Analysis on the Use of Synonymous Adverbs: 
Maybe, Perhaps, Possibly, Probably, and Likely

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The main objective of the current paper is to provide fuller definitions of five synonymous adverbs that express uncertainty: Maybe, perhaps, possibly, probably, and likely. In order to achieve this goal, 178 examples are collected from both spoken and written corpora and closely examined from semantic, stylistic, pragmatic, and syntactic points of view. The major findings are as follows: Maybe is used frequently in a casual context; perhaps is salient in its pragmatic use, such as hedges, when used in speech; possibly conveys a less degree of likelihood due to its theoretical property; probably frequently occurs with non-human propositions; and likely often accompanies good evidence and is the highest in the likelihood hierarchy. Observations under different perspectives are amalgamated to provide a clearer grasp of each adverb.

Keywords: adverbs, synonyms, semantics

Introduction

Advanced English learners may be able to list up maybe, perhaps, probably, possibly, and likely when they are asked to say as many adverbs as possible that express uncertainty. However, they may become rather reticent when they are further asked about areas where the words differ. They cannot be blamed, given that most dictionaries provide definitions of these words in terms of one another. For example, Collins Cobuild English Dictionary (1995) gives the same explanation for maybe and perhaps: “You use maybe/perhaps to express uncertainty, for example when you do not know that something is definitely true, or when you are mentioning something that may possibly happen in the future in the way you describe” (p.1226, 1030)\(^\text{1}\). The dictionary’s definition of probably accompanies the term likely, which is in turn accounted for with probably. An obvious problem is that dictionary users might come up with the wrong assumption that the words are merely substitutions of one another. While it may be true that the words are used interchangeably without much influence in meanings in some cases, there are also areas where their meanings and functions differ, which should not be simply ignored.

What this paper aims to do is to provide fuller definitions of these adverbs than the dictionaries that explain them in terms of one another. By doing so, it is hoped that learners develop a better idea about how they are used, and even that they come to recognize the idea that synonymous words are not always interchangeable, but often, each word has its own place to occur. In order to achieve this goal, the usage of each word is presented under several different perspectives, namely semantic, stylistic, pragmatic, and syntactic views. Corpus-based analysis is employed for the research. Examples are taken from both spoken and written data. The sources
of the spoken examples are movies, a TV show, a professional conference, and a formal interview. The written examples are found through academic articles, governmental documents, newspapers, magazines, and a classic novel.

Collocated Types of Propositions

In explaining possible, can, perhaps, and may, Doherty (1987) provides the following discussion: “They are connected with the way in which the modal concept is integrated into the evaluative meaning of a sentence, i.e. the part of sentence meaning by which the speaker expresses his attitude towards the state-of-affairs identified by the propositional meaning of the same sentence” (p.47). “The speaker’s evaluative attitude toward a proposition” seems to be expressed by not only perhaps and possibly, but also by the rest of the adverbs in question in this paper, maybe, probably, and likely, and this notion may serve as a good starting point. If all of the five words function as a device to express the speaker’s attitude toward a proposition, then a good question to be posited is: what type of propositions does each adverb typically occur with? An answer to this question may give some insights into the unique clarification of each adverb.

Seven categories are created after examining the propositions observed in 178 examples. Each category is demonstrated below with an example.

1) Types of Propositions

A. Speaker’s behavior, state, or will

E.g. Monica: Oh my god, what were you thinking?
Joey: All right, look, I'm not proud of this, ok? Well, maybe I am a little.
(TV show Friends)

B. Addressee’s behavior or state

E.g. Ross: Y’see, that’s where you’re wrong. Why would I marry her if I thought on any level that-that she was a lesbian?
Roger: I dunno. Maybe you wanted your marriage to fail.
(TV show Friends)

C. 3rd person’s behavior or state

E.g. Kapinus: Dorothy, I might add also that Judith probably has more history with NAEP than just about that I know of, you know, NAEP and reading.
(professional conference)

D. General people’s behavior or state

E.g. Monica: What did you tell them?
Phoebe: Well, they said that I had to think about it first, but what is there to think about? I’m gonna be giving them the greatest gift you can possibly give.
(TV show Friends)

