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“Quite Frankly, I’m Not Quite Sure That it is Quite the Right Colour.” A Corpus-Based Study of the Syntax and Semantics of *Quite* in Present-Day English

Ignacio M. Palacios Martínez

1. Introduction

The study of intensives, in general, and intensive adverbs, in particular, has received a lot of attention in the twentieth century studies in linguistics.¹ The high interest in this area of language can be justified by several reasons, as pointed out by Antoine R. Vermeire.² Firstly, intensifiers are very versatile in their use; secondly, they are directly linked to the expression of personal emotions; thirdly, they can occur in any position in the clause and can modify almost any word and expression; fourthly, most of them tend to form collocations and even fixed expressions. To these arguments adduced by Vermeire, one could add that they include a wide variety of lexical items and units, and they constitute an open class; they are present both in written and spoken English although they are more frequent in the latter medium of expression than in the former; they form part of the verbal repertoire of most languages; their meaning and use are generally conditioned by pragmatic factors and most of these intensives do not remain permanent in their use but they are changeable as the language develops. Thus, Alan Partington, for example, explains and illustrates with concrete examples how words such as *very*, *utterly*, *absolutely*, *sure*, which originally expressed a modal meaning gradually became intensifiers over time. This is what he calls “the modal-to-intensifier shift”. According to this, these words developed from simply transmitting the user’s attitude towards the message to placing emphasis on what is being conveyed. Partington also shows how some words of the intensifier class, such as *very*, *utterly*,

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¹See, for instance, Stoffel; Kirchner; Spitzbardt; Greenbaum; Bolinger; Bäcklund; Vermeire; Altenberg; Partington; Paradis; Lorenz; and Tao.

²Vermeire, 1.

45 *entirely* and *thoroughly*, seem to have at present a more limited syntactic range than in the past.³ Carita Paradis also refers to this question and, basing herself on information extracted from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, claims that the intensifying interpretations of adjectives, such as *utter*, *horrible*, *extreme*, *absolute*, *terrible*, *perfect*, *complete*, *total*, *dreadful* and *awful*, “are recent developments in the history of the English language” since the majority of them acquired this value during the early modern period.⁴ Finally, Hongyn Tao maintains a similar view with respect to “absolutely”.⁵

50 In this paper I am going to concentrate on *quite*, a lexical item which at first glance does not stand as an attractive grammatical unit worthy of attention but which can modify different units of language (verbs, adjectives, nouns, other adverbs, sentences, prepositions, phrases, etc.) at various levels (word, phrase, sentence, discourse), and which may express different meanings and may have several uses in present-day English. Although intensives, as explained above, have been thoroughly analysed from different perspectives and paradigms, there are very few studies, to my knowledge, concerning monographically with *quite*, with the exception of sections of general surveys on adverbs or on intensifiers that devote a few pages or refer particularly to the nature of this lexical item.⁶

60 My general aims will then be the study of *quite* in connection with the medium of expression (writing vs. speech), text type and register (degree of formality). My study is not diachronic, that is, I am not going to survey this form from a historical perspective or analyse the evolution of this word in the last four or five decades. I am just going to concentrate on this grammatical unit on the basis of data extracted from the British English component of the International Corpus of English (ICE). As a complement to this, I will also consider data taken from judgement tests administered to a group of fifteen native speakers of English. This information will serve to confirm and clarify some of the results obtained with the analysis of the corpus data.

70 The interest of this paper lies in the discussion of real uses which derive from information extracted directly from spoken and written English. The views maintained by the main English grammars available nowadays⁷ together with some of the most relevant specific studies concerned with it will be contrasted with the discussion of examples where I will be investigating the multifunctionality and meaning of this word.

2. Literature Review

80 *Quite* is generally classified as a degree adverb within the intensifier class. According to Randolph Quirk et al., two separate uses of this word are distinguished: maximizer

³Partington, 181ff.

⁴*Oxford English Dictionary*; Paradis, “Reinforcing Adjectives,” 235.

⁵Tao, 15.

⁶See, for example, Stoffel; Greenbaum; Bolinger; Bäcklund; Vermeire; Altenberg; Paradis; Diehl; and Tao.

⁷For instance, Huddleston; Quirk et al.; Givón; Biber et al.; Huddleston and Pullum; and Carter and McCarthy.

and compromiser.⁸ Furthermore, it is also very highly connected with sentence adverbials, such as *altogether*, *almost*, *entirely*, and it may also have a modal character expressing surprise, for example.

Quite as maximizer is very often used with non-gradable or non-scalar items meaning “absolutely”; *quite* as compromiser, however, goes with gradable words and it means “considerably”, “rather”. However, at times it is difficult to say what type or degree of intensification it expresses since it may be conditioned by contextual and prosodic factors. Stress and intonation seem to play a very relevant role in the intensifying force of this word. If stressed, it generally has the meaning of a maximizer, for example:

- (1) Phil is **QUITE** right.

In the previous example, the speaker places emphasis on the adjective *right*, which according to some grammarians belongs to the “absolute” class, that is, it has to be one thing or the other as there is no half point. In this particular case, Phil is either right or not right.⁹

In contrast, if the head of the adverb or adjective phrase is the one that is given more prominence prosodically, *quite* then functions more as a compromiser or downtoner, for instance:

- (2) The novel is quite **INTERESTING**.

In the above example, the emphasis is placed on *interesting*, which is a gradable adjective. There are also many borderline cases, that is, examples where it is very difficult to deduce the exact meaning intended by the language user. From this, it is also gathered that in written language there is generally an added difficulty for a sound interpretation of this word since information about stress and intonation is not available.

Apart from these two main uses within adjective and adverb phrases, *quite* may also modify noun and noun phrases to convey strong intensification. If I say something like,

- (3) “Yesterday I had to wait quite a while for Peter.”

I am really showing my dissatisfaction for having had to wait longer than expected. This value of strong intensification is also present with certain quantifiers as in:

- (4) A: “Did you spot out many mistakes in my essay?”
B: “Well, quite a few.”

⁸Quirk et al., 447.

⁹See, for example, Paradis, *Degree Modifiers*; and Biber et al.

130 Here speaker B is acknowledging through an understatement that the number of mistakes was high, and clearly more than expected.

Apart from this, this adverb may also modify a verb phrase and in this case it functions as a subjunct,¹⁰

135 (5) I quite agree with what you are saying.

Here *quite* modifies the verb phrase and the meaning intended is that of “completely”.

140 Finally, *quite* may also function as an independent clause in reply to a previous statement. This is relatively common in spoken language and in these cases the speaker usually expresses their agreement with something said by the interlocutor.

145 (6) A: “He really did very well.”

B: “Yes, quite.”

As Quirk et al. suggest, this is so independently of the polarity type of the previous clause.¹¹

150 (7) A: “They should not have behaved in that way.”

B: “Quite.”

This adverb functions in these contexts as a disjunct with a true standing use.

155 Summarising, we can say then that *quite* apart from being a modifier could be classified in Quirk et al.’s terminology under any of the main broad adverb types, that is, adjunct, disjunct or subjunct. It may modify almost any of the word categories although it is more likely to intensify adjectives, adverbs and verbs. Its position in the sentence, its meaning and function together with other pragmatic variables will tell us whether we are dealing with one type or another.

160 The complexity and high frequency of this adverb may explain the different perspectives and approaches adopted in the literature. Dwight Bolinger, in his general study on degree words, devotes a special section to *quite*.¹² Degree words are classified by this linguist in four classes: boosters, compromisers, diminishers and minimizers, depending on their place on the scale. As regards *quite* in particular, Bolinger refers to its multifunctionality and starts by comparing the expression *altogether* with *not quite* in sentences, such as *That lady is not quite nice* versus *That lady is not altogether nice*.¹³ He maintains that the differences between these two are given by the fact that *not quite* implies a beginning point; from this he concludes that the use of *not quite* is generally limited to qualities expressed by adjectives denoting a

10Quirk et al., 612.

11Ibid.

12Bolinger, 115ff and 223ff.

