7	4	2	
16	MEANS COMPLETE	148					2		1	3	4	2	4	6	10	16	14	21	16	14	12	14
17	FAIRLY COMPLETE	117								2	3	2	5	14	10	25	20	16	11	6	2	1
18	HOW COMPLETE	102	1	1	1		4	4	3	6	8	5	6	10	5	11	10	11	5	4	4	2
19	SUFFICIENTLY COMPLETE	97					1	1	2	6	8	10	15	12	11	14	5	2	5	3	2	
20	SUBSTANTIALLY COMPLETE	91								2	1		1	1		9	8	14	16	13	15	7

Figure 10. Most frequent adverbs with *complete* in Hansard per decades.

More complete and *most complete* are the most frequently mentioned in the usage guides and grammars. Besides them, the usage guides and grammars mention *so complete*, which has 929 occurrences in Hansard, i.e., 6 %, then we have *very complete* with 619 occurrences or 4 %, *less complete* with 223 occurrences or 1 % and *rather complete* with just 7 occurrences or 0.04 %. The decade with most occurrences for *so* is the 1860s (81 occurrences), for *very* is the 1930s (112 occurrences), for *less* is the 1950s (26 occurrences) and for *rather* is the 1950s (2 occurrences).

Figure 11 shows the frequency of the 20 most used degree adverbs found in combination with the adjective *complete* in COHA per decades. The total number of examples in COHA for the combination of "ADV *complete*" is 4581. The three most common adverbs are *more* with a total of 947 occurrences which is 21 %, *most* with 574 occurrences or 13 %, and *so* with 558 occurrences or 12 %. *More* is used most in the 1890s (77 times), *most* in the 1900s (60 times), and *so* in the 1890s (61 times).

Figure 11 (Corpus of Historical American English — FREQUENCY view):

		ALL	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	SEC1
1	MORE COMPLETE	947	27	43	49	58	71	66	65	77	72	76	63	53	42	42	39	34	32	38			947
2	MOST COMPLETE	574	11	26	37	23	39	37	35	50	60	54	32	24	27	25	27	23	18	26			574
3	SO COMPLETE	558	16	35	31	30	35	35	27	61	42	53	40	32	28	25	15	20	18	15			558
4	ALMOST COMPLETE	415		4	5	6	8	11	14	15	31	28	34	45	42	49	51	32	14	26			415
5	AS COMPLETE	302	1	17	13	15	27	34	14	20	19	24	23	22	23	14	15	8	9	4			302
6	LESS COMPLETE	170	4	6	3	14	11	13	14	17	15	24	7	12	10	5	4	2	9				170
7	NEARLY COMPLETE	147	1		5	4	4	4	5	13	11	15	6	12	6	13	7	12	15	14			147
8	NOW COMPLETE	114	3	5	10	8	12	5	2	4	8	4	3	5	4	4	8	7	11	11			114
9	VERY COMPLETE	107	4	3	4	6	5	11	6	15	5	10	11	4	10	4	5	1		3			107
10	YET COMPLETE	86	2	5	5	6	2	6	5	6	7	4	7	8	3	4	7	4	3	2			86
11	QUITE COMPLETE	75		1	2	2	1	4	4	3	7	11	1	10	5	8	4	5	4	3			75
12	HOW COMPLETE	63			2	2	9	10	2	8	5	3	2	1	7	3	3	2	3	1			63
13	FAIRLY COMPLETE	61							2	6	4	11	6	7	6	7	7	3	2				61
14	FROM COMPLETE	59		1		2	4		6	2	4	6	2	2	4	5	6	6	7	2			59
15	TOO COMPLETE	56		4	1		3	3	3	3	4	8	6	7	2	2	5	2	3				56
16	PRACTICALLY COMPLETE	49		1					1	6	4	8	9	8	6	1	2	2		1			49
17	VIRTUALLY COMPLETE	43							1		1	4	2	6	7	7	2	6	2	5			43
18	NEVER COMPLETE	35		1		2	1	3	3	1	4	2	5	3	1	2	2	2	1	2			35
19	PRETTY COMPLETE	34	2	1		1	2	1	2		3	10	3	1	1	4			2	1			34
20	SUFFICIENTLY COMPLETE	30	1	3	1	3	3	3	3		2	2	2	1	2	2	2						30

Figure 11. Most frequent adverbs with *complete* in COHA per decades.

Almost complete has 415 occurrences or 9 %, *less complete* has 170 occurrences or 4 %, *very complete* 107 occurrences or 2 %, and *rather complete* has 12 occurrences or 0.26 %. *Almost* is used most in the 1960s, *very* in the 1890s, *less* in the 1910s, and *rather* in the 1960s.

Researching the registers where the first three combinations are used, it can be concluded that *more complete* and *most complete* have most examples in the MAG section and *so complete* in the FIC section. Overall, the MAG section has most examples with 39 %. Then we have NF/ACAD with 27 %, FIC with 26 %, NEWS with 8 %, and TV/MOV with 1 %.

Table 4. Frequency of *complete* in COHA per registers.

	NF/ACAD	NEWS	MAG	FIC	TV/MOV
more complete	297	96	353	194	7
most complete	150	45	254	120	5
so complete	102	27	208	218	3

Figure 12 shows the frequency of the 20 most used degree adverbs in COCA with the adjective *complete*. The total number of examples in COCA for the combination of "ADV *complete*" is 1674. The three most common adverbs are *more* with a total of 385 occurrences which is 23 %, *most* with 167 occurrences or 10 %, and *almost* with 160 occurrences or 9 %.

HELP		ALL FORMS (SAMPLE): 100 200 500	FREQ	TOTAL 1,741 | UNIQUE 167 +
1	☐	MORE COMPLETE	385	
2	☐	MOST COMPLETE	167	
3	☐	ALMOST COMPLETE	160	
4	☐	NEARLY COMPLETE	106	
5	☐	SO COMPLETE	93	
6	☐	NOW COMPLETE	70	
7	☐	AS COMPLETE	62	
8	☐	SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETE	47	
9	☐	FROM COMPLETE	38	
10	☐	YET COMPLETE	38	
11	☐	NEVER COMPLETE	32	
12	☐	LESS COMPLETE	25	
13	☐	VERY COMPLETE	25	
14	☐	EVEN COMPLETE	18	
15	☐	THEN COMPLETE	18	
16	☐	FAIRLY COMPLETE	16	
17	☐	QUITE COMPLETE	15	
18	☐	JUST COMPLETE	14	
19	☐	VIRTUALLY COMPLETE	14	
20	☐	MEANS COMPLETE	13	

Figure 12. Most frequent adverbs with *complete* in COCA.

So complete has 93 occurrences or 6 %, *less complete* and *very complete* each have 25 occurrences or 1 % and *rather complete* has 6 occurrences or 0.35 %.

The BLOG and WEB sections have no registered examples. All three combinations, *more complete, most complete,* and *almost complete*, have most examples in the ACAD section. Overall, the ACAD section amounts to 51 %. Then there is MAG with 19 %, NEWS with 12 %, SPOK with 7 %, FIC with 6 %, and TV/MOV with 5 %.

Table 5. Frequency of *complete* in COCA per registers.

	SPOK	MAG	NEWS	TV/MOV	ACAD	FIC
more complete	21	65	37	8	235	19

most complete	15	43	31	7	62	9
almost complete	12	27	21	17	65	18

Table 6 shows the frequency of the selected adverbs in all the three corpora. *More* and *most* are at the first two places in all the three corpora, but they are the most frequently found in Hansard as well as *almost, very, so* and *less. Almost* is at the 3rd place in Hansard and COCA while *so* is in COHA. *Rather complete* is the only combination used more in the American corpora than the British one.

Table 6. Frequency of adverbs with *complete* per corpora.

	Hansard		COHA		COCA	
	place	frequency	place	frequency	place	frequency
more complete	1	2773	1	974	1	385
most complete	2	1925	2	594	2	167
almost complete	3	1713	4	415	3	160
so complete	6	929	3	558	5	93
very complete	7	619	9	107	13	25
less complete	12	223	6	170	12	25
rather complete	95	7	34	12	39	6

Although the usage guides, grammars and prescriptive grammar are against this usage, we can see that degree adverbs were used with *complete*. They were used less in Hansard (4606 examples) and COHA (1800 examples) in the 19th century when prescriptive rules were more strictly observed. This usage is more frequent in the 20th century (Hansard 10276 examples; COHA 2781 examples) when a descriptive approach is more followed. Interestingly, all the examples of incorrect usage in the selected usage guides and grammars belong to the 20th century, and most of the authors are Americans. So, it seems that rules were not so strictly observed.

According to *Heritage*, *complete* has two meanings: "whole, entire" as the original one and "thorough" as the extended meaning. *More, most, very, rather,* and *less* were considered incorrect

usage if the adjective *complete* had the meaning of "total, whole" as it seems to have in the following examples:

(24)   "one gets a *more complete* understanding if one actually sees what is happening outside the factory gate" (Hansard; House of Lords, 1983)

(25)   "This is the largest and *most complete* collection on the subject in existence" (COHA; Boyd, Southern History in American Universities, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, July 1902, pp. 238-246).

When *complete* has its extended meaning "thorough", it could be modified with *more*:

(26)   "the question of the noble Lord the Member for Woodstock deserved a *more complete* answer" (Hansard; House of Commons, 1881).

Almost is acceptable, as well:

(27)   "add to this the *almost complete* lack of adequate water sources" (COCA; Hillman, The Pauperization of the Maasai in Kenya, *The Quarter* 41/4, 1994, p. 57).

Figures 13 and 14 show the frequency of the adjective *complete* with *more* in Hansard and COHA, respectively. The number for each decade is normalized to the frequency per million words. To get the number of occurrences per million words, the raw frequency is divided by the total number of words and the result is multiplied by one million.

More complete is more frequently used in the 19th century in both Hansard and COHA. The frequency in the first decade of Hansard is 6.03, and it gets considerably lower in the 1810s, then it gradually increases, reaching its highest normalized frequency of 7.06 in the 1870s. The frequency is in constant decline from the next decade. The highest normalized frequency in COHA is 4.25 in the 1860s. The frequency in COHA varies during both centuries, with considerable decline from the 1920s.
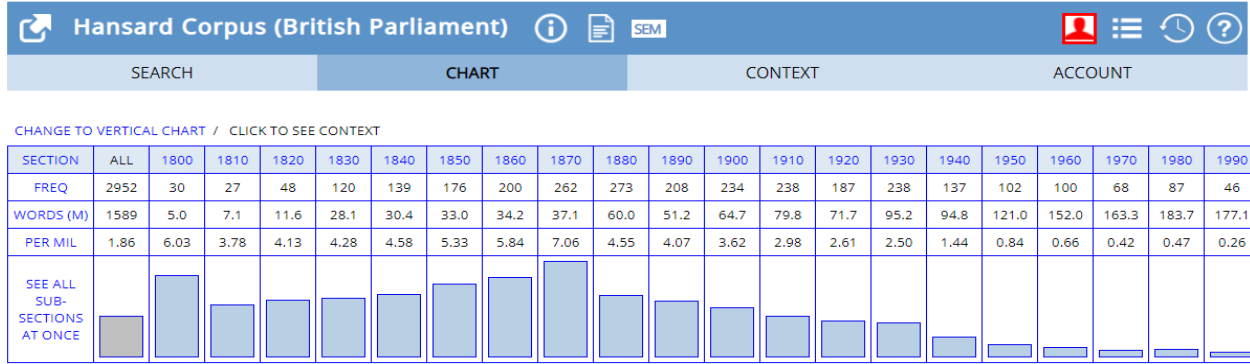
Figure 13. The normalized frequency of *more complete* in Hansard.
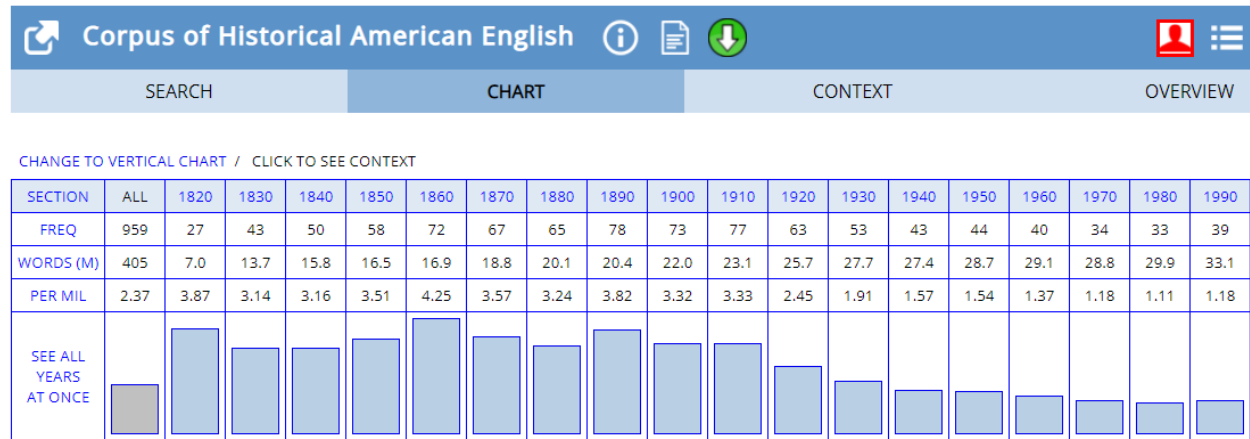
Figure 14. The normalized frequency of *more complete* in COHA.

Figures 15 and 16 show the frequency of the adjective *complete* with *most* in Hansard and COHA, respectively. The highest normalized frequency in Hansard is 4.77 in the 1810s and 2.82 in COHA in the 1900s. It is more frequently used in the 19th century in both corpora.
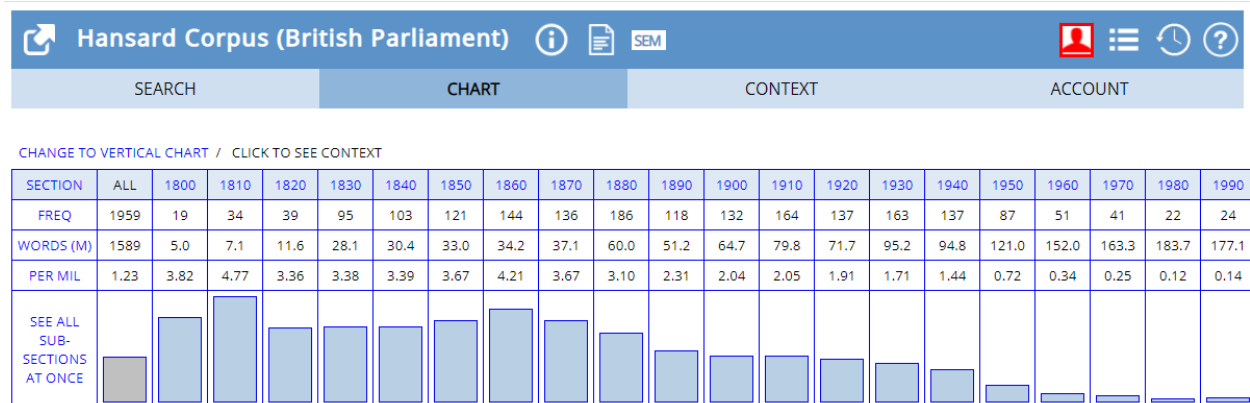
Figure 15. The normalized frequency of *most complete* in Hansard.
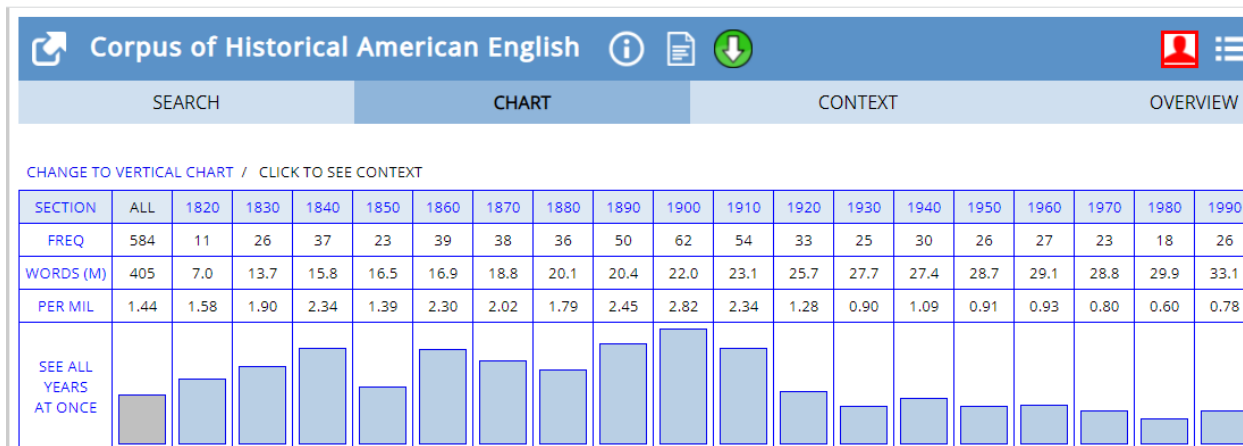
Figure 16. The normalized frequency of *most complete* in COHA.

