

On the multifunctionality of *literally* in American English youth speech

Martina Busetta, Castrenze Nigrelli
University of Palermo, Italy

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate, from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective, the multifunctionality of the adverb *literally* in present-day American English youth speech, in order to better understand the ongoing semantic change involving this adverb. Drawing from authentic spoken data taken from a teenage podcast, the analysis explores how *literally* is used beyond its prototypical literal meaning (i.e. ‘in a literal sense’) and develops a wide range of new functions, supporting the hypothesis of an ongoing grammaticalization process along with increasing subjectification.

Keywords: *literally*, grammaticalization, subjectification, American English, youth language

Introduction

In recent years *literally* has grown in frequency, and its semantic value has become a matter of debate within both academic studies and popular discourse. Previous studies on *literally* illustrate its development as the result of grammaticalization (or pragmaticalization; cf. Erman and Kotsinas 1993) — i.e., the process by which a word gradually shifts from a lexical to a grammatical function (Traugott 2003: 645) — in ways similar to other adverbs, such as *really* and *actually*, among others. In fact, the original meaning of the adverb at issue (i.e. ‘in a literal sense’) turns out to be partially blurred, giving way to new semantic and discourse functions that reflect increased (inter)subjectivity, i.e. involving speaker-based (or interpersonal) functions.

In more traditional accounts, *literally* is described either as a *subjunct* — i.e. a reinforcing adverb — or as a *disjunct*, i.e. a metalinguistic comment (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 583-589; 617-620). They also label some modern uses as “absurd”, especially when *literally* is used with non-literal meanings (e.g. *I literally split my sides laughing*; Quirk *et al.* 1985: 619).

Powell (1992) and Israel (2002) are among the first scholars to analyze the modern uses of *literally* as part of an ongoing process of semantic change from “orthodox” to “unorthodox” meanings, interpreting this development as a «natural semantic extension of its basic metalinguistic meaning» (Israel 2002: 423; cf. Powell 1992 on the «attitude of aptness»). More recent studies, including works by Calhoun (2013), Bueno-Amaro (2022), and Aijmer (2023), confirm this kind of development from a corpus-based perspective (see also Park 2016).

While recent empirical studies have mostly focused on British English (e.g. Bueno-Amaro 2022, Aijmer 2023), our analysis aims to bring new insights into the development of *literally* in American English, focusing on informal conversation among young speakers. Our dataset consists of 23 episodes of *LOL Podcast*, specifically those published between September 14 and November 30, 2024. The show, aimed at a teenage audience, is hosted by five young Americans aged between 15 and 24. The corpus, therefore, consists of spontaneous, face-to-face, informal conversations, covering everyday topics. Two digital tools, i.e. *Filmot* and *Sketch Engine*, were employed to search, manage, and analyze the textual data. Each occurrence of *literally* was examined in terms of syntactic distribution, scope, and semantic-pragmatic function in context.

Data analysis and discussion

It is worth noting that across the 23 selected episodes, *literally* occurs 327 times. This indicates a remarkably high frequency of *literally* in our corpus, especially considering that its semantic shift is a rather recent phenomenon. Although this finding aligns with recent studies on *literally* (cf. Bueno-Amaro 2022; Aijmer 2023), its high frequency in the present data appears even more striking and represents evidence for its grammaticalization, a process which is related to and driven by frequency.

As shown in Table 1, *literally* exhibits a syntactic scope increase in its wide range of combinatorial patterns. Such a syntactic flexibility also reflects its functional versatility, thus entailing a grammaticalization process.

Table 1. Distribution of *literally* according to syntactic scope and combinatorial patterns.

