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SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC PECULIARITIES OF QUITE IN MODERN ENGLISH

Summary. In this article we are going to concentrate on quite, a lexical item which can modify different units of language (verbs, adjectives, nouns, other adverbs, etc.) at various levels (word, phrase, sentence, discourse), and which may express different meanings and may have several uses in present-day English.

Key words: lexical item, adjunct, disjunct, predeterminer, modifier.

The study of intensives, in general, and intensive adverbs, in particular, has received a lot of attention in the twentieth century studies in linguistics. The high interest in this area of language can be justified by several reasons, as pointed out by Antoine R. Vermeire. Firstly, intensifiers are very versatile in their use; secondly, they are directly linked to the expression of personal emotions; thirdly, they can occur in any position in the clause and can modify almost any word and expression; fourthly, most of them tend to form collocations and even fixed expressions [1, 68]. To these arguments adduced by Vermeire, one could add that they include a wide variety of lexical items and units, and they constitute an open class; they are present both in written and spoken English although they are more frequent in the latter medium of expression than in the former; they form part of the verbal repertoire of most languages; their meaning and use are generally conditioned by pragmatic factors and most of these intensives do not remain permanent in their use but they are changeable as the language develops [1, 102]. Thus, Alan Partington, for example, explains and illustrates with concrete examples how words such as *very*, *utterly*, *absolutely*, *sure*, which originally expressed a modal meaning *gradually* became intensifiers over time. This is what he calls “the modal-to-intensifier shift”. According to this, these words developed from simply transmitting the user’s attitude towards the message to placing emphasis on what is being conveyed. Partington also shows how some words of the intensifier class, such as *very*, *utterly*, *entirely* and *thoroughly*, seem to have at present a more limited syntactic range than in the past [2, 172–192]. Carita Paradis also refers to this question and, basing herself on information extracted from the Oxford English Dictionary, claims that the intensifying interpretations of adjectives, such as *utter*, *horrible*, *extreme*, *absolute*, *terrible*, *perfect*, *complete*, *total*, *dreadful* and *awful*, “are recent developments in the history of the English language” since the majority of them acquired this value during the early modern period [3, 56]. Finally, Hongyn Tao maintains a similar view with respect to “absolutely” [4, 5–29].

In this article we are going to concentrate on *quite*, a lexical item which at first glance does not stand as an attractive grammatical unit worthy of attention but which can modify different units of language (verbs, adjectives, nouns, other adverbs, sentences, prepositions, phrases, etc.) at various levels (word, phrase, sentence, discourse), and which may express different meanings and may have several uses in present-day English. Although intensives, as explained

above, have been thoroughly analysed from different perspectives and paradigms, there are very few studies, to my knowledge, concerning monographically with *quite*, with the exception of sections of general surveys on adverbs or on intensifiers that devote a few pages or refer particularly to the nature of this lexical item.

Our general aims will then be the study of *quite* in connection with the medium of expression (writing vs. speech), text type and register (degree of formality). Our study is not diachronic, that is, we are not going to survey this form from a historical perspective or analyse the evolution of this word in the last four or five decades. We are just going to concentrate on this grammatical unit on the basis of data extracted from the British English component of the International Corpus of English (ICE). As a complement to this, we will also consider data taken from judgement tests administered to a group of fifteen native speakers of English. This information will serve to confirm and clarify some of the results obtained with the analysis of the corpus data.

The interest of this paper lies in the discussion of real uses which derive from information extracted directly from spoken and written English. The views maintained by the main English grammars available nowadays together with some of the most relevant specific studies concerned with it will be contrasted with the discussion of examples where we will be investigating the multifunctionality and meaning of this word.

Quite is generally classified as a degree adverb within the intensifier class. According to Randolph Quirk et al., two separate uses of this word are distinguished: maximizer and compromiser. Furthermore, it is also very highly connected with sentence adverbials, such as *altogether*, *almost*, *entirely*, and it may also have a modal character expressing surprise, for example. *Quite* as maximizer is very often used with non-gradable or non-scalar items meaning “absolutely”; *quite* as compromiser, however, goes with gradable words and it means “considerably”, “rather”. However, at times it is difficult to say what type or degree of intensification it expresses since it may be conditioned by contextual and prosodic factors [5, 224]. Stress and intonation seem to play a very relevant role in the intensifying force of this word. If stressed, it generally has the meaning of a maximizer, for example:

(1) Phil is **QUITE** right.

