

A Semantic Analysis of Adverbial *Just* and Its Pragmatic Ambiguity Based on Scalar Restriction

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Abstract

The traditional treatment of the adverb *just* as polysemous is unsatisfactory, failing to account for the interrelations between the senses identified and their nature. This study offers a unified account of the semantic structure of *just* with reference to its function of scalar restriction, i.e., its single core sense is to restrict what it modifies to a minimal value on the related scale. Meticulous semantic analyses reveal that, through making pragmatic inference, one uses *just* in physical-social, epistemic, and speech act domains in sequence until it evolves into a pragmatic marker expressing politeness. In its semantic change, the “preciseness” meaning, from which the restrictive meaning derives, plays a key role because all the newer meanings are pragmatic interpretations of its minimal scalar restriction in contexts. The functional interpretation of *just* as a hedge is largely context-dependent, though its pragmatic ambiguity demonstrates clear indications of polysemy.

Keywords

Just, Semantic Structure, Scalar Restriction, Pragmatic Ambiguity, Hedge

1. Introduction

Polysemy, defined as a phenomenon in which one same and single word with a phonological form has multiple senses that are distinct from but related to each other (Cf. [Ravin & Leacock, 2002](#) *et passim*), has been a key concern in semantic studies, but controversies remain with regard to the categorical differences between meaning and sense, as well as the criteria used for distinguishing among senses of lexical entries. Great attention in earlier polysemy studies has been paid to nouns ([Levickij, Drebet, & Kiiko, 1999](#)), verbs ([Ibarretxe-Antunano, 1999](#)), ad-

jectives (Lapata, 2001) and prepositions (Rice, 1992), but the present study aims to provide fresh insights into the semantic structure of *just* as an adverb, along with its semantic properties and nature. Consider the following two examples (Cf. Lee, 1987, 1991; Kishner & Gibbs, 1996):

- 1) It happened just before midnight.
- 2) Q: Why don't you buy it?
A: I just don't like it.

According to Souter (2004), Aijmer (2002: pp. 153, 161-162), Lindemann & Mauranen (2001) and Beeching (2016: p. 88), *just* holds a rank of around No. 55 among the 100 most frequently used words by both adults and children in Britain, which is lower than that of *that's* but higher than that of *which*. *Just* is widely used in all types of discourse. One may refer to Hansen (1998), Aijmer (2005b), Grant (2011), and Wiegand (2018), among others, for detailed analyses of the syntax and semantics of *just*. They will see clearly that *just* has also been a hot topic in such research areas as historical linguistics, psycholinguistics, discourse analysis, hedge studies, to name a few.

Just is generally held to be polysemous, but according to Tottie (1986: p. 99), Lee (1991), and Aijmer (2002: p. 173, 2005a), it is multi-functional, and it is notoriously difficult to give a clear-cut distinction within its internal semantic structure. Specifically, its core meaning is hard to generalize, especially as used in oral discourses. After all, the polysemous accounts of *just* are controversial (Cf. Molina & Romano, 2012). Based on the related analyses now available and the problems identified so far, this study makes a brief survey of the diachronic development of the semantics of *just* and offers a scalar analysis model for it, while drawing on data from the corpus of BNC and making reference to Construction Grammar (CxG, Cf. Goldberg, 1995) for an evaluation of its semantic nature.

Regarding the BNC-based sampling, a total of 19,728 sentences involving use of adverbial *just* were randomly retrieved, with fifteen words on both sides of it kept in the retrieval. The multiple sources contained different portions, including "Spoken", "Fiction", "Magazine", "Newspaper", "Non-ACAE", "academic", and "MISC". For convenience of operation, the sampled data were randomly sampled three times manually, until finally 280 qualified instances were left. Upon careful comparison and analysis, it is found that the sampled data largely (i.e., around 84.5%) align with the traditional scheme of polysemy description of *just*, or the six types of sense of *just* to be discussed in Section 2.2, but a rather large portion (i.e., around 15.5%) of the instances call for a more reasonable and powerful semantic characterization. In fact, the present paper tries to offer a unified semantic account of all the 280 instances.

2. The Status Quo of the Semantic Analysis of *Just* and Some Major Problems Thereof

In this section, a survey of some representative semantic analyses of *just* is given, along with some key problems related to such analyses, and then, with considera-

tion of the historical development of its meaning, a working hypothesis is then put forward.

2.1. The Lexicographical Semantic Description of *Just*

The treatment of the semantics of *just* by *Colins Cobuild Advanced Dictionary of American English*¹ is a typical one. It distinguishes between an adjectival *just* and an adverbial *just*, without explicating their interrelation, and it lists 16 meaning items all in all, again without clearly defining the criteria used in the semantic differentiation. In fact, the differentiation is so vague that one finds overlaps between meaning items or even within the same meaning items, and unclear interrelations between some fixed expressions, when otherwise necessary contextual information is unavailable. For example, the meaning item 2 reads like “If you say that you **are just doing** something, you mean that you are doing it now and will finish it very soon. If you say that you **are just about to do** something, or **just going to do** it, you mean that you will do it very soon”. In addition, while the meaning items 3, 5, 6, 10 and 14 are all concerned with the emphatic function of *just*, no elaboration is made on the condition and manner of the performance of the function. Likewise, both the meaning items 11 and 12 are concerned with the usage of *just a minute/ moment*, both the meaning items 15 and 16 are concerned with the usage of *just about*, which is somehow tangled with the meaning item 2, and further, the elaborations in the meaning items 4, 7 and 8 shun the senses of *just* in themselves, only making reference to some possible interpretations of *just* in specific contexts. For instance, the meaning item 7 goes like “You can use **just** in front of a verb to indicate that the result of something is unfortunate or undesirable and is likely to make the situation worse rather than better”.

The lexicographical semantic description of *just*, therefore, fails to offer a definitive account of its semantic structure and features, with a confusion of its semantic and pragmatic qualities such that most of the meaning items are not mutually exclusive. The loose ends pose practical difficulties and challenges to language users when faced with uses of *just* in various contexts, for example, being unable to interpret or explicate the ambiguity in the following case:

3) He **just** threw a ball to me.²

The first meaning of *just* in the above example is associated with its adverbial function, stating that the throwing of the ball occurred a very short time before the sentence was produced. The second meaning is adverbial too, but it expresses an emphatic function, indicating that throwing the ball was the only action he performed. The intended meaning by the producer can be determined only through context.

¹Heinle ELT, 2007 (1st ed.), see examples from pp. 719-720.

²This is a made-up sentence by the author, but a similar utterance is found in BNC, i.e., “*I just threw the lot at her*” (<https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/>). Some examples in this paper are made up in this way in order to save space unless their references are explicitly given. Their idiomaticity is ensured by the author’s consulting a couple of native speakers of English.

2.2. The Theoretical Semantic Analysis of *Just*

Research findings now available, such as Cohen (1969), Quirk et al. (1972, 1985), Lee (1987, 1991), Kishner and Gibbs (1996), Lindemann and Mauranen (2001), Grant (2011), Duffley and Larrivée (2012), Molina and Romano (2012), and Beeching (2016), among others, virtually adopt or support the view of polysemy of *just*³, arguing for its syntactic and semantic variability, with major differences in terms of the types and quantity of the senses of *just*. In summary, the following six primary ones have been identified in the existing literature⁴, mainly in the works of Lee (1987) and Kishner and Gibbs (1996).

The depreciatory sense of *just* means that it is used to downplay or downtone certain events, acts, or situations, i.e., signaling they are minimally significant (Lee, 1987). The evaluation serves as an indication of the speaker's attitude or way of treatment, often in comparison with a certain criterion related to entities of the same type, but often not mentioned explicitly (Gibbs & Matlock, 2001). That is, as analyzed in this study, a reference object (R) is negated while a focus object (F) is affirmed. Generally speaking, the values or degrees that R and F correspond to, respectively, are known to both parties involved in communication, which are often presupposed and easily activated with some modality. Roughly, *just* in this sense equates to *merely* or *simply* (Cf. (4)). Further, the contrast between R and F makes up a continuum, except that sometimes the contrast is not explicit enough (e.g. 5; Cf. Lee, 1987, 1991; Kishner & Gibbs, 1996):

- 4) It's not serious—just a nuisance... (That one's just a cyst, not a lump yet).
- 5) Just close your eyes.