13Ibid., 115.

beginning process. In a different section of his work, Bolinger concentrates on the perfective meaning conveyed by *quite* when modifying verbs, as in *I quite expected it*; some pages later he tries to explain the factors that may account for the variation between pairs of sentences, such as *He is a quite unusual person* versus *He is quite an unusual person*.¹⁴ 175

Vermeire, for his part, conducts a thorough study of fifteen degree intensifiers on the basis of the data provided by two computerised corpora (PAL and CAMET) of modern English and the replies obtained from an experiment, which consisted in the administration of a replacement, judgement and scaling test to a group of thirty British postgraduate students in linguistics.¹⁵ With all this information Vermeire focused on the nature of *quite* as intensifying verbs, adjectives and nouns, the gradability and affective meaning of the word modified by this adverb, the clause type of the sentences where it occurs, its position with respect to both the definite and the indefinite article, and the most frequent collocations. This study comes to relevant conclusions and presents interesting results which will be contrasted with my findings throughout the paper. 180 185

Ulf Bäcklund intends “to establish the ranges of adverbs of degree, i.e. what different elements they can collocate with.”¹⁶ For this purpose, he pays a lot of attention to contextual and situational variables. The material surveyed, organised in three stylistic categories (prose used in newspapers and magazines, conversational prose and narrative writing), has been gathered from several issues of two British newspapers and one American magazine. In addition to this, eight informants with different backgrounds were interviewed on controversial issues or on questions of special interest. *Quite* is classified within the category of adverbs expressing a moderate degree together with *pretty* and *rather*. For this scholar, these three adverbs are highly emotive as the speaker generally considers what the interlocutor has just said or is believed to be thinking. This is the reason why for this linguist *quite* is an argumentative word. On the basis of stress and pitch contour, Bäcklund also distinguishes two different contours according to whether it is unstressed (Contour A) or stressed (Contour B).¹⁷ Furthermore, he introduces something new since he proposes that although *quite* is mainly a word-sentence modifier or focalizer, it shares some of the features of a proper sentence-modifier when expressing some additional value of surprise, irony, condescension, sarcasm, contrast, etc. 190 195 200 205

Hannele Diehl is concerned with the study of *quite* as a degree modifier of verbs in writing on the basis of data extracted from the British National Corpus. Using the framework of cognitive linguistics, this paper tries to see up to what extent the configurational reading of the main verb that combines with *quite* conditions the interpretation of this adverb. The results indicate that 210

¹⁴Ibid., 223.

¹⁵Vermeire, 289–329.

¹⁶Bäcklund, 10.

¹⁷Ibid., 74. 215

the configurational reading of the verb that collocates with *quite* constrains the reading of *quite*. If the mode of construal of the collocating verb is clearly bounded, then *quite* functions as a bounded maximizer, as in *I quite understand*, but if the mode of construal of the collocating verb is unbounded, then *quite* functions as an unbounded booster, as in *I quite fancy this*.¹⁸

With all this information as a starting-point, I became engaged in this paper with the intention of making some contributions to the multifunctionality of this adverb in the light of new and more modern data. In my view, *quite* should be mainly considered as a word-modifier although there are cases in which it may function as something equivalent to a sentential adverb or even a discourse marker; in other words, the main function of *quite* will be that of a modifying word as a maximizer or compromiser, but at times it may serve to express other meanings as conditioned by contextual, situational and pragmatic factors.

3. Purpose and Method

The purpose of this paper, as explained above, is to study the use and meaning of *quite* on the basis of the data provided by the British component of the ICE and the information supplied by a group of highly educated native speakers of English. I will then analyse the distribution of this word in written and spoken English in detail and will also focus on the different functions this lexical item can perform at the phrase, clause and discourse level. This means that in this paper I will not only concentrate on the main function of *quite* as an intensifier of adjectives and adverbs, but will also address other structures and contexts where *quite* also occurs in the position of a predeterminer, modifier of nouns and noun phrases, and even as a full response to a previous statement or question. In fact, one of the main purposes in this paper will be to show the multifunctional nature of this lexical item. No textual or sociological variables will be particularly considered as they fall outside the scope of the present investigation. However, in the reading of the data pragmatic features will be considered when appropriate. The analysis is both quantitative and qualitative since figures will be presented together with an interpretation of their meaning and implications.

The ICE corpus contains one million words organised in 500 texts, each with approximately 2,000 words; 300 texts are extracts of transcribed speech while the other 200 belong to writing. There is not a perfect balance between the spoken and written samples as speech represents two thirds of the whole, that is, about 600,000 words while the total sample of written language amounts to 400,000 words. This factor should be borne in mind, especially when drawing contrasts between writing and speech.

The spoken component of the corpus consists of dialogues, both public and private, and monologues, both scripted and unscripted. The written part is divided

¹⁸Diehl, 18.

into printed and non-printed material. The latter is organised in two groups “non-professional writing” and “correspondence”. However, the latter contains subsections: academic and non-academic writing, reportage, instructional, persuasive and creative texts. 260

For the retrieval of the data, the corpus tools were used, which provided all the examples that contained an occurrence of *quite*. This raw data was closely surveyed and subsequently filtered since part of the material obtained was not valid for the purposes intended: the information presented was incomplete or was not relevant for the objectives in mind. At times, the context given was not sufficient for a complete and solid interpretation. As a consequence, a second search was at times necessary to trace additional facts. Once the irrelevant features were removed, I first considered the distribution of this word in modern written and spoken English. Furthermore, I tried to see whether there was any connection between the frequency of this word and particular text categories. Attention was also paid to the degree of formality of the texts where *quite* occurred. Finally, I classified its uses and functions in different groups. In all cases the corpus data was used to present the discussion and to prove the evidence. 265 270 275

In order to test and compare some of the results found through the corpus, I also administered a judgement test to a group of fifteen university native speakers of English. Nine of them were female and six were male. The majority of these subjects (eleven of them) were between twenty-one and thirty, eight were British, three American, two Irish and two Australian. They all had a university education and were acquainted with the linguistics field. They all volunteered to participate in the project so they were not specially selected for the study. A preliminary version of the test was piloted with a group of three subjects of similar characteristics and, as a result, minor adjustments were introduced in its structure and in the wording of some of the questions. 280 285

Following Sidney Greenbaum and Randolph Quirk,¹⁹ this judgement test can be regarded as a “similarity” class since the respondents are given pairs of sentences and are asked to indicate their degree of similarity together with an explanation for their decision. The sentences selected correspond to real uses of the language as they were directly picked up from the corpus material. Instruments of this kind have proved to be extremely useful for language research and have acted as very effective supplementation to corpus alone.²⁰ 290 295

The questionnaire consisted of sixteen items which represented cases of particular interest in the study of *quite*. Different variables were included in each of the questions: a) the contrast in meaning between *quite* and *very*, *quite* and *completely*, *quite* and *rather*. I wanted to study up to what extent *quite* is used to express different meanings from these other adverbs; b) *quite* as a verb modifier with verbs such as *know* and *like*. In this case it was my intention to focus on the type of modification 300

¹⁹Greenbaum, *Studies in English*, 13–14; Greenbaum and Quirk, 3–7.

²⁰Greenbaum, *Good English*, 88–9.

expressed by *quite* in combination with these verbal forms and the meanings associated with them; c) the semantic role played by *quite* in combination with the preposition *like*. I felt it necessary to analyse the meaning and use of *quite* as a prepositional modifier; d) the differences in meaning between structures with the pattern *a + quite + NP* versus *quite + a + NP*. This issue has been extensively discussed in the literature but it was important to see the opinions of real users of the language; e) the opposition between structures with *quite + some* versus *some* on its own. This time I wanted to investigate the meaning of *quite* in combination with this quantifier; f) *quite + NP* versus a NP alone; and finally, g) *quite* as an independent sentence response to a previous statement.

4. Analysis and Discussion of the Data

4.1. Frequency

The analysis of the data confirms, in general terms, previous results reported in the literature as regards the frequency of this lexical item.²¹ All the figures indicate that *quite* is not only a common but is after *very* by far the most common intensifier in modern English, and it is much more widely used in speech than in writing. The total number of examples identified in the corpus was 901; 761 of them were registered in spoken language, that is, 84.4 per cent of the total, while the remaining 140 (15.6%) were recorded in writing (Table 1). Considering, as mentioned above, that the oral subcorpus contained approximately 600,000 words, I find an average of 125 occurrences per 100,000 words. In the case of writing, where a sample of 400,000 words was analysed, this number decreases considerably to a proportion of only 35 tokens per 100,000 words.