E. Speaker’s and addressee’s behavior or state

E.g. Perhaps, we could use the format that we’ve been using with the National Assessment for Educational Progress that students are told if they are proficient, advanced, or partially proficient in each of the five content areas related to the ideas of mathematics.
(professional conference)

F. Speaker’s and 3rd person’s behavior or state

E.g. Sunday he’ll be in Houston for a DNC event. We will overnight in Houston. Events on Monday and beyond are still under discussion. So I have no -- but we’ll definitely overnight in Houston and possibly go someplace else in the Southeast --
(formal interview)

G. State of objects or description of situations

E.g. The reason for preposing the larger constituent (e.g. the entire PP rather than simply the discourse-old NP) is most likely syntactic (Birner 1994, p.242).

Table 1 shows the percentage for the co-occurrence between each type of propositions and each adverb.

Observing Table 1, a noticeable divergence is found with maybe. Maybe is the only one that does not occur with the “state of objects or description of situations” (G) at the percentage higher than fifty. Combining the spoken and written data, the co-occurrence of perhaps and this
type of propositions is 55.9% (11.5% + 40.4%), possibly, 55.1% (10.3% + 44.8%), probably, 67.8% (35.5% + 32.3%), and likely, 75% (25% + 50%), whereas maybe occurs with it at the percentage of only 33.9% (25.8% + 8.1%). On the other hand, the co-occurrences of maybe with the types of propositions involving either the speaker’s, addressee’s, or 3rd person’s behavior (A-C) outweigh other adverbs. One possible assumption is that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Propositions</th>
<th>The Number of Examples and the Percentage for Each Adverb</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maybe (N = 62)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A. Speaker’s behavior, state, or will</td>
<td>S</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. Addressee’s behavior or state</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. 3rd person’s behavior or state</td>
<td>S</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. General people’s behavior or state</td>
<td>S</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. Speaker’s and addressee’s behavior or state</td>
<td>S</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W</td>
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<tr>
<td>F. Speaker’s and 3rd person’s behavior or state</td>
<td>S</td>
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<td></td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. State of objects or description of situations</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>W</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: S = Spoken; W = Written; Note: ( ) = the percentage out of the total number of examples; Note: [ ] = the percentage out of the total number of either spoken or written examples.
maybe is favored for evaluation on human behaviors and states, but not so much for evaluation on objects and situations.

The adverbs that have particularly high collocation rates with the “state of objects or description of situations” (G) are probably and likely (67.8% and 75%, respectively). Examples of possibly with the human related propositions (A-F) almost always accompany the auxiliary verb can, and it should be noted that the most of other instances of possibly; that is, those without the well-known partnership with can fall into category G. It seems that the three adverbs, probably, likely, and possibly, are often used for evaluating non-human related propositions because they are associated with objectivity and formality.

The most notable finding for perhaps is its relatively high co-occurrence with the “speaker’s and addressee’s behavior or state” (E) (15.3%, combining the written and spoken data). As in the example of perhaps given in (E) above, the sentences or utterances with perhaps that involve the 1st and 2nd persons are often suggestions. The following are additional examples to illustrate this point.

2) a. Joey: I'm afraid the situation is much worse than we expected. Your sister is suffering from a subcranial hematoma. Perhaps we can discuss this over coffee. (TV show Friends)30

b. As you've read in the paper, I think this isn't the most important thing we could be talking about right now, but John Swofford assures me that this is an issue that never goes away. So perhaps we just have to keep dealing with it. (professional conference)48

Observing these examples, it is safe to say that perhaps is often used pragmatically. This issue will be returned later.

**Degree of Likelihood**

As generally believed, if the five adverbs all express uncertainty or are used when the speaker/writer is not sure about a proposition, is there any difference in the degree of likelihood expressed by the adverbs?

In other words, does an adverb indicate a higher chance for the actual occurrence of a proposition than another? In order to answer this question, the adverbs can be analyzed in terms of the following sub questions.

3) Sub questions for the degree of likelihood

a. Is the proposition expressed with each adverb based on or supported by evidence or good reasons?
b. Is the proposition expressed with each adverb theoretical or practical?