7.2. *Unique*

u·nique

adj.

1. Being the only one of its kind: *the unique existing example of Donne's handwriting.*

2. Characteristic only of a particular category or entity: *a weather pattern that is unique to coastal areas.*

3. Remarkable; extraordinary: *a unique opportunity to buy a house.*

[French, from Old French, from Latin *ūnicus*;]

Usage Note: Unique may be the foremost example of an absolute term—a term that, in the eyes of traditional grammarians, should not allow comparison or modification by an adverb of degree like *very, somewhat,* or *quite.* Thus, most grammarians believe that it is incorrect to say that something is *very unique* or *more unique than* something else, though phrases such as *nearly unique* and *almost unique* are presumably acceptable, since in these cases *unique* is not modified by an adverb of degree. A substantial majority of the Usage Panel supports the traditional view. In our 2004 survey, 66 percent of the Panelists disapproved of the sentence *Her designs are quite unique in today's fashion*, although in our 1988 survey, 80 percent rejected this same sentence, suggesting that resistance to this usage may be waning.[16]

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[16] Retrieved August 21, 2021, from https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=unique.

Figure 17 shows the frequency of the 20 most used degree adverbs in combination with the adjective *unique* in Hansard per decades. The total number of examples in Hansard for the combination of "ADV *unique*" is 2862. The most common three adverbs are *almost* with a total of 829 occurrences which is 29 %, *quite* with 320 occurrences or 11 %, and *means* (as in *by no means*[17]) with 141 occurrences or 5 %. *Almost* is used most in the 1980s (159 times), *quite* in the 1960s (66 times), and *means* in the 1970s (28 times). *Means* is not detected in the 1880s, the 1890s, the 1900s, and the 1920s. There are no registered occurrences of the ADV *unique* use in the first four decades of the 19th century (the 1880s, the 1810s, the 1820s, and the 1830s).

HELP			ALL	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
1	☐	ALMOST UNIQUE	878							3	4	13	10	27	32	32	42	51	69	102	139	159	146
2	☐	QUITE UNIQUE	326						1		1	6	4	5	20	6	13	22	37	66	64	49	26
3	☐	MEANS UNIQUE	151								1				2		2	7	9	26	28	33	33
4	☐	ABSOLUTELY UNIQUE	148								2	11	14	21	22	10	6	2	11	25	7	7	4
5	☐	PROBABLY UNIQUE	136									1		2	1	4	6	6	15	20	24	22	28
6	☐	RATHER UNIQUE	120												3	4	14	6	6	28	20	22	11
7	☐	PERHAPS UNIQUE	119									1	1	2	1		6	3	13	21	12	21	26
8	☐	SO UNIQUE	111							2		1	4	3	6	2	2	4	4	15	22	20	18
9	☐	ALSO UNIQUE	65									1	1		2		1		4	10	9	14	17
10	☐	SOMEWHAT UNIQUE	63									3	2	4	2	3	8	1	4	10	8	9	7
11	☐	INDEED UNIQUE	53											2	4	1	3	1	5	8	9	14	3
12	☐	VERY UNIQUE	47					1						3	10	4	7	4		3	6	7	
13	☐	MOST UNIQUE	46								1	4	3	2		4	3	1	2	6	3	10	6
14	☐	FAIRLY UNIQUE	38															1	1	1	4	15	12
15	☐	AS UNIQUE	37											2	2			1	5	9	7	7	
16	☐	VIRTUALLY UNIQUE	37															1	1	2	8	9	14
17	☐	POSSIBLY UNIQUE	34												1	1	1		2	7	6	6	8
18	☐	CERTAINLY UNIQUE	33						1				1	2	1	1	2		3	4	7	6	3
19	☐	ENTIRELY UNIQUE	30								1	1	1	1	2	1	3	1	2	3	5	4	4
20	☐	COMPLETELY UNIQUE	27														1	1	5	7	6	3	3

Figure 17. Most frequent adverbs with *unique* in Hansard per decades.

Several other combinations mentioned in the usage guides and grammars are as follows *absolutely unique* with 142 occurrences or 5 %, *rather unique* with 114 occurrences or 4 %, *perhaps unique* with 107 occurrences or 4 %, *so unique* with 103 occurrences or 4 %, *somewhat unique* with 61 occurrences or 2 %, *very unique* and *most unique* with 45 occurrences or 2 % both,

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[17] **Idioms: by no means** In no sense; certainly not: *This remark by no means should be taken lightly.* Retrieved August 22, 2021, from https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=by+no+means.

more unique with 21 occurrences or 1 % and *nearly unique* with 13 occurrences or 0.45 %. All of these combinations have less than 30 occurrences per decade.

Figure 18 shows the frequency of the 20 most used degree adverbs in combination with the adjective *unique* in COHA per decades. The total number of examples in COHA for the combination of "ADV *unique*" is 775. The first three most frequent adverbs are *most* with 82 occurrences or 11 %, *so* with 79 occurrences or 10 % and *almost* with 73 occurrences or 9 %. *Most* has no detected occurrences in the 1820s, the 1950s, and the 1960s and has most occurrences in the 1920s (13 occurrences). *So* is without occurrences in the 1820s and the 1950s and with most in the 1880s (10 occurrences). *Almost* has most occurrences in the 1900s (12 occurrences), but there are no occurrences in the 1820s, the 1830s, the 1840s, and the 1860s.

#		ALL	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	SEC1
1	MOST UNIQUE	82		2	2	2	2	1	6	4	10	9	13	6	5			6	4	10			82
2	SO UNIQUE	79		2	2	3	3	2	10	7	8	6	6	4	4		4	7	4	7			79
3	ALMOST UNIQUE	73				1		3	4	10	12	10	6	5	2	5	4	3	7	1			73
4	AS UNIQUE	38	1	1	1	2		3	3	5	3	1		2	3	2	1	2	3	5			38
5	QUITE UNIQUE	35	1	1	1		2	4	3	1	2	4		1	4	2	3		3	3			35
6	MEANS UNIQUE	26									1			3	2	4	1	3	4	7	1		26
7	MORE UNIQUE	26		3	1		1	2	1	2	1	3	4	1		2	2	2	1				26
8	VERY UNIQUE	26			1	1		1		2	3		4					7	3	4			26
9	ABSOLUTELY UNIQUE	24			1			2	1	1	2	1	2		2	1	3	5	2	1			24
10	RATHER UNIQUE	17								1	1	2			2	2		4	3	2			17
11	HARDLY UNIQUE	16														1	2	4	3	6			16
12	PERHAPS UNIQUE	15							1		3		1	1		3	1	2	2	1			15
13	ENTIRELY UNIQUE	15		1	1	3		1	2		1	1		1	1	1		1	1				15
14	CERTAINLY UNIQUE	14		1			1	1	3	2	3	1								2			14
15	TRULY UNIQUE	13			1										2		3	1		6			13
16	SOMEWHAT UNIQUE	12		1	2	1			1				1	2			3			1			12
17	PROBABLY UNIQUE	12										3	2	1	1	1	3		1				12
18	ALTOGETHER UNIQUE	11						2	3	2	1	2			1								11
19	EQUALLY UNIQUE	11		1		2		2			1			2	1					2			11
20	REALLY UNIQUE	10	1					1	1	1				1			1	3	1				10

Figure 18. Most frequent adverbs with *unique* in COHA per decades.

Quite unique is represented with 35 occurrences or 5 %, *means unique, more unique* and *very unique* with 26 occurrences or 3 %, *absolutely unique* with 24 occurrences or 3 %, *rather unique* with 17 occurrences or 2 %, *perhaps unique* with 15 occurrences or 2 %, *somewhat unique*

with 12 occurrences or 2 % and *nearly unique* with 5 occurrences or 1 %. All of these combinations have less than 10 occurrences per decade.

Most unique and *almost unique* have most examples in the MAG section, while *so unique* has the same number of examples in the MAG and FIC sections. The MAG section appears to have most examples with 38 %; then we have FIC with 27 %, NF/ACAD with 23 %, NEWS with 7 %, and TV/MOV with 5 %.

Table 7. Frequency of *unique* in COHA per registers.

	NF/ACAD	NEWS	MAG	FIC	TV/MOV
most unique	18	4	29	25	6
so unique	7	6	30	30	6
almost unique	28	6	31	8	0

Figure 19 represents the list of the 20 most frequent adverbs found in combination with the adjective *unique* in COCA. The total number of examples for the "ADV *unique*" combination in COCA is 989. The most common adverbs are *very* with 156 occurrences or 16 %, *so* with 85 occurrences or 9 % and *most* with 76 occurrences or 8 %.
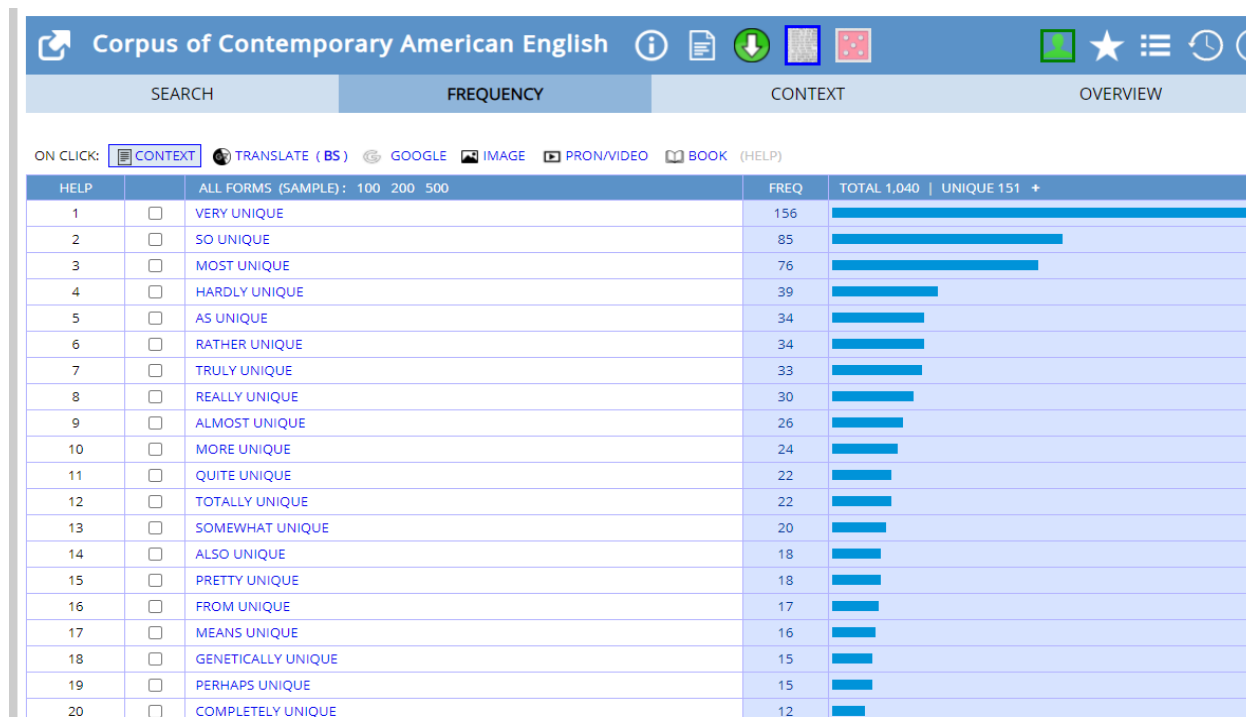
Figure 19. Most frequent adverbs with *unique* in COCA.

The rest of the combinations from the usage guides and grammars is as follows *rather unique* with 34 occurrences or 3 %, *absolutely unique* with 27 occurrences or 3 %, *almost unique* with 26 occurrences or 3 %, *more unique* with 24 occurrences or 2 %, *quite unique* with 22 occurrences or 2 %, *somewhat unique* with 20 occurrences or 2 %, *means unique* with 16 occurrences or 2 %, *perhaps unique* with 15 occurrences or 1 % and *nearly unique* with 6 occurrences or 0.60 %.

The BLOG and WEB sections have no examples registered in COCA. *Very unique* and *so unique* have most examples in the SPOK section while *most unique* has most examples in the MAG section. The SPOK section is with most examples, i.e., 38 %, then we have TV/MOV 19 %, NEWS 18 %, MAG 13 %, ACAD 7 % and FIC 5 %.

Table 8. Frequency of *unique* in COCA per registers.

	SPOK	MAG	NEWS	TV/MOV	ACAD	FIC
very unique	83	11	22	29	4	7
so unique	23	13	20	15	7	7
most unique	15	18	14	15	12	2

Looking at the three most frequent "ADV *unique*" combinations in the corpora, we can conclude how different their usage is, especially between British (Hansard) and American (COHA and COCA) varieties. Hansard's three most frequent combinations (*almost unique, quite unique, and means unique*) are at the 3rd, 5th, and 6th place in COHA and at the 9th, 11th, and 17th place in COCA, respectively. There is not much difference between the two American varieties. Their three most frequent adverbs (*most, so, almost,* and *very*) are in the first ten places, *so* being at the 2nd place in both. *Most unique* is used more in the American varieties than the British one and *very unique* just in COCA. *So unique* and *almost unique* still have more occurrences in Hansard than in the American corpora, although they are not registered in the first three places.

Table 9. Frequency of adverbs with *unique* per corpora.