The restrictive sense of *just* (Lee, 1987; Wierzbicka, 1991) means that it is employed to restrict things, acts, or events in certain situations involved. Consider the following examples (Cf. Lee, 1987):

- 6) I just noticed it *when I am in the kitchen*.

In the utterance above, *just* does not semantically orientate or govern the subordinate clause, and the moment of "noticing it" is only restricted to the temporal point designated by the *when*-clause, while other possible temporal points are excluded. That is to say, the proposition of "*P* just when *Q*" and the implicated proposition of "*P* not just when *Q*" form a contrast. For that reason, the following sentence is unacceptable for its semantic self-contradiction (Cf. Lee, 1987):

- 7) *I just notice it when I'm in the kitchen, and I also notice it when I'm in the study.

³Lee (1987, 1991) argues for a couple of relatively discrete senses with overlapping peripheral areas, which, as proposed in the present study, are to be treated as different interpretations of the same single core sense derived from interactions in contexts. More details will be given in sections that follow.

⁴Other senses are identified, such as "intensificatory" (Cf. Lee 1991), "contrastive" (Cf. Kishner & Gibbs 1996), "agreement & politeness" (Cf. Molina & Romano 2012), etc. As text interpretations of a pragmatic nature, they are discussed in later sections.

Contrary to the depreciatory sense of *just*, the restrictive sense is functional in expressing conceptual or propositional meaning and thus is roughly the equivalent of *only* (Wiegand, 2016).

The specificatory or marginal sense of *just* means that it can be used to specify the concrete spatial-temporal positions of or relation between two adjacent events or physical entities, i.e., marginally close to the explicit boundary or periphery of a process or something. As is well known, spatial entities can metaphorically refer to temporal ones, meaning that F is maximally close to R while one boundary of F is unclear and the other boundary becomes clear because of R. Examples include (1) and the following (8) (Cf. Lee, 1987):

8) It gets itchy just under the eyebrows.

Typically, when used in the specificatory or marginal sense, *just* is followed by PP or adverbs of place, and it is often interpreted as equivalent to *immediately*, *right*, *barely*, *marginally*, or *fractionally* (also Cf. Lee, 1987, 1991; Kishner & Gibbs, 1996). Sometimes such an interpretation is possible in certain tensed aspectual expressions. For instance:

9) He'd/He's has just come out of hospital⁵.

The fourth type of sense of *just* is an emphatic one, which means that one can use *just* to highlight a specific part of a related semantic range so that a related concept stands out or becomes prominent (Cf. Lee, 1991: p. 57). *Just* used in this sense is often seen modifying or in collocation with expressions indicating strong emotions such as *so*, *infuriate*, *amaze*, *dazzle*, *terrorize*, *atrocious*, *at all*, and so on (ibid), or in certain contexts associated with negation. Roughly, *just* used in an emphatic sense is equal to *really*, as indicated in (10):

10) (It's just so hard to keep his balance.) He is just amazing/that's just impossible!

The fifth type of sense of *just* is a comparative one, often used in comparative constructions and frequently seen before *as* or *like*, performing a modifying function. The comparative *just* is semantically equivalent to *in the same way*. Consider the following two examples:

11) I love chocolate, just as you love pizza.

12) Susan is just like her sister.

The sixth type of sense of *just* identified is termed as "exact", meaning that the adverb is used to focus or lay stress on what introduces an embedded clause or the referent of *wh*-words or demonstrative pronouns such as *that* and *these*. In this case, *just* can be paraphrased as *exactly*. See the following example (13):

13) That's just what the doctor ordered.

⁵The English perfective aspect positions an event within a temporal interval before a reference point. In (9), the temporal reference points are clear, but the tenses are different.

2.3. Some Problems with the Semantic Description of *Just*

A major problem with the semantic categories identified above is that they often permeate each other and overlap in such a way that the categorical peripheries are not clear-cut, and, as a result, a large quantity of cross-categorical uses are found in our data (also Cf. Lee, 1987, 1991; Kishner & Gibbs, 1996). Due to the syntactic-semantic variability, the interpretation of *just* is found to be considerably dependent on contexts, especially on the interactions of it with other components that co-occur in the same utterance. For that reason, both Lee (1987, 1991) and Kishner and Gibbs (1996) admit that such a problem disproves or undermines the validity of the polysemy account of *just*. Therefore, as it is argued here, a cross-categorically oriented analysis can be more insightful. Different cross-categorical uses are discussed below.

2.3.1. Depreciatory vs. Specificatory/Marginal Sense

Brown & Levinson (1978: pp. 181-182) argue that *just* in (2) depreciates the significance of the content of the related proposition by weakening it to an extreme. Similarly, Lee (1987, 1991) holds that the primary semantic difference between the two uses of *just* in (1) and (2) is that *just* used in the former takes part in the expression of the propositional content of the sentence, while *just* used in the latter does not. Instead, it only functions as an orientation of what is expressed by the proposition to the role and attitude of the participant involved in communication. Therefore, the former performs the ideational function and the latter performs the interpersonal function in Halliday's terms. As such, the objective description⁶ and subjective expression of one's attitude or stance brought about by the use of *just* are often intertwined and thus difficult to distinguish, and, indeed, speech acts in social interactions are often subjective and the modal use of *just* can make an answer sound more polite, which helps to save or maintain a hearer's face. Consider the following mini-talk (Cf. Lee, 1991):

14) Doctor: Was there anything else?

Patient: Oh, I was just going to talk about my husband.

As indicated in the above example, the doctor wants to put an end to the talk, but the patient is surprised and says she is "on the edge" or at the moment of talking about her husband, which on the one hand indicates that *just* has a specificatory/marginal sense, but on the other hand can be interpreted as meaning that talking about her husband is not important at all (to the doctor and/or to herself). If *just* is understood in this depreciatory sense, the patient may imply that she is willing to cooperate and terminate their talk, or she is declining the doctor's request and suggests that she would rather go on with her talk about her husband.

⁶The semantic range (e.g., a temporal interval) that *just* is associated with has one end that is open and another end that is extremely close to R in the bordering area, so this boundary is clear. For example, in (1), the temporal end could be 23:59 PM, which is extremely close to "midnight". Similar interpretations can be made for (8). *Just* interpreted as carrying an explicit specificatory/marginal sense is often used under similar contextual conditions.

It is clear that both the depreciatory sense and the specificatory/marginal sense are associated with “restriction”, but *just* is often taken to carry the depreciatory sense when the speaker’s attitude or stance is alluded to.

2.3.2. Depreciatory vs. Emphatic Sense

The contrast between these two senses involves a striking difference in a speaker’s attitude and emotion when using *just*. Based on such a feature, Quirk et al. (1985: p. 584) argue for the polysemy treatment of *just*, with the only difference lying in such paralinguistic features as tones in the expression, and, sometimes, the semantic features of the co-occurring components. Lee (1991) also points out that the emphatic use of *just* is frequently accompanied by high-pitched tones, intense sound, fast and brief breath, as well as other expressions indicating strong emotions such as *at all*, *not a single*, *not a damn*, etc., and corresponding body language such as facial expressions and shrugging; if the tone is neutralized and mild, *just* is often taken as depreciatory. Since it is obviously a matter of degree, when the aforesaid features are missing, determining the meaning of *just* usually becomes a tricky task. See the following example:

15) He just *didn’t listen/wasn’t paying attention*.