In the previous example, the speaker places emphasis on the adjective right, which according to some grammarians belongs to the “absolute” class, that is, it has to be one thing or the other as there is no half point. In this particular case, Phil is either right or not right.

In contrast, if the head of the adverb or adjective phrase is the one that is given more prominence prosodically, *quite* then functions more as a compromiser or downtoner, for instance:

(2) The novel is quite **INTERESTING**.

In the above example, the emphasis is placed on interesting, which is a gradable adjective. There are also many borderline

cases, that is, examples where it is very difficult to deduce the exact meaning intended by the language user. From this, it is also gathered that in written language there is generally an added difficulty for a sound interpretation of this word since information about stress and intonation is not available.

Apart from these two main uses within adjective and adverb phrases, *quite* may also modify noun and noun phrases to convey strong intensification. If I say something like,

(3) "Yesterday I had to wait quite a while for Peter."

I am really showing my dissatisfaction for having had to wait longer than expected.

This value of strong intensification is also present with certain quantifiers as in:

(4) A: "Did you spot out many mistakes in my essay?"

B: "Well, quite a few."

Here speaker B is acknowledging through an understatement that the number of mistakes was high, and clearly more than expected.

Apart from this, this adverb may also modify a verb phrase and in this case it functions as a subjunct,

(5) I quite agree with what you are saying.

Here *quite* modifies the verb phrase and the meaning intended is that of "completely".

Finally, *quite* may also function as an independent clause in reply to a previous statement. This is relatively common in spoken language and in these cases the speaker usually expresses their agreement with something said by the interlocutor.

(6) A: "He really did very well."

B: "Yes, quite."

As Quirk et al. suggest, this is so independently of the polarity type of the previous clause.

(7) A: "They should not have behaved in that way."

B: "Quite."

This adverb functions in these contexts as a disjunct with a true standing use.

Summarising, we can say then that *quite* apart from being a modifier could be classified in Quirk et al.'s terminology under any of the main broad adverb types, that is, adjunct, disjunct or subjunct. It may modify almost any of the word categories although it is more likely to intensify adjectives, adverbs and verbs. Its position in the sentence, its meaning and function together with other pragmatic variables will tell us whether we are dealing with one type or another.

The complexity and high frequency of this adverb may explain the different perspectives and approaches **adopted in the literature**. Dwight Bolinger, in his general study on degree words, devotes a special section to *quite*. Degree words are classified by this linguist in four classes: boosters, compromisers, diminishers and minimizers, depending on their place on the scale. As regards *quite* in particular,

Bolinger refers to its multifunctionality and starts by comparing the expression *altogether* with *not quite* in sentences, such as *That lady is not quite nice* versus *That lady is not altogether nice*. He maintains that the differences between these two are given by the fact that *not quite* implies a beginning point; from this he concludes that the use of *not quite* is generally limited to qualities expressed by adjectives denoting a beginning process. In a different section of his work, Bolinger concentrates on the perfective meaning conveyed by *quite* when modifying verbs, as in *I quite expected it*; some pages later he tries to explain the factors that may account for the variation

between pairs of sentences, such as *He is a quite unusual person* versus *He is quite an unusual person* [6, 56–94].

Vermeire, for his part, conducts a thorough study of fifteen degree intensifiers on the basis of the data provided by two computerised corpora (PAL and CAMET) of modern English and the replies obtained from an experiment, which consisted in the administration of a replacement, judgement and scaling test to a group of thirty British postgraduate students in linguistics. With all this information Vermeire focused on the nature of *quite* as intensifying verbs, adjectives and nouns, the gradability and affective meaning of the word modified by this adverb, the clause type of the sentences where it occurs, its position with respect to both the definite and the indefinite article, and the most frequent collocations. This study comes to relevant conclusions and presents interesting results which will be contrasted with my findings throughout the paper [1, 180].

