

# **“We’ve only missed an emergent phenomenon in Standard British English!”: the mirative ONLY in contemporary colloquial English**

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## **About the author**

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## **A. Introduction and presentation of the form under study**

In this article, I would like to turn the spotlight onto what I hypothesize to be an emergent phenomenon involving a discourse particle, that of what I shall interchangeably refer to as the *mirative ONLY* and the *extraordinary ONLY*. The reasons behind this terminology will be addressed below, but I shall content myself for the moment with merely illustrating the phenomenon. Moreover, this illustration will precede the justification that I will provide for seeing *ONLY* as a discourse particle, and that for wishing to use this example in a reflection about standardisation.

*ONLY*, as an adverb, has a restrictive meaning, glosable as in the Oxford English Dictionary by “Solely, merely, exclusively; with no one or nothing more besides; as a single or solitary thing or fact; no more than. Also, with a verb or verb phrase: no more than, simply, merely”. Using the inalienable privilege of the linguist to invent examples which correspond to a life-long fantasy, we can illustrate this conventional, long-standing meaning in the following way:

1. *Jim has only won Wimbledon*

*ONLY*, as is well known, has ambiguous scope, inasmuch as in the above example, it may be read that Jim has done nothing but win at Wimbledon, *i.e.* he has entered the tournament on four occasions and has never lost a single match. This, however, is a very unlikely reading of the above sentence, not least because its antonym:

2. ? *Jim has only lost Wimbledon*

is somewhat anomalous.

A more likely reading of (1) is that the only tournament that Jim has ever won is Wimbledon. He has never succeeded at any of the other major tournaments. The scope of *ONLY* here is in fact over the NP Wimbledon, as is shown by the fact that the alternative structure in (3) is entirely synonymous.

3. *Jim has won only Wimbledon.*

This is all well-known and uncontentious, even though two passing remarks are in order: firstly that there is some prescriptive pressure tending to prefer (3) over (1), as we will briefly adumbrate shortly, and second that there is a considerable amount of literature, particularly in the field of formal semantics, on the subject of the ambiguous scope of *ONLY*. Neither of these should detain us here.

What I am seeking to demonstrate is that, provided the context is appropriate and, importantly, provided the requisite intonational pattern is applied, example (1), and crucially not the synonymous (3), is open to an entirely different reading, one that could be contextualized as follows: “Jim was the underdog for Wimbledon, nobody could possibly have predicted his victory, and yet here we are, on a July Sunday afternoon, and, it's incredible, but he has indeed won it!”

This reading, in this example, is therefore counter-expectational. It is my contention that there is a wider range of interpretations, ranging from the counter-expectational to the undesirable to the simply emphatic, all of which can be seen in the following, uninvented, examples:

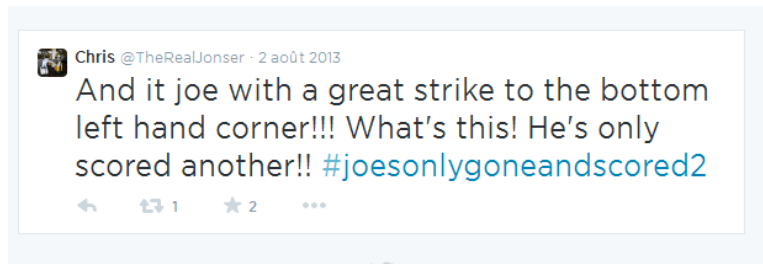
4. *Well b\*\*\*\*r me, he's only done it again!*<sup>1</sup>  
<http://www.golfmagic.com/forum/the-19th-hole/well-br-me-hes-only-done-it-again/58875.html#ixzz3BVLbw9GW>
5. *Anne Hanley must've been on the clever pills this week/fortnight/month/holocene period. She's only WON again with her Joker boosted 'SMELLS LIKE TINA SPIRIT' gaining six points. Well done Anne for again being the newest PUNSLINGER in town!*  
<https://www.facebook.com/Punbelievable/posts/443325029040570>
6. *And after their super showbiz playdate, what happened? Liam only went and bumped into Jay Z!*  
 example from GlowBe corpus (Daily Mirror, UK)
7. *Britain prayed James Blunt would retire, renounce music and go burn £50 notes for fun in his mansion. No luck. He's only gone and come back.*  
<http://www.nme.com/reviews/artist/james-blunt>

My reading of the above examples is that the events depicted are reinforced by *ONLY*, either because they are particularly noteworthy, or run counter to expectations, or are unwanted. Note that examples (6) and (7) combine this mirative use of *ONLY* with *GO AND V* hendiadys, in the Present Perfect form. There is some indication, which I shall not be able to explore in this particular article, that there may be a strong connection between these three phenomena, which I have argued elsewhere (Walker, 2017) are all mirative and combine in a process of collocationalisation. This close connection can be illustrated by the following tweet:

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<sup>1</sup> Let it be stressed that the rather coy asterisks here are not of my doing, but that of the original, in a long-standing journalistic tradition of prudently pretending that vulgarity does not exist while providing exactly enough clues for the reader to reconstruct the original term.