It is important to study carefully the reasons and factors that may favour the higher frequency of *quite* in spoken over written language. I presume that the highly intensifying nature of this adverb may well explain this circumstance since it serves to emphasise quantities and sizes, and it is also used to denote different degrees of qualities and actions. Furthermore, it frequently collocates, as we will see below, with a large number of colloquial oral expressions. It is true that the previous arguments could also be applied to other degree words, such as *completely* and *rather*, for example, but their frequency according to the literature reviewed is not comparable to that of *quite*.²² The fact that the latter can be a multi-modifying word since it can intensify not only adjectives, verbs and adverbs but also prepositions, determiners, pronouns and even whole noun phrases could well explain this. It is also surprising that very few studies in the past have investigated this question in closer detail.

Although the frequency figures partly coincide with those provided by other scholars, they also show important differences worth reporting. Douglas Biber et al.

²¹See, for example, Bäcklund; Vermeire; Altenberg; Biber et al.; Lorenz; Carter and McCarthy.

²²Bäcklund; Vermeire; Altenberg; Biber et al.; Lorenz; Carter and McCarthy.

Table 1 Frequency of *Quite* in the ICE Corpus

	Spoken language		Written language		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>Quite</i>	761	84.4	140	15.6	901	100.0

record a frequency of 350 occurrences of *quite* in British English conversation, 50 in American English conversation and 150 in what they describe as academic texts from a total sample of 1 million words.²³ However, this data should be handled with care because these linguists are considering only those examples in which *quite* immediately precedes adjectives, that is, *quite* as an adjective modifier. As can be seen in Table 3 below, if we restrict our comparison to cases where *quite* functions exclusively as adjective modifier, Biber et al.'s results and mine practically coincide: 550 instances versus 530 per million words. However, I am focusing not only on this particular function but I am also examining other contexts where *quite* also appears as modifier of verbs, adverbs, determiners, prepositions, pronouns, noun phrases and even as a response marker, that is, as an independent clause expressing affirmation or agreement with what was previously said.

Bäcklund records a total of 503 occurrences of *quite* per million words but his corpus is not comparable either to Biber et al.'s or to the ICE corpus since it only comprises material taken from writing.²⁴ The figures provided by Vermeire are more in keeping with my findings although they also present important divergencies.²⁵ A total of 1,345 occurrences of *quite* are registered in his two million samples, 1,268 of which are intensifying in nature. As before, the tendency of *quite* in favour of spoken language is clearly marked.

4.2. Distribution of *Quite* According to Text Category

Vermeire claims that “the largest number of *quite* occurrences is found in Imaginative Prose. Further evidence for the less frequent use of *quite* in more formal style comes from the survey sample where no less than 146 occurrences were recorded”.²⁶ In the light of this, one could claim that stilted language is not characterised by a common use of *quite*. This may well be applied to other intensifiers, such as *very*, *really*, *actually*, *rather*, *completely*, etc.

The structure and design of the corpus used do not allow me to analyse this variable in depth and to confirm this assumption although I clearly perceive a tendency in this direction. As the number of words varies considerably from one

²³Biber et al., 556ff.

²⁴Bäcklund, 71.

²⁵Vermeire, 289ff.

²⁶Ibid., 289.

gender to another, I provide normalised frequencies for a text length of 10,000 words. Thus Table 2 illustrates that the largest number of *quite* occurrences is found in texts taken from telephone and face-to-face conversations. In contrast, the lowest amount of examples is found in academic and administrative writing, the latter being clearly associated with formal varieties of language. Broadcast news and non-broadcast speeches, although classified as spoken language, are the oral texts with the lowest frequency of this word. The formal nature of the language used may well account for this. Within written language the highest figures correspond to novels and stories, and press news reports. This may be explained by the fact that these last two categories of texts are closer to speech than the rest. Press news tends to combine reported with direct speech, including at times the exact words somebody said.

Table 2 Distribution of *Quite* According to Text Categories in the ICE Corpus

Text category	Words	Examples	Normalised frequency
Telephone conversations	20,000	43	21.5
Face-to-face conversations	180,000	352	19.5
Broadcast interviews	20,000	37	18.5
Business transactions	20,000	34	17
Demonstrations	20,000	33	16.5
Spontaneous commentaries	40,000	61	15.25
Broadcast discussions	40,000	59	14.75
Classroom lessons	40,000	39	9.75
Social letters	30,000	24	8
Legal presentations	20,000	15	7.5
Novels and stories	40,000	28	7
Unscripted speeches	60,000	36	6
Legal cross-examinations	20,000	11	5.5
Press news reports	40,000	18	4.5
Parliamentary debates	20,000	9	4.5
Broadcast talks	40,000	16	4
Academic writing (humanities)	20,000	8	4
Non-academic writing (natural sciences)	20,000	8	4
Non-academic writing (technology)	20,000	8	4
Student untimed essays	20,000	7	3.5
Broadcast news	40,000	12	3
Academic writing (social sciences)	20,000	6	3
Academic writing (natural sciences)	20,000	5	2.5
Non-academic writing (humanities)	20,000	5	2.5
Non-academic writing (social sciences)	20,000	5	2.5
Business letters	30,000	7	2.33
Non-broadcast speeches	20,000	4	2
Academic writing (technology)	20,000	4	2
Press editorials	20,000	3	1.5
Student examination scripts	20,000	2	1
Skills and hobbies	20,000	2	1
Administrative/regulatory writing	20,000	0	0
Total	1,000,000	901	

Moreover, it is quite common that novels and stories include dialogues and exchanges of conversations between the different characters that form part of the plot of the narrative.

4.3. Functional Distribution of Quite

Once the general frequency and distribution of *quite* according to text categories have been examined, I can now concentrate on the different functions and senses this word can perform and express. Table 3 shows its functional distribution: modifying determiners (example 8), response marker (9), intensifying adjectives (10), intensifying adverbs (11), verb intensifier (12), intensifying prepositional phrases (13) and, finally, modifying pronouns (14) and noun phrases modifier (15). Apparently none of these functions of *quite* are new in the language. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) lists all these uses of *quite* throughout the history of the English language. The only exceptions to this are the functions of predeterminer and pronoun modifier. Quite surprisingly, we are not given any occurrences of *quite* with *a lot of*, *a bit of*, *a few of*, *enough*, either as quantifiers or as heads of a noun phrase. The examples that follow demonstrate each of these functions.

- (8) And yet the list that Melvyn read out were established theatres that have been established over quite a few years. (435S1B-022/591)
- (9) Oh quite yes. (31S1A-011/69)
- (10) I've been able to use some French in Romania which was quite useful. (44S1A-014/113)
- (11) In fact I re-read most of them quite recently. (45S1A-015/240)
- (12) Well I don't think I know quite what you mean. (68S1A-018/349)
- (13) I don't think there's anything quite like Toblerone (90S1A-023/192)
- (14) It would mean quite a lot to the children. (204S1A-050/169)
- (15) They do tend to last quite a while. (56S1A017/3741)

Table 3 Functional Distribution of *Quite* in the ICE Corpus

	Spoken language	%	Written language	%	Total	%
Determiner modifier	38	5.0	1	0.7	39	4.3
Response marker	14	1.9	1	0.7	15	1.6
Adjective modifier	435	57.6	95	68.3	530	58.8
Adverb modifier	92	12.2	29	20.9	121	13.6
Verb modifier	47	6.2	3	2.2	50	5.6
Preposition modifier	30	3.9	3	2.2	33	3.7
Pronoun modifier	40	5.3	1	0.0	41	4.5
Noun phrase modifier	25	2.6	5	3.6	30	3.3
Unclear	40	5.3	2	1.4	42	4.6
Total	761	100.0	140	100.0	901	100.0

475 The alphanumeric code that appears after the examples cited refers to the text
and lines of the ICE from which the example was taken. The first digit indicates the
number given in the database, S stands for spoken and W for written, while the
480 following abbreviations represent the genre in which the compilers of the ICE
included that particular text. Example (8), for instance, was coded with the number
435 in the database and was drawn from the sequence number 022/591 of the spoken
text labelled as 1B and classified as belonging to dialogues (broadcast discussions).

485 Under the heading of “unclear”, I listed all those cases which could not be easily
classified under any specific category, either because not enough context is provided
in the corpus or because there is a short or long pause that makes the sentences
inconclusive. This is especially common in spoken language where, given the
particular features of this medium of expression, the speaker very often initiates a
turn, stops or makes a pause, and then reinitiates the speech again. The following
example shows this:

490 (16) They're quite <, > you know (394S1A-100/293/3)

In the previous example (16), I assume that *quite* is modifying an adjective or an
adverb although this cannot really be confirmed because there is an interruption in
the speaker's speech.