Ulf Backlund intends to establish the ranges of adverbs of degree, i.e. what different elements they can collocate with.» For this purpose, he pays a lot of attention to contextual and situational variables. The material surveyed, organised in three stylistic categories (prose used in newspapers and magazines, conversational prose and narrative writing), has been gathered from several issues of two British newspapers and one American magazine. In addition to this, eight informants with different backgrounds were interviewed on controversial issues or on questions of special interest. *Quite* is classified within the category of adverbs expressing a moderate degree together with *pretty* and *rather*. For this scholar, these three adverbs are highly emotive as the speaker generally considers what the interlocutor has just said or is believed to be thinking. This is the reason why for this linguist *quite* is an argumentative word. On the basis of stress and pitch contour, Backlund also distinguishes two different contours according to whether it is unstressed (Contour A) or stressed (Contour B). Furthermore, he introduces something new since he proposes that although *quite* is mainly a word-sentence modifier or focalizer, it shares some of the features of a proper sentence-modifier when expressing some additional value of surprise, irony, condescension, sarcasm, contrast, etc [7, 34–39].

Hannele Diehl is concerned with the study of *quite* as a degree modifier of verbs in writing on the basis of data extracted from the British National Corpus. Using the framework of cognitive linguistics, this paper tries to see up to what extent the configurational reading of the main verb that combines with *quite* conditions the interpretation of this adverb. The results indicate that the configurational reading of the verb that collocates with *quite* constrains the reading of *quite*. If the mode of construal of the collocating verb is clearly bounded, then *quite* functions as a bounded maximizer, as in *I quite understand*, but if the mode of construal of the collocating verb is unbounded, then *quite* functions as an unbounded booster, as in *I quite fancy this* [8, 1–19].

With all this information as a starting-point, we became engaged in this paper with the intention of making some contributions to the multifunctionality of this adverb in the light of new and more modern data. In our view, *quite* should be mainly considered as a word-modifier although there are cases in which it may function as something equivalent to a sentential adverb or even a discourse marker; in other words, the main function of *quite* will be that of a modifying word as a maximizer or compromiser, but at times it may serve to express other meanings as conditioned by contextual, situational and pragmatic factors.

The purpose of this paper, as explained above, is to study the use and meaning of *quite* on the basis of the data provided by the British component of the ICE and the information supplied by a group of highly educated native speakers of English. We will then analyse the distribution of this word in written and spoken English in detail and will also focus on the different functions this lexical item can perform at the phrase, clause and discourse level. This means that in this paper we will not only concentrate on the main function of *quite* as an intensifier of adjectives and adverbs, but will also address other structures and contexts where *quite* also occurs in the position of a predeterminer, modifier of nouns and noun phrases, and even as a full response to a previous statement or question. In fact, one of the main purposes in this paper will be to show the multifunctional nature of this lexical item. No textual or sociological variables will be particularly considered as they fall outside the scope of the present investigation. However, in the reading of the data pragmatic features will be considered when appropriate.

The ICE corpus contains one million words organised in 500 texts, each with approximately 2,000 words; 300 texts are extracts of transcribed speech while the other 200 belong to writing. There is not a perfect balance between the spoken and written samples as speech represents two thirds of the whole, that is, about 600,000 words while the total sample of written language amounts to 400,000 words. This factor should be borne in mind, especially when drawing contrasts between writing and speech. The spoken component of the corpus consists of dialogues, both public and private, and monologues, both scripted and unscripted. The written part is divided into printed and non-printed material. The latter is organised in two groups “nonprofessional writing” and “correspondence”. However, the latter contains subsections: academic and non-academic writing, reportage, instructional, persuasive and creative texts. For the retrieval of the data, the corpus tools were used, which provided all the examples that contained an occurrence of *quite*. This raw data was closely surveyed and subsequently filtered since part of the material obtained was not valid for the purposes intended: the information presented was incomplete or was not relevant for the objectives in mind. At times, the context given was not sufficient for a complete and solid interpretation. As a consequence, a second search was at times necessary to trace additional facts. Once the irrelevant features were removed, we first considered the distribution of this word in modern written and spoken English. Furthermore, we tried to see whether there was any connection between the frequency of this word and particular text categories. Attention was also paid to the degree of formality of the texts where *quite* occurred. Finally, we classified its uses and functions in different groups. In all cases the corpus data was used to present the discussion and to prove the evidence.

In order to test and compare some of the results found through the corpus, we also administered a judgement test to a group of fifteen university native speakers of English. Nine of them were female and six were male. The majority of these subjects (eleven of them) were between twenty-one and thirty, eight were British, three American, two Irish and two Australian. They all had a university education and were acquainted with the linguistics field. They all volunteered to participate in the project so they were not specially selected for the study. A preliminary version of the test was piloted with a group of three subjects of similar characteristics and, as a result, minor adjustments were introduced in its structure and in the wording of some of the questions.