8.



which shows an *ONLY* + *V* in the body of the tweet, and in combination with a hendiadic construction in the hashtag. For the time being, however, I shall endeavour to restrict myself to the question of *ONLY*, taken in isolation. In short, I shall be restricting this survey only to those contexts where *ONLY* appears directly before the verb, and to those interpretations which I take not to be restrictive, but emphatic or mirative.

This article is divided into 5 sections will first take a brief look at the issue of discourse particles in English, particularly within the framework of pragmaticalization. It will then focus on the history of *ONLY*, to attempt to determine whether this new usage is consistent with other pragmaticalization clines that have been observed in the literature. Subsequent sections will take a diachronic and comparative stance, before a conclusion is provided on the subject as to whether what we are observing here can be said to be a change occurring in Standard English, or whether that question even makes any sense.

## **B. Discourse particles and grammaticalization**

Discourse markers or particles, (henceforth DMs) form a disparate category, but one that has been widely recognized and extensively studied since Schiffrin's seminal book (1987) on the subject. In short, as this is not the place to attempt to summarize years of research and dozens of textbooks, the prime function of DM's is to organize and structure discourse. In other words, they serve frequently to mark relations between sequentially dependent units of discourse. These items are all primarily pragmatic, or at least are not involved in the truth conditionality of statements in any way, which may, *en passant*, account for why they had been largely ignored until the last few years.

However, despite being essentially pragmatic in function, they are "part of the grammar of a language" (Fraser, 1988: 32) inasmuch as they are frequently highly syntactically constrained, not to mention being subject at times to well-defined intonational properties. Schiffrin allowed for a very wide range of items under the term "Discourse

Markers", sometimes also referred to as discourse particles<sup>2</sup>. Others have been somewhat more restrictive in their analysis. Fraser, for example, only admits into the category those items which Schiffrin calls "discourse deictics", which highlight the type of relationship that holds between the current utterance and the discourse which has held prior thereto (Fraser, 1988: 21-22). In the words of Redeker, a DM, on this view, is "[a] linguistic expression that is used to signal the relation of an utterance to the immediate context with the primary function of bringing to the listener's attention a particular kind of linkage of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context." (Redeker, 1991: 1168).

The "current utterance" may range from the fairly minimal, a single intonational unit, for instance, or perhaps a single sentence in a written discourse, whether what is to be understood by "prior discourse" may be an actual utterance immediately or proximally prior to the current utterance, or may be jointly contextually reconstructed by the interlocutors.

To illustrate, from among the dozens of examples possible, we might examine sentence initial *so*. This could easily appear in contexts such as:

9. *So, as I was saying before John came into the room.*

where *so* is clearly marking a desire to connect the current (and immediately following utterance) to one that must have formed part of the previous discourse, which had been interrupted. Here, no contextual reconstruction is required. It might equally be found in the introduction to a speech, for instance:

10. *So, we are gathered here today to pay tribute to....*

Here, there is no prior discourse, but there is a shared expectation among the speaker and the listeners, a reconstructible context involving invitation, acceptance of invitation and so forth.

As suggested by the definition, removing a DM from the utterance will not render it ungrammatical, but it will frequently have adverse communicative effects, insofar as DM's carry clues as to the speaker's assessment of, and commitment to, the relationships being established between various chunks of discourse.

Other examples include words or phrases such as *well*, *indeed*, *right*, *y'know*, *I mean*, etc., and all of these have received fairly extensive coverage in the literature, both from a

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<sup>2</sup> Brinton (1996: 30-32) provides an extensive discussion and a list of the various terms found in the literature.

synchronic (largely conversational analysis) and diachronic perspective. Many DM's emerge over time from truth conditional, non-pragmatic uses, a process that has been dubbed *pragmaticalization*. The extraordinary *ONLY* seems to fall neatly under these definitions, and corresponds closely to these criteria.

