

Comparison and Analysis of Modern Chinese Adverbs “Almost” and “Simply” Based on Corpus

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Keywords: Almost, Simply, Syntactic structure, Sentence category

Abstract: “Almost” and “Simply” is a pair of adverbs which are very commonly used in modern Chinese, both of them can indicate approximating to a certain situation, but the sentence with the “Almost” generally expresses an objective fact while that with the “Simply” generally expresses the subjective feeling of the speaker; meantime, both of them can be used in a sentence expressing degree, but the “Simply” is higher than “Almost” in expressing a mood. As far as the sentence category as concerned, “Almost” and “Simply” can both be used in declarative sentences and exclamatory sentences; “Almost” can also be used in interrogative sentences.

1. Introduction

“Almost” and “Simply” are two commonly used adverbs in modern Chinese. About the difference of them, Feng Chuanqiang and Fang Yi made a comparison between them from semantics and pragmatics in the *Semantic and Pragmatic Differences Between the Adverbs “Almost” and “Simply” in Modern Chinese* (2002) and concluded: The main difference of them is about subjective, “Almost” is an objective word while “Simply” is a subjective word. In the paper, some contents are reasonable, but it is found through corpus analysis that “Objectivity” and “Subjectivity” are not reflected from such two words themselves but expressed by the whole sentence under different contexts. If we understand the meaning in a sentence as the meaning of the word itself, we will commit the mistake of “Judging the grammatical meaning expressed by a certain sentence format only from a function word in the format” as said by Ma Zhen (2003).

In order to better distinguish “Almost” and “Simply”, we take contemporary novels as the research corpus, from which we select all sentences with “Almost” and “Simply”, including 3,722 sentences with the former and 2,353 sentences with the later, so as to better distinguish and use them through analysis.

2. Syntactic Features

“Almost” and “Simply” are adverbs. They are classified by different scholars into different adverb subcategories. However, no matter which subcategory they belong to, they are just used as adverbial modifiers as for syntactic constituents, with very obvious adverb features. Therefore, in order to investigate their syntactic features, we need not to investigate their syntactic constituents but to mainly analyze their use with other words.

2.1 Selection of Adverbs for “Almost” and “Simply”

2.1.1 Adverbs of Range

The common adverbs of range include “All, All of Them, Only, Altogether, In All”, which are used to indicate the scope of words in front of or behind them.

“Almost” and “Simply” can be directly followed by the adverb “All”, as shown in 172 sentences with “Almost” and in 19 sentences with “Simply”.

The explanations about the adverb “All” in various materials generally include: A: all inclusive, that is, all constituents except interrogative sentences are located in front of “All”. B: “Even”. C:

“Already”. Explanation A is determined as the adverbs of range, which is generally accepted, so we express “All” with scope meaning as “All^I” and the others as “All^{II}”.

There are 161 sentences with “Almost” and “All^I”, only 1 sentence with “Simply” and “All^I”, 11 sentences with “Almost” and “All^{II}”, and 18 sentences with “Simply” and “All^{II}”.

(1) Students on campus [almost] have all gone, and the lake without pedestrians on its sides also becomes quiet. (Fairy Tale of Youth written by Lin Hai’ou)

(2) Your grandfather faced living pressure at that time because his daughter married to a member of the Rightist, which [almost] affected your uncle’s promotion to a high school. (Ganluchuan written by Zhang Hong)

(3) “Are you? I [simply] don’t even know you! ...” (Song of Youth written by Yang Mo)

(4) Diao Shigui was angry: “You [simply] are all female members of the 18 G.A. of the National Revolutionary Army, you won’t be honest unless I teach you a lesson. Well, push away the table, go inside and catch them.” (Steel Meets Fire written by Liu Liu)

With these example sentences, we find that it is “All^I” in sentence (1) with “All” to modify and restrict the “students on campus” in front of it. The adverbs of range are characterized by modifying and restricting the objective facts that exist or are expressed. The whole sentence is a concrete and clear declarative sentence. “Almost” is to modify a sentence expressing an objective fact and indicates approximating to a fact. However, there is only (4) having such meaning in sentences with “Simply”, which can be understood as “more or less” with same meaning as “Almost”. This enables them to have a similarity.

In sentences (2) and (3), “All” means “All^{II}”. “All” in these sentences can be understood as “Even”, and the whole sentence can more clearly express the speaker’s subjective view of an event only with the modifier “All^{II}”. This indicates that both “Almost” and “Simply” can modify sentences expressing subjective feelings, and “Almost” in these sentences can be replaced by “Simply”, which is the reason for their exchange.

In the corpus extracted by us, there are also cases where “Almost” is used with other adverbs of range, with 103 sentences with “Almost” and “All of Them” and 7 sentences with “Almost” and “Only”. “All of Them” and “Only” are adverbs to express uniqueness, with the same characteristics as “All^I”. But, “Simply” cannot be used with such words.

2.1.2 Adverbs of Degree

The common adverbs of degree include “Quite, Too, Most, Very, A Little”, which are used to modify adjectives, verbs and predicate-object structures.