495 In the pages that follow, I will be discussing each of these functions in particular.
Attention will also be paid to the meaning or meanings expressed in each situation.

43.1. *Quite intensifying determiners.* Most of the determiners modified by *quite* (*a lot*,
a few, *some*, *a bit*) are quantifiers and the meaning expressed is that of a large number
500 or amount. The first in the previous list, that is, *a lot*, is the most frequent, occurring
on sixteen occasions, followed by *a few* with eleven, *some* with four and *a bit* with
two. The preposition *of* often follows *a lot* and *a bit* as in:

505 (17) Quite a lot of money for an hour's lesson. (328S1A083123/1)

(18) And again with the camera work I mean although I did quite a bit of the
actual landscape camera work ... (519S1B045117/1)

510 The intensifying force of *quite* in combination with *some* also serves to denote a
high quantity rather than an indeterminate number, as illustrated in the following
example:

(19) Uh behind this this complex imagery which will take quite some time to go
through uhm. (697S2A057/21)

515 The speaker in (19) is making clear that the revision of the complex imagery will take
longer than expected. The use of *quite* with *some* also helps to express the idea of

something unusual or surprising. In all the examples recorded of this kind *quite* collocates with *time*.

I also find two cases in which *quite* modifies *that*, which is not really functioning as a normal demonstrative but as a real intensifier. In both examples the context is negative and a comparison with something previously said or commented on is implied.

- (20) No it wasn't quite that easy actually. (525S1B49155/1)

This use of *quite* as determiner intensifier was also considered in the survey (items 9 and 10). As regards the contrast between the pairs *quite a lot of money* versus *a lot of money*, the answers given cannot be regarded as conclusive since the respondents do not come to full agreement. Five of them maintain that the presence of *quite* makes the sentence more emphatic and stronger whereas four of them believe that *quite* functions as a compromiser rather than as a maximizer. The rest opt for saying that the two sentences mean the same or simply they do not know. In this particular case intonation may play an important role and may make a difference in meaning.

In the case of the combination of *quite* with *some*, that is, *quite some time* versus *some time* (item 10 of the test), there is full agreement as all the informants consider that *quite* is stronger, adding emphasis to the sentences and clearly denoting a longer period of time.

4.3.2. *Quite as response marker*. Although Table 3 above clearly demonstrates that *quite* is mainly a modifying lexical item, a total of fifteen occurrences, that is, 1.7 per cent of the total, were recorded where it functions as an independent clause expressing agreement or disagreement with something mentioned before. *Quite* here resembles other adverbs such as *sure(ly)*, *absolutely*, *exactly*, *definitely*, *right* and, as happens with all these words, it is particularly common in spoken language.

- (21) Speaker A: She's she's quite a a sweet crumbly sort of person really when you speak to her.
Speaker B: Yes quite. (78S1A02031/1)

In the previous example, speaker B apparently makes clear his total agreement with A through the use of *quite*. Note that in this particular case *quite* also occurs in the previous turn as a determiner modifier and part of a NP where we find two adjectives: one after the other *sweet* and *crumbly*. It seems, as reported in Bäcklund, that the preceding adjectives, *sweet* and *crumbly* in (21), would have been omitted in the response together with the rest of the elements of the previous clause, and that *quite* is clearly an intensifier of these two adjectives.²⁷ However, this is not always the general rule as examples are also found in the corpus where *quite* is not present in the

²⁷Bäcklund, 105.

560 conversation exchange that comes before (22). *Quite* used with this meaning may also
 express emphasis, being equivalent to *exactly* or *absolutely*.

(22) Speaker A: Actually the ideal place for a soap tray is under the shower so it
 doesn't fill up with water.

565 Speaker B: Yeah uhm.

Speaker C: Yeah is under the shower yeah.

Speaker B: Yes.

Speaker C: Exactly.

Speaker: Quite. (554S1B071198/1)

570 As Tao suggests for *absolutely*, *quite* here alone “has the potential to be a turn
 construction unit (TCU)” from the perspective of Conversational Analysis.²⁸ This
 means that, as defended by Tao and other scholars, *quite* may follow the tendency of
 575 other adverbs of similar nature (*absolutely*, *indeed*, *surely*) in the sense that in these
 uses it may have gone through a process of grammaticalisation being equivalent to a
 typical discourse marker.²⁹

580 At times, we also have the impression that the speaker resorts to this construction
 to inform their interlocutor that they are listening to them and they are participating
 in the conversation. In these cases, more than expressing agreement the speaker is
 simply communicating their being there as part of the oral exchange. In this sense it
 would function as a backchannel. This can be clearly seen in the next example (23):

(23) Speaker A: Well I think uhm that he sings with a choir <,> and the choir
 and this is the Baroque Singers of York or something or the Bach Choir the
 585 York Bach Choir <,> and uh the leader arranges uhm venues and gigs.

Speaker B: Oh yes quite. Yes, yes Mmm. (128S1A032218/1)

590 On some occasions *quite* may also occur together with *so*. The latter functions as a
 pro element representing the preceding sentence. If used in the negative form, *quite* is
 always preceded by *not*, finding then *not quite* or *not quite so*.

(24) Speaker A: I hope she doesn't work at this institute <,,> or this institute
 Speaker B : That's a plot of a novel there <,>

595 Speaker A: Not quite. (79S1A020143/1)

600 Since I wanted to expand my analysis and as the function and meaning of *quite* in
 these contexts were not totally clear since contextual factors seem to condition its
 value and meaning, it was also included in the survey (item 16) where the subjects
 were asked to explain the communicative force of this adverb. In reply to this

²⁸Tao, 7. For Conversational Analysis, see, for example, Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson.

²⁹That is the case of Elizabeth Closs Traugott and Richard B. Dasher, for example.

question, most informants maintain that the presence of *quite* in the response of the example provided by the test adds a new feeling or intention on the speaker's part. Although more context would perhaps be necessary to explain this, one has the impression that the speaker is being very damning with faint praise rather than simply agreeing with the statement made by the previous speaker in the conversation exchange. 605

All this seems to indicate that although in most cases of this kind *quite* serves to express agreement, it may also denote other semantic values, such as sarcasm, criticism and condescension. It will be important to consider contextual features to come to a conclusive answer. 610

Finally, all the informants believe, as expected, that this use of *quite* is more common in formal spoken styles of British English to the extent of being regarded as an archaism, which is completely in line with the views maintained by Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter.³⁰ Furthermore, from the replies obtained, differences according to the variety of English studied may also be anticipated. Some of the informants who participated in the survey claimed that this use of *quite* was relatively common in British English whereas it was less usual in American English where there is a tendency to use other alternatives such as *sure(ly)* instead. This assumption is also confirmed by McCarthy's results who records no occurrence of this word in his American English data versus a proportion of 0.8 per cent in his British English sample.³¹ 615 620

4.3.3. *Quite as adjective modifier.* No doubt, the majority of the words *quite* modifies are adjectivals. As reported in Table 3 above, this amounts to 530 cases, which represent more than half of the total occurrences recorded (58.8%). Broadly speaking, one could then say that *quite* is mainly a degree word although this label applies specially to the adjectival category. 625

When questioned about the differences in meaning between *quite* and *very* (item 1 of the test), only three of our respondents claim that they are identical in meaning whereas for the majority of them *very* would be equivalent to "a lot" and *quite* to "a little bit", that is, they see the latter more as a compromiser. As regards the contrast in meaning between *quite* and *completely* (item 2), most of the respondents maintain that the latter is stronger than the former and even sounds more natural to spoken English. Only two of the subjects surveyed perceive that these two adverbs denote similar things. This finding contrasts with the subjects' perception of *quite* versus *rather* (item 3). On this occasion, more than half, eight subjects, believe that they express an identical meaning although for three of them *quite* seems to be stronger than *rather*. Finally, a couple of the individuals questioned consider that intonation is a key factor to be considered. 630 635 640

³⁰McCarthy, 60; McCarthy and Carter, 129.

³¹McCarthy, 60.

With respect to the types of adjectives that normally go with *quite*, we find, as expected, that predicatives are much more common than attributives, as Table 4 illustrates.