There are quite a lot of cases where the semantic features of the co-occurring components of *just* may affect its interpretation, for example, when negating epistemic modals or root modals, or when expressions that strengthen or weaken emotions in such contexts are involved. Consider the following three examples (Cf. Lee, 1991):

16) He just *may not/won’t/can’t* have seen us.

17) He just won’t *lift a finger*.

18) He just can’t do it, *unfortunately/I’m afraid*.

According to Lee (1991), the speculative meaning in (16) becomes stronger and stronger one by one: when *just* is collocated with *may*, which has the least speculative force, it most probably carries the depreciatory sense; as *won’t* has a slightly stronger speculative force in comparison with *may*, and it already shows an affirmative color⁷, *just* used as a modifier of it is more likely to perform an emphatic or depreciatory function; when *just* collocates with *can’t*, which has the strongest speculative force, it most probably carries the so-called emphatic sense, especially when the speaker is refuting the assertion of its talking partner⁸. The underlined part in (17) indicates strong emotion, so *just* in it has an emphatic meaning; however, the underlined part in (18) weakens the expression of the speaker’s emotion, so the function of *just* in it is rather vague⁹. Therefore, it seems that the deprecia-

⁷This explains why the following sentence is self-contradictory: *‘‘She won’t have read it, though it’s just/also possible that she has’’.

⁸It can be depreciatory, of course, for instance, ‘‘He just can’t have seen us, that’s all’’.

⁹Similarly, if the predicate that co-occurs with *just* is not expressed with strong emotions, then *just* usually has no emphatic meaning. For example, *just* used in ‘‘He just annoyed everyone’’, ‘‘He just surprised us’’ and ‘‘He just makes us afraid’’ do not indicate emphatic function (Cf. Lee, 1991).

tory sense and the emphatic sense of *just* form a continuum in some cases, if not all, and its interpretation in specific contexts shows a gradience because it is conditioned by various contextual factors. Consequently, the semantic indeterminacy of *just* in language use is quite common.

2.3.3. Specificatory/Marginal vs. Emphatic Sense

A precondition for the determination of the specificatory sense of *just* is that one end of the related semantic range is open and therefore has a vague boundary, and the other end is immediately adjacent to R and therefore has an explicit boundary. Good examples are (1) and (8) given above. In (1), the temporal point immediately approaching the point of “midnight” (e.g., R) is clear (say, suppose it is 23:59 PM), and, in (8), the spatial point immediately adjacent to the physical boundary of the “eyebrow” is also explicit. In both cases, the notions of “midnight” and the “eyebrow” are definite with clear boundaries so that *just* indicates a point belonging to the marginal section. Therefore, any other points that do not belong to such a marginal section are excluded in a truth conditional sense in the interpretation of *just*. For instance, in (1), the temporal point of 23:58 PM or other points than 23:59 PM do not apply. However, in some cases, the notion of space and sections of space can form a continuum, and some spatial points on the continuum can apply in the interpretation of *just* in a truth conditional sense, with differences only in degree. Take the following example (19) (Cf. Lee, 1991):

19) The shop is just near the bank. Jo was standing just at the corner.

In the two uses of *just* in (19), in accordance with Lee (1991), the physical boundaries of the two entities, i.e., “the bank” and “the corner”, are clear and definite, but the adjacency to them makes up a continuum, and the notion has a feature of gradience. That is to say, the more F is adjacent to R, the more reasonable and acceptable the sentence becomes. Thus, all the points that are reasonably at the gradience are applicable or valid as candidates in the interpretation of *just* in the case in the truth-conditional sense. Such a gradual process implied by the gradience proves that *just* has an intensification sense (Cf. Lee, 1991)¹⁰, where the R end has a clear boundary. In contrast, the two ends of F and R, when the specificatory/marginal sense of *just* is involved, have clear boundaries, and the emphatic sense of *just* implies intensification, except that the two ends in this case do not have clear boundaries, which is observable in the uses of *amazing* and *impossible* in (10). Similar to the emphatic sense, the intensification sense of *just* highlights a prominent part of the features related in the continuum, but, in spite of the distinction made above in terms of bounding feature, cross-categorical uses of *just*

¹⁰Thus (12) also has some intensification color. Langacker (1987: 151) points out that *be like* is different from *resemble* and *similar to* in terms of bounding: the former does not set bounds and indefinitely approaches the R entity of “being perfectly equal”, while the latter two do, implying that a certain distance always remains from the R entity, which means that differences are obvious although there are similarities. Therefore, the utterance “Sue just *resembles* / *is just similar to* her mother” has no intensification color.

are still possible when a speaker conceptualizes a situation before he or she expresses himself or herself. Take the following example (Cf. Lee, 1987, 1991):

20) I was just about to leave.

Lee (1991) argues that the notion of “periphery” exists independently in the notion of “being about to leave”. Then, when it is taken as a reference point with a clear and definite boundary, *just* carries a static specificatory/marginal sense; however, if the situation is taken as a dynamic process in which “I” was approaching the temporal point of “leaving”, then *just* carries the intensification sense, but it carries the emphatic sense if prominence is given to the state of “being about to leave”. Therefore, it is obvious that the differences in the interpretation of *just* in the same sentence are the results of different construals (Cf. Langacker, 1987: pp. 63, 117). Additionally, the way of construal is subject to communicative situations involved and one’s encyclopedic knowledge. Take the following examples (Cf. Lee, 1991):

21) The ball landed just outside the line. vs The car stopped just outside the bank.

Construals in different epistemic domains (Cf. Langacker, 1987: pp. 63, 117) will lead one to different cognitions of the relative spatial positions of “the ball” and “the car” to “the line” and “the bank” respectively when one consults his or her encyclopedic knowledge about the specific entities. For that reason, the two *justs* as used in (21) demonstrate a contrast between the specificatory/marginal sense and the intensification sense, i.e., in the former sentence, *just* shows a stronger specificatory/marginal sense, while in the latter, the intensification sense is more remarkable.

2.3.4. Depreciatory vs. Restrictive Sense

The restrictive sense of *just* concerns an objective expression of propositional content itself, rather than the subjective expression of a speaker’s attitude or evaluation typical of the depreciatory sense. The example in (6) demonstrates that point, and consider another one here (Cf. Lee, 1991):

22) Just in one heel it lifted, but not its back in both.

It is noteworthy that the restrictive sense of *just* involves entailment, while the depreciatory sense is associated with contrast, in which entailment is unavailable or very hard to determine. For instance, the sentence in (6) entails the one in (23) (Cf. Lee, 1987):

23) I notice it when I am in the kitchen.

Let’s take a look at the interactions of *just* with negation and the related scopes in the following sentences before we proceed to offer an explanation of the difference and contrast implied in the aforementioned examples (also Cf. Lee, 1991):

24) I just didn’t speak.

25) I didn't just speak.

One can see clearly that in (24), the negation falls within the scope of *just*, in which case *just* is often taken to carry the depreciatory sense. However, in (25), by contrast, *just* is often understood to be restrictive in sense. Lee (1991) argues that it is a result of pragmatic influence, in that the situation is concerned with a contrast between R and F. Specifically, when F is governed by *just*, it calls for an understanding of the adverb as depreciatory or restrictive in sense, but negating a proposition, as a way of expression, can be employed to modulate the tone and weaken the depreciatory force because it is often used to refute a prior assertion or entailment made and makes itself an appropriate means of modalization. Nonetheless, when making a choice from many alternatives is involved, one often gives prominence to *just* in his or her expression of the restrictive sense, but ultimately its interpretation is dependent on various contextual factors rather than on the linguistic expression itself. The following example suffices to illustrate this point:

26) (A says that B didn't listen or speak, and B answers) No, that's untrue. I did listen carefully. I just didn't speak.

This way of negation achieves the same result as in the negation of "just VP" in (25), which is the restricted item. It is also not likely a case of negation of "just VP" in the depreciatory sense. Whether *just* is taken as carrying the depreciatory sense or the restrictive sense is ultimately determined by the interaction of *just* with negation and the relation of F to R. Importantly, the ways of construal made by the two parties in communication greatly affect the interpretation of *just*. For example, if an explicit R is missing, their interpretations are often different.