	Hansard		COHA		COCA	
	place	frequency	place	frequency	place	frequency
almost unique	1	829	3	73	9	26
quite unique	2	320	5	35	11	22
means unique	3	141	6	26	17	16
absolutely unique	4	142	9	24	27	7
rather unique	6	114	10	17	6	34
perhaps unique	7	107	12	15	19	15
so unique	8	103	2	79	2	85
somewhat unique	10	61	16	12	13	20
very unique	12	45	8	26	1	156
most unique	13	45	1	82	3	76
more unique	22	21	7	26	10	24
nearly unique	31	13	31	5	33	6

Heritage gives two meanings of *unique*, "being the only one of its kind" as the original meaning and "remarkable, extraordinary" as the extended one. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD)* allows *absolutely, totally,* and *almost* with the original meaning and *more* and *very* with the extended meaning.[18]

Hansard has no "ADV *unique*" combinations registered until the 1840s, *very unique* being the first one. The use of degree adverbs with *unique* is more present in COHA since the first occurrence is already registered in the 1820s. If we consider the usage guides and grammars, then Hansard has a more considerable frequency in the combinations described as correct usage in the usage guides and grammars, such as *almost unique, quite unique, absolutely unique,* and *perhaps unique*:

(28)   "the public schools are an *almost unique* institution in this country" (Hansard; House of Commons, 1980)

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[18] Retrieved August 28, 2021, from https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/unique?q=unique

(29)　　　"the airport occupies a *quite unique* position, making it one of the safest airports in the country" (Hansard; House of Commons, 1967)

(30)　　　"partly because the occasion is one of an *absolutely unique* and unprecedented kind" (Hansard; House of Commons, 1885)

(31)　　　"I may say that the Uganda Railway […] is *perhaps unique* in the whole world" (Hansard; House of Commons, 1914),

while COHA and COCA show that more frequently used are those considered to be incorrect usage such as *most unique, so unique, very unique,* and *rather unique*:

(32)　　　"the Brazilian women's movement since the end of the '70s has been characterized as the biggest, *most unique,* most radical, and most influential among the Latin American women's movements" (COCA; Rodrigues, Women's Movements in Brazil, # 6/1, 1998, p. 40)

(33)　　　"the sensibility in your writing is *so unique*" (COCA; Ratiner, At Play With the Toy of Language, *The Home Forum*, 1992)

(34)　　　"communication along the coast is maintained in a *very unique* manner" (COHA; *New York Times*, 1902),

(35)　　　"I grant you that no one is indispensable, but Ralson has always seemed to be *rather unique*" (COHA; Asimov, *Robot Dreams*, 1986).

British and American authors from the 19th century do not use *unique* as an example of an absolute adjective, whereas the authors from the 20th century do. Therefore, its usage with degree adverbs should be less frequent in the 20th century. Still, the frequency of the use in the corpora shows it is actually less used in the 19th century, especially in Hansard (19th century 128 examples vs. 20th century 2734 examples). COHA has 190 examples in the 19th century and 585 examples in the 20th century.

Figures 20 and 21 show the frequency of the adjective *unique* with *almost* in Hansard and COHA, respectively. No cases of *almost unique* are detected from the 1800s to the 1860s in Hansard. The increase in numbers is slight in the following decades. The highest normalized frequency is 0.87 in the 1980s. No cases of *almost unique* are detected from the 1820s to the 1850s and in the 1860s in COHA. The highest normalized frequency is 0.55 in the 1900s. From then on, the numbers are in constant decline. It is more frequently used in the 20th century in both corpora.

Hansard Corpus (British Parliament)   SEARCH · CHART · CONTEXT · ACCOUNT

CHANGE TO VERTICAL CHART / CLICK TO SEE CONTEXT

SECTION	ALL	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
FREQ	878	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	4	13	10	27	32	32	42	51	69	102	139	159	146
WORDS (M)	1589	5.0	7.1	11.6	28.1	30.4	33.0	34.2	37.1	60.0	51.2	64.7	79.8	71.7	95.2	94.8	121.0	152.0	163.3	183.7	177.1
PER MIL	0.55	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.09	0.11	0.22	0.20	0.42	0.40	0.45	0.44	0.54	0.57	0.67	0.85	0.87	0.82

Figure 20. The normalized frequency of *almost unique* in Hansard.

Corpus of Historical American English   SEARCH · CHART · CONTEXT · OVERVIEW

CHANGE TO VERTICAL CHART / CLICK TO SEE CONTEXT

SECTION	ALL	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
FREQ	73	0	0	0	1	0	3	4	10	12	10	6	5	2	5	4	3	7	1
WORDS (M)	405	7.0	13.7	15.8	16.5	16.9	18.8	20.1	20.4	22.0	23.1	25.7	27.7	27.4	28.7	29.1	28.8	29.9	33.1
PER MIL	0.18	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.16	0.20	0.49	0.55	0.43	0.23	0.18	0.07	0.17	0.14	0.10	0.23	0.03

Figure 21. The normalized frequency of *almost unique* in COHA.

Figures 22 and 23 show the frequency of the adjective *unique* with *most* in Hansard and COHA, respectively. No cases of *most unique* are registered from the 1800s to the 1870s and in the 1880s in Hansard. The highest normalized frequency is 0.08 in Hansard in the 1890s. The decades with no cases in COHA are the 1820s, the 1950s and the 1960s. The highest normalized frequency is 0.51 in COHA in the 1920s. *Most unique* is more frequently used in the 20th century in both corpora, although the use is more constant in COHA throughout both centuries.
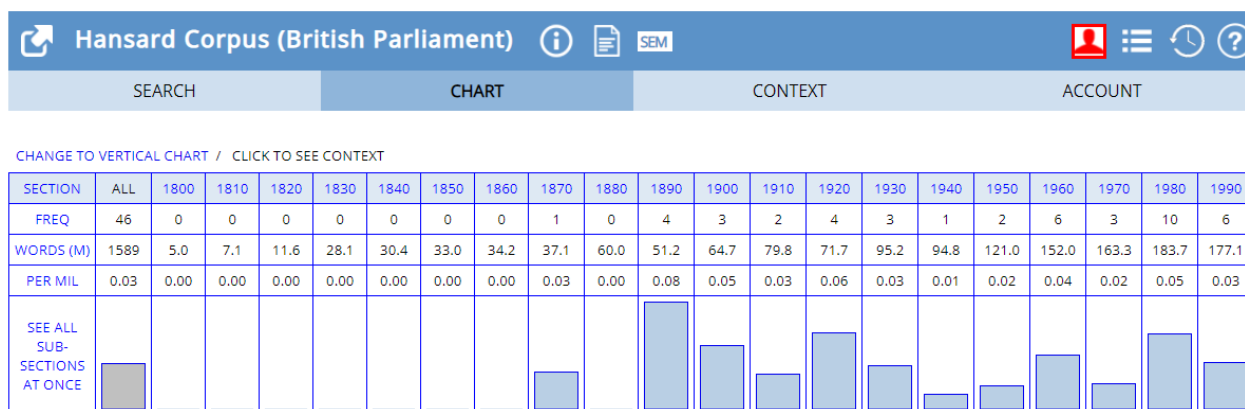
Figure 22. The normalized frequency of *most unique* in Hansard.
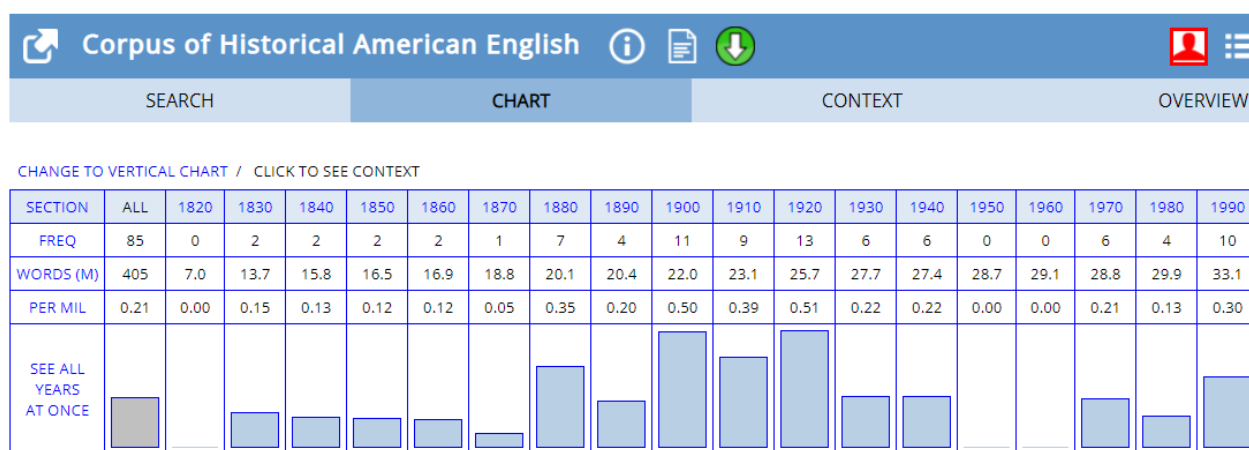
Figure 23. The normalized frequency of *most unique* in COHA.

7.3. *Perfect*

per·fect

adj.

1. Lacking nothing essential to the whole; complete of its nature or kind.

2. Being without defect or blemish: *a perfect specimen.*

3. Thoroughly skilled or talented in a certain field or area; proficient.

4. Completely suited for a particular purpose or situation: *She was the perfect actress for the part.*

5.   a. Completely corresponding to a description, standard, or type: *a perfect circle; a perfect gentleman.*

   b. Accurately reproducing an original: *a perfect copy of the painting.*

6. Complete; thorough; utter: *a perfect fool.*

7. Pure; undiluted; unmixed: *perfect red.*

8. Excellent and delightful in all respects: *a perfect day.*

9. *Botany* Having both stamens and pistils in the same flower; monoclinous.

10. Capable of sexual reproduction. Used of fungi.

11. *Grammar* Of, relating to, or constituting a verb form expressing action completed prior to a fixed point of reference in time.

12. *Music* Designating the three basic intervals of the octave, fourth, and fifth.

[Middle English *perfit*, from Old French *parfit*, from Latin *perfectus*, past participle of *perficere*, to finish: *per-,* per- + *facere*, to do.]

Usage Note: The adjective *perfect* is often considered an absolute term like *chief* and *prime*; some maintain that it therefore cannot be modified by *more, quite, relatively,* and other qualifiers of degree. But the qualification of *perfect* has many reputable precedents (most notably in the preamble to the US Constitution in the phrase "*in order to form a more perfect Union*"). When *perfect* means "ideal for a purpose," as in *There could be no more perfect spot for the picnic*, modification by degree is considered acceptable; in fact 74 percent of the Usage Panel approved this example in our 2004 survey.[19]

Figure 24 shows the frequency of the 20 most frequent degree adverbs combined with the adjective *perfect* in Hansard per decades. The total number of examples in Hansard for the combination "ADV *perfect*" is 7432. The three most common adverbs are *most* with 2112 occurrences or 28 %, *more* with 1085 occurrences or 15 %, and *as* (as in *as perfect as*[20]) with 1061 or 14 %. *Most* has 254 occurrences in the 1850s, *more* 104 in the 1860s, and *as* has 137 in the 1850s.

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[19] Retrieved August 23, 2021, from https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=perfect.

[20] "Comparison to the same degree is expressed by *as* (or sometimes *so*) ... *as*" (Greenbaum and Quirk, 1997: 152); "In examples like *as big as usual* the first *as* is an adverb, while the second (which requires a complement) is a preposition" (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002: 570).

Figure 24. Most frequent adverbs with *perfect* in Hansard per decades.

HELP			ALL	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
1	☐	MOST PERFECT	2126	46	65	100	231	198	254	190	163	159	103	107	106	66	69	74	34	30	52	41	24
2	☐	MORE PERFECT	1094	26	15	35	66	101	94	104	98	83	69	73	76	64	44	31	15	23	11	33	24
3	☐	AS PERFECT	1078	13	16	29	109	92	137	69	88	68	49	56	78	26	34	47	30	42	29	27	22
4	☐	SO PERFECT	560	4	14	13	48	28	40	49	38	34	40	20	24	28	18	30	24	17	34	27	23
5	☐	FROM PERFECT	495	1				2	6	9	5	8	6	7	10	7	16	19	23	36	69	85	109
6	☐	ABSOLUTELY PERFECT	344	1		1	3		4	5	12	21	24	32	25	18	18	24	14	33	35	33	25
7	☐	MEANS PERFECT	227			1	3	1	4	4	4	4	7	4	8	4	11	11	31	20	24	33	27
8	☐	ALMOST PERFECT	222			2	5	6	3	13	14	11	7	15	10	10	17	15	11	25	19	17	15
9	☐	LESS PERFECT	125	3	1	8	2	9	10	11	12	13	13	5	5	2	4	2	1	4	12	3	4
10	☐	NEARLY PERFECT	123				2	4	7	8	13	5	6	2	3	6	9	9	12	8	15	6	6
11	☐	VERY PERFECT	120	2	1	2	3	10	9	9	7	10	8	7	17	8	9	8	3	2	3		2
12	☐	QUITE PERFECT	105			4	4	2	5	7	2	7	3	7	5	6	7	12	4	7	5	13	3
13	☐	HOWEVER PERFECT	102				7	3	5	7	2	4	4	9	4	2	8	12	11	8	8	2	6
14	☐	ALWAYS PERFECT	74					1		1			1	3	1	3	4	9	4	5	8	13	7
15	☐	NECESSARILY PERFECT	71							2	1	5	2	2				4	12	9	4	10	11
16	☐	THEORETICALLY PERFECT	69				3	1	6	1	5	11	6	7	1	1	10	3	2	6	2	1	3
17	☐	YET PERFECT	57				2	1	1	4	1		1	1	2	2	3	2	8	3	4	7	8
18	☐	TECHNICALLY PERFECT	46												3	1	2	1	11	8	7	7	3
19	☐	HOW PERFECT	38						3	1		2	1		4	2	6	4	5	3	2	2	3
20	☐	EVER PERFECT	36							1			1			1	1	3	3	7	3	4	5

Some other adverbs in combination with *perfect* that might be of importance because they were dealt with in the selected usage guides and grammars are *so* with 553 occurrences or 7 %, *almost* with 215 occurrences or 3 %, *nearly* with 121 occurrences or 2 %, *very* with 120 occurrences or 2 % and *quite* with 103 occurrences or 1 %. *Just perfect* is not detected in Hansard's 100 most frequent adverbs (mentioned here because it is at the 3rd place in COCA). *Almost perfect* has 25 occurrences in the 1960s, which is the highest number, *nearly perfect* 15 occurrences in the 1970s, *very perfect* 17 occurrences in the 1910s, and *quite perfect* 13 occurrences in the 1980s. They are not detected in all the decades.

Figure 25 shows the frequency of the 20 most used adverbs combined with the adjective *perfect* in COHA per decades. The total number of examples in COHA for the "ADV *perfect*" combination is 5509. The three most common adverbs are *most* with 1312 occurrences or 24 %, *more* with 987 occurrences or 18 %, and *so* with 679 or 12 %. The decade with most occurrences

for *most perfect* is the 1840s with 159 occurrences, for *more perfect* is the 1850s with 114 occurrences and for *so perfect* is the 1840s with 60 occurrences.