These two words can be directly followed by an adverb of degree, such as “Almost + Quite” and “Simply + Quite/Too/A Little/To Some Degree”. The order of these adverbs to express degrees is “Too” > “Quite” > “To Some Degree, A Little”.

(5) A’xue glanced at Shuangyue. Her words were quite serious but the voice was so low that it was [almost] quite hard to hear. (Men and Women in the World written by Jia Fei)

(6) Didn’t he inform the crew before leaving? This guy was [simply] too ridiculous! (Classic Love written by Mo Ran and Yang Rundong)

(7) Xiaoxiao seemed happy tonight, which made Jiang Fan [simply] overjoyed a little. (Red and Black written by Gu Jie, et al)

Through analysis of Sentences (5), (6) and (7), we can see that these sentences containing adverbs of degree express very strong subjective feelings. “Almost” can only be used with “Quite”, and in such sentences as with “Almost” + “Quite”, “Almost” can be replaced by “Simply”. However, “Simply” can not only be used with the adverbs expressing excess such as “Too” but also the adverbs expressing low degree such as “A Little, To Some Degree”. We can see from this that “Simply” can be used with adverbs of degree expressing different degrees, so it expresses a higher degree than “Almost”. In other words, “Simply” expresses a stronger mood in a sentence than “Almost”.

Table 1 Selection of Adverbs of Range and Adverbs of Degree between “Almost” and “Simply”.

Almost	Adverbs of range				Adverbs of degree				
	All	All of Them	Only	Proportion	Quite			Proportion	
	161	103	7	7.3%	9			0.2%	
Simply	All			Proportion	Quite	Too	A Little	To Some Degree	Proportion
	1			0.04%	2	42	23	10	3.3%

2.2 Metaphorical and Comparative Sentences

“Almost” can be used in a metaphorical sentence, while “Simply” can be used in not only metaphorical sentence but also comparative sentence. “Simply” can be used in such sentences as with “Simply + As/Like/Just Like” and “Simply + Than/Even” respectively in 219 and 47 sentences, while “Almost” can be used only with “Like” only in 9 sentences.

(8) Dayuan popped his head out of a pile of statements, and the expression on his face was [simply] bitterer than bitter gourd. (You Are Stupid and I’m Smart written by Jing Qin)

(9) Both of them [almost] rushed out of the study like a race. (Fairy Tale of Youth written by Lin Hai’ou)

Metaphor is a kind of figure of speech. Metaphorical sentence itself has an exaggerated meaning, and comparative sentence also often has an exaggerated meaning for a better comparison, for example in Sentence (8), the “painful expression” is compared with “bitter gourd”. Therefore, “Simply” and “Almost” themselves do not have an exaggerated meaning. “Almost” and “Simply” are used in such vivid and subjective sentences to express more approximating to this exaggerated meaning, and “Almost” can be replaced by “Simply” in “Almost” + “Like” sentences.

3. Distribution in Sentence Category

Sentences are usually classified into declarative sentences, interrogative sentences, exclamatory sentences and imperative sentences. Through investigation of example sentences, we find that “Almost” can be used in declarative sentences, interrogative sentences and exclamatory sentences; while “Simply” can only be used in declarative sentences and exclamatory sentences.

Both “Almost” and “Simply” can be used in declarative sentences, including positive ones and negative ones, to express a declarative mood.

The exclamatory sentences mainly express exclamatory mood, and a sentence expressed with exclamatory mood is to express a feeling, a very strong feeling.

In the whole corpus, there are 46 exclamatory sentences with “Almost”, accounting for 1.2%, and 515 ones with “Simply”, accounting for 21.9%.

(10) It is so heavy that my light soul [almost] cannot bear it! (Getting out of Marriage written by Li Zhenyu)

(11) He has worked for your family for all of his life, and just due to a little mistake he committed at his old age, you threw him out of the house, which was [simply] too immoral! (Silver Valley written by Cheng Yi)

“Almost” in Sentence (10) can be replaced by “Simply”, but “Simply” in Sentence (11) cannot be replaced by “Almost”. If replaced, the strong feeling that “You are too immoral!” cannot be expressed. The degree of expression of “Almost” is lower than that of “Simply”.

“Almost” can be used in interrogative sentences, but “Simply” cannot.

(12) How can it be so complicated? He looked at his mother doubtfully, why is she so active to [almost] get mad? (A Sad Angle without Tears written by Li Xi)

4. Conclusion

This paper mainly explores the comparison of syntactic structures and genres between the

adverbs “Almost” and “Simply”. We can see that in terms of selection of adverbs of range, “Almost” can be used with adverbs of range in far more cases than “Simply”, and “Almost” can also be used with the adverbs of range expressing uniqueness. Both “Almost” and “Simply” can indicate approximating to a certain situation, but the sentence with the “Almost” generally expresses an objective fact while that with the “Simply” generally expresses the subjective feeling of the speaker; meantime, both of them can be used in a sentence expressing degree, but the “Simply” is higher than “Almost” in expressing a mood, which can be seen from the use with adverbs of degree.

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