In summary, it is argued that the polysemy-based semantic account is essentially an analysis and description based on pragmatic functions in contexts such that the senses identified are closely interwoven and permeate each other. As a result, since the senses are not exclusive enough among themselves, the interpretation of *just* in utterances ultimately relies on the complex interactions among contextual factors. In fact, both Wierzbicka (1991: p. 350) and Aijmer (2005a) point out that Lee's (1987) classification of the senses is too elaborate and detailed to explicitly define the semantic nature of *just* as well as the internal differences and relations among the senses. Especially, the polysemy account fails to demarcate the semantic and pragmatic similarities and dissimilarities between *just* and its synonyms or semantic equivalents such as *merely*, *only*, and *simply*, etc. Lee (1987, 1991) himself is well aware of the limitations of his polysemy account and admits that a semantic account with more descriptive and explanative power and higher operability is called for.

2.4. The Semantic Evolution Path of *Just* and Its Implications for the Semantic Description

Traugott (1989) argues that one needs to examine the lexical semantic develop-

ment so as to ascertain the evolutionary path and the general trend of the change if they intend to achieve the internal reconstruction of the lexical meaning and account for polysemy. In accordance with the findings of Cohen (1969), Traugott (1988, 1990), Nevalainen (1991), Preston (1993a, 1993b), Molina & Romano (2012), and Beeching (2017), *just* originated from a Latin adjective meaning “righteous, fair, legitimate, equitable” and was borrowed into English via French in the later period of the 14th century at the latest. The archaic meaning is in use even today. No later than the year 1391 did the sense of “precise” appear, and very naturally the corresponding adverbial use of *just* came out while the semantic extension was in progress, i.e., “precisely, exactly”, along with the use of *just* as an adverbial of manner, meaning “justly, honourably”, which as a critical usage helps change *just* into a scalar particle ultimately. It should be noted that *just* used in this sense has a synonym “right” which can mean “clarification”, which in turn well matches “precisely”. As a scalar particle, *just* is used to give prominence to F, and meanwhile it associates as a particularizer with the values of other choices at the same related scale (Cf. Traugott, 1988: p. 131). It is generally held that the sense of “precise(ness)” is a critical point along the semantic evolution path from which other senses or interpretations of *just* extend in various directions.

According to Nevalainen (1991: pp. 151-155) and Preston (1993a, 1993b), at the beginning of the 15th century, *just* developed the specificatory/marginal sense used for expressing positional precision in measurement, which derived from the sense of “exactly, precisely” and became prevalent in use in Early Modern English (EME). Till the later period of the 16th century, the specificatory/marginal sense extended into the temporal domain. Specifically, *just* was used to perform the absolute temporal function in the middle of the 17th century, i.e., it modified F at the moment of speaking (e.g., *She left just then*); and then later it could modify a nearest future temporal point (e.g., *She’s just leaving*), and even later it could be used to modify a nearest past temporal point (e.g., *She just left*). In such a way, *just* experienced a change from directly modifying a temporal NP to modifying a VP, thereby becoming closely associated with tense and aspect. It is noteworthy that such a semantic extension of the specificatory/marginal sense from the spatial domain to the temporal domain and the subsequent evolution related to temporal references are all reflections of human construals and subjective treatment, representing a subjectified process of making objective expressions of the real world and subjective expressions of the unreal world. For that reason, Traugott (1988: p. 134) argues that *just* is gradually merged with the speaker’s subjectivity in his or her expression of propositional content and thus ultimately is no longer used to indicate precision of measurement. Understandably, the uses of *just* in the depreciatory sense and other uses indicating temporal points in the future or the past are no later than its use as a scalar particle.

The investigations made by Nevalainen and Preston reveal that the restrictive sense of *just* appeared in the late period of the 17th century when both the older and later usages were available side by side. The exclusive sense of *just* (i.e., *exclu-*

sively) did not emerge until the end of the 17th century. Meanwhile, uses of *just* based on its pragmatic functions and the subjectified expressions became even more prevalent and more and more mature until, in the early period and later period of the 18th century, increasingly subjective use and downtoning use of *just* came into existence respectively, the former being equivalent to *really/simply* and the latter being synonymous with *merely*. It is important to note that, while other senses or functions of *just* kept coming out sporadically in history, such as the sense of “indeed” that appeared in the 16th century and the intensification sense in the 18th century became even stronger so that *just* came to perform an emphatic function, the general trend is that in English in the later period of the 19th century and Modern English, *just* gradually lost its semantic content and ultimately came to be used as a pragmatic marker functioning as a mitigator or minimizer to achieve politeness. To summarize the major findings of the aforementioned studies, the semantic evolution path of *just* can be shown in the following chart (Cf. Preston, 1993a, 1993b):

From such a chart (Figure 1), one can easily spot that the “preciseness” sense of *just* is a key point and condition in its semantic evolution because it is from such a point that the adverbial use of the word, i.e. “precisely/exactly”, is possible, from which, in turn, semantic extension in various directions occurs. Specifically, along with the semantic change within the social-physical domain, usages in epistemic domain develop in which the subjectified extension proceeds along two routes, i.e. showing prominence and demonstrating depreciation. Ultimately, the former usage develops into an adverb indicating emphatic function, while the latter usage changes into a pragmatic marker functioning in the speech-act domain as a diminisher and mitigator for politeness purposes. Roughly, the semantic structure of *just* appears to be central-radial, while the semantic evolution path shows apparent linearity. Such a changing process matches the trend description made by Preston (1993a, 1993b) and conforms to the pattern of lexical semantic change proposed by Traugott (1989), which follows a universal functional order of “Propositional > Textual > Expressive”. Traugott points out that lexical meaning evolves in a linear way in three conceptual domains, and that is, a word, such as *because*, is used to make an objective description of the world, as a propositional expression, in the social-physical domain, and then it is further used in epistemic domain within a text to indicate a speaker’s cognition or evaluation of the propositional content, and then further it is used to show the speaker’s evaluation and treatment of his or her own speech act in the speech-act domain. In addition, the subjectified expression is effected through making pragmatic inference, which is conditioned by communicative information and the principle of intensification of pragmatic relevance¹¹.

¹¹See the uses of *because* in three domains: 1) “She is wet because she fell into the pond.” (in the social-physical domain where *because* can be interpreted as *with the cause being that...*); 2) “She fell into the pond because she is wet.” (in the epistemic domain where one subjectively speculates on the cause-effect relation); 3) “Are you free today, because there is a movie tonight.” (in the speech-act domain where one explains why he or she conducts the speech act involved). Cf. Sweetser (1990: pp. 11, 69, 76-78).

FROM ADJECTIVAL “JUST” TO ADVERBIAL “JUST”

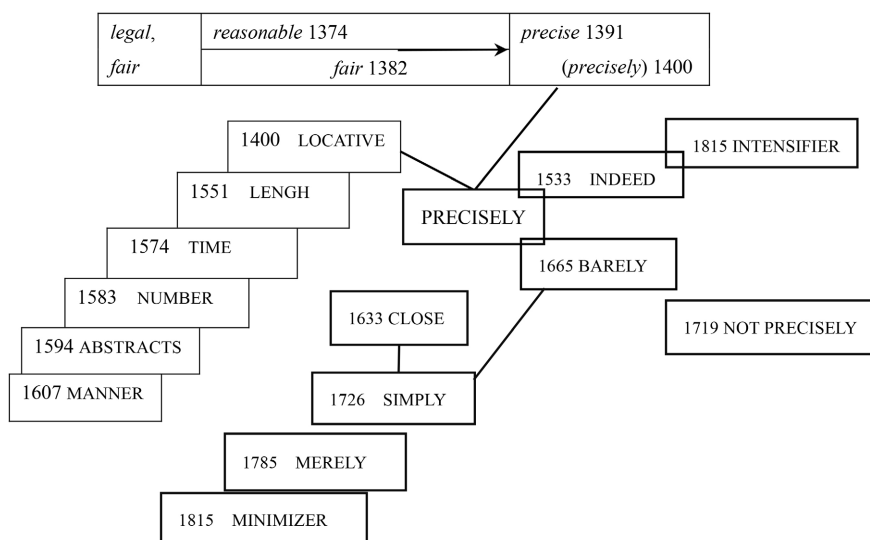


Figure 1. The semantic evolution of *just*.