Following Sidney Greenbaum and Randolph Quirk, this judgement test can be regarded as a “similarity” class since the respondents are given pairs of sentences and are asked to indicate their degree of similarity together with an explanation for their decision [5, 160–172]. The sentences selected correspond to real uses of the language as they were directly picked up from the corpus material. Instruments of this kind have proved to be extremely useful for language research and have acted as very effective supplementation to corpus alone. The questionnaire consisted of sixteen items which represented cases of particular interest in the study of *quite*. Different variables were included in each of the questions: a) the contrast in meaning between *quite* and *very*, *quite* and *completely*, *quite* and *rather*. We wanted to study up to what extent *quite* is used to express different meanings from these other adverbs; b) *quite* as a verb modifier with verbs such as *know* and *like*. In this case it was our intention to focus on the type of modification expressed by *quite* in combination with these verbal forms and the meanings associated with them; c) the semantic role played by *quite* in combination with the preposition *like*. We felt it necessary to analyse the meaning and use of *quite* as a prepositional modifier; d) the differences in meaning between structures with the pattern *a.quite.NP* versus *quite.a.NP*. This issue has been extensively discussed in the literature but it was important to see the opinions of real users of the language; e) the opposition between structures with *quite.some* versus *some* on its own. This time we wanted to investigate the meaning of *quite* in combination with this quantifier; f) *quite.NP* versus a NP alone; and finally, g) *quite* as an independent sentence response to a previous statement.

To conclude, we hope we have provided an overview of the general behaviour of *quite* as an intensifier, being either an amplifier or a compromiser. The scalar nature of the words it modifies and prosodic features seem to determine its intensifying meaning. *Quite* is then prototypically a degree word and its most distinctive property is that of multifunctionality. As a result, it can occur in different positions in the clause and it may not only modify adverbs and adjectives but also intensify other categories, such as noun, verb and preposition phrases. As an adverb it can not only function as an adjunct and subjunct but also as a freestanding disjunct used to imply a positive reply or an affirmative statement. This is also a relevant function in addition to that of intensifier and modifier.

The findings obtained clearly indicate that this item is very frequent in the language, especially if compared with the rest of the intensifiers class and it is much more common in spoken than in written British English. Almost 85 per cent of the examples recorded were classified within text categories associated with the former medium of expression rather than with the latter. The figures collected follow in general terms the tendencies identified in previous studies although differences in percentages are also detected; this could be explained by the different nature of the research instruments used and the dissimilarities in the organisational and compositional features of the corpora considered.

Observing the different types of text categories, the data indicates that the highest number of occurrences of this adverb is registered in face-to-face conversations whereas the lowest one is reported in administrative and regulatory writing. This may be justified by a strong link of this word with speech. Furthermore, there seems to be a correlation between *quite* as a word modifier and informal registers of language; this hypothesis, however, could not be definitively proved.

As mentioned throughout this paper, the archetypal function of *quite* is that of a modifier, and particularly an intensifier of

adjectives, adverbs and verbs. Thus, in more than half of the examples examined, this adverb modifies adjectivals. Most of these adjectives are of a predicative nature and about 10 per cent of the total number are participial ones. The majority of the adjectives that occur with this adverb denote positive qualities, measure or size, or refer to a distinctive feature of a person or thing. Special attention was devoted to the variation between structures of the type *It was quite an expensive holiday* versus *It was a quite expensive holiday*. The former constructions, that is, those in which *quite* is placed before the NP appear to be much more frequent than the latter. On many occasions, there is no difference in meaning but in some cases the speaker opts for the second alternative on purpose in order to express an idea of surprise or something unexpected. Time frequency, manner, degree or comparison and stance disjuncts are very often intensified by *quite*. Most of these adverbials are derivatives with the *-ly* suffix. The presence of *quite* as adverb modifier does not play an important role regarding the standard position of time frequency, manner and comparison adverbs in the sentence. The verbal category is very often intensified by *quite*, particularly in the oral medium of expression. Two thirds of the examples recorded for this group show a non-assertive or negative item. In the negative, *quite* tends to collocate with verbs of knowing, understanding and speaking; in the positive, however, it is construed with verbs of liking, expecting and wondering. However, there are verbs such as *understand* which may occur both in the negative and in the positive form. The meaning of *quite* in all these cases will mainly be given by pragmatic and contextual factors but it will basically function as an amplifier or compromiser. Although *quite* usually modifies adjectives, adverbs and verbs, it may also intensify prepositions, noun phrases and pronouns. Although these are more marginal uses, they are also worth reporting because they present very idiosyncratic features. A total of ten prepositional forms appear to be modified by this lexical item. The prepositions denoting comparison (*as*, *like*) are the most frequent, being most typically found in negative polarity clauses. Quantifiers with a pronominal value such as *a lot*, *a bit*, *a few* are also often intensified by *quite*. Collocations with *a bit* are the most interesting linguistically since they normally denote the opposite of what is intended. They are in fact equivalent to understatements in colloquial English. At times these quantifiers do not stand on their own as heads and they are part of a NP. *Quite* then functions as a predeterminer.