However, it is noteworthy that in her inventory of “substantive studies of individual pragmatic markers in Modern English”, Brinton (1996: 279 *et seq.*) lists no fewer than 37 different examples which have been the subject of intense research, but that *ONLY* is conspicuously absent. To my knowledge, there is only one scholarly article which begins to touch on this (hypothesized) extension of *ONLY*, namely Brinton (1998). It is perhaps worth questioning, then, whether *ONLY*, as used in the aforementioned examples, is a discourse marker in the usual sense of the term.

To do so, rather than apply to general definitions referred to at the outset of this section, an alternative is to use the various criteria proposed by Brinton (1996: 32 *et seq.*) for distinguishing DM's, and seeing to what extent they apply, even pre-empirically, to *ONLY*:

1 – *Pragmatic markers are primarily features of oral rather than written discourse.* This may have been the case in 1996, although it is harder to argue for this as a clear criterion in the internet age (see Crystal 2001 and any of the subsequent editions or rewrites) for an incisive argument, which has stood the test of time, to the effect that computer-mediated language has broken down the divide between written and spoken). All of the data to be presented below, on *ONLY*, are taken from internet sources. However, it is almost certainly the case that, YES, extraordinary *ONLY* is more associated with oral, or with highly oralized written discourse.

2 – *Pragmatic markers appear with high frequency in oral discourse.* This is, both intuitively and empirically, not the case of the extraordinary *ONLY*, but this may possibly be ascribed to its particular pragmatic uses.

3 - *Pragmatic markers are stylistically stigmatized and negatively evaluated* – I have unearthed no evidence to this effect, though see below on the syntactic positioning of focal *ONLY*.

4 – *Pragmatic markers are 'short' items* – YES.

5 – *Pragmatic markers form a separate tone group.* While this is not strictly speaking the case of the extraordinary *ONLY*, it does have a specific, and constrained, intonational pattern.

6 – *Pragmatic markers appear sentence initially.* This is not the case for extraordinary *ONLY*, which is syntactically constrained to a position immediately prior to the verb. However, Brinton herself remarks that this has only been regarded as a criterial factor by very few scholars.

7 – *Pragmatic markers are “difficult to specify lexically”*, which amounts to saying they contribute little or nothing to the propositional content of the utterance. Extraordinary *ONLY* fits the bill.

8 – *Pragmatic markers have no clear grammatical function.* I would argue that this is indeed the case with mirative *ONLY*.

9 – *Pragmatic markers are optional.* As discussed above, this is indeed the case of *ONLY*.

However, before concluding that *ONLY* can function as a discourse marker, because it seems to bear some of the hallmarks of the category as commonly defined, and before rushing to the conclusion that Brinton's list of markers is incomplete, and that the mirative *ONLY* is a very recent development in British English, we need to backtrack a little, to examine the literature on *ONLY* in synchrony, before turning to the diachrony of *ONLY*, from a global historical perspective and then more specifically on the grammaticalization of the marker.

### **C. A focus on a focus particle: *only* and mirativity**

The previous section served only to introduce and briefly exemplify the use of *ONLY* which is of interest here. In this section, we will look more closely at *ONLY* in synchrony, and justify the label of *mirative* which I have decided to use to refer to the hypothesized recent development.

*ONLY* is often described as a focus particle, along with adverbs such as *even*, *too* or *also*<sup>3</sup>. Briefly, what this means is that it is a particle which can be used to throw the spotlight on a particular element of a clause, to single it out, exclude or limit its scope, or otherwise highlight it. Focus particles are related to the processing of presuppositions and relations between new information and presupposition background, or relevance. While phrasal adverbs (*still*, *already*) link events to expectations concerning their continuation and termination, focus particles (*even*, *too*, *only*) evaluate entities and predications in relation to their membership in relevant presupposed sets and categorizations (Matras 2009: 197).

Focus particles are very frequently characterized by particular, or obligatory, intonational patterns, which serve to bolster the focussing effect of the particle itself. Another corollary of this focussing effect is the syntactic versatility of such particles, which can find themselves in more or less any position within a sentence, depending on what element is the object of focus, as in<sup>4</sup>:

- a. *Only Ahmed could have given the painting to Fatima.*
- b. *Ahmed only could have given the painting to Fatima.*
- c. *Ahmed could only have given the painting to Fatima.*
- d. *Ahmed could have only given the painting to Fatima.*
- e. *Ahmed could have given only the painting to Fatima.*
- f. *Ahmed could have given the painting only to Fatima.*
- g. *Ahmed could have given the painting to Fatima only.*

*ONLY*, furthermore, is restrictive in meaning, serving to focus on a given element to the exclusion of other paradigmatically possible elements. In (a) above, the focus is on Ahmed to the exclusion of any other person who may have been thought a possible agent; in (d), the focus is on the verb *give* to the exclusion of any other action that may possibly have been brought to bear upon the painting; in (e), the focus is on the painting as the only possible subject of the verb *give*, and so on.