HELP			ALL	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	SEC1
1	☐	MOST PERFECT	1312	58	113	159	129	106	118	101	89	87	104	60	42	26	24	26	34	18	18			1312
2	☐	MORE PERFECT	987	43	77	106	114	106	98	68	62	56	67	35	31	21	14	17	21	22	29			987
3	☐	SO PERFECT	679	20	40	60	50	35	59	48	40	27	39	35	26	23	32	24	31	48	42			679
4	☐	AS PERFECT	370	11	32	27	39	35	30	20	19	28	22	18	15	9	10	13	19	11	12			370
5	☐	ALMOST PERFECT	294	2	9	13	11	7	14	10	16	23	16	24	25	14	20	21	19	26	24			294
6	☐	NEARLY PERFECT	171	2	7	1	8	9	11	13	7	9	7	14	11	6	8	16	11	15	16			171
7	☐	LESS PERFECT	159	12	18	15	18	11	16	17	8	8	13	5	5	2	4	2	2	1	2			159
8	☐	TOO PERFECT	146	1	2	4	6	1	4	13	7	1	4	14	10	5	3	16	13	22	20			146
9	☐	ABSOLUTELY PERFECT	136	1	2	3	2	8	4	9	8	8	6	3	6	6	13	13	19	16	9			136
10	☐	VERY PERFECT	113	1	7	28	13	8	14	4	8	6	8	4	6			1	2	3				113
11	☐	JUST PERFECT	108							1	1	1	3	5	2	2	9	13	19	18	13	21		108
12	☐	FROM PERFECT	96		3	2	2	1	2	6	4	3	5	10	9	11	4	6	3	9	16			96
13	☐	HOW PERFECT	96	1	6	5	8	6	9	8	1	4	8	2	7	3	3	3	10		12			96
14	☐	QUITE PERFECT	82	1	3	4	2	6	5	12	7	1	11	8	4	5	4	2	2	3	2			82
15	☐	ALWAYS PERFECT	34			7	2	1	1	2	2	1	1		2	2	1	3	3	3	3			34
16	☐	ONLY PERFECT	34		1	3	1	1	5	4	4	3	2	2	1	1	1	1	2		2			34
17	☐	PRACTICALLY PERFECT	27					1	1		3		3	2	5	1	5		2	2	2			27
18	☐	EQUALLY PERFECT	26	1	3	2	1	2	2	3	1	2	1	3	2	1	1	1						26
19	☐	HOWEVER PERFECT	26	1		4	2	7	3	4	1		1	1	1	1								26
20	☐	MEANS PERFECT	26			1			5		2	4	1	2	1	2	3			1	4			26

Figure 25. Most frequent adverbs with *perfect* in COHA per decades.

Other examples are as follows *as perfect* with 370 occurrences (7 %), *almost perfect* with 294 occurrences (5 %), *nearly perfect* with 171 occurrences (3 %), *very perfect* with 113 occurrences (2 %), *just perfect* with 108 occurrences (2 %) and *quite perfect* with 82 occurrences (1 %). *Very perfect* is not detected in the 1940s, the 1950s and the 1990s and *just perfect* from the 1820s to the 1870s. The rest of them are detected in all the decades.

Most perfect has most examples in the NF/ACAD section, *more perfect* in the MAG section, and *so perfect* in the FIC section. Overall, the FIC section has most examples with 35 %, MAG with 31 %, NF/ACAD 29 %, TV/MOV 3 %, and NEWS 2 %.

Table 10. Frequency of *perfect* in COHA per registers.

	NF/ACAD	NEWS	MAG	FIC	TV/MOV
most perfect	430	18	426	409	29

more perfect	310	34	351	277	15
so perfect	108	11	154	363	43

Figure 26 shows the frequency of the 20 most used degree adverbs with the adjective *perfect* in COCA. The total number of examples in COCA for the combination "ADV *perfect*" is 1767. The most common are *so perfect* with 247 occurrences (14 %), *more perfect* with 168 occurrences (10 %), and *just perfect* with 158 occurrences (9 %).
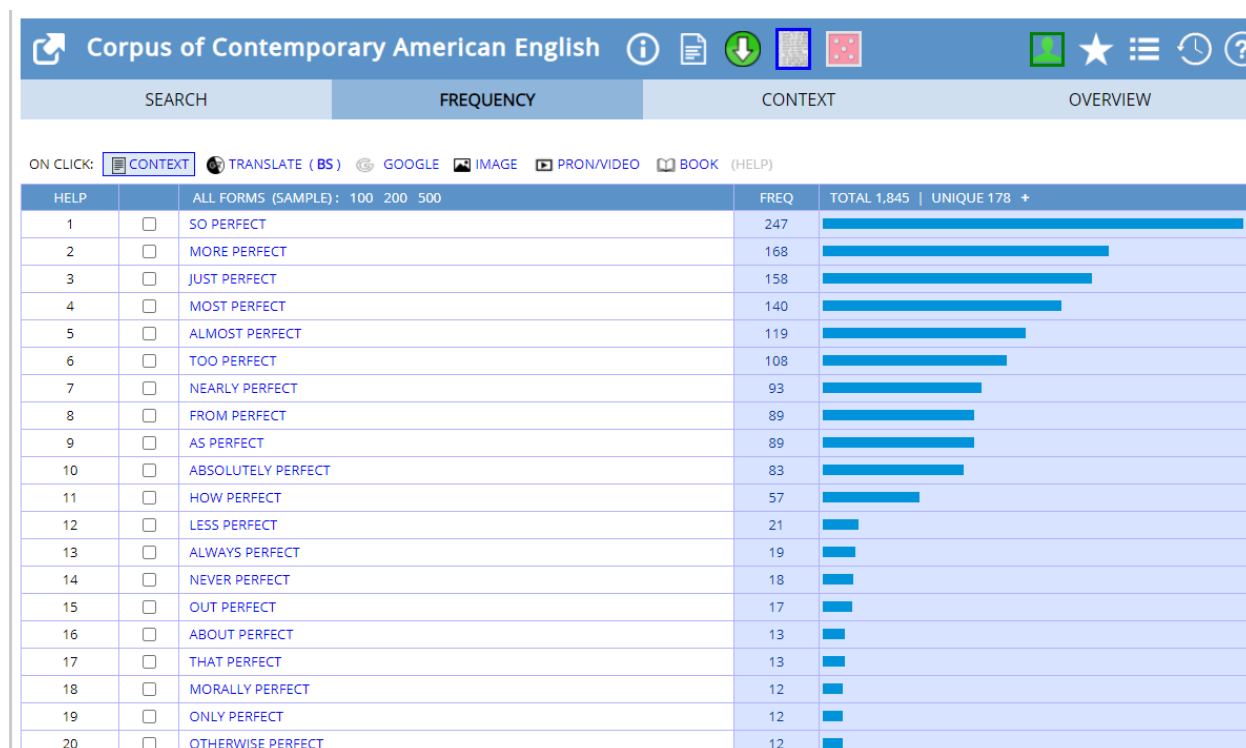
Figure 26. Most frequent adverbs with *perfect* in COCA.

Most perfect has 140 occurrences (8 %), *almost perfect* 119 occurrences (7 %), *nearly perfect* 93 occurrences (5 %), *as perfect* 89 occurrences (5 %), *quite perfect* 11 occurrences (1 %) and *very perfect* just 4 occurrences (0.22 %).

There are no registered examples in the BLOG and WEB sections. *So perfect* and *just perfect* have most examples in the TV/MOV section while *more perfect* has most examples in the MAG section. Overall, the TV/MOV section has most examples with 33 %, FIC with 23 %. Then we have SPOK with 15 %, MAG and NEWS with 12 % each, and ACAD with 5 %.

Table 11. Frequency of *perfect* in COCA per registers.

	SPOK	MAG	NEWS	TV/MOV	ACAD	FIC
so perfect	23	26	25	93	4	76
more perfect	28	33	29	21	25	32
just perfect	33	9	13	77	1	25

Table 12 represents the frequency of the selected adverbs in all the three corpora. The first three most used combinations in Hansard (*most perfect, more perfect, as perfect*) and COHA (*most perfect, more perfect, so perfect*) and the first two most used combinations in COCA (*so perfect, more perfect*) are in the top 10 positions in the other corpora. *Most perfect* takes the 1st place in Hansard and COHA and the 4th in COCA. *More perfect* takes the 2nd place in all the three corpora. *As perfect* ranks 3rd in Hansard, 4th in COHA, and 9th in COCA. COCA's number 1, *so perfect*, is at the 4th place in Hansard and the 3rd in COHA. However, the most interesting is the third-placed example in COCA, *just perfect*, which is only at the 11th place in COHA and not among the top 100 in Hansard.

Table 12. Frequency of adverbs with *perfect* per corpora.

	Hansard		COHA		COCA	
	place	frequency	place	frequency	place	frequency
most perfect	1	2112	1	1312	4	140
more perfect	2	1085	2	987	2	168
as perfect	3	1061	4	370	9	89
so perfect	4	553	3	679	1	247
almost perfect	8	215	5	294	5	119
nearly perfect	10	121	6	171	7	93
very perfect	11	120	10	113	45	4
quite perfect	12	103	14	82	11	24
just perfect			11	108	3	158

Perfect was used with degree adverbs throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in British and American varieties, although the usage guides and grammars in most cases suggest otherwise and treat it as an absolute. The combinations with the adjective *perfect* are used more in the 19th century than the 20th century in both Hansard and COHA (Hansard 3869 vs. 3563 examples; COHA 2952 vs. 2557 examples).

If we compare the usage guides and grammars examples and the corpora results, we can conclude that those characterised as incorrect usage are the most frequent ones in all the corpora, such as *most perfect, more perfect,* and *so perfect*:

(36)   "when a ship was paid off, the seamen had acquired the *most perfect* discipline" (Hansard; House of Commons, 1853)

(37)   "I have never known anything *more perfect* than some of those mid-August days" (COHA; Garland, *A Daughter of the Middle Border*, 1921)

(38)   "I mean it's almost like a jewelry box, it's *so perfect* with, you know, the stainless steel and the concrete and everything finished so beautifully" (COCA; Invisible New York, *NPR Morning*, 1998),

whereas those considered as correct or allowable usage are less used in the corpora, such as *nearly perfect, almost perfect,* and *quite perfect*:

(39)   "meanwhile, life was *nearly perfect* as it was" (COHA; Meeker, *Ivory Mischief*, 1942)

(40)   "these nodules provide an *almost perfect* experimental material" (COCA; Gould, Capturing the Center, *Natural History* 107/10, p. 14)

(41)   "the hon: Gentleman also said the law was *quite perfect*, and all that was wanted was to put it in force" (Hansard; House of Commons, 1862).

Even though they also have a considerable number of examples, their number is not so significant compared to those incorrect ones. *Very perfect* is considered incorrect usage in some usage guides and grammars and correct usage in others, and we can see that it is used often in Hansard and COHA, not so much in COCA. There is also no difference between the British and American varieties, as well.

Figures 27 and 28 show the frequency of the adjective *perfect* with *most* in Hansard and COHA, respectively. The highest normalized frequency in Hansard is 9.45 in the 1800s. From then

on, it is in constant decline, rapidly decreasing from the 1940s and reaching the lowest frequency of 0.14 in the 1990s. The highest normalized frequency in COHA is 10.19 in the 1840s. The number varies until the 1920s when it starts to decline. The lowest frequency is 0.54 in the 1990s. The combination is more frequently used in the 19th century in both corpora.

SECTION	ALL	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
FREQ	2142	47	65	101	233	200	256	190	165	161	104	108	106	66	71	74	34	30	52	41	24
WORDS (M)	1589	5.0	7.1	11.6	28.1	30.4	33.0	34.2	37.1	60.0	51.2	64.7	79.8	71.7	95.2	94.8	121.0	152.0	163.3	183.7	177.1
PER MIL	1.35	9.45	9.11	8.70	8.30	6.58	7.76	5.55	4.45	2.68	2.03	1.67	1.33	0.92	0.75	0.78	0.28	0.20	0.32	0.22	0.14
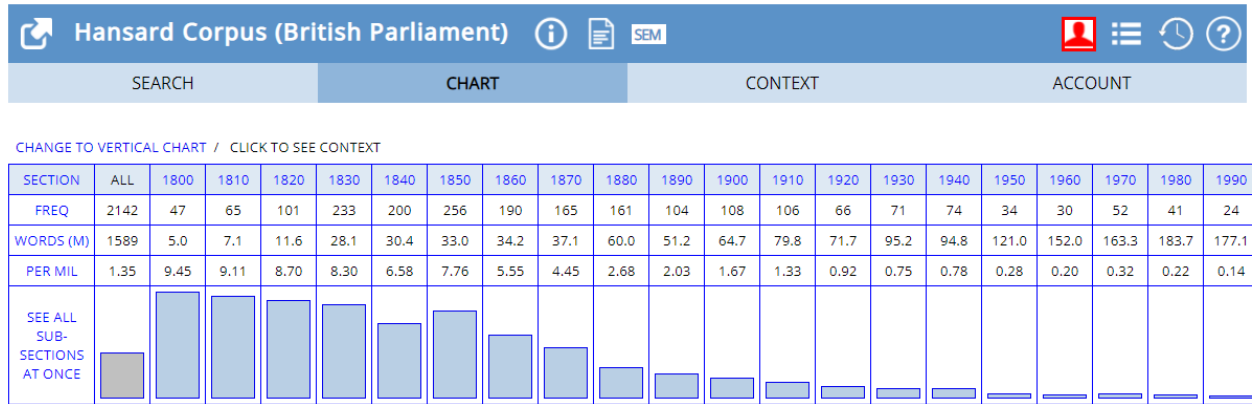
Figure 27. The normalized frequency of *most perfect* in Hansard.

SECTION	ALL	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
FREQ	1328	58	115	161	129	109	120	102	91	87	105	61	43	26	24	27	34	18	18
WORDS (M)	405	7.0	13.7	15.8	16.5	16.9	18.8	20.1	20.4	22.0	23.1	25.7	27.7	27.4	28.7	29.1	28.8	29.9	33.1
PER MIL	3.28	8.31	8.39	10.19	7.80	6.44	6.39	5.08	4.45	3.96	4.54	2.37	1.55	0.95	0.84	0.93	1.18	0.60	0.54
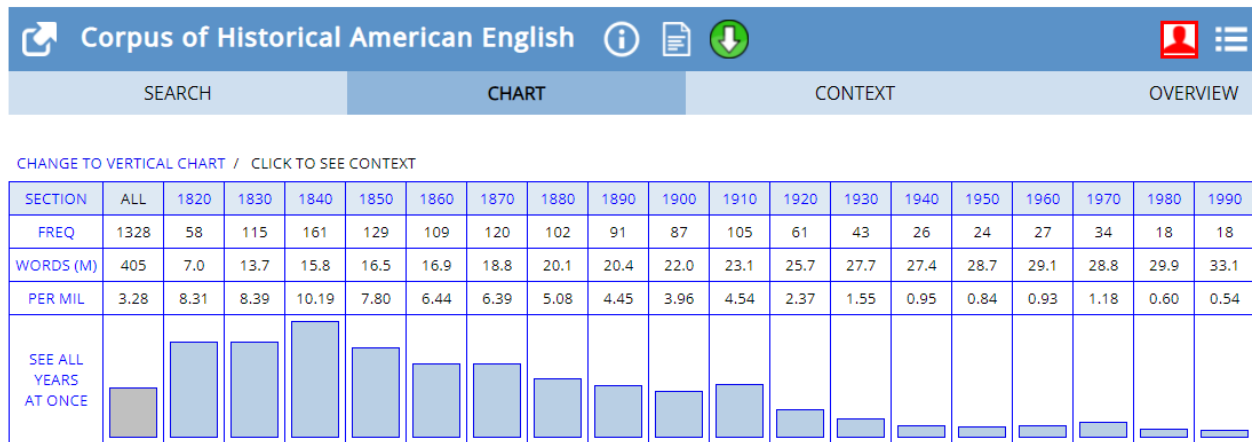
Figure 28. The normalized frequency of *most perfect* in COHA.

Figures 29 and 30 show the frequency of the adjective *perfect* with *more* in Hansard and COHA, respectively. The highest normalized frequency in Hansard is 5.23 in the 1800s. The frequency declines significantly in the 20th century, reaching the lowest frequency of 0.07 in the 1970s. The highest normalized frequency in COHA is 7.01 in the 1850s and the 20th century also has low frequencies. It appears more frequently in the 19th century in both corpora.