On the borderline between collocations and semi-idiomatic expressions, we find combinations of *quite* with NPs. The nouns functioning as heads of these phrases will vary depending on whether they are determined by the definite or the indefinite article. Within the first group we find collocations, such as *quite the same*, *quite the opposite*, *quite the point* whereas within the second the nouns tend to denote an abstract nature and are very frequently related to time, such as *quite a change*, *quite a while*, *quite a period of time*, etc. Furthermore, the constructions of the first set occur in negative contexts; however, polarity does not play a determining role in the case of the second. In both cases, *quite* functions as an amplifier and serves to draw a comparison with something previously said or with an idea or point shared in knowledge by the speaker and the interlocutor. Special mention deserves the use of *quite* as a freestanding disjunct. It functions as an affirmative reply to a previous statement with the intention of acknowledging what the other speaker has just stated or agreeing explicitly with the point just made.

Apparently, this adverb, in the light of previous studies may be following a similar tendency to other adverbs of similar nature such as *absolutely*, *indeed*, *surely*, which have undergone a process of grammaticalisation to become discourse markers that have scope over larger pieces of language and convey categorical affirmations. As regards the methodology used, corpus data can be illuminating and illustrative providing us with interesting information. However, it also presents serious limitations since contextual and pragmatic features may not be given or may be only partly given. This can be a key issue when analysing a modifying and multifunctional word such as *quite* that is highly conditioned by the speaker's emotions. Elicitation instruments like the similarity test used in the current investigation have proved to be very helpful. In this respect, the selection of the informants and the design of the questionnaire seem to be of the utmost importance.

This general study should be **considered as preliminary** since there are still a number of questions that should be examined in close detail with the analysis of more data and with the aid of additional research instruments. Comparisons across different varieties of English would also be worth conducting since the behaviour of *quite* will certainly vary from one to the other. Among the areas that would need further investigation we can mention the following: (i) as studied, *quite* is used to intensify different word categories but independently of the nature of the category modified there must be a linking element which may justify its behaviour in discourse; (ii) it would be very useful to explore the correlation between this adverb and the degree of text formality; (iii) from a more applied perspective it would be helpful to study the implications of all this for language teaching. In fact, some scholars have already opened a path for the latter question.

All this and many other questions in connection with the point at issue confirm without a doubt the hypothesis that there are still problems to be solved and, precisely because of this, they justify the attention that an apparently dull and unattractive language item like *quite* clearly deserves.

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Татаровська О. В. Синтаксичні та семантичні особливості quite в сучасній англійській мові

Анотація. У статті увагу сконцентровано на лексичній одиниці quite, яка може модифікувати різні частини мови (дієслова, прикметники, іменники, інші прислівники та ін.) на різних рівнях (слова, фрази, речення, дискурсу), а також виражати різні значення та мати різноманітне вживання у сучасній англійській мові.

Ключові слова: лексична одиниця, доповнення, відокремлення, предетермінант, модифікатор.

Татаровская О. В. Синтаксические и семантические особенности quite в современном английском языке

Аннотация. В статье внимание сконцентрировано на лексической единице quite, которая может модифицировать разные части речи (глаголы, имена прилагательные, имена нарицательные, другие причастия) на разных уровнях (слова, фразы, предложения, дискурса), а также выражать разные значения и иметь разнообразные применения в современном английском языке.

Ключевые слова: лексическая единица, дополнение, обособление, предетерминант, модификатор.