A considerable proportion of the literature on *ONLY* as a focus particle has been written in the perspective of formal semantics, much of it concentrating on matters of scope (see

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<sup>3</sup> König (2002: 14) suggests the following list for English: *also*, *alone*, *as well*, *at least*, *even especially*, *either*, *exactly*, *in addition*, *in particular*, *just*, *merely*, *only*, *let alone*, *likewise*, *so much as*, *solely*, *still/much less*, *purely*, *too*. The class as a whole contains some core members (*even*, *too*, *also*, *only*), although none of even these correspond to each and every criterion König proposes for the category.

<sup>4</sup> Examples adapted, and indeed extended, from König (2002: 10).



below) and is therefore not for the faint of heart. For our purposes, we need only note that, in its 'conventional' use, *ONLY* serves to pick out, or to focus on, a particular element in a proposition, and can appear either before or after the focused element (compare, for instance, examples (f) and (g) above, where the focused element is Fatima). Similarly, the element in question can be of any grammatical category: noun, verb, adjective, clause, and so on. It is no doubt this flexibility in scope which has given rise to the scopal ambiguity of *ONLY*, which is occasionally the subject of explicit meta-linguistic and sometimes prescriptivist comment. Indeed, American journalist James J. Kilpatrick wrote a syndicated column, entitled *The Writer's Art* (also the name of a collection of said articles), which appeared in newspapers around the country. Every January, for over three decades, Kilpatrick devoted a column specifically to the placement of *ONLY*.

To take just one instance, using the sentence:

11. *Many animals hibernate in the winter, only waking occasionally for nourishment.*

the authors of the website [www.getitwriteonline.com](http://www.getitwriteonline.com)<sup>5</sup> complain that it is "incorrect", explaining that "The first version of [the sentence] is illogical because *only* modifies waking. Since a hibernating animal engages in a great deal of sleeping, it makes no sense to suggest that he or she is "only waking." In the improved version, the sentence more appropriately tells us that the animal wakes "only occasionally".

None of this would seem to apply to the mirative *ONLY*, as illustrated in examples (117) to (120) above, and further illustrated, for the sake of convenience, by the following three instances:

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.getitwriteonline.com/archive/070901Only.htm> (posted 09/07/2001, accessed 31/10/2015)

12. *Still, I thought - these are reasonable people - I'll ask for a pay rise and guess what? **I only fucking got one!** I went from £2 and hour to £2 and 8 pence an hour.*<sup>6</sup>
13. *You know what she did? **She only went and put me** in a whole new body! I know, I know, in-credible [sic], right? I couldn't believe it either!*<sup>7</sup>
14. ***We only bloody did it!** We've done the most northern, western and eastern roads in North America. 10,000 miles so far.*<sup>8</sup>

These examples also serve to demonstrate why I term this usage “mirative”. This latter term has been somewhat in vogue since the seminal work by DeLancey (1997), the title of which serves in some sense as a definition. Mirativity refers to a “grammatical category marking the speaker's unprepared mind, unexpected new information, and concomitant surprise, or deferred realization of facts” (Kim & Jahnke, 2011: 47) (for an extensive survey on mirativity, see Aikhenvald, 2004, chapter 6). In DeLancey's work, the mirative refers to a verb mood, indicating unexpected information, or a range of emotions such as surprise, doubt and irony. DeLancey focuses on the manner in which these are expressed through verbal marking systems in languages ranging from Tibetan to Turkish, via Korean, but the term has also been used to refer not just to verbal markers *per se*, but more generally to pragmatic markers (Kim & Jahnke, 2011 on the mirative uses of utterance-final *EVEN*) and to particular uses of otherwise existing verb forms (Ritz & Engel, 2008 and Ritz, 2010, on the present perfect in Australian English).