Special mention should also be made to participial adjectives, a total of 50, which correspond to 9.4 per cent of the whole number. Of all participial adjectives, thirty-three are *-ing* forms while the remaining seventeen are *-ed* ones. Furthermore, there is an important set of adjectives used attributively in both written and spoken language with *quite* combining with the indefinite article. In some cases, *quite* precedes the indefinite article while in others, the opposite is true. Five occurrences are also recorded in which *quite* follows a determiner different from *a*, mainly a numeral and *some*. Table 5 shows these uses of *quite* in more detail.

4.3.3.1. *quite* + *a* + adj. + noun. As can easily be derived from Table 5, in most cases (77.1%) *quite* occurs determining the indefinite article, being followed by an adjective and a noun. These adjectives may be both gradable and non-gradable although there is a tendency for gradability. The most common adjective collocations found in this pattern are as follows in Table 6.

Most of these adjectives denote positive qualities: *good, nice, smart, important, formidable, attractive, pleasant, significant, serious, sweet, handy, valid, comfortable, humble, substantial, interesting, popular*. There is also a group of them which express some kind of measure or size, such as *long, high, big, large, major, wide, huge, small*. *Quite* in these cases means the same as “a fairly/a rather”.

4.3.3.2. *a* + *quite* + adj. + noun. As shown in Table 5, there are also eleven examples in which the position of *quite* and *a* is inverted, that is, the indefinite article

Table 4 General Distribution of *Quite* as Adjective Modifier

	Spoken language	%	Written language	%	Total	%
Predicative	374	85.8	68	71.6	442	83.4
Attributive	61	14.2	27	28.4	88	16.6
Total	435	100.0	95	100.0	530	100.0

Table 5 Use of *Quite* as Adjectival Intensifier in Combination with a Determiner

	Spoken language	%	Written language	%	Total	%
<i>Quite</i> + <i>a</i>	38	76	16	80	54	77.1
<i>a</i> + <i>quite</i>	8	16	3	15	11	15.7
Det + <i>quite</i>	4	8	1	5	5	7.2
Total	50	100	20	100	70	100.0

Table 6 Adjective Collocations of *Quite* as Predeterminer of the Indefinite Article

Adjective	N
good	6
long	3
high	2
important	2
significant	2
interesting	2
large	2
different	2
nice	2

occurs first being followed by *quite*. This construction is not as frequent as the previous one but it is worth studying:

- (25) This sustained growth bred confidence and that in turn led to a quite unprecedented rise in borrowing ... (749S2B4179/2)

The semantic nature of the adjectives *quite* collocates with in these constructions does not differ very much from that reported in the preceding case. As before, they also denote a distinctive property of a person or thing: *remarkable, good, technical, serious, successful, unprecedented, high*. However, adjectives conveying size or measure are not common at all in this group. Although there is a difference in the position of the elements (*a quite* vs. *quite a*), the meaning expressed seems to be the same. Bolinger refers to the possible existence of language variation in which “outside factors may decide to choose”.³² In one case, the adjective is intensified whereas in the other we intensify a NP. This possible variation disappears when the adjective is not present since in that case the indefinite article can only be placed between the intensifier and the noun. Study the following:

- (26) The production of a sentence grammar you know limited to a particular domain would be quite a formidable task to me. (92S1A024126/1)
- (26a) The production of a sentence grammar you know limited to a particular domain would be a quite formidable task to me.
- (26b) The production of a sentence grammar you know limited to a particular domain would be quite a task to me.
- (26c) *The production of a sentence grammar you know limited to a particular domain would be a quite task to me.

³²Bolinger, 99–100.

Some scholars, such as Cornelis Stoffel, however, maintain that *quite* in these contexts also conveys a modal meaning associated to the idea of surprise.³³ It seems as if the speaker is not expecting what they are finding and this feeling of something unexpected is then expressed with the help of *quite* in these contexts. This can be easily seen in the following example in which speaker A is asking B about her last holidays. Speaker B then shows her astonishment by saying:

(27) It was quite an expensive holiday. (268S1A063/90)

Anyhow, I believe that this undertone of surprise or of something unexpected may vary according to each particular situation. Consequently, this issue was further investigated in the survey through question 7 (*She's got a quite small house vs. she's got quite a small house*). One third of the subjects questioned consider that the placement of the indefinite article before the intensifier makes the sentence sound awkward and slightly deviant to the point that they would never use it like that. However, six of them share the opinion that the position of *quite* before or after the article does not make any difference either in meaning or in style. It is also worth pointing out that in some reference works such as the *COBUILD English Usage*, it is categorically stated that *quite* should be placed in front of "a" and not after it.³⁴ Furthermore, Gunter Lorenz in his comparative study of adjective intensification between learners and native speakers only found four instances in all the corpora used in which *quite* is used as a postdeterminer rather than as a predeterminer: one of them is in the native corpus while the remaining ones are in the learner samples. Consequently, in his view, the rule that states that *quite* should be put in front of "a" and not after it "may well serve as a valid 'didactic' simplification for L2 production".³⁵

4.3.3.3. Det + *quite* + adj. + noun. The number of cases in which a determiner different from *a* precedes *quite* is highly limited. It is reduced to only five occurrences: three of them with the numeral *two* and the remaining with the quantifier *some*.

(28) I've done two quite big feature articles illustrated which I published in Bombay. (282S1A066/162)

(29) and told him there were some quite large companies in the market who were interested in acquiring businesses in that field. (727S2A07051/1)

In these cases *quite* clearly intensifies the quality expressed by the adjective.

³³Quoted from Vermeire, 305.

³⁴Sinclair, ed., 566.

³⁵Lorenz, 145.

Table 7 Collocations of *Quite* as Adverb Modifier

Adverb	N
often	9
clearly	6
happily	7
rightly	7
honestly	5
frankly	4
easily	4
possibly	4
dramatically	3
accurately	2
definitely	2
well	5
recently	2
regularly	2

4.3.4. *Quite as adverb modifier.* Adverbs are the second most frequent word-class *quite* modifies in the corpus. A total of 121 examples were found, being equivalent to almost 14 per cent of the total. This is also in keeping with Vermeire and Bäcklund's results, who report a figure of 17.5 per cent and 16.6 per cent, respectively.³⁶ *Quite* is always placed before the adverbs it modifies. Most of these adverbs are formations with the suffix *-ly*. The adverbs *often*, *so*, *well*, *enough*, *little*, *soon* and *close* are exceptions to this general rule. The most common collocations of *quite* with an adverb are as follows in Table 7.

The adverbs that usually combine with *quite* could be well divided semantically into four main groups: time frequency (*often*, *regularly*, *recently*, *frequently*, *soon*), manner or mode (*well*, *correctly*, *carefully*, *nicely*, *easily*, *quickly*, *happily*, *slowly*, *roughly*, *dramatically*, *gently*, *arbitrarily*, *rapidly*), degree or comparison (*as*, *so*, *enough*, *such a*) and a fourth one, which may be described as stance, sentence adverbs or style disjuncts since they comment on the content or style of the clause (*honestly*, *frankly*, *rightly*, *clearly*, *conspicuously*, *definitely*, *naturally*, *correctly*, *possibly*, *literally*, *topically*).

As regards the position in the sentence of these adverbs, *quite* does not seem to play an important role. The position of these adverbs is conditioned by their semantic and syntactic nature rather than by the influence of *quite*. Thus, time frequency adverb phrases modified by *quite* can vary their position in the sentence. We may find them at the end (30), in medial position, that is, between the subject and the main verb (31) and at the beginning (32).

(30) In fact I re-read most of them quite recently. (49S1A015240/1)

(31) They quite often refer to God as the Divine. (223S1A053299/1)

³⁶Vermeire, 308; Bäcklund, 267–8.

- (32) And quite often the local libraries are actually better equipped.
(400S1B00730/1)

Manner or mode adverbs with *quite* generally occupy final position (33). However, at times they may modify an adjective phrase and they are then placed right before the phrase they intensify (34) and (35).