Syntactic context	VP	NP	AdjP	PP	AdvP	Sub. clause	(Semi) independent	Stand alone	Null
Tokens	143	35	11	13	29	8	43	11	34

The combination with verb phrases (VP) remains the most common syntactic combination (143×) for *literally*, consistent with previous research, and is typically associated with its use as an emphasizer (see analysis below). A modest preference is observed for semi-independent uses (43×) — i.e. syntactically detached occurrences of *literally*, appearing at the sentence periphery or in an interpolated position, carrying no propositional meaning and having global scope over the discourse as a whole — along with 11× fully stand-alone occurrences. These findings support the idea of an ongoing grammaticalization of *literally*, pointing toward more (inter)subjective functions.

The textual analysis confirms a considerable functional versatility of *literally*. Compared to previous studies, in our dataset *literally* shows a wider and more nuanced range of functional layers. Some functions of *literally* are less subjective and relate to its prototypical metalinguistic value (i.e. metalinguistic operator, de-

emphasizer, metalinguistic emphatic operator), while others reflect the speaker's subjectivity and procedural-discourse level (i.e. truth emphasize, focalizer, intensifier, rhetorical emphasize, illocutionary emphasize, pragmatic and response marker). For reasons of space, only some among the most relevant ones are discussed here (see Busetta and Nigrelli, forthcoming).

The original semantic value of *literally* ('in the truest sense of the word, non-metaphorically') aims to disambiguate any potential metaphoric or hyperbolic interpretation. In the present dataset, however, this core metalinguistic meaning is frequently intertwined with other senses and becomes partially blurred. For instance, *literally* occurs as a de-emphasizer and mitigator of a statement (i.e., 'simply', 'nothing else than'), when used to reduce the action's relevance or the speaker's commitment, as in (1):

(1) Cash: I **literally** just play the drums.

In (2), *literally* operates as a metalinguistic emphatic operator, connecting literal accuracy with more subjective meanings such as mirativity, surprise or shock, which represents an intermediate stage along the (inter)subjectification cline (cf. Bueno Amaro 2022: 286). In (3), instead, *literally* is used as a mere truth emphasize: the utterance requires no disambiguation and *literally* simply conveys plain emphasis and the speaker's commitment and emotional involvement.

(2) Maverick: We almost died (group laughter). **Literally**, I kid you not. Worst honeymoon ever!

(3) Kate: I **literally** can't wait. I really can't.

Additionally, *literally* can function as a focalizer when it asserts the identity of two arguments. In (4) *literally* does not express metalinguistic accuracy nor truth emphasize: its primary role is to focalize the identity between, on the one hand, the gymnastic pose performed by Harper, to which *that* refers, and the phrase *how you do it*.

(4) Harper: That's **literally** how you do it (showing a gymnastics pose).

Literally also operates as a rhetorical emphasize, strengthening hyperbolic or metaphorical statements for expressive or stylistic purposes, functioning as «a way of appreciating the non-literal» (cf. Powell 1992: 345). In several cases, *literally* functions as an illocutionary emphasize, as in (5), reinforcing the illocutionary force of the speech act, which is commissive in this case.

(5) Cash: She is making this up now.

Kate: No, I **literally** swear. I'm not.

This function can be interpreted as a bridging context within the (inter)subjectification cline, as it links the subjective emphasize with more hearer-oriented and pragmatic functions. Indeed, moving beyond its illocutionary uses, in the sample *literally* is also used as a discourse-pragmatic marker (cf. Aijmer

2023 for British English), i.e. a syntactically independent and semantically bleached operator, used for various interactional purposes (e.g., follow-ups, agreement, floor-holding). Involving the interpersonal level (i.e. intersubjectification, in the narrow sense), this use of *literally* points to an advanced stage of grammaticalization, in which *literally* functions primarily as a pragmatic operator (i.e. pragmaticalization) rather than a subjectivity-related modifier (for further details see Busetta and Nigrelli, forthcoming).

Overall, the analysis of *literally* in *LOL Podcast* has provided new and significant evidence on its semantic shift. Its notably high frequency in the present corpus, along with its remarkable syntactic flexibility and scope increase, and its wide range of semantic-pragmatic functions, support the idea of an ongoing grammaticalization and (inter)subjectification process undergone by *literally*.

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