An alternative term for this same usage, I propose, is the *extraordinary ONLY*, and this will be used interchangeably with *mirative ONLY*. The inspiration for the former of the two terms is taken from a rather unlikely source, an article on French by Bres and Lebeau (2012). In their terms, the *VENIR* and *ALLER extraordinaire* are auxiliarized uses of the verbs in question which “confère[nt] au verbe dont l'infinitif le suit un caractère dérangeant par rapport à l'ordre attendu des choses” (2012: 152), which is similar to the kind of meaning that I claim is coded by the pre-verbal *ONLY*. They provide examples such as:

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.b3ta.com/questions/childlabour/page8/> (posted 17/02/06; accessed 14/11/15)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/7434133/9/Blue-Sky> (posted 3/10/11; accessed 14/11/15)

<sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/c90adventures/status/605750645417603072> (posted 02/06/15; accessed 14/11/15)

15. *Ah! ça c'est fort! Tu as eu une vie extrêmement libre quand tu étais étudiante et maintenant tu viens faire la sainte nitouche! A d'autres!*
16. *et cet imbécile il est allé se rappeler ce que je lui avais promis!*

Apart from the semantic-pragmatic differences between this extraordinary *ONLY* and the more conventional restrictive or focusing *ONLY*, there is also a difference in the scope options. Recall that, notwithstanding prescriptive complaints, focusing *ONLY* can take a variety of scopes and adopt a number of positions in the clause, as is further highlighted by the example provided by Quirk et al. (8.117):

17. *He's only thinking about marrying a fellow doctor.*

Quirk sees this sentence as having four potential meanings, depending on scope:

- a. The marriage is merely a fancy, and “he” is not actually undertaking any actions to bring it about (the scope is *THINK*)
- b. The marriage is the only thing he is thinking about – he can't get her out of his head (scope is “marrying a fellow doctor”)
- c. The only conceivable future partner is a member of the same profession (scope is “fellow doctor”)
- d. The situation is only that, and nothing more – there is no need to worry that he may be perturbed by something else (scope is the entire clause).

My contention is that the extraordinary *ONLY* provides a fifth possible interpretation: “have you heard the news? You won't believe what he has decided to do!”, where the formal scope is the same as in 4. This perhaps points to a hypothesis as to the origin of the form, which may have arisen as some form of ironic reversal of 4<sup>9</sup>. This brings us on to the issue of diachrony.

#### **D. The diachrony of mirative *only*: has it emerged?**

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<sup>9</sup> While the origin of the mirative *only* is not the main thrust of this paper, it is nevertheless worthwhile noting that such ironic reversals in English, while by no means rare (note the often decried *I could care less*), are intuitively less common in fixed constructions than in French, which offers its bemused learners a host of *je n'ai pas eu l'air bête; une soirée au Ritz? Ben, il est pas vantard, déjà, c'est ça qui est bien* and the wonderful negative preteritions of the kind *je t'explique pas ce qui m'est arrivé* and *Jean-Paul, pour ne pas le nommer*.

Before examining the question specifically of the extraordinary *ONLY*, it is necessary to retrace the history of the conventional focusing *ONLY*. Evidently, if the former is a recent development of the latter, a matter to which we will turn, it will be useful to set this development within a wider framework of grammaticalization, or more particularly of pragmatization.

One of the only scholarly articles to devote itself to the development of focusing *ONLY* is Brinton (1998), in which the following pathway is laid out:

- a. adjectival form comprised of the numeral ONE + suffix -LY (Old English *-līc*), with meanings relating to unicity, as in the PDE *only child*.
- b. Found very early as an adverb, presumably via conversion, with the meaning of “pre-eminently, in a special way”, such as:
  18. Thow bare Ihesu with-oute payne And *onely* had a child. With-outen losyng of thy maydenhede. (OED)
- c. exclusive focusing *ONLY*
  19. I will haue nothing else but onely this. (OED – Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*)
    - a. adversative DM
  20. *The flowers are lovely, only they have no scent* (the title of Brinton (1998)).

There seems to be little doubt that this is indeed the track followed by *ONLY* over the course of the history of English. As such, it shows an entirely typical shift from propositional content to the signalling of interpersonal and interclausal relationships, one of the hallmarks of pragmatization (Brinton, 1996: 275).

Turning now to the mirative *ONLY*, a number of incidental clues point to its being a relatively recent phenomenon. The first is that it appears to be absent from all of the desk dictionaries which I have been able to consult on the matter. The Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, provides no instance of anything that is clearly an example of the mirative *ONLY*

as I have been discussing it. The closest we come is the entry 5b, which defines *only* as “In a main clause (freq. following a modal verb or *to serve* and infinitive): inevitably although contrary to intention or desire”, where we find the “unwanted” pragmatics of some of the examples I have produced, but none of the examples given corresponds to an extraordinary *ONLY*. The seeds may have been sown with usages such as the following example, of course, but the mirative *ONLY per se* is absent from the OED.

21. *If you improve the housing conditions of the working class, they will only put coals in the bath.*

The second is that it seems to have escaped the attention of fellow linguists. While it may be a downside of the fact that it is nigh on impossible to search through the standard bibliographical tools for the word “only” with any hope of narrowing the search to a manageable quantity, it does indeed appear to be the case that there is no article devoted to this question.