2.5. The Working Hypothesis of the Present Study

Lee (1991) speculates that, probably, *just* is relatively semantically homogeneous and therefore should be treated in a unified way. Similarly, Aijmer (2002: p. 173) treats *just* as a metalinguistic operator which provides guidance for interpreting certain linguistic signs. In the same way, Wierzbicka (1991: p. 350) argues for using a highly abstract generalized form for its semantic structure description¹². Traugott (1989) points out that polysemy has fuzzy sets as its structural feature and dynamic flexibility based on prototypical sense, based on which, as a semantic core, various new senses are derived so as to flexibly meet the demands of communicative contexts. Importantly, Traugott (1988, 1989, 1990), Nevalainen (1991), Molina and Romano (2012), and Duffley and Larrivé (2012) all refer to scalarity for analyzing the semantics of *just*, and they believe that *just* in collocation with many syntactic components, such as *any*, usually leads to scalar interpretations. Such a belief is in accordance with the function of modulation proposed by Lee (1987). Based on those considerations, it is hypothesized in this study that *just*, though having quite a lot of different meanings derived and extending in various directions through making pragmatic inference¹³ ever since the meaning of “precisely” came out, has only one core sense; that is, it prescribes a restriction to a feature of a certain scale or to the minimal value of a certain scalar system and functions as a scalar restrictor. The scalar feature involved or activated is conditioned by context, and the interpretations of the same core sense of *just* used in

¹²Wierzbicka generalizes the semantic content of *just* into the following three components: 1) nothing else (=not something other than this); 2) this is not much; 3) one could think: it is (would be) more. The working hypothesis accords with her argument in spirit.

¹³This is an embodiment of the subjectification mechanism and the principle of making invited inferences for semantic evolution advanced by Traugott & Dasher (2002: pp. 1, 34-40).

the three domains can differ greatly due to different pragmatic functions.

3. Fuzziness in Language Use and Modulation of Scalar Restriction

In what follows, an analysis of the scalar semantic features of *just* is conducted from such perspectives as semantic fuzziness, pragmatic slack or looseness, discourse relevance, and constructional features of semantic interpretation.

3.1. Fuzziness in Knowledge Representation and Semantic Expression

Most, if not all, cognitive linguists hold that semantic fuzziness is one of the fundamental features of language use. Based on their embodied cognition and through their cognitive processes, human beings are able to know the world and express it with language. Determined by reality, on the one hand, human cognition determines language use; on the other hand, as a tool for and result of cognition, language use reflects cognition. Understandably, therefore, as conditioned by their own organs and faculties, human beings' cognition of the world is always fuzzy, and, therefore, their use of language for expressing the world can hardly be absolutely precise. For example, the same modifier "red" in "red apple" and "red hair" may in fact refer to different colors. The semantic underspecification of this sort (cf. Blutner, 2002) is a universal feature across language uses. As is well known, language users are always making choices and maintaining balance between achieving communicative efficiency and maintaining economy of language in using language. Likewise, in using language and expressing themselves, they are always trying to keep a good balance between being precise enough and being fuzzy enough. The Gricean Cooperative Principle with the four Maxims, especially the Maxim of Quantity, is a reflection or illustration of this law. Significantly, both decoding and encoding of semantically precise and/or fuzzy expressions are primarily dependent upon the purpose and demands of communication, and means of making modification are necessary if language users want to increase the degree of precision in their expressions.

3.2. Pragmatic Slack/Looseness and Discourse Relevance

Gatewood (1983) argues that talking loosely is a universal feature of human communication. Sperber and Wilson (1986) point out that due to semantic fuzziness, literal talk, loose talk, and metaphoric expressions are identical in nature and in ways of interpretation, with differences only in degree of looseness. Additionally, the looseness of human talk is pragmatic and non-truth-conditional in essence, which implies that people's utterances do not necessarily follow the social convention of being literally true, and utterance interpretation cannot be absolutely accurate and true in every way to the propositional content of the utterances and the speaker's intent, but only stays, at most, maximally close to them. Based on such an understanding, Lasersohn (1999) proposes that pragmatic slack or loose-

ness¹⁴ be used to account for the differences in people's cooperation under specific contextual conditions. He further argues that both expression and interpretation are simply close to truth (value) to certain degrees, and the semantic differences in utterances often do not lie in truth conditions, but rather in how much pragmatic looseness they allow. That means how much they are allowed by contexts to be deviated from truth without being misinterpreted. To effect correct interpretation, people will make use of encyclopedic knowledge they possess and all sorts of real-time non-verbal communication factors in their mental process of interpreting, such as body language and tones, etc. Normally, both parties in communication can tolerate or ignore unimportant fuzzy information in their language use if pragmatic conditions are satisfied, especially discourse relevance. Take the following examples (Cf. Lasersohn, 1999: pp. 522-523):

27) Mary arrived at (exactly) three o'clock.

28) (All)/The townspeople are asleep.

Due to the semantic contribution of *exactly*, the relevant meanings both encoded and decoded by utterance (27) can be any other temporal point than "three o'clock sharp", and the point is extremely close to the latter temporal point. The use of *all* in (28) performs a similar function and achieves similar effects. Utterance (28) without the use of *all* normally is interpreted as already containing the concept of *all*¹⁵; however, whether or not "the whole of the townspeople" are asleep does not affect the communication in significant ways only if the utterance meets the contextual requirements. Whether what is encoded in or decoded from the utterance should be an absolute "whole without any exception" or not varies across contexts (Cf. Lasersohn, 1999: p. 525). Lasersohn then points out that language users make use of certain linguistic means or forms to modulate or regulate the information transferred in their utterances so as to decrease or reduce pragmatic looseness. Such slack regulators as *exactly* and *all* indicate the amount of pragmatic looseness contained in the utterances. They are targeted at the so-called pragmatic "halos" and thus can make the expressions more precise. It is here argued that *just* is another slack regulator that falls within the category Lasersohn discusses.

3.3. Constructional Features of Semantic Interpretation

Normally, there is a core sense lying at the center of the lexical semantic structure from which other related senses derive in different contexts. However, such a tra-

¹⁴Lasersohn metaphorically terms this fundamental feature as "halos" and argues that language users use such regulators to regulate the degree of precision of linguistic expressions, which is just like focusing in photography. "Halos" can be taken as features or degrees of (expressions') deviation from truth or facts.

¹⁵Without all, (28) may mean to both the speaker and hearer that "more-or-less all of the townspeople are asleep". A comparison of the two utterance versions can reveal the differences in such a universal reference: a. "Although the townspeople are asleep, some of them are awake" vs. b. "Although more-or-less the townspeople are asleep, some of them are awake" (Cf. Lasersohn 1999: 523).

ditional definition is highly controversial in terms of the criterion used in sense differentiation, the nature of and the interrelations between the senses differentiated, the mechanisms of semantic derivation, etc. A notoriously difficult case in defining polysemy is related to *over*, a single word that has a complex lexical categorial status. Obviously, new ways of analyzing lexical semantics related to polysemy as traditionally defined are necessary (Cf. [Blutner, 2002](#); [Nerlich & Clarke, 2003](#)). In fact, quite a lot of so-called polysemous cases identified mainly under the influence of the thought of semantic compositionality (Cf. [Pelletier, 1994](#)) are not genuinely polysemous when viewed from a Construction Grammar perspective. Consider the following cases (Cf. [Pustejovsky, 1993](#)):

- 29) a) a fast car: (ambiguous) a car driven quickly/one that is inherently fast.
- b) a fast typist: the person performs the act of typing quickly.
- c) a fast waltz: the motion of the dance is quick.
- d) a fast book: one that can be read in a short time.
- e) a fast reader: one who reads quickly.