- (33) In fact that particular colour it goes quite well here. (333S1A08668/1)
(34) Somebody who was a solicitor acting for your husband could quite easily argue ... (563S1B072242/1)
(35) I mean <,> museums I have uh some kind of background in just because the work that I was doing was quite closely affiliated with museums and stuff. (278S1A06656/1)

Degree or comparison adverbs modified by *quite* are not very many but we do find some cases which are worth reporting. They generally occur in negative or interrogative constructions. Witness the following:

- (36) but quite as plainly we're better educated than we were in the past <,> (623S2A02130/1)
(37) It's not quite such a heavy task as <,> not nearly in my opinion <,> and certainly not quite so much a heavy task as <,> proving a case beyond reasonable doubt <,> (717S2A0614/1)
(38) And he couldn't give her that quite so easily. (131W2F01159/1)

The combinations of *quite* with another adverb, such as *clearly*, *rightly*, *frankly*, *honestly*, *definitely* that function as a stance discourse marker are quite common in both speech and writing. In these cases the nature of the adverb plays a more important role than the presence of *quite*. These adverb combinations may also occupy initial (39), medial (40, 41) or final position (42). However, initial position is the most frequent. When they are placed in the middle of the clause, they are usually marked off by commas in writing and they function as a parenthetical construction or aside remark. However, in most cases the position of this stance expression does not really alter the meaning of the sentence.

- (39) Quite clearly there are different points of view. (735S2B00777/1)
(40) And then in time what happened was as you quite rightly say <,> this nerve degenerates as a result of the fact that it's been cut off from its cell bodies. (406S1B009116/1)
(41) Some workers will argue, quite rightly, that it is extremely dangerous to ascribe degrees of severity to episodes of abuse. (71W2B01716/1)
(42) It didn't really appeal to me quite honestly. (131S1A03420/1)

In (39) the speaker is referring to a question at issue and expresses the existence of sheer differences in perception. Therefore, his initial remark affects the meaning of the whole clause and is explicitly stated. Example (40) was extracted from a classroom lesson and the speaker, presumably a teacher or a lecturer, wants firstly to acknowledge the interlocutor and, secondly, to emphasise the point. Example (41) belongs to non-academic writing and represents the speaker's view on the idea they are discussing. Finally, (42) serves to reinforce the notion being conveyed. Even on certain occasions in spoken language a statement is initiated with both a verb of thinking and a stance marker of this kind.

Consider the following:

- (43) I think quite rightly felt a little bit aggrieved that there was Wade Dooley lying right across the Irish side of that <, > (588S2A002203/1)

It is important to point out that all these adverbs that combine with *quite* are gradable and denote positive qualities. There are also some adjectives such as *likely*, *clear*, for example, which may also perform that role.

- (44) It's quite likely I've got lots of people this year <, > than there were last ... (168S1A04079/1)

The position of *quite* collocations with a time frequency adverb and a style disjunct, such as *often* and *honest* respectively was closely examined in the test (items 11 and 12). The respondents were asked to report the differences in meaning between pairs of sentences of the type *They quite often refer to God ...* versus *They refer quite often to God*, and *Quite honestly, it doesn't appeal to me* versus *It doesn't appeal to me, quite honestly*. According to the informants, the position of these adverbials in the sentence does not introduce any change in meaning. A large majority of them believe that these pairs of clauses mean exactly the same. However, three of the respondents claim that in the case of *quite often* the natural position of this adverb phrase is right before the verb rather than after it: they even add that the latter construction may sound unnatural to them and is regarded as incorrect. A similar argument is used by two individuals in the case of *quite honestly*, as they maintain that the placement of this adverbial at the end of the sentence rather than in front position is artificial and typical of foreign speech.

4.3.5. *Quite as verb intensifier*. The results obtained clearly indicate that verbs are modified by *quite* more frequently in spoken English than in written English: forty-seven occurrences were found in the former versus only three in the latter. Furthermore, two thirds of the finite verb phrases which are modified by *quite* include some non-assertive or negative formative. This is something already recorded by Bengt Altenberg in his study of amplifier collocations in the London Lund Corpus

of Spoken English, when he says that *quite* as a subjunct “is especially common in non-assertive contexts.”³⁷ This is worth mentioning because *quite* is very rarely characterised as sensitive to non-assertive or negative contexts, either in reference grammars, or even in specific studies on the system of negation in English.³⁸ Apart from this, certain verbs may occur both in the negative and in the positive. That is the case of *understand*, for example. Table 8 shows the frequency of the verbal forms found with *quite* in the whole ICE corpus.

On closer observation, it is possible to arrange the verbs that collocate with *quite* in particular semantic categories. Some of these tend to be more common in the negative than in the positive, and vice versa.

4.3.5.1. Negative.

a) Verbs of knowing: *know, imagine, remember*

(45) Uhm I didn't quite know what I was supposed to be into <,,>
(295S1A0721161/B)

b) Verbs of understanding: *understand, figure out, work out, explain, control, cope, get*

(46) but nev they never quite explain what they mean by going back to the basics. (480S1B039341/C)

c) Verbs of speaking: *call, gather*

(47) He didn't quite gather it cleanly first time ... (614S2A0152091/A)

Quite in the negative may express different meanings according to the context. Thus in (45), (46) and (47) it is really a maximizer since it conveys the idea of closeness to the state or situation mentioned. However, in other cases, as in (48), it is used to reduce the force of the negative for questions of politeness or lack of determinacy.³⁹ It really functions as a kind of hedge. This means that pragmatic factors are often at work in these structures.

(48) Having said that, I am very much in favour of the idea that clients see the best models available as early on as possible and get into negotiations where the model doesn't quite fit. (39W1B03085/5)

We may find the modal verbs *can* and *could* in the negative with some of the previous verbs, as in the following. They all denote ability and *quite* here functions as

³⁷Altenberg, 137.

³⁸For reference grammars, see, for instance, Huddleston; Quirk et al.; Biber et al.; Huddleston and Pullum; and McCarthy and Carter. Classic studies on negation are, for instance, Jespersen; Tottie; Progovac; Haegeman; and more recently, Horn and Kato, eds.; and Mazzon.

³⁹Diehl, 4.

Table 8 Distribution of *Quite* as Verbal Intensifier

Verb	N	
know	9	950
like	8	
understand	4	
get	3	
look forward to	3	
control	2	
fit	2	955
work (out)	2	
be	1	
call	1	
centre	1	
come off	1	
cope	1	
expect	1	960
figure out	1	
gather	1	
have	1	
imagine	1	
make	1	
overstep	1	965
place	1	
put one's finger	1	
remember	1	
wonder	1	

970

a downtoner rather than as an amplifier. This fact is also particularly reported by Leo Hoyer in his study of adverbs and modality in present-day English.⁴⁰

(49) But knowing Sarah I can't quite imagine the same from her <,,>
(293S1A0712271/C)

975

(50) Is that an irritation when you have a vague feeling you've lent a book to somebody and you can't quite figure it out. (38S1A013921/A)

(51) Couldn't quite control it. (587S2A001651/A)

980

4.3.5.2. Positive.

a) Verbs of liking: *like*

(52) Well I quite like that sort of quineney taste that grapefruit has.
(24S1A009601/A)

b) Verbs of expecting: *expect*, *look forward to*

985

(53) I'm quite looking forward to it actually. (387S1A0993182/A)

c) Verbs of wondering: *wonder*

⁴⁰Hoyer, 175.

990 (54) So one wonders quite at his absence. (714S2A060106/1A)

As Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey Pullum explain, *quite* in the affirmative may express high degree when it modifies something that implies accomplishment or achievement, but it may also convey moderate degree with gradable properties as
995 such expressed by *like* (55), for example.⁴¹

As regards tense, almost two thirds of them, thirty-four, to be exact, occur in the present while the remaining ones, sixteen, in the past. There is only one collocation of *quite* with a non-finite verb phrase, an *-ing* form, which is rather unusual.

1000 (55) Pritchard had over the years learned the fine art of scaling the heights of impertinence without quite over-stepping them. (116W2F00533/1)

In thirty cases the subject of these verbal constructions with *quite* is the first person personal pronoun in its singular form, that is, *I*. We also find several structures of this
1005 sort containing an impersonal reference with *you* or *no one* as in,

(56) So one wonders quite at his absence. (714S2A0601061/A)

With only five exceptions, *quite* precedes the main verb. It is only with the verb
1010 *know* where it may occur before or after it.

(57) and I don't quite know how how they can how they can get away with with doing any form of analysis without phonology. (19S1A008201/A)

(58) Well I don't think I know quite what you mean (68S1A018341/A)

1015 The position of *quite* in the previous cases does not seem to alter the meaning of the sentence. In order to verify this hypothesis, this question was further studied in the judgement test (items 4 and 5). Half of the informants claim that the position of *quite* in sentences having *know* as a main verb does not make any difference in
1020 meaning; two of them are undecided and the rest consider that the placement of *quite* after *know* plays a role since it introduces an element of surprise and adds formality or stiltedness. In the case of the verb *like*, twelve of the informants affirm that the sentence containing *quite* after *like* sounds awkward and is even incorrect. From the above, all indicates that it is more natural to think of the position of *quite* as verb
1025 modifier as placed before the verb rather than after it, at least with verbs such as *know* and *like*.