While it is quite hard to reach a definite answer for some examples in the corpus due to the lack of context, there are some instances that can be more clearly explained along the questions posited above. The following examples of likely show that the propositions are supported by evidence.

4) a. Phoebe: This is so fun. All right, what do we do now?
   Chandler: Well, now, I actually have to get to work.
   Phoebe: Most likely. [goes toward the door] Okay, I'm gonna be out there.
   Chandler: Okay. (TV show Friends)30

b. (Joey is an actor, and the speakers are watching a TV series where he is on.)
   Joey: (smiling) Oh, they cut me out of the show.
   Rachel: (smiling) What?!
   Ross: (smiling) Are you sure?
   Phoebe: (smiling) Maybe your scene’s coming up?
   Joey: (smiling) Not likely. ’Cause you see that body bag right there?
   Rachel: (smiling) Yeah.
   Joey: (smiling) I’m in it. (TV show Friends)30

c. The reason for preposing the larger constituent (e.g. the entire PP rather than simply the discourse-old NP) is most likely syntactic. Ex. (i)a below is grammatical, but (i)b and (i)c are not (on the relevant reading):

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In (4a), the proposition that is expressed with likely in Phoebe’s words – “Phoebe and Chandler get to work” – has a very high possibility that it actually occurs. Even the beginning of the realization is described by Phoebe’s behavior of going toward the door in order to leave the place where they were doing something fun and get to work. In (4b), the proposition that Joey’s scene is coming up, which is expressed with not likely, has little chance to actually happen, and it is backed up by the good reason that Joey on TV is in a body bag. The little possibility expressed by not likely is simply a negation of a high possibility expressed with likely. As often seen in academic articles, in (4c), the proposition – “the reason for preposing is syntactic” – is backed up by examples.

There are some instances of probably where the proposition is supported by good reasons as follows.

(5a) In practically every case, people prefer a person who comes across as ‘polite but vernacular’ to one who uses standard English forms without adopting the appropriate conventions for carrying out various mainstream language functions. A program for teaching standard English probably cannot be very successful without considering the broader conventions of language use and behavior (academic article, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998, p.291)

(6) a. Here again it seems to be the vagueness of make that causes the idiomaticity. Possibly the root notion was that one makes up for something by an act or series of acts which makes---or more precisely, produces---a compensatory result. (academic article, Lindstromberg 1998, p.271)

b. Each finger has retained --possibly until the death of the victim --the fearful grasp by which it originally imbedded itself. (novel The Murders in the Rue Morgue)

In both (6a) and (6b), it is understood that the proposition expressed with possibly is one of several possibilities. In other words, possibly admits that there exist some other views. For example, in (6a), there may be other root notions for the vagueness of make. In (6b), there may be some other phases before reaching the death. It seems that with possibly, the writer picks up one of those views with their own reasoning, which is unsaid. Comparing with the instances of likely and probably where the proposition is given with clear reasons, the examples in (6) might sound a little weaker in terms of the degree of likelihood.

It might be even rarer that the propositions expressed with maybe or perhaps are based on solid reasons. In most of the examples examined in this paper, the propositions described with these two adverbs are motivated by more personal beliefs rather than by solid evidence. In many cases, they are wild guesses. The
following are some of those examples.

(7) a. Ross: Y’see, that’s where you’re wrong. Why would I marry her if I thought on any level that—that she was a lesbian?
Roger: I dunno. Maybe you wanted your marriage to fail.
Roger: I don’t know. Maybe—maybe low self-esteem, maybe—maybe to compensate for overshadowing a sibling, maybe you—
(TV show Friends)

b. Maybe you suffer from migraines and your doctor has prescribed sumatriptan (Imitrex). You want to know more about the drug and its side effects. You might call up the Mayo Clinic on your computer and check out its Medicine Center for a description of sumatriptan (or any prescription drug) and its effects.
(magazine Reader’s Digest)

c. Perhaps you’ve been told you have multiple sclerosis.
(magazine Reader’s Digest)

d. Howard Somers had always been afraid of heights.
Perhaps his fear was some sort of an omen.
(magazine Reader’s Digest)

In (7a), the speaker repeatedly uses maybe together with I don’t know, and the way he lists his reasons sounds rather thoughtless and almost irresponsible. The sentences in (7b) and (7c) are both taken from a magazine, and in these examples, the addressee is an indefinite number of readers. The writer has no idea which individual has what actual problems. The sentences beginning with “Maybe you suffer…” and “Perhaps you’ve been told” are quite hypothetical—almost equivalent to “Suppose you suffer…” and “Suppose you’ve been told…” Without specific reasons, the proposition described with perhaps in (7d) seems to be highly personal.