[Pustejovsky \(1993\)](#) distinguishes at least three senses of *fast*, arguing that the interpretation of the word is ultimately dependent on the context in which it is used:

- 30) a) to move quickly;
- b) to perform some act quickly;
- c) to do something that takes little time.

It is arguable that *fast* used in all the cases in (29) has only one prototypical sense, i.e., put simply, “(NP) moving at high speed”. Based on metonymical thinking and expression and frame semantics-related knowledge, one can use the “Art_{def.} + Adj. + NP” construction in a wide variety of ways. So, the three senses identified in (30) are actually different pragmatic interpretations of the same core sense in contexts. Specifically, the prototypical NP in the phrasal construction relates to an action or a process. And based on the prototypical use of the construction, one forms a mental schema in its mind along with a frame semantics system that relates to and matches the schema. In using the construction to express the same event semantics, a certain part involved in the related event catches one’s most attention and is given prominence in linguistic expression, encoded by the NP. Using any NP related in expression will activate one’s event semantics knowledge, and the degree of difficulty of the activation is largely dependent on how far the NP in question is from the prototypical NP in one’s mind and how familiar he or she is with such knowledge. Anyway, the activation of the same event semantics is metonymical in nature. When a non-prototypical NP is used, a hearer usually needs to resort to making invited pragmatic inference in interpreting the meaning of *fast*. In this sense, *fast* can be semantically underspecified when modifying certain types of NP in the construction¹⁶. The specific interpretations

¹⁶Similar cases are found in *a fast clock*, *fast food*, etc., but not in *fast colors*, *fast friends*, *a fast life*, etc.

of a lexical item in a phrasal construction are results of constructional coercion, which does not lend support to the polysemous claim that different senses exist and affect the meaning construction in different collocates. Such a feature of constructional coercion is also seen in sentential constructions¹⁷ (Cf. Goldberg, 1995: p. 9). Nonetheless, Pustejovsky (1993) admits that the subtle differences between the senses identified basically are not independent of each other, but rather, they overlap and permeate each other and closely interact with each other. This viewpoint coincides with the spirit of Sperber and Wilson (1986) on loose talk. In light of what has been discovered and discussed so far, a unified account of the semantics of *just* is made.

4. An Analysis of the Scalar Semantics of *Just* and Its Pragmatic Functions

Since the semantic account of the classical category style has shortcomings, I try to make a unified analysis of the sense of *just* from the perspective of its scalar semantic features.

4.1. Scalar Structure and the Regulatory Mechanism of *Just*

Scalar structures represent human beings' cognition and abstraction of degrees of qualities that things or entities possess, such as big vs small, far vs near, tall vs short, fat vs thin, heavy vs light, etc. They are diverse and various, and universal across language use as well, functioning as presupposition for language use and relating to both entailment and implicature of utterances. Lexical items and utterances in discourses are often associated with and/or trigger language users' concepts and knowledge about certain scalars, thus forming or activating corresponding image schemas (Cf. Fauconnier, 1975; Israel, 2001; Kennedy & McNally, 2005; Beavers, 2007; Katsos & Cummins, 2012). Additionally, both Lee (1987, 1991) and Duffley and Larrivé (2012) refer to interactions of scalar restriction between the senses of *just*, and Duffley and Larrivé even propose that *just* has a unified semantic representation of "goodness of fit". Similarly, Coppock and Beaver (2014) treat exclusives like *just* as scalars and Fauconnier (1975) analyzes *any* as a pragmatic scalar trigger. It is argued in this study that *just*, like *any* in many ways, functions as a regulatory restrictor and regulates the scalar features or information amount related by restricting them to a minimal value range, thus reducing the pragmatic looseness. What is regulated varies according to what *just* modifies. Except for it being used as a discourse marker, as our corpus data reveal, *just* mainly modifies AP, NP, PP, VP, and clauses introduced by conjunctions, and it is not much conditioned in terms of tense or aspect. It is found in our BNC-based data

¹⁷For example, neither *cry* nor *sneeze* carries the sense of making a transfer or causing motion, but they can enter into the Double Object Construction ("*Cry me a river.*") and Caused Motion Construction ("*He sneezed a napkin off the table.*") respectively. Their specific interpretations are coerced and made possible by the syntactic constructions they are used in because the constructions have overriding meanings (Cf. Goldberg 1995: 9).

analysis that, as a general rule, *just* holds a syntactic position that is almost always immediately to the left of the head it modifies¹⁸.

Take some gradable adjectives as examples (see Kennedy & McNally (2005) for detailed discussion). Quite a lot of semantically related adjectives are distributed on a scale according to their differences in grade, each pair of two of them forming a contrast, e.g., “He’s not *funny*, he’s *hilarious*”. Now I use an arrowed line section to illustrate the scalar modulation function of *just* on a scale or continuum of quality (cf. Lee, 1987, 1991; also Laparle, 2016):

- 31) a) He is good.
 b) He is just good.
 c) No, he is not (just) good, he is fantastic.

Let’s suppose the value 0 means “mediocre”, and on its right, the one part of the scale as a whole is termed or conceptualized as “goodness”, and by contrast, the other part of the scale that stands to the left of the value 0 is “badness”. A group of semantically related adjectives are distributed along the line with two arrows in opposite directions, and they make up a scale like the next (Cf. Laparle & Truswell, 2018; Laparle, 2016: p. 20):

In (31), *good* in utterance a is open-ended rightward, and the concept of “goodness” has no boundary or upper limit, which means it includes various grades and causes semantic fuzziness and pragmatic looseness. However, in utterance b, the speaker uses *just* to restrict the related value of “goodness” to the minimal one on the scale, i.e., a specific mini section immediately adjacent to the point of 0, whose boundary overlaps with that of the adjacent concept of “great” (as indicated in Figure 2, and note that the boundary between two adjacent concepts is usually vague), indicating the minimal value of the scalar concept of “goodness”. Narrowing the range of a concept like that is the so-called scalar restriction or regulation of pragmatic looseness, which helps maintain optimal relevance (Cf. Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Importantly, utterance c indicates that on the part of the scale rightward, there are multiple other grades (represented by different adjectives) whose values make up contrasts with the specific value of “just good”, such as *fabulous*, *amazing*, *stellar*, *perfect*¹⁹, etc. The concept of “badness” to the right of the point of 0, as a reverse mirror image of the concept of “goodness”, can be treated likewise.

¹⁸The author obtained 124,905 hits for JUST in BNC and found the three items with the highest frequency of use, respectively, in each of the six types of syntactic elements following JUST as follows: 1) Article (unique 4, Total: 12,132): *a/an* (65.5%); *the* (34%); *every* (0.06%); 2) Adjective (unique 1177, Total: 3892): *right* (4.75%); *plain* (3.24%); *short* (2.47%); 3) Preposition (unique 70, Total: 12,210): *like* (15.46%); *before* (11.81%); *for* (11.47%); 4) Conjunction (unique 31, Total: 8,564): *as* (50.62%); *because* (12.39%); *that* (11.62%); 5) Verb (unique 3839, Total: 50,582): *do* (2.83%); *have* (2.73%); *been* (2.38%); 6) ADV-Wh (unique 6, Total: 395): *how* (74.43%); *why* (15.95%); *where* (5.57%).

¹⁹Such contrasts can involve type differences. As lexical items are typical conceptual entities, a single word can relate to various features and thus pertain to different scales. It forms parts of continua along with other words of different types. For example, *funny* may contrast with *hilarious* on the scale of “funniness” or with *witty* on the scale of “cleverness”.