SECTION	ALL	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
FREQ	1123	26	15	36	69	102	96	107	101	83	72	74	80	66	44	34	17	23	12	33	24
WORDS (M)	1589	5.0	7.1	11.6	28.1	30.4	33.0	34.2	37.1	60.0	51.2	64.7	79.8	71.7	95.2	94.8	121.0	152.0	163.3	183.7	177.1
PER MIL	0.71	5.23	2.10	3.10	2.46	3.36	2.91	3.13	2.72	1.38	1.41	1.14	1.00	0.92	0.46	0.36	0.14	0.15	0.07	0.18	0.14
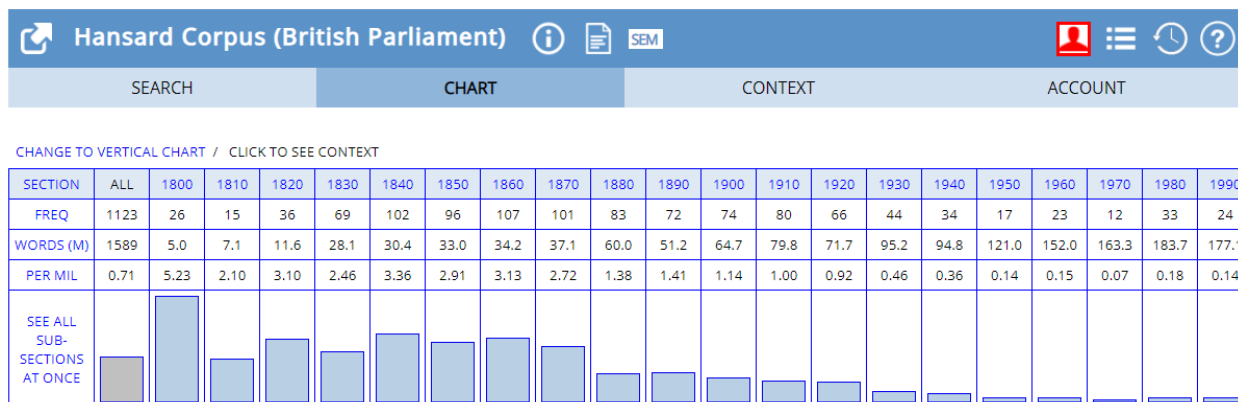
Figure 29. The normalized frequency of *more perfect* in Hansard.

SECTION	ALL	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
FREQ	1019	45	81	109	116	107	104	70	63	57	67	36	33	22	15	18	21	24	31
WORDS (M)	405	7.0	13.7	15.8	16.5	16.9	18.8	20.1	20.4	22.0	23.1	25.7	27.7	27.4	28.7	29.1	28.8	29.9	33.1
PER MIL	2.52	6.45	5.91	6.90	7.01	6.32	5.54	3.49	3.08	2.59	2.90	1.40	1.19	0.80	0.52	0.62	0.73	0.80	0.94
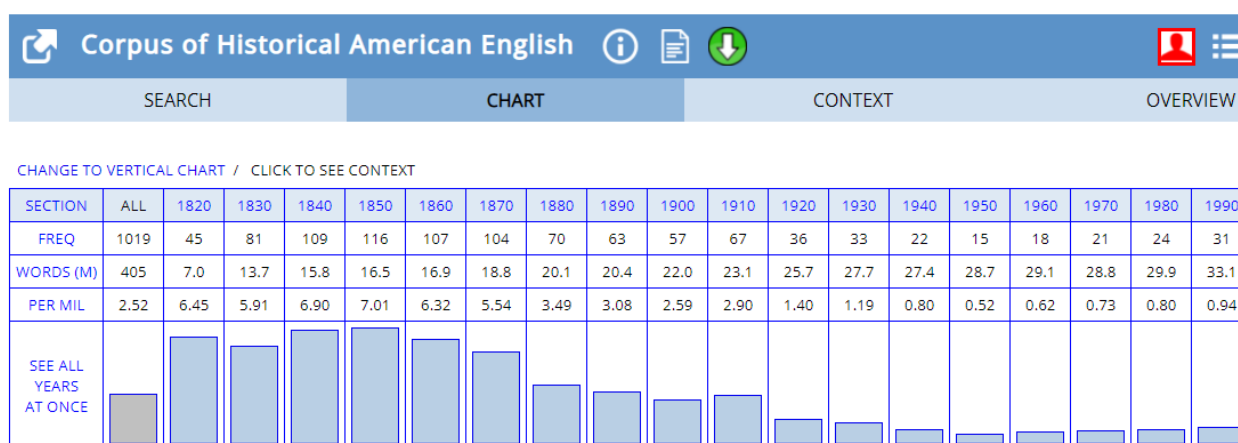
Figure 30. The normalized frequency of *more perfect* in COHA.

7.4. *Equal*

e·qual

adj.

1. Having the same quantity, measure, or value as another.

2. *Mathematics* Being the same or identical to in value.

3. a. Having the same privileges, status, or rights: *citizens equal before the law.*

  b. Being the same for all members of a group: *gave every player an equal chance to win.*

4. a. Having the requisite qualities, such as strength or ability, for a task or situation: *"Elizabeth found herself quite equal to the scene" (Jane Austen).*

  b. Similar to or the same as another, as in ability: *As the playoffs began, the teams were considered roughly equal.*

[Middle English, from Latin *aequālis,* from *aequus*, even, level.]

Usage Note: It has been argued that *equal* is an absolute term—two quantities either are or are not equal—and hence cannot be qualified as to degree. Therefore one cannot logically speak of *a more equal allocation of resources among the departments*. But this usage is fairly common, and was acceptable to 71 percent of the Usage Panel as far back as 1967. Objections to the *more equal* construction assume that the mathematical notion of equality is appropriate to the description of a world where the equality of two quantities is often an approximate matter, and where statements of equality are always relative to an implicit standard of tolerance.[21]

Figure 31 shows the frequency of the 20 most used degree adverbs found in combination with the adjective *equal* in Hansard per decades. The total number of examples in Hansard for the combination of "ADV *equal*" is 8893. The three most common adverbs in this combination are *more* with 1238 occurrences or 14 %, *least* with 1066 occurrences or 12 %, and *almost* with 942 occurrences or 11 %. *More equal* has most occurrences in the 1980s (182 of them), *least equal* is most used in the 1970s with 92 occurrences and *almost equal* in the 1960s with 87 occurrences.

Hansard Corpus (British Parliament)

#	Adverb	ALL	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
1	MORE EQUAL	1327	8	13	20	65	84	55	27	33	48	40	33	40	21	42	51	77	75	159	182	165
2	LEAST EQUAL	1088	5	14	21	33	32	32	37	27	45	41	59	78	57	77	79	88	91	92	84	74
3	ALMOST EQUAL	959	2	5	8	30	26	33	39	40	47	47	49	54	51	78	85	80	87	70	67	44
4	NEARLY EQUAL	808	23	25	35	87	79	74	70	42	65	41	43	37	31	40	20	43	22	12	11	5
5	QUITE EQUAL	483	4	2	5	17	28	44	53	43	49	44	49	50	29	25	14	9	9	7	2	
6	FULLY EQUAL	365	5	9	13	36	35	45	37	27	25	17	17	18	13	13	15	9	12	5	5	5
7	APPROXIMATELY EQUAL	335								1	3	3	8	29	32	35	49	28	57	44	20	16
8	EXACTLY EQUAL	309	3	2	5	5	4	6	8	8	17	17	23	18	12	32	23	24	30	32	23	13
9	ROUGHLY EQUAL	293													6	15	10	36	62	52	48	45
10	ONLY EQUAL	285	2	6	7	15	9	15	24	17	22	18	16	27	21	26	16	14	5	7	12	3
11	AS EQUAL	202	2	3	4	4	4	12	7	7	8	4	5	11	7	9	12	9	19	21	19	24
12	LESS EQUAL	194				1		1	1		1	4	3	6	8	15	17	25	18	24	27	28
13	ABSOLUTELY EQUAL	174			1				1	3	9	9	26	16	11	15	22	11	14	13	10	11
14	ALL EQUAL	135	3	1	4	10	13	15	20	14	15	9	10	12	3	2	3		1			
15	ABOUT EQUAL	123				1	1	1		6	8	14	4	2	4	9	11	9	15	11	9	9	7
16	PERFECTLY EQUAL	123	2	1		5	12	12	14	21	12	9	8	8	3	6	2		3	1	2	2
17	NOW EQUAL	101		1	3	1	1	6	3	2	8	7	5	6	6	8	8	5	4	10	7	9
18	OUT EQUAL	90		2	2	10	9	2	1	3	15	19	5	7	1		3		2	1	4	1
19	PRACTICALLY EQUAL	89				1	1				4	5	14	22	12	12	9	4	2	1	2	
20	FAIRLY EQUAL	82							1	5	8	9	11	3	4	6		6	6	6	8	6

Figure 31. Most frequent adverbs with *equal* in Hansard per decades.

Some of the other combinations from the usage guides and grammars or the other two corpora are *nearly equal* with 805 occurrences (9 %), *quite equal* with 483 occurrences (5 %), *approximately equal* with 325 occurrences (4 %), *exactly equal* with 305 occurrences (3 %), *roughly equal* with 274 occurrences (3 %) and *very equal* with 10 occurrences (0.11 %). *Nearly equal* is most used in the 1830s (87 occurrences) and *quite equal* in the 1860s (53 occurrences) and without occurrences in the last decade of the 20th century. *Exactly equal* has most occurrences in the 1930s and the 1970s (32 occurrences each). *Approximately equal* and *roughly equal* are researched because they appear in the first two places in COCA. We can see that they are of a more modern character, *approximately* appearing for the first time in the 1870s and *roughly* in the 1920s. *Approximately equal* and *roughly equal* both reached their peak in the 1960s (57 and 62 occurrences, respectively).

Figure 32 represents the frequency of the 20 most used degree adverbs found in combination with the adjective *equal* in COHA per decades. The total number of examples in COHA for the "ADV *equal*" combination is 2952. The first three combinations are *nearly equal* with 424 occurrences or 14 %, *almost equal* with 380 occurrences or 13 %, and *quite equal* with 246 occurrences or 8 %. The decades with most occurrences are the 1830s for *nearly equal* (53 occurrences), the 1890s for *almost equal* (43 occurrences), and the 1860s for *quite equal* (29 occurrences).

HELP			ALL	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	SEC1
1	☐	NEARLY EQUAL	424	22	53	49	39	41	36	24	32	26	21	22	11	6	11	10	8	9	4			424
2	☐	ALMOST EQUAL	380	8	23	17	22	23	25	37	43	29	23	18	29	25	19	12	10	8	9			380
3	☐	QUITE EQUAL	246	8	19	28	26	29	25	27	20	15	16	8	7	5	6	1	2	3	1			246
4	☐	LEAST EQUAL	179	9	11	9	14	12	7	13	8	4	9	10	13	11	14	10	13	9	3			179
5	☐	FULLY EQUAL	167	5	20	17	20	14	20	14	13	13	7	5	7	1	2	4	2	1	2			167
6	☐	MORE EQUAL	148	3	11	15	7	8	9	2	6	3	8	3	8	3	6	10	22	18	6			148
7	☐	APPROXIMATELY EQUAL	105							7		4	9	13	16	9	12	12	8	8	7			105
8	☐	EXACTLY EQUAL	102	7	5	3	5	6	3	2	3	8	6	9	13	7	2	11	8	1	3			102
9	☐	ABOUT EQUAL	97		3	7	8	7	7	5	5	10	6	9	3	3	10	5	6	2	1			97
10	☐	ROUGHLY EQUAL	91										1	2	2	9	10	6	13	21	27			91
11	☐	ALWAYS EQUAL	55	3	5	4	3	4	8	1		3	3	1	5	2	2	5	1	4	1			55
12	☐	ONLY EQUAL	45	1	4	4	6	2	1	4	3	4	4	2	1	1	1	1	2	3	1			45
13	☐	NEVER EQUAL	40	2	2	3	4	2	6	1	1	3	1		3	1	3	1	1	3	3			40
14	☐	JUST EQUAL	39	1	2		9	1			1	3	1	5	5	6		3	2					39
15	☐	HARDLY EQUAL	36		2	4	6	3	2	6	3	1	5	1	2		1							36
16	☐	SUBSTANTIALLY EQUAL	36				1			1	2	6		6	5	3	5	6		1				36
17	☐	AS EQUAL	32	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	1	2		2	2		1	5	3	2	2			32
18	☐	PRECISELY EQUAL	30	1	4	3	2	4	3	1		3	2	1	2		3		1					30
19	☐	ABSOLUTELY EQUAL	28			1	1	4	1	4	1	2	4	1			2	3	2	2				28
20	☐	PERFECTLY EQUAL	28	1	7	2	3		4		1		1	2	2		1	2		1	1			28

Figure 32. Most frequent adverbs with *equal* in COHA per decades.

Least equal has 179 occurrences (6 %) and the highest number in the 1850s and the 1950s (14 in each decade), *more equal* 148 occurrences (5 %) and most in the 1970s (22), *approximately equal* 105 occurrences (4 %) and the 1930s being the decade with most occurrences (16), *exactly equal* 102 occurrences (3 %) and with most in the 1930s (13), *roughly equal* 91 occurrences (3 %) and most in the 1990s (27) and *very equal* with just 5 occurrences (0.16 %). The combination with *approximately* appears for the first time in the 1880s and with no occurrences in the following decade while the combination with *roughly* is first registered in the 1910s.

Nearly equal and *almost equal* have most examples in the MAG section, while *quite equal* has most examples in the FIC section. Overall, the MAG section has most examples with 36 %, FIC with 31 %, NF/ACAD with 26 %, NEWS with 6 %, and TV/MOV with 1 %.

Table 13. Frequency of *equal* in COHA per registers.

	NF/ACAD	NEWS	MAG	FIC	TV/MOV
nearly equal	148	24	160	92	0

| almost equal | 85 | 34 | 144 | 117 | 0 |
| quite equal | 46 | 8 | 79 | 112 | 1 |

Figure 33 shows the frequency of the 20 most used degree adverbs found in combination with the adjective *equal* in COCA per decades. The total number of examples in COCA for the "ADV *equal*" combination is 1069. The most common adverbs are *approximately* with 139 occurrences (13 %), *roughly* with 136 occurrences (13 %), and *more* with 115 occurrences (11 %).
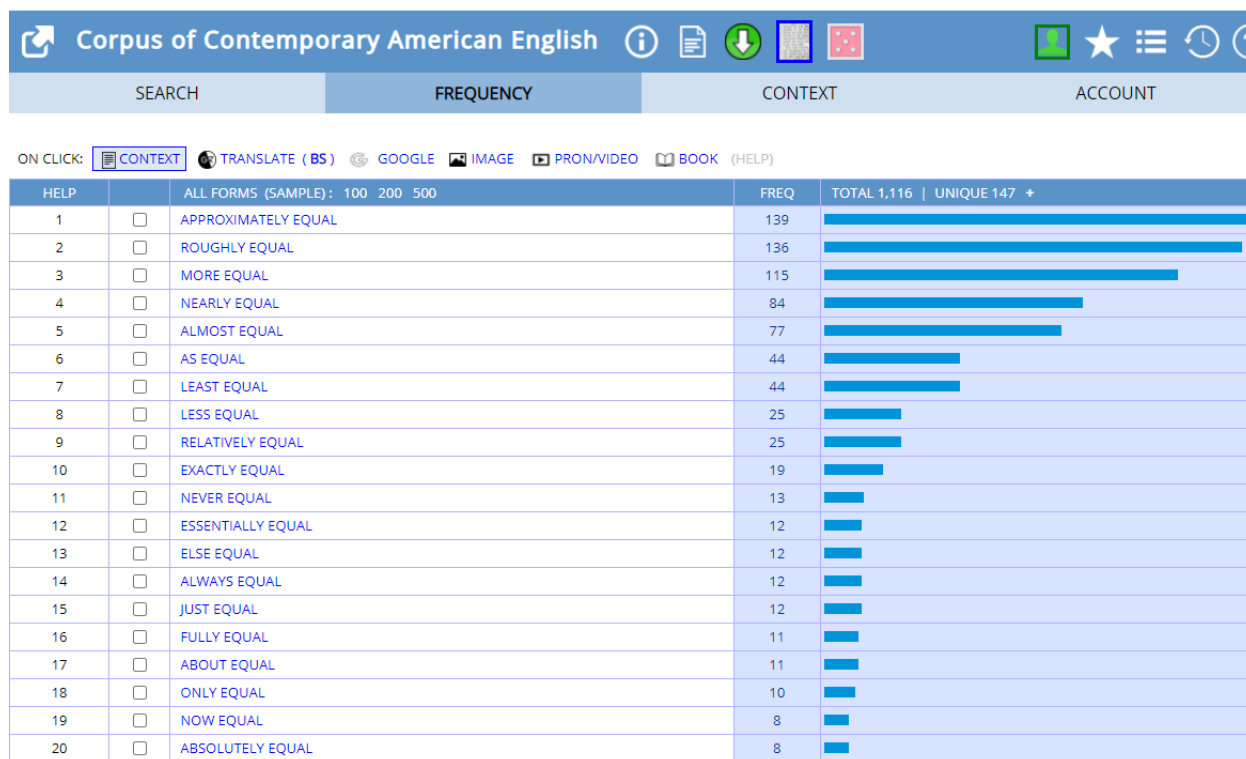
Figure 33. Most frequent adverbs with *equal* in COCA.