Interestingly, those adverbs that do not tend to be based on wild guessing, namely likely, probably, and possibly, share a common morphological feature. They have the negative forms unlikely, impossibly, and improbably, respectively. There are no negative prefixes for maybe and perhaps. The pairs of positive and negative forms indicate two sides of a proposition. In other words, a proposition can be stated in either one way or the opposite. This clearness seems to be consonant with evidence-based propositions with which the adverbs often occur. Furthermore, the finding that likely, probably, and possibly have a higher collocation rate with non-human propositions is compatible with the clearness property in that objective propositions are expected to be clear-cut than subjective ones.

Given that the proposition with evidence or good reasons has a higher possibility of actual occurrence, likely and probably seem to express a higher degree of likelihood. Possibly might follow the two adverbs in the ranking, and maybe and perhaps might express the least degrees. However, it should be noted that as in the examples in (5), formal contexts such as academic articles and professional conferences require the speaker/writer to provide examples, evidence, or good reasons so that their discussions can be more argumentative or more convincing. Entailing many examples might not necessarily be linked to the actual likelihood of propositions. Whether or not the adverbs are used with back-up information certainly serves as an indicator for determining the degree of likelihood, but it should not be a sole criterion.

Another criterion that might determine the degree of likelihood is whether the proposition expressed with each adverb is theoretical or practical. To begin with, consider the following examples of possibly.

(8) a. In the case of on, a first step must be to decide whether one is dealing with on’ or on’ or, possibly, both at the same time
(academic article, Lindstromberg 1998, p.68).

b. I’m not sure how you could possibly do that, other than the fact of telling them that it’s important. But the idea of thinking about what could students do to be supported in doing the best they possibly can.
(professional conference)
Analysis on the Use of Synonymous Adverbs: Maybe, Perhaps, Possibly, Probably, and Likely

The writer and the speaker in the examples in (8) are talking theoretically, rather than practically. The writer of (8a) lists up possible notions in theory, and the first possibly in (8b) indicates “with all means,” and the second one, “with the best effort” in theory. Theoretical issues do not necessarily result in actual happening, and thus it may be the case that propositions expressed with possibly have only a small degree of likelihood. To examine this point further, more examples are given below.

(9) a. In addition to these sanctions, the United States could step up assistance to Israel’s Arrow antimissile program to ensure that Israel will have adequate defenses by the time the Iranian missiles go into production, possibly in 1999. (magazine Reader’s Digest)

b. The mission is the second wave of a long-term assault on the planet aimed at learning more about its geology, climate and potential for supporting life, including possibly future visits by humans. (newspaper The Washington Post)

c. Rachel: Patrick and I had such a great time last night! I mean I think this could maybe turn into something serious.
Chandler: Really?! I-I thought you weren’t looking for something serious. I thought you were looking for some kind of a fling.
Rachel: Well, y’know, possibly. (pause) You didn’t tell him that, though? Right? (TV show Friends)

The writers in examples (9a) and (9b) sound as though they are hoping Israel’s having adequate defenses in 1999 and future visits by humans, respectively. The degree of likelihood of the propositions does not go beyond the writers’ desire or ambition. In example (9c), the idea that the speaker was looking for some kind of a fling could be true only in an ambitious quest. Substituting possibly with other adverbs in (9c) may reveal interesting contrasts in the degree of likelihood except for likely, which occurs as an adverb in the most restricted environment as OED (second edition, VIII) states that “Now chiefly most likely, very likely; otherwise rare” (p.949). Consider the following contrasts.