Indeed, the only explicit mention of it I have managed to track down was entirely serendipitous, and in an article unrelated to the phenomenon. In research on, of all things, Korean honorification, Kim and Sells (2007: 320) offer a series of examples with what they claim to be the same propositional content:

*Her ladyship sat down.*

*Her ladyship’s only gone and sat down!*

*Her ladyship’s only gone and parked her bum!*

The authors note that “the other examples [*i.e. the second and third in the above list*] have extra expressive dimensions of meaning, at least involving the speakers’ attitude towards the subject, the (un)expectedness of the sitting act.”

Finally, searches for mirative *ONLY* in various corpora do not show any historical examples. Using Google Books, I can find no instance of *ONLY GONE AND V* any earlier than 2003<sup>10</sup>:

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<sup>10</sup> It could easily, and justifiably, be suggested that this search string is conflating two structures, as it involves GO AND V hendiadys, which is associated with similar emphatic readings. The reason is related to the quasi-impossibility of searching for strings involving *only* and filtering the restrictives from the miratives, given that there is no syntactic difference between the two. I shall resort to a similar methodological artifice, and provide a justification, when I discuss my use of “mirative triggers” later.

22. “Some twit has only gone and left their car right outside our drive. Do you know who it is, Abby?” “Sorry, Resa, that was me.”

Susannah George, *True Colours*, 2003.

Using the string *ONLY WENT AND V*, we find examples a little earlier, but still not before 1983:

23. “You remember that Koran I translated last year? They only went and printed Percival Chairman Allah all through instead of Merciful Chairman Allah, didn't they?”. “Mistake anyone could make,” sympathised Ming.

Keith Waterhouse, *Fanny Peculiar*, 1983.

There is, however, an earlier metalinguistic comment, from 1980, which gives a brief explanation of the mirative *ONLY*. The fact that the author deemed that it needed a form of gloss or explanation is perhaps a sign that it was felt to be a very new form.

24. “He only went and told everybody, didn't he!” (*'only' is another present-day term, ironical for some breathtaking act*). *The idea is to make the sentences more riveting*).

Jim Warltrop, *The Muvver Tongue*, 1980.

There is therefore some *prima facie* evidence that we are dealing with a relatively recently emerged phenomenon. While bearing in mind the caveats we already underscored in previous chapters, regarding the rush to judgement as to recent emergence, it would be useful to look at the geographical spread of the mirative *ONLY* as perhaps further evidence that this is something rather new.

### **E. The geographical spread of mirative *only*: British *only*?**

It is, of course, impossible to automate a search for the extraordinary *ONLY*, because of the frequency with which *ONLY* appears in all of its other various adverbial uses in the corpora, but it is possible to take advantage of its association with the hendiadic *GO AND V*

construction, in which it seems to bear the extraordinary interpretation almost systematically, in order to facilitate the search process.

Using the capacity of Google Advanced Search to indicate the national origin of a page, and armed with all the usual caveats about such a search, in particular caveats about the reports on the number of hits provided by the search engine<sup>11</sup>, we obtain the following numbers<sup>12</sup>:

	I've only gone and	S/he's _____	we've _____	they've _____
AU	13	40	1	22
US	11	34	0	15
NZ	4	6	0	1
GB	11,000	27,340	20,800	8,110
CA	23	34	11	19

Table 2: HAVE + GO AND + V: geographical spread

Pending further investigation using other corpora, the initial result is clear. The *HAVE ONLY GO AND V* construction is clearly overwhelmingly a British phenomenon. When it is taken into account that a considerable number of the results obtained from US, AU, NZ and CA domains are clearly resyndicated articles from originally British newspapers, or repostings of blog entries originally written by British contributors, the figures become even more striking<sup>13</sup>: *ONLY GO AND* is panlectal, but considerably more common in GB English.

A second intriguing connection is that extraordinary *ONLY* is highly correlated with vulgarity. As evidence of that, in a little over 50 % of the corpus of examples constituted for this research, with some 750 occurrences, there is some form of vulgarity, as in:

<sup>11</sup> The means by which the major Internet search engines index and count sites is an area of some considerable research and debate. See Janetzko (2008).

<sup>12</sup> Search conducted 06/06/2014.