Nearly equal has 84 occurrences (8 %), *almost equal* 77 occurrences (7 %), *least equal* 44 occurrences (4 %), *exactly equal* 19 occurrences (2 %), *very equal* only 8 occurrences (1 %) and *quite equal* only 7 occurrences (1 %).

The BLOG and WEB sections have no registered examples with any of the combinations. All the three combinations, *approximately equal, roughly equal,* and *more equal*, have most examples in the ACAD section. Overall, the ACAD section has most examples with 56 %, MAG with 22 %, NEWS with 13 %, SPOK with 4 %, FIC and TV/MOV with 2 % each.

Table 14. Frequency of *equal* in COCA per registers.

	SPOK	MAG	NEWS	TV/MOV	ACAD	FIC
approximately equal	1	17	2	0	117	2
roughly equal	5	48	25	0	53	5
more equal	11	22	22	7	49	4

We can see in Table 15 that almost all the highest-ranking adverbs in all the three corpora differ; Hansard and COHA share *almost*, Hansard and COCA share *more,* and COHA and COCA do not have the same adverbs in the first three places. They are all in the top 10 rankings in corpora except *quite*, which is at the 26th place in COCA but at the 3rd and 5th place in COHA and Hansard, respectively.

Table 15. Frequency of adverbs with *equal* per corpora.

	Hansard		COHA		COCA	
	place	frequency	place	frequency	place	frequency
more equal	1	1238	6	148	3	115
least equal	2	1066	4	179	7	44
almost equal	3	942	2	380	5	77
nearly equal	4	805	1	424	4	84
quite equal	5	483	3	246	26	7
approximately equal	7	325	7	105	1	139
exactly equal	8	305	8	102	10	19
roughly equal	9	274	10	91	2	136
very equal	78	10	67	5	23	8

Heritage gives us several definitions of the adjective *equal* but "having the same quantity, measure or value" as its original meaning and "having the same privileges, rights" as the extended

one. *OALD* allows *exactly, approximately, precisely* with the original meaning and *more* with the extended meaning.[22]

More equal and *very equal* are treated as incorrect usage by the usage guides and grammars authors, but unlike *more equal*, which is at the 1st, 6th, and 3rd place with a total of 1501 occurrences, *very equal* has only 23 occurrences. Therefore, we can say that the suggestions were largely respected when it comes to *very equal*. The examples below show incorrect usage according to the selected usage guides and grammars:

(42)   "all of them have called for national academic standards, to make schools stronger and *more equal*" (COCA; Gagnon, Making Better Schools, *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 1996)

(43)   "no doubt they would make a very hard fight of it, but it would not be a *very equal* contest" (Hansard; House of Lords, 1893).

         Equal used as "more equitable" is shown in the example below:

(44)   "the desired result would be a much *more equal* division of the world's riches and productive capacities" (COHA; *Time Magazine*, April 1976).

         When *more* is acceptable with *equal*, it gives it the "more nearly equal" meaning:

(45)   "as the trend toward *more equal* pay for women creeps along, gender roles in the home can be expected to undergo further change" (COCA; *Psychology Today* 27/1, p. 32).

Since the nineteenth-century authors did not mention *more equal* or *equal* in general as an absolute in their books, it could be expected to be found more frequently, but the situation is reversed in Hansard, where this adjective is used more in the 20th century than in the 19th century (5694 vs. 3199 occurrences). There are just 112 examples in favour of the 19th century in COHA (1532 vs. 1420 occurrences). It can be concluded that it was used more in the 20th century when the authors began to classify and write about *equal* as a non-gradable adjective. Since the 1930s, there has been an increase in the number of occurrences in Hansard and somewhat less in COHA and COCA.

Almost equal is considered as correct usage and is used as such having 1416 occurrences in total:

(46)   "the price of the land is *almost equal* to the price of the cost of building a house on it" (Hansard; House of Lords, 1990).

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[22] Retrieved August 29, 2021, from https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/equal_1?q=equal.

It has more occurrences in the 20th century than in the 19th century in Hansard, and a slight advantage is given to the 19th century in COHA (198 occurrences to 182 occurrences).

Quite equal, nearly equal, approximately equal, and *roughly equal* should be treated as correct usage since they express similar qualities or a nearer approach to a complete notion of what an absolute adjective represents:

(47)   "her imagination, however, was not *quite equal* to the task of making the science happily and helpfully available" (COHA; Wilkinson, The Literary and Ethical Quality of George Elliot's Novels, *Scribners*, October 1874, pp. 685-703)

(48)   "It is composed of *roughly equal* parts ice and rock" (COCA; Stephens, The Biggest, the Brightest, the Best, *Astronomy* 25/6, June 1997, p. 44).

Least equal is incorrect because it expresses a lesser notion than the adjective represents:

(49)   "those officers were at *least equal* in ability, in training, and in the earnestness which they brought to their work, to any men in the Army" (Hansard; House of Commons, 1900).

The first three most frequent combinations in COHA were used more in the 19th century, whereas those most frequent ones in Hansard are used more in the 20th century as if Americans followed the rules more than the British.

Figures 34 and 35 show the frequency of the adjective *equal* with *more* in Hansard and COHA, respectively. The highest normalized frequency in Hansard is 2.77 in the 1840s. It goes below 1.00 from the 1860s to the 1970s, reaching 1.01 in the 1980s. The normalized frequency never reaches 1.00 in COHA, and the highest one registered is 0.95 in the 1840s. *More equal* is more frequently used in the 19th century in both corpora.

SECTION	ALL	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
FREQ	1352	10	13	20	65	84	55	27	34	49	42	33	40	21	43	53	80	78	163	185	166
WORDS (M)	1589	5.0	7.1	11.6	28.1	30.4	33.0	34.2	37.1	60.0	51.2	64.7	79.8	71.7	95.2	94.8	121.0	152.0	163.3	183.7	177.1
PER MIL	0.85	2.01	1.82	1.72	2.32	2.77	1.67	0.79	0.92	0.82	0.82	0.51	0.50	0.29	0.45	0.56	0.66	0.51	1.00	1.01	0.94
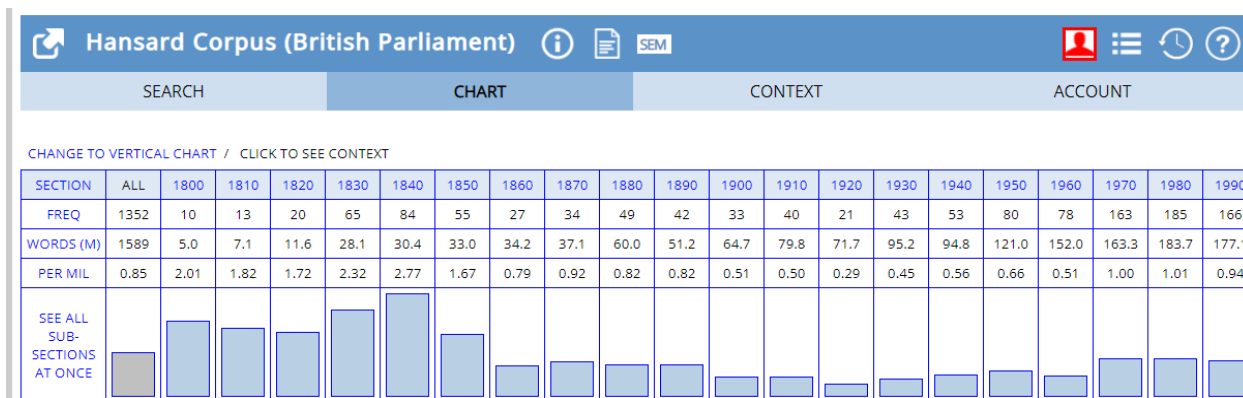
Figure 34. The normalized frequency of *more equal* in Hansard.
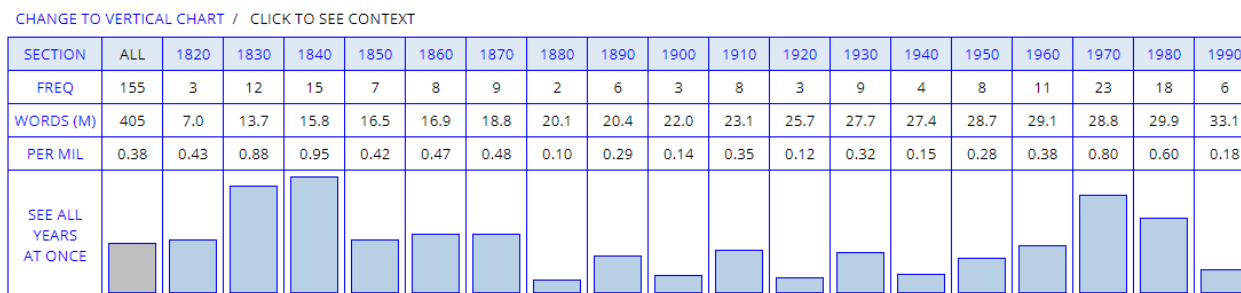
Figure 35. The normalized frequency of *more equal* in COHA.

Figures 36 and 37 show the frequency of the adjective *equal* with *nearly* in Hansard and COHA, respectively. The highest normalized frequency in Hansard is 4.62 in the 1800s and the frequency in the 20th century goes below 1.00. The highest normalized frequency in COHA is 3.87 in the 1830s. It also goes below 1.00 in the 20th century.

Figure 36. The normalized frequency of *nearly equal* in Hansard.

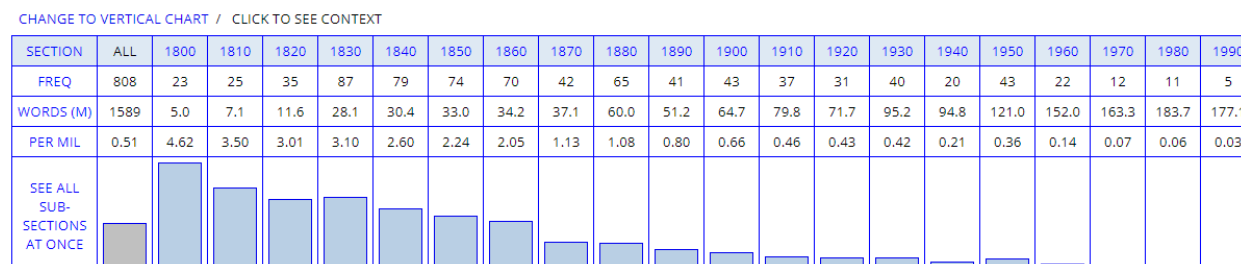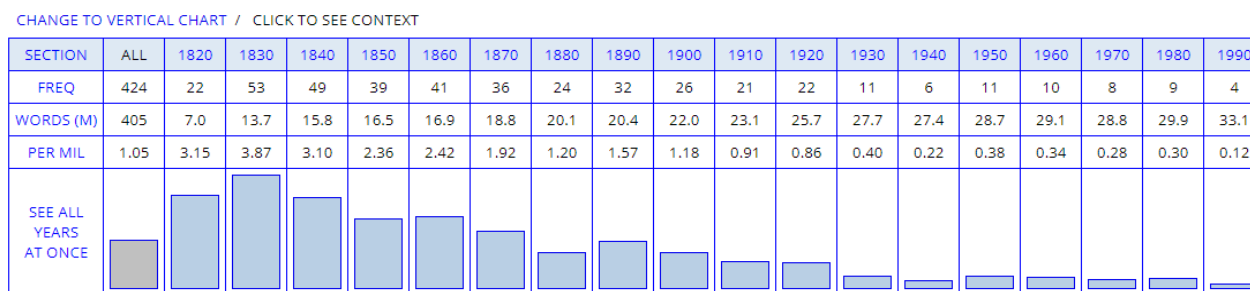Figure 37. The normalized frequency of *nearly equal* in COHA.

7.5. *Excellent*

ex·cel·lent

adj.

1. Of the highest or finest quality; exceptionally good for its kind: *enjoyed an excellent meal at the restaurant.*

2. *Archaic* Being so to an extreme degree.

[Middle English, from Old French, from Latin *excellēns*, *excellent-,* present participle of *excellere,* to excel; see EXCEL.][23]

Figure 38 shows the frequency of the 20 most used degree adverbs found in combination with the adjective *excellent* in Hansard per decades. The total number of examples for the combination of "ADV *excellent*" is 8778. The three most common combinations are *most excellent* with 3005 occurrences (34 %), *very excellent* with 2827 occurrences (32 %), and *however excellent*[24] with 437 occurrences (5 %). *Most excellent* shows the highest number of occurrences in the 1910s (281 times), *very excellent* in the 1920s (407 times), and *however excellent* in the 1910s (48 times). They are all registered in all the decades of the 19th and 20th centuries.

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[23] Retrieved August 26, 2021, from https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=excellent.

[24] *adv.* **3.** To whatever degree or extent: *"The prospect of success, however remote, was tantalizing" (Stephen Baker).* Retrieved August 26, 2021, from https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=however.

HELP			ALL	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
1	☐	MOST EXCELLENT	3040	12	25	37	107	111	113	130	129	146	176	280	281	181	222	232	151	160	158	213	141
2	☐	VERY EXCELLENT	2839	2	7	17	29	56	51	79	102	154	141	239	323	407	398	350	175	140	72	71	14
3	☐	HOWEVER EXCELLENT	448	1	4	4	10	12	18	20	33	24	34	36	48	37	30	30	20	20	23	24	9
4	☐	SO EXCELLENT	421	1	6	8	15	15	24	23	29	27	25	28	30	26	20	21	21	22	33	20	19
5	☐	MORE EXCELLENT	272		4	8	9	12	9	15	15	18	17	38	35	16	27	10	6	7	5	5	11
6	☐	OTHERWISE EXCELLENT	249		1		1	1	2		1	3	4	11	4	7	10	15	23	32	23	37	46
7	☐	QUITE EXCELLENT	210										1	4	12	8	7	12	12	34	36	41	35
8	☐	HOW EXCELLENT	151	1			1		3	5	2	4	2	8	8	5	7	12	10	13	16	23	24
9	☐	REALLY EXCELLENT	142			2			3		3	3	2	2	5	4	8	8	14	28	18	22	13
10	☐	AS EXCELLENT	91	1	1	1	8	4	2	4	3	4	6	6	4	6	3	2	3	6	6	5	13
11	☐	ABSOLUTELY EXCELLENT	90														2	3	2	7	10	28	23
12	☐	TRULY EXCELLENT	86			1	1										1			3	11	18	31
13	☐	MUCH EXCELLENT	67							1	1			1	1	1	1	5	7	5	2	9	24
14	☐	ALSO EXCELLENT	67				1	1	1	1	2	1	2				2	3	2	5	4	17	16
15	☐	DOUBT EXCELLENT	60				2			2	3	1	7	4	2	2	2	2	5	9	5	7	2
16	☐	OUT EXCELLENT	56					1	1	1	2	2	3	2		3	2		3	5	3		22
17	☐	BOTH EXCELLENT	55								1	2	1	2	2	4	1	4	8	7	10	10	
18	☐	ALREADY EXCELLENT	52							2	1				1		1	2	4	3	4	5	22
19	☐	EQUALLY EXCELLENT	42			1	2						1			3	1	1	3	5	5	5	7
20	☐	NOW EXCELLENT	39							1	1	1	3		1		3	1	4	2	5	7	8

Figure 38. Most frequent adverbs with *excellent* in Hansard per decades.