(10) a. Chandler: I thought you were looking for some kind of a fling.
Rachel: Well, y’know, maybe.

b. Chandler: I thought you were looking for some kind of a fling.
Rachel: Well, y’know, perhaps.

c. Chandler: I thought you were looking for some kind of a fling.
Rachel: Well, y’know, probably.

d. Chandler: I thought you were looking for some kind of a fling.
Rachel: Well, y’know, possibly.

Out of maybe, perhaps, probably, and possibly, possibly might suggest the least likelihood. One of the reasons why possibly tends to convey a less degree of likelihood may be that the realization of the proposition is one of the options available in theory, rather than a practical suggestion. As shown in (9a) and (9b), whether or not the proposition comes to be true is often determined by circumstances rather than by human’s will. Even when one wishes an event to happen, existing circumstances or means may prevent it from happening.

In summary, likely and probably often occur with evidence and solid reasons, indicating that they have a higher degree of likelihood. Possibly also accompanies evidence or examples but is often used when the speaker/writer is discussing matters theoretically, which do not necessarily lead to actual happening unless the circumstances are favorable and allow them to happen. Maybe and perhaps are more practical but are often used with wild guesses and highly personal speculation, which does not yield much creditability for the issue of likelihood.

Formality

There seem to be some differences among the adverbs in terms of formality. Some adverbs might occur in a formal context more often than others. One way of determining “a formal context” is to find whether the
adverbs are used in the spoken or written language. It is typically believed that the written language is more formal than the spoken one. The percentages of spoken and written data are summarized in Table 2 below.

The way the data were gathered is not perfectly impartial, and thus nothing definite can be claimed. Yet, there may be several points worth mentioning. As shown in Table 2, "maybe" seems to be preferred much more strongly in the spoken language (90.3%) than in the written one (9.7%). Examples of this word were most easily found in the spoken corpus, especially in the transcripts of a comedy show, which mostly consists of casual conversations among close friends. "Probably" seems to be preferred in speech as well (67.7%), but it may not be very hard to find the word in writing unlike "maybe" (32.3%). "Perhaps" and "possibly" seem to be used both in speech and writing with a slight favor towards writing (59.6% and 58.6%, respectively).

In terms of formality, several plausible proposals are posited as follows: 1) "maybe" is casual, 2) "probably" is more formal than "maybe"; and 3) "perhaps" is the most formal. As for "possibly" and "likely", although they sound rather formal, other perspectives, such as the degree of likelihood, might override the issue of formality.

Pragmatic Factors

It is important to mention that there exist cases where the degree of likelihood or the degree of certainty becomes irrelevant or minimized. In her study of words that are used to determine degrees of certainty, Holmes (1984) states that "Boosters or lexical items which express certainty or conviction (Holmes 1983b) may function mainly to express the speaker’s attitude to the addressee rather than to the proposition being asserted" (p.49). As she claims, some of the five adverbs are sometimes used according to contexts whose main constituents are interlocutors, situations, and topics. When the words are used in this way, the degree of likelihood or certainty of a proposition can be insignificant. The following is the list of pragmatic functions observed in the current corpus.

(11) Pragmatic Functions

a. Hedging (politeness, defending oneself in case of a rejection)

e.g. 1. (Ross has the doubt that his boss, Dr. Leedbetter might have eaten his sandwich.)
Ross: (getting upset) Oh-oh really? Did you confuse it with your own turkey sandwich with a Moist Maker?
Dr. Leedbetter: No.
Ross: Do you perhaps seeing a note on top of it?
Dr. Leedbetter: There may have been a-a joke or a limerick of some kind.
Ross: (getting angry) That said it was my sandwich!
(TV show Friends)31

b. Jokes

e.g. 2. I agree with Marsh that probably it shouldn’t be first out of the box, but I think it needs to be included again because of the audience that we’re trying to appeal to. And that’s the student, not the policymakers. (professional conference)41

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. The Percentages of Spoken and Written Data</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spoken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe (N = 62)</td>
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<tr>
<td>90.3% (N = 56)</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.7% (N = 6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perhaps (N = 52)</td>
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<tr>
<td>40.4% (N = 21)</td>
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<tr>
<td>59.6% (N = 31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibly (N = 29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58.6% (N = 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably (N = 31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67.7% (N = 21)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Likely (N = 4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>50% (N = 2)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Analysis on the Use of Synonymous Adverbs: *Maybe*, *Perhaps*, *Possibly*, *Probability*, and *Likely*