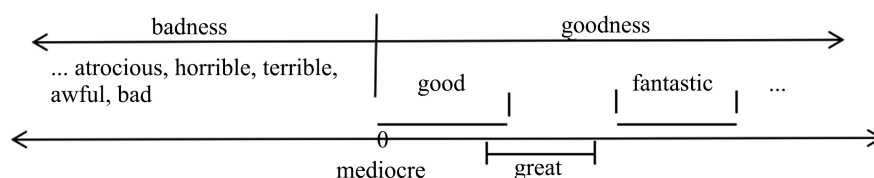


Figure 2. The scalar regulation of *just* on the scale or continuum of quality.

4.2. The Objective Regulation of Scale by *Just*: Exact, Specificatory, Restrictive, and Exclusive

One's knowledge on scales is activated by relevant language use in contexts. As discussed, the "exact", "specificatory", "restrictive", and "exclusive" meanings or functions of *just* all derive from the meaning of "precisely" through one's making invited pragmatic inferences. It is well understood that one naturally associates "precision" with "specification" and "exactness" of value on a scale, which again naturally connects to "restriction to a minimal value", which in turn stimulates an association with "exclusion of other values on scale". All the meanings are related to the objective description of things (Cf. Molina & Romano, 2012; Traugott, 1988: p. 139)²⁰. Utterance (8) is an example that shows how *just* regulates a feature value on a spatial scale. In (8), the facial part that starts downward from the "eyebrow" as a reference point forms a range that functions as an open scale of spatial length, on which the "itchy" point is immediately next to the reference point on the same scale. Thus, the use of *just* places a restriction on a minimal value. The close associations and entailments between "exact", "restrictive", and "exclusive" meanings of *just* can be seen in (6) and (7). More detailed discussion on the "exclusive" meaning can be found in Coppock and Beaver (2014) and Wiegand (2018)²¹. It is noteworthy that the unexplanatory sense²² of *just* identified by Wiegand again is in nature a kind of pragmatic-functional interpretation of the core sense of *just* in a specific context. It shows that one's mental construction of a scale in communication is a highly subjective process, in that the speaker can use *just* to modify F only if he or she thinks that there is an R that is associated with F and meanwhile forms a contrast with it. Consider the following three examples (Cf. Laparle, 2016:

²⁰Both Brown & Levinson (1978: 182) and Lee (1987, 1991) point out that *just* has "restriction" as its core sense or function. Quirk et al. (1972: pp. 431, 434, 505) classify *just* as a "restrictive adjunct", which has two usages: "depreciatory" and "restriction".

²¹Consider "Just do it". The speaker restricts the hearer's act to "do it" only and excludes all the possibilities of doing other acts, or excludes all other possible sub-events before and after "do it" on the same scale (of a timeline). The "exclusive" sense of *just* is not directly related to spatial-temporal scalar regulation, but it can be viewed as a conceptual space-like scale on which F and R are two entities. The regulation shifts F to somewhere close to the extremity formed by R. This helps explain the "comparative" sense identified by Kishner & Gibbs (1996), e.g., "Tim handed in his paper *just* as the bell struck noon" (Cf. (11) & (12)).

²²For instance, "I was sitting there and the lamp just broke" can be taken to mean that the speaker implies that, among a scale of alternative possible explanations, he or she cannot offer any other explanation but only knows the fact that happened before his or her eyes. Quirk et al. (1972: pp. 431, 483, 505) hold that *just* in (1) has a temporal feature and classify the *just*s used in "Just go there" and "You can get a B grade just for that answer" as restrictive. Their viewpoint is fundamentally the same. Note that Quirk et al. (1985: pp. 604-605) later classify the second *just* as an exclusive, which is a subcategory of the restrictive sense.

pp. 22-24):

32) A: I think Tom is just perfect.

B: Just perfect?

A: Okay, he is incredible, amazing, gorgeous, my one true love.

33) Tim is just witty.

34) Oh, Mary is just asleep. She isn't dead or anything²³.

In the mini-talk in (32), speaker B thinks that A's use of "perfect" is not appropriate enough for describing its comment and feeling on Tom, or summing up the good qualities of Tom. Utterance (33) involves ambiguity in that a possible interpretation is that the speaker may think Tom's being witty as a quality is not enough according to a certain criterion or standard. Perhaps, he or she thinks that Tom should possess other important qualities. In (34), the speaker does not think any other more serious condition is involved on the scale of "degree of seriousness", such as "dead".

Temporal expressions are metaphorical expressions of spatial expressions (Lakoff & Turner, 1989: pp. 99-100; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999: pp. 30, 139-140). The one-dimensionality of time connects the past, current moment of speaking, and future, which form a continuum or scale, which is closely related to one's encyclopedic knowledge. Some modifiers, such as *soon* and *recently*, can be used to modify features related to temporal duration or point (Cf. Beavers, 2007). Similarly, *just* can be employed to regulate the temporal positioning or duration of events. Moens and Steedman (1988) argue that an event may be decomposed into three parts: preparatory process, consequent state, and culmination. And culmination is a punctual point of instantaneous change between the other two parts, indicating the completion of the core sub-event. Both preparatory process and consequent state consist of various sub-events that are all associated with culmination, and they as a whole are a part of a language user's encyclopedic knowledge. Therefore, in virtue of metonymy, one's speaking of any of the sub-events can activate its hearer's knowledge about other related sub-events. The modification of VP by *just* follows one and single mechanism, with differences in the object of reference. For example, completing an MA thesis consists of a series of sub-events whose temporal continuum forms a scale, as shown below (Cf. (9); Lapparle & Truswell, 2018; Lapparle, 2016: p. 27) (Figure 3):

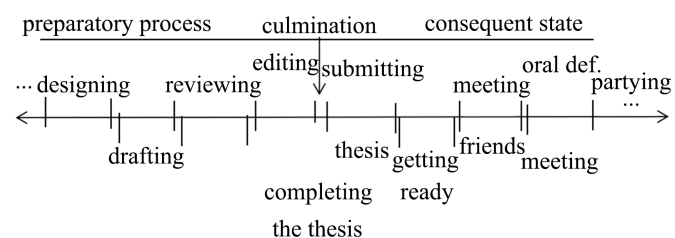


Figure 3. The scale (knowledge) related to completing an MA thesis.

²³Such a feature of *just* makes it possible for some complementary adjectives to be modified by gradable adverbs, e.g. (Are you sure he isn't *just* unconscious?) "Yeah, he is *very* dead".

- 35) a) Tim has just finished his paper.
 b) Tim has/had just finished his paper.
 c) Tim is just about to finish his paper.
 d) Tim is just finishing his paper. (Then he will meet us at the bar.)

In utterance a of (35), R as a temporal point is the present moment of speaking somewhere on the scale to the right of the point X. When modified by *just*, the focused temporal point is regulated and shifted to somewhere to the left of and maximally adjacent to X, making prominent the most recent completion of the action. The same interpretation can be made of utterance b, the only difference being that R is a temporal point somewhere in the past. Similarly, R in utterance c is the present moment of speaking somewhere on the scale to the left of the point X. When modified by *just*, the focused temporal point is regulated and shifted to somewhere to the right of and maximally adjacent to X, making prominent the most recent beginning of the action. Similar to the case of utterance c, in utterance d, the durative temporal interval indicated by the progressive aspect is approaching the culmination point on the right very soon, but *just* as a modifier restricts it to the starting point of the interval.