As far as aspect is concerned, Bolinger's hypothesis is only partly confirmed since I do not find any uses of *quite* with verbs expressing progressive aspect.⁴² However,
1030

⁴¹Huddleston and Pullum, 721–2.

⁴²Bolinger, 225.

perfectivity is not the rule either, as Bolinger and Diehl claim.⁴³ I record only two positive verb clauses in the perfect. Other contextual factors seem to be in operation in these cases.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, *quite* as verb modifier tends to occur specially in non-assertive and negative polarity contexts. This means that it would be possible to establish here a connection between the meaning of this word and the polarity system. The interaction between these two features will have to be explored in more detail in subsequent studies.

4.3.6. *Quite as preposition modifier.* *Quite* modifies prepositions on 33 occasions in the corpus, which amount to 3.7 per cent of the total number of occurrences. As is generally the case, the vast majority of the latter are found in speech rather than in writing. Four of them (*as, like, close to, near to*) are gradable in nature while the rest (*against, apart, by, into, beyond, out of*) are non-gradable.

As can easily be seen from Table 9 below, the prepositions with a comparative meaning, that is, *like* and *as* are the ones that most commonly collocate with *quite*. In the case of the latter the meaning expressed by *quite* is that of a maximizer and it is common to find them in negative contexts rather than in positive ones, more particularly, cases of negative raising or transported negative, that is, the negative has been moved from the subordinate clause to the main clause. This is quite common with *think* as the verb of the superordinate clause.

(59) I don't think there is anything quite like Toblerone. (89SA023192/1)

(60) I don't think it's actually quite as good. (88S1A023151/1)

It is evident that for the speaker in (59) *Toblerone* is the best, that is, nothing can be compared with it. Something similar applies to (60). The only difference between (59) and (60) is given by the category of the word the preposition goes with. In (59) it is a noun, *Toblerone*, while in (60) it is an adjective, *good*. This seems to be the general rule although I also find examples where *quite as* forms part of a comparative structure containing a second member of a comparison. In these cases *quite* functions as an intensifier rather than as a maximizer.

(61) It's not quite as bad as it looks. (101S1A026133/1)

The function and meaning of *quite* with the preposition *like* were also taken up in the test (item 6) where informants were asked to explain the differences between *It was like that* and *It was quite like that*. The answers obtained were not unanimous. About half of the respondents claim that the presence of *quite* in the second sentence makes it more vehement and emphatic since it serves to stress the point the speaker wants to make. *Quite* here would function as an amplifier or maximizer; the other

⁴³Bolinger, 225; Diehl, 4.

Table 9 Distribution of *Quite* as Preposition Modifier

Preposition	Spoken language	Written language	Total
as	12	0	12
like	4	0	4
apart	3	3	6
against	2	0	2
into	2	0	2
near to	2	0	2
out of	2	0	2
beyond	1	0	1
by	1	0	1
close to	1	0	1
Total	30	3	33

half, however, seem to interpret it as a downtoner. One of the subjects questioned explains it as follows: “In 6a, the thing was exactly the same; in 6b it was similar but not exactly the same.” Intonation and stress may perform an important function here since *quite* would have to be stressed in b to make sense.

With both the prepositions *apart* and *close to*, *quite* also expresses an intensifying meaning. In the case of the former, the use of *quite* helps to express the speaker’s point more emphatically and firmly; (62) is a good example of this:

- (62) I would controversially add that quite apart from the money the undeniable intellectual fascination flowing from microspecialisation also infects those of us who try sometimes to be on the side of the angels. (660S2A03989/1)

Only two examples of *quite* with *against* were recorded; (63) is interesting from a pragmatic point of view since the use of *quite* in a subordinate clause is responsible for the existence of a transferred or transported negation in the main clause as attested previously in examples (59) and (60). Consider the following:

- (63) I don’t think I’m quite against it. (201S1A050137/1)

The speaker, instead of affirming categorically “I think I’m not against it”, prefers to adopt a more compromising position through the use of *quite* in combination with a transferred negation. This meaning is thus clearly stated in this way.

4.3.7. *Quite as a pronoun modifier.* The highest number of pronouns modified by *quite* are the indefinite and quantifying pronouns *a bit*, *a lot*, *another* and *enough*. I also register an example with *anything*. They follow the general tendency since they are all found in speech rather than in writing. The only exception to this is *enough*,

Table 10 Distribution of *Quite* as Pronoun Modifier

Pronoun	Spoken language	Written language	Total
a bit	9	0	9
a few	2	0	2
a lot	26	0	26
another	1	0	1
anything	1	0	1
enough	0	1	1
Total	39	1	40

which occurs on one single occasion and that is in the text category of non-academic writing.

- (64) It's a very big oil-spill, and that's quite enough to be getting on with.
(81W2B0294/1)

The speaker in this case is showing annoyance with the situation and is demanding a quick change in the situation. As can be gathered from Table 10, the quantifying pronoun *a lot* is the most frequent, followed by *a bit*, the rest of them being quite rare.⁴⁴

The examples recorded with *quite a bit* are interesting since the quantifying quality of this word is increased through the presence of *quite*; in fact, the speakers generally mean just the opposite of what they intend to say. This may also apply to uses with *a few*. In fact, these constructions of *quite* with *a bit* and *a few* function as understatements. Consider the following:

- (65) Well <, > uhm <, > young Cochran the man that's on he he's he knows quite a bit about the church. (109S1A028214/1)

In (65) above, the speaker is not simply stating that the man is not highly informed about the church but more to the contrary. Most of these NPs having one of these pronouns as heads collocate with transitive verbs (*develop, have, give, know, look, appeal, play, ponder, make, publish, invite, summarise*) and they function as direct objects of the clause. On seven occasions, however, the main verb is of a copulative nature and the noun phrase then functions as a subject complement.

- (66) There's going to be quite a lot in terms of quality assurance and backup.
(434S1B020205/1)

⁴⁴There is apparently not unanimous agreement as regards the category of these words. Some grammarians such as Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter classify *a lot* and *a bit* within the adverb category.

4.3.8. *Quite as a noun phrase modifier.* As presented in Table 3 above, on a number of occasions, 30 to be more accurate, that is, 3 per cent of the total, *quite* may function as a predeterminer of a noun phrase which is in turn determined either by the definite or the indefinite article. Most of the occurrences found belong to the spoken sample and they are almost equally distributed in the two article patterns: fourteen occurrences in the first group versus sixteen in the second.

4.3.8.1. *quite + the + noun.* The nouns functioning as heads of these NPs are mainly *same, opposite, contrary, case, way, point, story* and *equivalent*. More than simple collocations, these expressions could even be regarded as fixed or semi-idiomatic. Study the following:

- (67) Don't think their picking up was quite the same. (80S1A20155/1)
 (68) Unfortunately, this is not quite the case. (53W2A01762/1)
 (69) We tend not to think of it in quite the same way Delius was having quite a success in Germany. (465S1B03257/1)
 (70) I believe that Coleridge, in his poems of the supernatural, did quite the opposite. (43W2A00630/1)
 (71) But that isn't quite <, > the story because without a script the various scenarios in *The Garden* are an invention themselves ... (520S1B045128/1)
 (72) But not directly, no, apart from living in the house, but that's not quite the point. (128W2F01156/1)

The main verbs in most of these expressions (67)–(72) express negative polarity as drawing a contrast or contradicting something that was said or mentioned before. Example (70) is the only exception to this because of the lexical negative import conveyed by the noun *opposite*. *Quite*, functioning once again as an intensifier, helps to establish this contrast.

Item 13 of the test was intended to obtain information on the value of *quite* with expressions of this nature. Informants were asked in particular to explain the differences in meaning between *Unfortunately, this is not quite the case* versus *Unfortunately, this is not the case*. On this occasion, there seems to be full agreement on this question and all the respondents consider that the presence of *quite* tones down the meaning conveyed by the speaker. The second sentence of the pair is regarded as more categorical or authoritative.

4.3.8.2. *quite + a + noun.* Under this pattern the nouns functioning as the head of these NPs usually denote positive qualities and they are of an abstract nature; examples of these are *period, while, problem, lead, scramble, climax, challenge, pause, strain, change, variation, while*.