Paul the Wine Guy?
Ross: He finally asked you out?
Monica: Yes!
('TV show Friends')

e.g. 2. Paul: Well, ever-ev-... ever since she left me, um, I haven't been able to, uh, perform. (Monica takes a sip of her drink) ...Sexually.
Monica: (spits out her drink in shock) Oh God, oh God, I am sorry... I am so sorry...
Paul: It’s okay...
Monica: I know being spit on is probably not what you need right now. Um... how long?
Paul: Two years.
('TV show Friends')

c. Sarcasm

e.g. Chandler: Well, it’s official there are no good movies.
Janice: Well, let’s go to a bad one and make out. (they start to kiss and lean back into Monica.)
Monica: *Perhaps*, you would like me to turn like this, (turns sideways on the couch) so that you can bunny bump against my back.
('TV show Friends')

d. Encouragement

e.g. Jane: I’m sure Mom never got your letter. Grandmother wouldn’t have forwarded it. *Perhaps*, it’s not too late.
Father: It’s been too long. It’s over and done with.
There’s nothing you can do.
('movie Lantern Hill')

e. Sympathy

e.g. Chandler: Yes, it’s working! Why isn’t she calling me back?
Joey: *Maybe* she never got your message.
('TV show Friends')

f. Request

e.g. 1. Rachel: (still trapped under Ross) Pheebs, could you *maybe* hand me a cracker?
('TV show Friends')

e.g. 2. Strickland: I thought we might begin by having David and *perhaps* Eunice telling us what items that were in the minutes that were included in the draft.
('professional conference')

g. Provocation

e.g. (Rachel is talking on the phone with her Dad.)
Ross: You can see where he’d have trouble.
Rachel: Look Daddy, it’s my life. Well *maybe* I’ll just stay here with Monica.
Monica: Well, I guess we’ve established who’s staying here with Monica...
Rachel: Well, *maybe* that’s my decision. Well, *maybe* I don’t need your money.
Wait!! Wait, I said *maybe*!!
('TV show Friends')

h. Suggestion

e.g. Phoebe: This is nice. We never do anything just the two of us.
Chandler: It’s great. *Maybe* tomorrow we can rent a car and run over some puppies.
('TV show Friends')

i. Exaggeration

e.g. Rachel: Oh Monica that was the best Thanksgiving dinner ever! I think you killed us.
Ross: I couldn’t *possibly* eat another bite.
('TV show Friends')

The examples given in (11) are mostly found in the spoken corpus. Pragmatic functions such as those given above are more easily revealed in the spoken language since speakers are constantly subjected to rich contexts that consist of interlocutors, situations, and topics. Yanofsky and Holisky (1979) report the use of *perhaps* for encouragement (d) and request (f) as well as persuasion, which is not found in the current corpus. Holmes (1984) discusses hedging (a) in great detail. The propositions expressed in the examples for hedging (a), jokes (b), sarcasm (c), and request (f) are easily true with no room for doubt. Those for encouragement (d), sympathy (e), provocation (g), suggestion (h),
and exaggeration (i) are opposite. In these instances, the speakers are not concerned with whether or not the propositions are true, but they focus on what effects are conveyed to the interlocutors.

Table 3 shows the percentage of the spoken examples for each adverb clearly used for pragmatic purposes.

It is evident that perhaps is almost always used pragmatically when it is spoken (95.2%). In contrast, possibly and likely do not seem to be preferred as pragmatic markers. The two examples that are counted as pragmatic use of possibly both take the form "I couldn't possibly..." and are categorized into exaggeration (i). Maybe and probably seem to occur quite often in utterances with pragmatic functions (67.9% and 71.4%, respectively). In terms of preferred functions, one might argue that perhaps and maybe behave similarly in that they have a wider range of usage. Yanofsky and Holisky (1979) state that "the observation we have made about the behavior of perhaps in these three restricted contexts (encouragement, request, and persuasion) can be generalized for the class of possibility operators in ordinary English" (p.106)

Their generalization might hold for maybe and partially for probably, but not so much for possibly and likely. Indeed, the substitutions among maybe, perhaps, and probably in many of the examples in (11) do not seem to affect meanings too much while the substitutions with possibly and likely might cause greater changes. As for likely, the substitution is not even possible in many cases. Consider the example for encouragement (d) with the contrast between perhaps and possibly.