Some other degree adverbs found in the usage guides and grammars or being most used in the other corpora are *so* with 413 occurrences (5 %), *more* with 267 occurrences (3 %), *quite* with 202 occurrences (2 %), and *really* with 132 occurrences (1 %). The decade with most occurrences with *so* is the 1970s (33 of them), with *more* is the 1900s (38) with no registered occurrences in the 1800s, then with *quite* is the 1980s (41), which has no occurrences until the 1880s and then again in the 1890s and with *really* is the 1960s (28) without occurrences from the 1800s to the 1820s, then from the 1830s to the 1860s and in the 1870s.

Figure 39 represents the frequency of the 20 most used degree adverbs found in combination with the adjective *excellent* in COHA per decades. The total number of occurrences in COHA for the "ADV *excellent*" combination is 1749. The most common ones are *most excellent* with 544 occurrences (31 %), *very excellent* with 277 occurrences (16 %), and *so excellent* with 201 occurrences (11 %). The 1850s is the decade with most occurrences for all three combinations:

most excellent 61 occurrences, *very excellent* 47 occurrences, and *so excellent* 35 occurrences. No occurrences are detected for *so excellent* in the 1970s and the 1980s.

		ALL	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	SEC1
1	MOST EXCELLENT	544	30	44	50	61	48	40	47	53	43	24	26	29	17	5	5	9	5	8			544
2	VERY EXCELLENT	277	5	22	30	47	24	25	17	12	12	6	20	24	7	8	7	6	2	3			277
3	SO EXCELLENT	201	6	17	28	35	19	13	9	11	17	11	12	5	6	5	4			3			201
4	MORE EXCELLENT	108	7	3	17	12	9	9	14	8	10	5	3	2		3	1	2	1	2			108
5	REALLY EXCELLENT	53		3	4	2		2	1	3	1	1	11	6	1	2	5	5	2	4			53
6	HOWEVER EXCELLENT	50	7	7	2	4	2	3	3	5	4	5	3	3	2								50
7	AS EXCELLENT	42	1	2	5	1	1	2	6	5	1	2	5	2	2	2	2	1	2				42
8	ALSO EXCELLENT	41		2	3				5	2	2		3	4	5	4	1	3	1	6			41
9	HOW EXCELLENT	33		1	3	1	5	2	1	3	1	1	4	1	3	1	1	1	3	1			33
10	BOTH EXCELLENT	30		2	3	2	1	1	1	1	2	4			4	3	1	2	2	1			30
11	OTHERWISE EXCELLENT	29	1	1			1	3		2	1	3	2	2	2	3	2	3	1	2			29
12	TRULY EXCELLENT	29	5	1	4	4	3	2	2	1			1				1	1	1	3			29
13	ALWAYS EXCELLENT	20	1	1	2			2	2	2	1		1	2	1		1	1	1	2			20
14	EQUALLY EXCELLENT	17		1	1	1		5	2	2	2	1			1				1				17
15	LESS EXCELLENT	15	3	2		2	1				1		1	1	1	2				1			15
16	GENERALLY EXCELLENT	13	1			1		1				1		2		2	1		3	1			13
17	OFTEN EXCELLENT	13				2	3	2	1	1	1					1	1			1			13
18	TOO EXCELLENT	11		1	4		1	1	1	1		1			1								11
19	MUCH EXCELLENT	10						1	3	3	2	1											10
20	THOROUGHLY EXCELLENT	10						1	3	2	1	1	1	1									10

Figure 39. Most frequent adverbs with *excellent* in COHA per decades.

More excellent has 108 occurrences (6 %) with the biggest number of occurrences being 17 in the 1840s and no detected occurrences in the 1940s. *Really excellent* has 53 occurrences (3 %) with most of them being 11 in the 1920s and no detected ones in the 1820s and the 1860s. *However excellent* has 50 occurrences (3 %), the highest number being 7 in the 1st two decades of the 19th century and without occurrences from the 1950s to the 1990s. *Quite excellent* has just 7 occurrences (0.40 %).

All three combinations have most examples in the FIC section. Overall, the FIC section has most examples with 48 %, and then we have MAG with 23 %, NF/ACAD with 22 %, NEWS with 4 %, and TV/MOV with 3 %.

Table 16. Frequency of *excellent* in COHA per registers.

	NF/ACAD	NEWS	MAG	FIC	TV/MOV
most excellent	140	18	118	259	9
very excellent	51	17	55	134	20
so excellent	34	5	58	99	3

Figure 40 shows the frequency of the 20 most used adverbs in combination with the adjective *excellent* in COCA. The total number of examples found in COCA for the "ADV *excellent*" combination is 370. The three most common adverbs are *most* with 54 occurrences (15 %), *also* with 34 occurrences (9 %), and *really* with 32 occurrences (9 %). Although *also* is an adverb, it is not a degree adverb; therefore, it will not be researched beyond this. *Really excellent* will be treated as being at the 2nd place and *very excellent* as in the 3rd place.
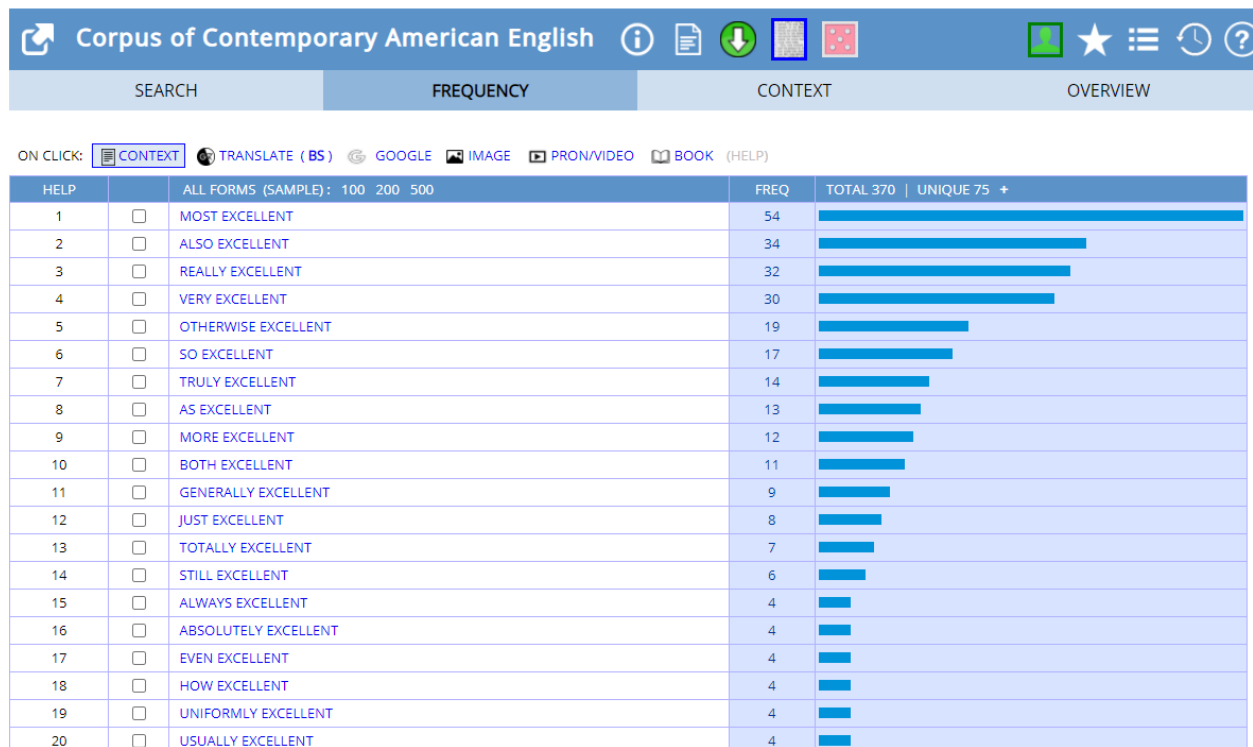

Figure 40. Most frequent adverbs with *excellent* in COCA.

Very excellent has 30 occurrences (8 %), *so excellent* 17 occurrences (5 %), *more excellent* 12 occurrences (3 %) and *quite excellent* just 4 occurrences (1 %).

There are no registered examples in the BLOG and WEB sections. *Most excellent* has most examples in the TV/MOV section while *really excellent* and *very excellent* have most examples in the SPOK section. Overall, the TV/MOV section has most examples, i.e., 30 %, then comes SPOK with 28 %, ACAD and FIC with 13 % each, NEWS with 9 %, and MAG with 7 %.

Table 17. Frequency of *excellent* in COCA per registers.

	SPOK	MAG	NEWS	TV/MOV	ACAD	FIC
most excellent	3	6	6	17	13	9
really excellent	13	1	3	11	1	3
very excellent	17	1	1	7	1	3

Table 18 represents the frequency of the selected adverbs in all the three corpora. As can be seen, *most* is at the 1st place in all of them and *very* is at the 2nd place in Hansard and COHA but at the 3rd place in COCA while *really* is at the 2nd place. *However* and *so* are at the 3rd place in Hansard and COHA, respectively. All combinations from Table 18 have more examples in Hansard than in COHA or COCA, even though they are lower ranked in that corpus. The reason for this may be that out of the total number of examples, which is 10897, Hansard has 8778 examples or 81 %, COHA 1749 or 16 %, and COCA just 370 or 3 %.

Table 18. Frequency of adverbs with *excellent* per corpora.

	Hansard		COHA		COCA	
	place	frequency	place	frequency	place	frequency
most excellent	1	3005	1	544	1	54
very excellent	2	2827	2	277	3	30
however excellent	3	437	6	50	59	1
so excellent	4	413	3	201	6	17
more excellent	5	267	4	108	9	12
quite excellent	7	202	24	7	22	4
really excellent	9	132	5	53	2	32

Excellent is treated as a non-gradable adjective in the 20th-century usage guides and grammars, whose authors are mostly British. It is not mentioned in the 19th-century usage guides and grammars. Still, it is used more with degree adverbs in the 20th century than in the 19th century in Hansard (6532 vs. 2246 occurrences). The number of occurrences in COHA favours the 19th century (1060 vs. 689 occurrences).

Quite excellent is recommended as proper use, but we can see that it does not have many occurrences compared to the other adverbs used here:

(50)   "he has done a *quite excellent* job for Hong Kong in extremely difficult and increasingly difficult circumstances" (Hansard; House of Lords, 1992).

More and *very* are considered incorrect usage, but the number of examples is significant, especially in Hansard and especially with *more*:

(51)   "he believed that a more honourable man, or a *more excellent* officer, did not exist" (Hansard; House of Commons, 1836)

(52)   "Samuel is a *very excellent* name" (COHA; Twain, Memoranda, *Galaxy*, June 1870, pp. 858-868).

These combinations are in more frequent use in the 20th century in Hansard and in the 19th century when it comes to COHA, which is again in conflict with the recommendations from the usage guides and grammars. *Most excellent* was in the 1st place in all the three corpora, and the usage guides and grammars recommend its use only as an absolute superlative expressing high degree or for the emphatic use or approval as in the following examples:

(53)   "you will find that I have left you a *most excellent* wine cellar" (COCA; Struthers, *Along the Street*, 1942)

(54)   "I saw this morning the queen and the king's *most excellent* majesty" (COHA; Sanderson, *The American in Paris*, 1838).

So excellent should be treated as incorrect usage because it emphasizes what the adjective represents. In contrast, *really excellent* could be treated as correct usage because it confirms what the adjective itself represents:

(55)   "the noble Lord's argument was *so excellent* and good that I wish every Member had read that argument" (Hansard; House of Commons, 1839)

(56)   "were it not for the fact that in Scotland you have a *really excellent* system of secondary schools: I wish we had it in England" (Hansard; House of Lords, 1918).

Figures 41 and 42 show the frequency of the adjective *excellent* with *most* in Hansard and COHA, respectively. The highest normalized frequency in Hansard is 4.87 in the 1900s. It varies during the 19th century, and after the 1900s, it slowly declines reaching the lowest frequency of 0.82 in the 1990s. The highest normalized frequency in COHA is 4.73 in the 1820s. We can see that it is in constant decline from then on reaching the lowest frequency of 0.20 in the 1980s. The use is more constant in Hansard than COHA, although both corpora favour it more in the 19th century.
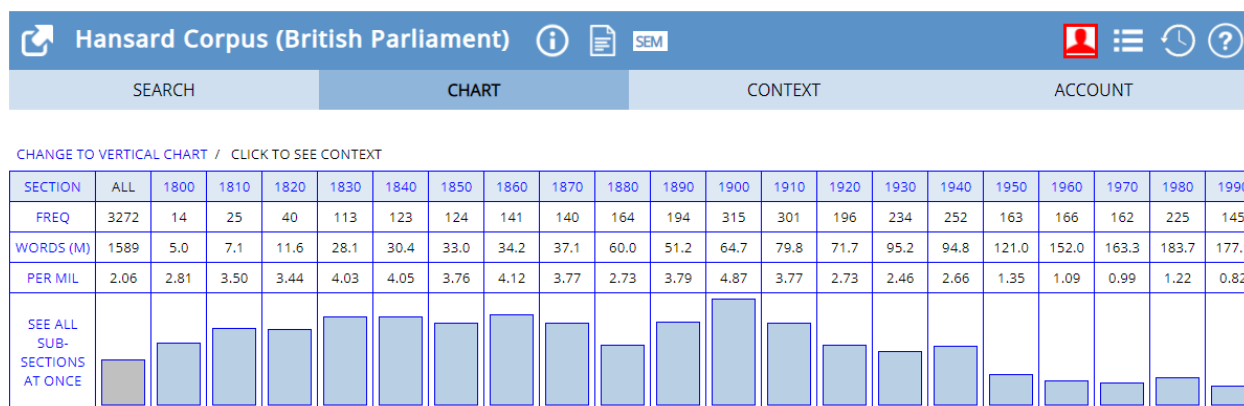

SECTION	ALL	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
FREQ	3272	14	25	40	113	123	124	141	140	164	194	315	301	196	234	252	163	166	162	225	145
WORDS (M)	1589	5.0	7.1	11.6	28.1	30.4	33.0	34.2	37.1	60.0	51.2	64.7	79.8	71.7	95.2	94.8	121.0	152.0	163.3	183.7	177.1
PER MIL	2.06	2.81	3.50	3.44	4.03	4.05	3.76	4.12	3.77	2.73	3.79	4.87	3.77	2.73	2.46	2.66	1.35	1.09	0.99	1.22	0.82

Figure 41. The normalized frequency of *most excellent* in Hansard.