We can distinguish three sets of nouns according to their semantics. A first group makes reference to a difficulty or unexpected situation experienced by the speaker:

strain, problem, challenge, scramble. A second series of these nouns convey the idea of movement or change in the state of something, such as *climax, variation, lead* and even the noun *change* itself. Finally, a third set includes nouns associated with the time category: *while, pause, period*. In fact, the expressions *quite a while* and *quite a period* obtain the highest number of mentions, three and two respectively.

- (73) It's going to stay there for quite a while I think. (63S1A018304/1)
 (74) I think f what's been happening for for quite a period of time is that therapy ... (10S1A00493/1)

In most cases, a gradable adjective seems to be implicitly present. Thus when the speaker says *quite a period of time*, he is implying *quite a long period of time* and the same applies to other cases, such as *quite a problem/challenge* meaning *quite a big or considerable problem/challenge* (75). All these examples occur in spoken language and, more particularly, in dialogues and conversations.

- (75) This is really quite a problem I imagine. (438S1B023121/1)

This finding is also confirmed through the replies obtained in the test (item 14). The subjects questioned had to report the differences in meaning between *I'm going to stay here for a while* versus *I'm going to stay there for quite a while*. All the respondents but one postulate that *quite* in this case functions as an amplifier apart from intensifier suggesting a longer period of time.

As Vermeire claims, the speaker in examples such as the one above creates in the hearer a certain kind of indeterminacy.⁴⁵ This means that the qualifier in question will have to be deduced from the context by the listener. According to the semantic nature of the noun functioning as head of the noun phrase, it will be necessary for the speaker to mention that quality or to omit it. This can be clearly seen in (76) below where the noun "week-end" requires a particular specification of a qualifier.

- (76) It was quite a quiet week-end actually <, > and lots of scoffing. (230S1A05579/1)

If we just say "It was quite a week-end", it is not really very clear what is meant. It could easily indicate a "long", "interesting", "exciting", "terrible" or so week-end. As a result, the noun "week-end" requires a concrete specification by the speaker.

5. Summary and Conclusions

To conclude, I hope I have provided an overview of the general behaviour of *quite* as an intensifier, being either an amplifier or a compromiser. The scalar nature of the

⁴⁵Vermeire, 295.

words it modifies and prosodic features seem to determine its intensifying meaning. *Quite* is then prototypically a degree word and its most distinctive property is that of multifunctionality. As a result, it can occur in different positions in the clause and it may not only modify adverbs and adjectives but also intensify other categories, such as noun, verb and preposition phrases. As an adverb it can not only function as an adjunct and subjunct but also as a freestanding disjunct used to imply a positive reply or an affirmative statement. This is also a relevant function in addition to that of intensifier and modifier.

The findings obtained clearly indicate that this item is very frequent in the language, especially if compared with the rest of the intensifiers class and it is much more common in spoken than in written British English. Almost 85 per cent of the examples recorded were classified within text categories associated with the former medium of expression rather than with the latter. The figures collected follow in general terms the tendencies identified in previous studies although differences in percentages are also detected;⁴⁶ this could be explained by the different nature of the research instruments used and the dissimilarities in the organisational and compositional features of the corpora considered.

Observing the different types of text categories, the data indicates that the highest number of occurrences of this adverb is registered in face-to-face conversations whereas the lowest one is reported in administrative and regulatory writing. This may be justified by a strong link of this word with speech. Furthermore, there seems to be a correlation between *quite* as a word modifier and informal registers of language; this hypothesis, however, could not be definitively proved.

As mentioned throughout this paper, the archetypical function of *quite* is that of a modifier, and particularly an intensifier of adjectives, adverbs and verbs. Thus, in more than half of the examples examined, this adverb modifies adjectivals. Most of these adjectives are of a predicative nature and about 10 per cent of the total number are participial ones. The majority of the adjectives that occur with this adverb denote positive qualities, measure or size, or refer to a distinctive feature of a person or thing. Special attention was devoted to the variation between structures of the type *It was quite an expensive holiday* versus *It was a quite expensive holiday*. The former constructions, that is, those in which *quite* is placed before the NP appear to be much more frequent than the latter. On many occasions, there is no difference in meaning but in some cases the speaker opts for the second alternative on purpose in order to express an idea of surprise or something unexpected.

Time frequency, manner, degree or comparison and stance disjuncts are very often intensified by *quite*. Most of these adverbials are derivatives with the *-ly* suffix. The presence of *quite* as adverb modifier does not play an important role regarding the standard position of time frequency, manner and comparison adverbs in the sentence.

⁴⁶See, for example, Bäcklund, 71; Vermeire, 289ff.; and Biber et al., 556ff.

The verbal category is very often intensified by *quite*, particularly in the oral medium of expression. Two thirds of the examples recorded for this group show a non-assertive or negative item. In the negative, *quite* tends to collocate with verbs of knowing, understanding and speaking; in the positive, however, it is construed with verbs of liking, expecting and wondering. However, there are verbs such as *understand* which may occur both in the negative and in the positive form. The meaning of *quite* in all these cases will mainly be given by pragmatic and contextual factors but it will basically function as an amplifier or compromiser.

Although *quite* usually modifies adjectives, adverbs and verbs, it may also intensify prepositions, noun phrases and pronouns. Although these are more marginal uses, they are also worth reporting because they present very idiosyncratic features.

A total of ten prepositional forms appear to be modified by this lexical item. The prepositions denoting comparison (*as, like*) are the most frequent, being most typically found in negative polarity clauses.

Quantifiers with a pronominal value such as *a lot, a bit, a few* are also often intensified by *quite*. Collocations with *a bit* are the most interesting linguistically since they normally denote the opposite of what is intended. They are in fact equivalent to understatements in colloquial English. At times these quantifiers do not stand on their own as heads and they are part of a NP. *Quite* then functions as a predeterminer.

On the borderline between collocations and semi-idiomatic expressions, we find combinations of *quite* with NPs. The nouns functioning as heads of these phrases will vary depending on whether they are determined by the definite or the indefinite article. Within the first group we find collocations, such as *quite the same, quite the opposite, quite the point* whereas within the second the nouns tend to denote an abstract nature and are very frequently related to time, such as *quite a change, quite a while, quite a period of time*, etc. Furthermore, the constructions of the first set occur in negative contexts; however, polarity does not play a determining role in the case of the second. In both cases, *quite* functions as an amplifier and serves to draw a comparison with something previously said or with an idea or point shared in knowledge by the speaker and the interlocutor.

Special mention deserves the use of *quite* as a freestanding disjunct. It functions as an affirmative reply to a previous statement with the intention of acknowledging what the other speaker has just stated or agreeing explicitly with the point just made. Apparently, this adverb, in the light of previous studies may be following a similar tendency to other adverbs of similar nature such as *absolutely, indeed, surely*, which have undergone a process of grammaticalisation to become discourse markers that have scope over larger pieces of language and convey categorical affirmations.⁴⁷

As regards the methodology used, corpus data can be illuminating and illustrative providing us with interesting information. However, it also presents serious limitations since contextual and pragmatic features may not be given or may be

⁴⁷See, for example, Traugott and Dasher; and Tao.

only partly given. This can be a key issue when analysing a modifying and multifunctional word such as *quite* that is highly conditioned by the speaker's emotions. Elicitation instruments like the similarity test used in the current investigation have proved to be very helpful. In this respect, the selection of the informants and the design of the questionnaire seem to be of the utmost importance.

This general study should be considered as preliminary since there are still a number of questions that should be examined in close detail with the analysis of more data and with the aid of additional research instruments. Comparisons across different varieties of English would also be worth conducting since the behaviour of *quite* will certainly vary from one to the other. Among the areas that would need further investigation I can mention the following: (i) as studied, *quite* is used to intensify different word categories but independently of the nature of the category modified there must be a linking element which may justify its behaviour in discourse; (ii) it would be very useful to explore the correlation between this adverb and the degree of text formality; (iii) from a more applied perspective it would be helpful to study the implications of all this for language teaching. In fact, some scholars have already opened a path for the latter question.⁴⁸

All this and many other questions in connection with the point at issue confirm without a doubt the hypothesis that there are still problems to be solved and, precisely because of this, they justify the attention that an apparently dull and unattractive language item like *quite* clearly deserves.

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⁴⁸For example, Lorenz; and Kennedy.

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