Understanding the Adverb

Adverbs are more important to the English language than one may think. Without adverbs Chipper Jones could not smack homeruns powerfully, Hemingway could not have written passionately, and this very sentence could not have been written adverbially. This statement may be somewhat drastic, but adverbs do play a big part in the English language. Many times people overlook how important certain functions of the language actually are. Adverbs help add power to action in the written and spoken English language.

One may wonder specifically what an adverb is.

“An adverb is a word used to modify, or qualify, a verb (or verbal), an adjective, or another verb. It usually answers one of these questions: When? Where? How? Why? Under what conditions? To what degree?” (Hacker 503)

A simple sentence using an adverb could be: He runs quickly. Quickly acts as the adverb in this sentence because quick, an adjective, plus the morpheme –ly makes the adverb quickly. It is common for adjectives plus the morpheme –ly to become adverbs. Quickly also tells how or to what degree just as the definition says above. Simple sentences make it easy to distinguish adverbs from adjectives and other parts of speech. However, as with many other aspects in life, adverbs can pose problems.
“Adverbs are in the main a well-behaved part of speech, though certain adverbs now and then cause trouble. Sometimes the difficulty arises from confusion between adjective and adverb. Thus good as an adverb, in *He doesn’t write good,* is not acceptable standard English because standard English uses *good* only as an adjective, the corresponding adverb being *well.* But *well* may be either adverb or adjective, as in *He writes well, He is well.*” (Krapp 31)

Thus, it is important to know when to use certain words as adverbs and when not to use certain words as adverbs. People who learn English as a second language would probably experience difficulty discerning when to use “well” as opposed to “good.” As a teacher, one may need to spend extra time helping students with problems such as this. Sometimes rules are not the answer to problems that arise in English. Memorization of when and where to use certain words, as cited in the example above, is sometimes the only way to make sure not to make a mistake. However, languages are very complex, and there are many “exceptions to the rule. One should always examine each grammatical situation with careful consideration, because each situation is unique.

Another problem one may face when using or teaching about adverbs is the simple addition of the morpheme -*ly* to nouns. “In one group of words, time words like *hourly, daily, monthly, yearly,* adverbs made from nouns with -*ly* are acceptable usage in Modern English…” (Krapp 33) How difficult it may seem to some people who are not native speakers of English, as well as native English speakers, to learn that *hour, month,* and *year* are nouns. Then they are told that these same words can be turned into adverbs with the suffix –*ly,* because if Jack runs in a marathon *yearly,* *yearly* tells how often he runs. These students may catch on to –*ly* adverbs and start using them often,
“but sometimes this is so awkward that it cannot be done. One cannot make an
adverb friendlily, and the only possibilities are circumlocution in a friendly
manner, or an adverb friendly.” (33) How does this relate to the ‘yearly’
discussion above?

So, are adverbs always used in a neat, concrete, specific way? Of course not, because the
English language has many ifs, ands, and buts. For example, the word bright is most
often used as an adjective. Yet, one can easily say, “His flashlight shone brightly,
because it has an L.E.D bulb.” Brightly modifies the verb shone. Shone is used as a verb
in the past tense in this sentence. Thus, brightly is an adverb which uses the added suffix
morpheme -ly. Also, if the morpheme –ly is added to a noun, an adjective is produced.
For example, the sentence, “He is manly,” proves this point. Manly describes the subject
he. What would happen if the morpheme –ly were added to beauty. Beauty would
become beautifully. For example, she arranged the flowers beautifully. Beautifully
describes how she arranged the flowers. Arranged is the verb thus making beautifully an
adverb.

Sentences can also include phrases that act just as single word adverbs do. For
example, one may say that “Tom ran the race without stopping.” In this sentence the
phrase, without stopping, acts as an adverb allowing the reader to know how Tom ran.
Phrases such as this help expand the reader’s knowledge of the action that has taken place
and quite possibly the character of the subject. One may infer that Tom is either in shape
or very stubborn. “Adverbs signal re-evaluation of the expressions on which they
operate, helping to ‘build’ logical form.” (McConnell-Ginet 144) Adverbs help enrich
the quality of sentences and provide the reader with a more vivid sense of understanding.
Announcers played a very important role especially before the era of the television. They painted a vivid picture of what most people would never be able to see in person. Therefore, they needed to announce the game with such words that made the listener imagine the event with ease. For example, Michael Jordan’s incredible shots could never have been announced well without adverbs. ‘Michael shoots an eighteen footer off balance.’ ‘Michael Jordan hits it powerfully at the foul-line against the Cavaliers.’ ‘Michael scores calmly.’

Announcers rely heavily on adverbs to help them tell the events of a game with more passion. If an announcer made the statement that “Michael Jordan shot” in a game and said nothing else, people would want to know how he shot. Did he shoot powerfully, off balance, quickly, playfully, commandingly or slowly? People want to know more than just the basics, especially when it comes to sports. Sadlly, sports can become a bigger part of many Americans’ lives than their own religion. Therefore, announcers must be somewhat competitive and describe the games that they announce with action words. Adverbs help to add power to verbs. Adjectives, prepositions, and articles are important to the English language, but they do not add the power to verbs that adverbs do.

Adverbs can also be used as clauses. For example, “When Pippen made the shot from half court, it was truly amazing.” When Pippen made the shot from half court is the adverbial clause. This clause modifies the verb was, because it tells when it was amazing. Another example is, “He arrived after you left.” (Klammer 419) In this

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Paraphrases from sports net websites. Cool…
sentence, the phrase *after you left* acts as an adverbial clause. *After you left* allows the reader to know when someone arrived. This is yet another of the seemingly endless ways that words can act in a way that fits the adverbial mold.

Adverbs are important, but they are also sometimes very confusing. The very basic uses of adverbs are easily discerned. Yet, when nouns function as adverbs, clauses act adverbially, and phrases take on adverbial positions, even the most proficient English speaker may become confused when questioned directly on the mechanics of speech. Obviously, then, people who speak English as a second language may get confused with the varying rules of English. Teachers in the United States are encountering more ESL (English as a Second Language) students. The Upstate of South Carolina is also increasingly becoming flooded with ESL students. Therefore, teachers need to take into consideration the complexity of the English language and the differences between English and other languages. Teachers may also need to become more familiar with foreign languages in order to help explain the English language in a more understandable way. Teachers should diagram sentences when teaching students about adverbs so that visual learners will be able to see how adverbs function. It would also be helpful if the teacher could diagram sentences in foreign languages if needed. Cool thought! Another way to teach adverbs is to take a sentence and cut out the words of the sentence so that the student can move the words around. Adverbs can often function in various parts of the sentence. Cutting the words out so that they are moveable would help satisfy the kinesthetic learners’ needs for tangible objects to help them learn. Nice. Just by looking at one part of speech, adverbs, one can see that the English language is obviously not made up of concrete rules. Teachers should explain clearly that many words, phrases,
and clauses can perform differently under different circumstances. One just has to be careful to make sure that he uses English in the way that he intends to use it, especially when teaching students.

Works Cited