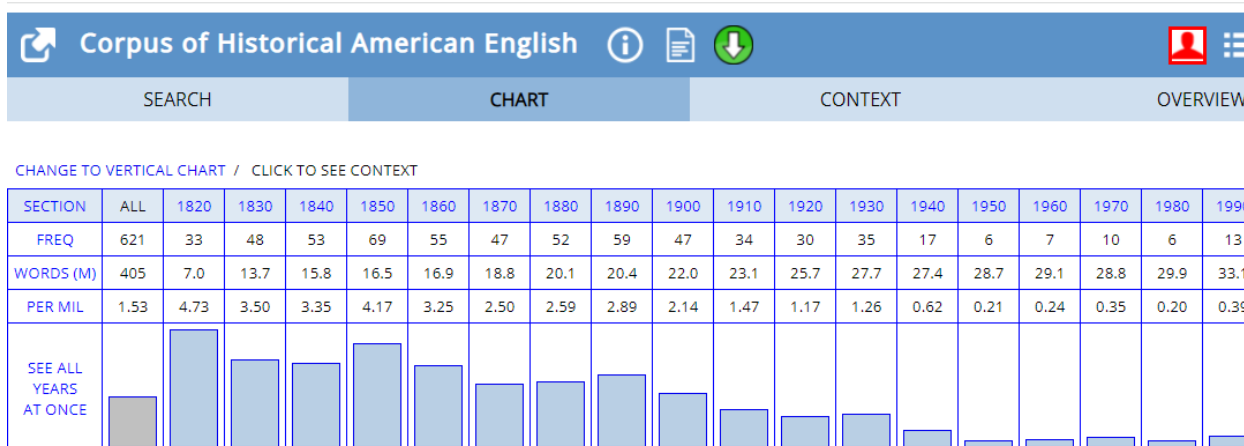	SECTION	ALL	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
FREQ	621	33	48	53	69	55	47	52	59	47	34	30	35	17	6	7	10	6	13
WORDS (M)	405	7.0	13.7	15.8	16.5	16.9	18.8	20.1	20.4	22.0	23.1	25.7	27.7	27.4	28.7	29.1	28.8	29.9	33.1
PER MIL	1.53	4.73	3.50	3.35	4.17	3.25	2.50	2.59	2.89	2.14	1.47	1.17	1.26	0.62	0.21	0.24	0.35	0.20	0.39

Figure 42. The normalized frequency of *most excellent* in COHA.

Figures 43 and 44 show the frequency of the adjective *excellent* with *very* in Hansard and COHA, respectively. The highest normalized frequency in Hansard is 5.68 in the 1920s. The lowest one registered is 0.08 in the 1990s. The highest normalized frequency in COHA is 2.84 in the 1850s. It is more frequently used in the 20th century in Hansard and in the 19th century in COHA.
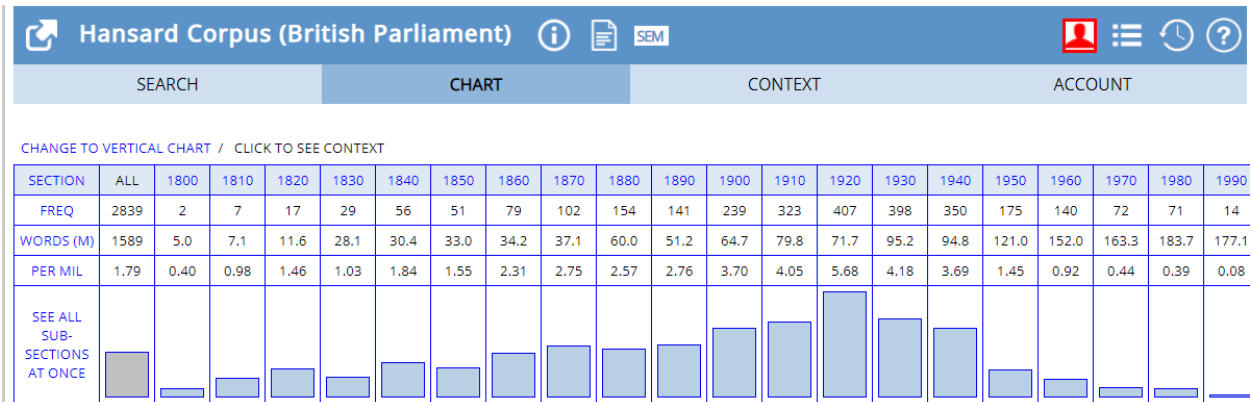
SECTION	ALL	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
FREQ	2839	2	7	17	29	56	51	79	102	154	141	239	323	407	398	350	175	140	72	71	14
WORDS (M)	1589	5.0	7.1	11.6	28.1	30.4	33.0	34.2	37.1	60.0	51.2	64.7	79.8	71.7	95.2	94.8	121.0	152.0	163.3	183.7	177.1
PER MIL	1.79	0.40	0.98	1.46	1.03	1.84	1.55	2.31	2.75	2.57	2.76	3.70	4.05	5.68	4.18	3.69	1.45	0.92	0.44	0.39	0.08

Figure 43. The normalized frequency of *very excellent* in Hansard.

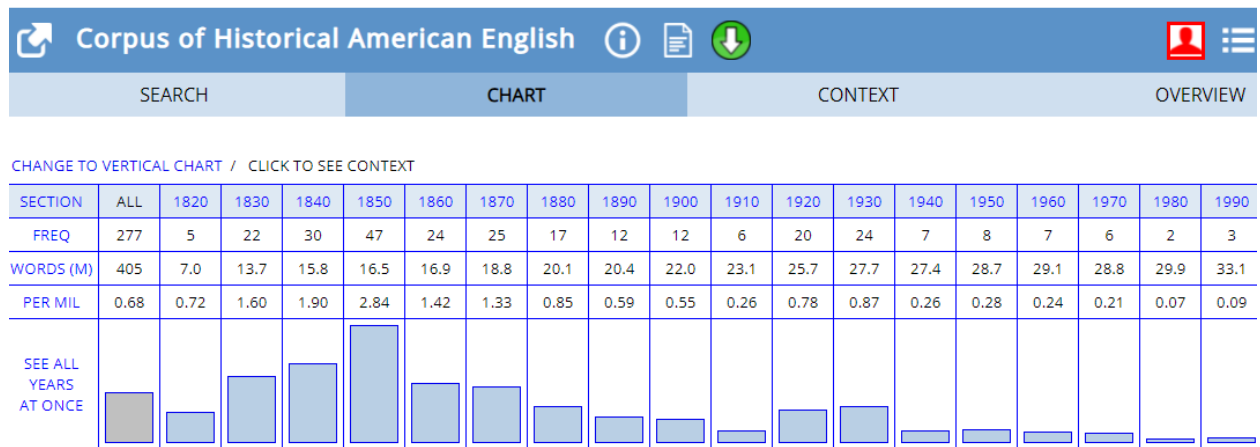| SECTION	ALL	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
FREQ	277	5	22	30	47	24	25	17	12	12	6	20	24	7	8	7	6	2	3
WORDS (M)	405	7.0	13.7	15.8	16.5	16.9	18.8	20.1	20.4	22.0	23.1	25.7	27.7	27.4	28.7	29.1	28.8	29.9	33.1
PER MIL	0.68	0.72	1.60	1.90	2.84	1.42	1.33	0.85	0.59	0.55	0.26	0.78	0.87	0.26	0.28	0.24	0.21	0.07	0.09

Figure 44. The normalized frequency of *very excellent* in COHA.

VIII CONCLUSION

Absolute adjectives had been used as gradable ones long before they were characterised as non-gradable, and the examples of this usage date back to the fourteenth century. The rules were followed more strictly with the appearance of prescriptive grammar books such as Lowth's and Murray's and, to a lesser extent, Priestley's.

It can be seen from the research of usage guides and grammars that most of them dealt with absolute adjectives as a usage problem (77 %), 18 % were written and published in the nineteenth century, and 59 % in the twentieth century. Regardless of the century, more American usage guides and grammars addressed the problem, 43 % of American ones compared to 34 % British ones. Although fewer nineteenth-century usage guides and grammars dealt with this topic, their approach was still prescriptive and clearer, saying that degree adverbs should not be used with absolute adjectives. In contrast, twentieth-century usage guides and grammars expressed a somewhat more descriptive approach and were rather vague when it came to using degree adverbs with absolute adjectives. Their point of view was that some adjectives could be modified with certain degree adverbs.

The adjectives that stood out most in the usage guides and grammars when the authors explained the concept of absolute adjectives are *unique, perfect, complete,* and *equal*. The largest number of different degree adverbs was used with these particular adjectives: *unique* with 19 adverbs, *perfect* with 11, *equal* with 7, and *complete* with 5 adverbs. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, not all the combinations of degree adverbs with absolute adjectives were considered correct by the authors.

The authors have different opinions about absolute adjectives being modified with degree adverbs. On the one hand, some are completely against it. On the other hand, some consider it informal writing, some a casual speech, some think of it as an idiomatic use, and some say it is acceptable to use it for emphasis; rarely those combinations enter the standard norm. Absolute adjectives change their meaning when modified, intensified with degree adverbs, or compared, and this usage is then acceptable to most authors. Very often, their meanings are diminished as Strang (1969: 136) confirms, "unmodified, they mean the absolute of what they say; with *more, most*, or the inflections of comparison […] they are weaker in effect than the positive term".

It can be concluded that in most cases, it is acceptable to modify absolute adjectives with certain degree adverbs if we want to express or confirm similar or exact qualities represented with a particular adjective or a nearer approach to a complete notion defined with an absolute adjective (e.g., *really / nearly / almost / absolutely* with *unique, infinite, perfect, excellent,* etc.). It is not acceptable when we try to express more of a quality than the adjective represents or if we want to emphasize it (e.g., *more / most / very / so* with *impossible, essential, perfect, unique,* etc.).

Let's look at the online corpora research done here. We can say that absolute adjectives were used with degree adverbs regardless of the recommendations or advice from the usage guides and grammars authors or our understanding that something logically cannot be more perfect, unique or infinite, etc.

The most frequent adverbs found at the first three places with the adjectives researched in this analysis (*unique, perfect, equal, excellent, complete*) are *most* appearing 10 times, *more* 6 times, *almost* 7 times, and *so* 6 times. *Very* has appeared 4 times, *quite* 2 times and *nearly, just, really, means, as, least, however, approximately* and *roughly* have appeared just once at the first three places in the corpora research of the above adjectives. When we compare this to the total number of occurrences of the adverbs at the first three places, which is 30945, *most* takes up 32 %, *more* 25 %, *so* and *almost* 6 % each, *very* and *nearly* 5 % each, *quite* 3 %, *just* 2 %, *roughly* and *approximately* 1 %.

The most frequent adverbs per corpora are *most, more,* and *almost* in Hansard and *most, more* and *so* in COHA and COCA. Hansard is interesting because of the adverbs that do not seem to be degree adverbs at first such as *means* (as in *by no means*), *however,* and *as*, which appear among the first three only in this corpora. *Nearly* is the only adverb among the first three just in COHA and *approximately, roughly, just* and *really* just in COCA.

Among the adverbs such as *quite, more, most, so, nearly, almost,* etc., which are at the first three places in the corpora, the adverbs considered incorrect usage in combinations with the selected adjectives are used more than those characterised as correct usage. *Most* is not used only with *equal* and *complete* and *excellent* is even used in all the three corpora. *More* is used with *complete* and *perfect* in all the three corpora and with *equal*. *So* is not used only with *equal* in the top three adverbs. Among the adverbs that can be used as correct usage, *almost* has most examples.

It seems that absolute adjectives were used as gradable adjectives more in the century in which the usage guides and grammars authors advised against that usage. The research in Hansard

shows that the selected adverbs in the combinations with adjectives *unique, equal, complete,* and *excellent* were used more in the 20th century, unlike COHA, where the use is more diversified. *Complete* and *unique* were used more in the 20th century and *perfect, equal,* and *excellent* in the 19th century. The only adjective with degree adverbs that had more uses in the 19th century than in the 20th century in Hansard is *perfect*. COCA covers the period from 1990 to 1999, so we can say that *complete* and *equal* have more uses in the first half of the decade (1990-1994) and *unique, perfect* and *excellent* in the second half of the decade (1995-1999).

The authors of the usage guides and grammars from both centuries characterised *complete* as an absolute adjective. The American authors from the 20th century used adverbs with it to show incorrect usage and were against its usage as a gradable adjective. Still, we can see that both Hansard and COHA used degree adverbs with this adjective more in the 20th century. Hansard had most occurrences in the 1930s (1296 of them) and COHA in the 1910s (416 of them).

Unique is not mentioned in the 19th-century usage guides and grammars, but 20th-century authors describe it as an absolute adjective. However, this adjective in the combinations with degree adverbs is used more in the 20th century than in the 19th century. The decade with most examples in Hansard is the 1980s (539) and the 1990s (94) in COHA. It still has fewer examples than was expected. It does not have occurrences in the first four decades of the 19th century in Hansard, and the authors are divided on the adverbs that may or may not be used as correct usage with it.

Both British and American authors from both centuries pointed out *perfect* as an absolute adjective and were mostly against its usage with degree adverbs. The number of examples shows us that the "degree adverb + *perfect*" combination was used more in the 19th century in Hansard and COHA. The 1850s are the decade with most examples (603) in Hansard and the 1840s (468 examples) in COHA.

Equal as an absolute adjective is not mentioned in the 19th-century usage guides and grammars. It was used more in the 19th century in COHA and the 20th century in Hansard when the usage guides and grammars started to treat it as an absolute adjective. Hansard has most examples in the 1970s (696) and COHA in the 1830s (225).

Excellent is not singled out as an absolute adjective in the 19th century, but it is mentioned as such in the 20th century and more often by the British authors than the American ones. Regardless, Hansard has more examples of its usage in the 20th century and COHA in the 19th

century. The decade with most examples is the 1910s (790) in Hansard and the 1950s in COHA (186).

The adjective with the least occurrences in Hansard is *unique*, which means it was considered an absolute adjective although it was not mentioned as such in the 19th century. *Complete* has most occurrences. *Perfect* has most occurrences in COHA and *unique* least while *perfect* is the adjective with most occurrences and *excellent* with least in COCA. When we are talking about the "degree adverb + an adjective" combinations, then *most excellent* (3005) has most examples in Hansard, *most perfect* (1312) in COHA, and *more complete* (385) in COCA.

If we take into account the total number of occurrences of the three most frequent adverbs in the combinations with each of these five adjectives per registers, the MAG section with 30 % is used most, then we have FIC with 29 %, ACAD with 28 %, TV/MOV and NEWS with 5 % each, and SPOK with 3 %. If we compare COHA and COCA, then the results show that three sections show more frequent use in COHA than COCA: ACAD (75 % vs. 25 %), MAG (88 % vs. 12 %), and FIC (92 % vs. 8 %) while NEWS (61 % vs. 39 %) and TV/MOV (69 % vs. 31 %) show more frequent use in COCA than COHA. The SPOK section is excluded from this comparison since this section only exists in COCA.

Despite prescriptive usage guides and grammars with clearly defined rules for the use of absolute adjectives with degree adverbs, the trends of modifying absolute adjectives with degree adverbs in the online corpora do not seem to be affected in the 19th century; however, the 20th century does show decline in many instances. We can and do have a set of rules on how something should or should not be used, but we should not forget that language is a living matter subject to changes and various influences.

The advice given in the usage guides and grammars is not completely followed in practice but as Tieken-Boon (2020) points out, "usage advice can be proscriptive or prescriptive […] but it can also be a mixture of this" (2020: 149).

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