

## “They ... practically live in canoes”: The rise of a new downtoner in LModE

In Late Modern English, we see the rise of the degree adverb use of *practically*, meaning ‘almost, as good as, virtually’ and functioning as a “downtoner” (Quirk et al. 1985) or “attenuator” (Paradis 1987). The first citation in the OED (s.v. *practically*, adv. 2) dates from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century (1a). This dating would seem to be confirmed by evidence from CLMET3.0 (1b):

- (1) a. The true Root, or such an Approximation as is **practically equivalent** (1749 D. Hartley, *Observ. Man* I.iii.349)
- b. The latter seems to have been a woman of character, and to have **practically governed** the island (1768–71 *Captain Cook’s Journals*)

This paper is a corpus-based study of the development of downtoner *practically*, from its source in a manner adverb (2a) in EModE to its various downtoner uses as a degree modifier (2b), a degree adjunct (2c), and a “peripheral modifier” of an NP or DP (2d) (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 430–31, 437):

- (2) a. those who both doctrinally and **practically apply** the lawes and censures of excommunication (1606 EEBO)
- b. (i) Thus far, each settlement had chosen its own military leader, and discipline was **practically unknown** (1831 CEAL)
- (ii) which opens the door to **practically unlimited issues** of paper money (1863 COHA)
- (iii) I think it went **practically directly** inwards (1884 OB)
- (iv) until the very end of his life, **practically on his death bed**. (1871 COHA)
- c. except with those who **practically despise** house-hold concerns (1836 CEAL)
- d. (i) we had **practically half the Northern people** arrayed (1881 COHA)
- (ii) there is **practically no increase** of population. (1848 CLMET3.0)

As a manner adverb, *practically* is found in all of the relevant syntactic contexts by Late Modern English, beginning with the pre-verbal position in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (2a). In ambiguous or “bridging” contexts (such as those in (1)), the manner meaning ‘in practice, in effect’ can be reinterpreted as ‘most often the case, for all intents and purposes’ and hence as falling short of the expected level, thus giving rise to the downtoner meaning ‘almost, nearly’. The first downtoner use appears in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century with lexical adjectives in predicative position (2b(i)); the other downtoner uses emerge more or less simultaneously (within a span of 50 years). The early use of *practically* as a modifier of verbs and verbal participles seems to support the “well-known trajectory” (Méndez-Naya 2008) in which the degree adjunct use arises before the degree adverb use. With lexical adjectives, the downtoner occurs first in attributive position and only later in predicative position, most likely because the predicative position is closest to the locus for reanalysis (cf. De Smet 2012). A negative implicature arises with the adjunct use (see Ziegeler 2015a, b) in negative contexts, where ‘almost P’ is reinterpreted as ‘not (quite) P’. While the changes described here give rise to new grammatical forms (degree adverbs and adjuncts), the process only weakly meets the characteristics of grammaticalization, and is better understood as a process of semantic change.

This paper contributes to ongoing research on the grammaticalization of intensifiers in the history of English (Kytö and Claridge 2021).

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## Corpora

- CEAL = *Corpus of Early American Literature*. See Mikko Höglund & Kaj Syrjänen. 2016. Corpus of early American literature, *ICAME Journal* 40. 17–38.
- CLMET3.0 = *The Corpus of Late Modern English Texts, Version 3.0* (CLMET3.0). Created by Hendrik De Smet, Hans-Jürgen Diller & Jukka Tyrkkö. See [https://perswww.kuleuven.be/~u0044428/clmet3\\_0.htm](https://perswww.kuleuven.be/~u0044428/clmet3_0.htm)
- COHA = *The Corpus of Historical American English*. 2010–. Compiled by Mark Davies. Available online at <https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/>
- EEBO = *Early English books online corpus*. 2017. Mark Davies (comp). Part of the SAMUELS project. Available online at <https://corpus.byu.edu/eebo/>
- OB = *The Old Bailey Proceedings Online, 1674–1913*. 2012. Tim Hitchcock, Robert Shoemaker, Clive Emsley, Sharon Howard & Jamie McLaughlin et al. (eds). <[www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org)> version 7.0, March 2012.