<sup>13</sup> <http://autoblog.ca/reader/news/higgins-breaks-isle-of-man-record%E2%80%A6again>, for instance, is only Canadian by illusion. It originates from the Top Gear blog, deriving from the BBC TV programme of the same name: <http://www.topgear.com/uk/car-news/isle-of-man-tt-course-new-record-mark-higgins-subaru-wrx-2014-06-06?imageNo=8>

25. *She's only fucking gone and done it again*<sup>14</sup>

26. *We've only bloody gone and done it! 32hrs 48mins now will someone please open the champagne*<sup>15</sup>

So powerful is this connection that I was able to use vulgarity as one of the “trigger collocations” for the searches to be reported on in the final section of this research paper.

## F. Where does it come from?

To speculate on the origin of the mirative *ONLY*, a speculation that will have to expeditiously ignore the geographical restrictions on the form, we might point to fact that it is not infrequent, cross-linguistically, to find restrictive adverbs adopting an emphatic usage. (as shown in Walker, 2017, Swedish *bara* bears a strong likeness to the situation in British English, Russian *только* similarly, and so on). The fact that this is so common should, I think, point us in two obvious directions for an explanation. One would involve invocations of UG constraints of some form or another, the other cognitive processes. The obvious candidate here is the latter (although the two are admittedly not incompatible).

Possibly what is at stake here is some form of (ironic) reversal of the kind at work in the much maligned *I could care less* of English, or the negative for positive in French which so bemused me when I first began to encounter it, such as *Avec ce chapeau, je vais pas avoir l'air ridicule*, when of course entirely the opposite is meant. It may well be that this restriction > emphasis is a cognitive universal of some description.

It does seem that we might begin to posit:

- a. that *ONLY* has followed a universal pragmaticalization cline, explicable through cognitive commonalities, such that:

restrictive, focus particle > emphatic, mirative particle.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.thetales.co.uk/index.php?showtopic=1086&st=325>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pages/C2C-for-Caitlyn-for-British-Heart-Foundation/19663985372045>



- b. the mirative reading is labelled as colloquial or familiar, which is of course consistent with change in progress – new usages are very often tarred with a prescriptive brush.
- c. Focus particle *ONLY* has developed a discourse marker use through subjectification, serving to signal a speaker's surprise or otherwise counter-expectational stance, and is supported in this development by frequent juxtaposition with GO AND V hendiadys and the mirative perfect, also largely a British phenomenon, as illustrated below in the brief and concluding corpus searches.

- 27. *So we wait two whole excruciating weeks to see our new record signing in action and **he's only gone and fallen ill** a day before the match*<sup>16</sup>.
- 28. *By George! **He's only gone and cut** price of a pint for a second time.*<sup>17</sup>
- 29. *Great Scot. **He's only gone and done it**. Andy Murray is the Wimbledon champion!*<sup>18</sup>

To try and establish the degree to which these three features are, if not interdependent, at least significantly correlated, we undertook a series of corpus searches.

First, to what degree do we find mirative *ONLY* with neither of the supporting constructions? Here, we have to confess that we have perhaps chosen the wrong structure to examine. There is no means by which any of the corpora that are available is able to automate the search for mirative *ONLY* as opposed to a conventional restrictive *ONLY*, even allowing for the syntactic restriction on the position of *ONLY* in mirative contexts, whereby it has to appear immediately prior to the verb. The numbers produced are close to overwhelming. The following search string, [P\*] | [n\*] only [v?d\*], in the British National Corpus, gives a total of 2,128 occurrences, and the only way to adjudicate between a mirative and a non-mirative use would be to examine each one in turn. For instance, the following example, taken more or less at random, has *ONLY* used in its conventional focusing sense (50% and no more than that):

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.footballforums.net/forums/archive/index.php/t-301079.html>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.burtonmail.co.uk/News/By-George-Hes-only-gone-and-cut-price-of-a-pint-for-a-second-time-20140320080000.htm>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2013/jul/07/andy-murray-novak-djokovic-live>

30. *We only charged him fifty per cent for returning it.*

However, in a slightly different context, the same structure could easily be an expression of exasperation or astonishment:

31. *[You'll never believe what we did then!] We only charged him fifty per cent for returning it!*

A more patient researcher than myself may well have undertaken this Herculean task, but I felt that another solution was possible, at the risk of introducing an element of circularity into the search. In other words, I decided that by searching for the given string in collocation with “mirative triggers”, I would be better served. By “mirative trigger”, I mean words and/or phrases which by their nature or semantics, seem, on the basis of impressionistic observation, to be particularly common in conjunction with mirative *ONLY*. These triggers are of three kinds:

1. the word *again*, as in the following instance, where I take the number of exclamation marks to be a good indication of mirativity:

32. *He's only done it again!!!*<sup>19</sup>

2. some form of vulgarity, which serves as a proxy for the exclamatory nature of the utterance:

33. *And just when we thought his cheaty new single Don't couldn't \*get\* any more sassy, **he's only gone and teamed up** with rapper-type Rick Ross on the bloody remix.*<sup>20</sup>

3. an expression of incredulity, such as *unbelievable*, or *you'll never guess*, or the like:

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/KissFMUK/posts/174994139317257>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.sugarscape.com/node/1060150>

34. *'You'll never guess! He's only been accepted on an apprenticeship to be a Curse Breaker in Egypt!*<sup>21</sup>

The circularity involved (a search for mirative examples by using mirative triggers, which necessarily increases the proportion of mirative examples) is not problematic in this instance, as the search is not to establish whether mirative *ONLY* is, for instance, on the increase, or what proportion of *ONLY* can be attributed mirative meaning. The purpose, recall, is to determine whether there is any connection or correlation between three different constructions or markers which carry mirative meaning, and therefore the more we can single out just those examples, the better.

Returning, then, to the use of *ONLY* without any of the supporting cast, and repeating the above search<sup>22</sup>, but this time including the various mirative triggers, we find that the BNC only provides us with one example, and it is not entirely clear to me how it should be interpreted:

35. *she only had the bloody cheek to charge us last year for a turkey wrong, but I mean I did get that sorted out afterwards.*

A second search involving mirative *ONLY* in combination with a present perfect form was then conducted (search string [P\*] | [n\*] [vh\*] only [v?n\*]), revealing a grand total of zero occurrences. Only by adding the hendiadys do we eventually find something.

36. *And that (pause) so I spent hours doing it (pause) (unclear) done it for Marie and she's only gone and swapped with the nurse!*

The fourth possible logical combination, that of simple past plus hendiadys also turns up no hits in the BNC. Summarizing, then:

Search string	Explanation	Number of hits
[P*][n*] only [v?d*]	Only plus simple past	1 (?)

<sup>21</sup> <http://occlumency.sycophanthex.com/viewstory.php?sid=7912>

<sup>22</sup> Three searches were conducted, for each of the trigger factors. In the latter two cases, use was made of the “word list” function of the BYU interface for the BNC.

[P*][n*] have has only [v?n*]	Only plus present perfect	0
[P*][n*] only went and	Only plus hendiadys, simple past	0
[P*][n*] have has only gone and PLUS	Only plus hendiadys plus present perfect collocating with mirative triggers	1
[P*][n*] have has only gone and	Only plus hendiadys plus present perfect, without mirative triggers	3

Table 3: Mirative only in the British National Corpus

This is hardly a ringing endorsement for the use of the BNC to find examples of this particular set of constructions.

Only by extending the net a little further do we find the corpora turning up more examples, but even the GlowBe corpus provides us only with the following figures:

Search string	Explanation	Number of hits
[P*][n*] only [v?d*]	Only plus simple past	0
[P*][n*] have has only [v?n*]	Only plus present perfect	0
[P*][n*] only went and	Only plus hendiadys, simple past	3
[P*][n*] have has only gone and	Only plus hendiadys plus present perfect	2
[P*][n*] have has only gone and	Only plus hendiadys plus present perfect	11

Table 4: Mirative only in the GlowBe corpus

It should be noted that all of the foregoing examples are to be found in the British and Irish sections of the GlowBe corpus, reinforcing the conclusion that this is a phenomenon currently restricted to the British Isles.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> There is one apparent exception to this statement, which highlights once again one of the dangers of the GlowBe corpus, however huge and useful it may be. We find a “*We only went and won it... again!!!*” listed from the Canadian section of the corpus. Closer inspection, however, reveals that this is actually written by a British person (we know this because of the concurrent references to “returning to Bournemouth”) on a Canadian chat forum.

## G. The briefest of conclusions

Unfortunately, then, the corpus work is totally insufficient for providing any kind of conclusions. All we are thus far able to say is that mirative *ONLY* is indeed found in combination with both the other mirative markers, the present perfect and hendiadic *GO AND*, more frequently than it is with either of them separately, which could be the slightest glimmer of the entrenchment of a complex construction, but the figures are insufficient, and the corpora too unwieldy, to be able to explore this avenue any further. More research is needed, therefore, to determine, as I rather suspect, whether mirative only has developed in British English, to the exception of other dialects, because of a perfect collocational storm, to coin an expression, wherein the inherent mirativisational potential of focus adverbs, through ironic reversal, has been accelerated, or set off, by a happy combination with verbal hendiadys and mirative perfect use, both of which are also demonstrably more frequent in British English than any other variety.

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