4.3. The Subjective Regulation of Scale by *Just*: Intensification, Emphatic, Depreciatory, Mitigating and Minimizing

Language use is naturally and necessarily subjective, and the use of *just* can easily affect subjectification of utterance making (Cf. (32) - (34)). Such an effect is achieved through integrating into expressions a speaker's construal, attitude, evaluation, feeling, and emotion, etc. because uttering the word *just* is accompanied by phonological, facial, and other paralinguistic features. The critical condition to be satisfied for such an effect is the possibility of making an invited inference based on the restrictive sense of *just*. For example, the restrictive and exclusive functions naturally lead to the prominence of certain features in their extensions in different directions: through making an invited inference, one naturally connects feature prominence with intensification, laying emphasis, and depreciation (of others), the major pragmatic functions that all involve an increase in pitch and tone strengthening. In addition, restricting to a minimal value is easily associated with self-depreciation and mitigation, which are often accompanied by low pitch, slurring or swallowing syllables, or words not fully pronounced. Clearly, the matchup between such phonological phenomena and a speaker's emotional attitude is a manifestation of linguistic iconicity. With the constant loss of its semantic content, the mitigating function of *just* ultimately evolves into a pragmatic marker that a speaker uses to evaluate his or her own speech act. When one restricts to a minimal value with the use of *just*, he or she is extending metaphorically the function to one that means "extremely trivial or unimportant", indicating that the speech act itself is nothing important at all. In that way, as its semantic content has practically been lost and the tone is minimized, *just* sounds like a mouth filler and makes the speech sound more polite, especially when self-depreciation is

made by the speaker²⁴. However, Wierzbicka (1991: pp. 350-351) argues that the term “depreciatory” is misleading because the evaluation is not always depreciatory: in some cases *just* can indicate intimacy, sweetness, comfort, self-defense, regret, or compliment, so on and so forth (Cf. Traugott, 1988: p. 131). Consider the following utterance:

36) Let’s have dinner together—just the two of us.

Wierzbicka holds that the use of *just* in (36) shows a warm and sweet tone. Likewise, the semantic interpretations of subjectified uses of *just* are so subtle and complicated that they are largely context-dependent. On the one hand, *just* is associated with certain contextual backgrounds and scales, but, on the other hand, a subjective color can be attributed to such a use (Cf. (4)). Nevertheless, all the interpretations in contexts are ultimately based on its core sense: the restriction to the scalar minimal value is related to the concept of “smallness”, which in itself is an objective description, but how such “smallness” is valued, whether as good or bad, is largely a result of subjectification and social conventionalization²⁵. Therefore, parties involved in communicative interactions can make interpretations of the same utterance that are different from or even opposite to each other, rendering *just* functional in serving various pragmatic purposes. The unexplanatory sense of *just* mentioned earlier, for instance, is associated with a scale of “being able to offer more possible explanations”, and *just* is often used to indicate that a speaker can only offer a minimal amount of information, often with a strong emphatic tone. For example (Laparle, 2016: pp. 36, 37):

37) a) The museum is *just* closing. No one knows why.

b) (Just be careful...) He is *just* dead. What else do you want me to tell you?

However, using *just* can also mean that a hearer is not allowed to make his or her own choice, or ask any further questions or make requests, which makes the utterance sound simple and crude. This is clearly perceivable in (37)b and imperatives like (5).

4.4. The Constructional Features in the Use of *Just*

Although interpreting the core sense of *just* is a highly complex and flexible process with dynamics that are very much dependent on context, it can be relatively concrete and stable when *just* is used in specific syntactic constructions coupled

²⁴For instance, in utterance “I just want to tell you that I just meant to just say that I didn’t mean to offend you”, *just* indicates that the speaker’s motive is pure and simple. Quirk et al. (1985: 598) term it as “attitude diminisher”. It is a use that takes place in the speech-act domain, indicating that on the scale of “importance”, a speaker restricts the importance of his or her own speech act to an extreme (or minimal) value. For that reason, *just* is often found to be followed by other hedges such as *sort of* (also Cf. Lee 1987).

²⁵For instance, *only* indicates an objective restriction and exclusion of range, without any implication of one’s evaluation of the amount involved, but *just* does, as shown in “She gave him only/²just two thirds of the sum that he expected.” (Cf. Wierzbicka 1991: 351). Normally, two thirds of a sum is not a small amount.

with certain paralinguistic features. Kishner and Gibbs (1996) discover that, to a great extent, interpretations of *just* are conditioned by the syntactic environment in which it is used. Specifically, when modifying NP or AP, *just* usually has a depreciatory function, while it normally has “specificatory” or “exact” meaning when modifying interrogative or demonstrative words. And it often has “restrictive” or “specificatory” meaning when it modifies PP and VP. As noted earlier, the depreciatory and specificatory functions are associated with “restriction”, and *just* often carries a depreciatory function when a speaker’s emotional attitude is involved. However, *just* is frequently taken to be emphatic when it is used to modify a word that has a high scalar value along with strong subjective color (e.g., usually coupled with paralinguistic features), such as *perfect*, *amazing*, etc. On the contrary, it has a depreciatory function when the words modified have relatively smaller scalar values, such as *good*, *mediocre*, etc. And, when *just* is weakly stressed, it normally functions as a pragmatic marker. Consider the following utterances:

- 38) a) (Do you think the movie is great?)—No, it is ,just good/fine.
 b) (You really like it, do you?)—Yeah, it’s ‘just ‘great/‘fantastic/‘perfect!
 c) (How do you like it?)—It’s ,just good. vs It’s ‘just ‘great!

Additionally, the functions of *just* as used in certain specific collocations are explicit and stable. For example, in *be just doing/going to do sth*, *be just about to do sth* and other perfective-aspectual structures, *just* often has a specificatory meaning, indicating that something will happen soon or has just happened. It is used to lay emphasis in such collocations as *just then*, *just in case*, *just any*, *right/ exactly just*²⁶, and it usually means “minimally” when modifying some modal verbs, such as *might*, *may* and *could*, while it normally indicates “exactness” when modifying *as*, *like*, *the same*, etc. Needless to say, the meaning of *just* is much stabler and clearer when it is used in certain idiomatic expressions, such as *It is just that...*, *I just feel/ think/ can’t t...*, *I was just asking...*, *just a minute/ moment*, *just see/hear something* and *just about* (Cf. Aijmer, 2005a). Therefore, the matchup between such forms and functions shows that certain usages of *just* demonstrate some constructional features. Molina and Romano (2012) have proven their psychological reality. Both Wierzbicka (1991: p. 351) and Aijmer (2005a) point out that *just*, though it goes through a change from expressing propositional content through expressing subjectification in interactions to functioning as a pragmatic marker, is very likely to develop further pragmatic functions; and, with high frequency of use and under social conventions, some of the functions can become increasingly concrete and stable. Thus, it is arguable that the constructional features of *just* show that it has acquired certain polysemous nature.

²⁶For information on the use of *just any*, one can refer to Duffley & Larrivé (2012). In this study, altogether 33 hits of *right just* and 3 hits of *exactly just* are found in BNC.

5. Conclusion

Previous polysemous accounts of *just* have confused the boundaries of sense relations and pragmatic interpretations. The semantic analysis of *just* conducted in this study has validated the working hypothesis and lent support to a unified account of its semantics. It is arguable that *just* functions as a scalar restrictor and regulator of pragmatic looseness that serves as a means to reduce fuzziness in expression. Specifically, *just* is used to place a restriction on a minimal value of a concept on its scale with which it is associated, but the setting of the type of scale can be highly subjective and varies from person to person. Influenced by such subjectified language use, therefore, interpreting the single and core sense of *just* is highly dependent on contexts and interpersonal interactions, showing much flexibility, variability, and pragmatic ambiguity. A critical point in the semantic evolution of adverbial *just* is its use as an adjective meaning “precise”, ultimately from which the “restrictive” meaning and other meanings are derived through making invited inferences. The meaning derivations centering around “preciseness” take place in succession or in parallel in the physical-social domain, epistemic domain, and speech-act domain as changes in pragmatic function, but all such changes and differences in interpretations derive from the core sense. In addition, *just* as used in collocation with some NPs, PPs, and idiomatic expressions shows increasingly explicit constructional features and thus has acquired some polysemous color. The major findings of this study echo Wittgenstein’s well-known viewpoint that the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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