(12) a. I’m sure Mom never got your letter.  
Grandmother wouldn’t have forwarded it.  
Perhaps, it’s not too late.

b. I’m sure Mom never got your letter.

Table 3. The Pragmatic Use of the Adverbs

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Maybe</th>
<th>Perhaps</th>
<th>Possibly</th>
<th>Probably</th>
<th>Likely</th>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>67.9%</td>
<td>95.2%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
(13) a. Perhaps Jon will come.
    b. Jon will come perhaps.

They argue that *perhaps* in (13a) functions as an encouragement, which is most likely followed by reasons why the speaker believes the proposition. In contrast, they claim that (13b) is much less natural as an act of encouragement. Although my data do not contain any sentence-final examples, their claim for the importance of the sentence-initial position for a pragmatic reason can be applied to the results of the data given in Table 4. *Maybe* is one of the words which often function pragmatically, and it is often required to occur in this position so that the sentence becomes a proper statement of encouragement, suggestion, sympathy, or provocation. Adverbs in the sentence-initial position could affect the whole sentence and are capable of making the proposition in the sentence stronger.

*Perhaps*, the most prominent pragmatic marker in the spoken language, is found to occur in both sentence-initial and sentence-medial positions almost equally (46.2% and 50%, respectively). One possible explanation for this behavior is that *perhaps*, unlike *maybe*, tends to occur more in written texts where pragmatic functions are not primary concern. *Possibly* much prefers the sentence-medial position (89.7%) to the sentence-initial position (6.9%), which is also compatible with the fact that the adverb is often independent from pragmatic factors. Also, the circumstance-confined property of this word may prevent it from putting emphasis on the whole sentence from a personal point of view by occurring at the beginning of the sentence. *Probably* acts similarly as *possibly* in terms of syntactic positions. It is discussed above that this adverb often collocates with non-human type of propositions. The objective property of the word may be inconsistent with emotional acts, such as encouragement, sympathy, and provocation. This may be a reason why *probably* seems to be more limited in its pragmatic functions than *maybe* and *perhaps*. It would be very hard to find a sentence-initial *likely* due to its highly inflexible usage and its objectivity, a shared trait with *possibly* and *probably*.

When the adverbs occur in fragments, they are always responses to the previous utterance as in “Well, y’know, possibly” and “Not likely.” As shown in Table 4, the instances of this type are rare for all the adverbs, and differences seem to attribute to the degree of likelihood rather than syntactic positions.

**Fuller Definitions of the Five Adverbs**

In this section, the discussions from semantic, stylistic, pragmatic, and syntactic perspectives are amalgamated, and a fuller definition of each adverb is provided.

Maybe:

*Maybe* is used when the speaker/writer is uncertain about a proposition he or she asserts. The proposition with this word can be a wild guess or based on personal beliefs or on stronger reasons. *Maybe* is preferred in a casual context, such as in a conversation with friends, and accordingly, it does not seem to appear in formal writing very often. Apart from the function of making an uncertain statement, it is used when the speaker/writer wants to express his or her attitudes toward the interlocutor. When used in this manner, the primary function is not to express the feeling of uncertainty, but rather to make a number of social acts, such as encouragement, sympathy, jokes, hedges, sarcasm, suggestion, and so on. In some of these acts, *maybe* in the sentence-initial position works

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positions</th>
<th>Maybe (N = 62)</th>
<th>Perhaps (N = 52)</th>
<th>Possibly (N = 29)</th>
<th>Probably (N = 31)</th>
<th>Likely (N = 4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Initial</td>
<td>45 (72.6%)</td>
<td>24 (46.2%)</td>
<td>2 (6.9%)</td>
<td>4 (12.9%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Medial</td>
<td>14 (22.6%)</td>
<td>26 (50%)</td>
<td>26 (89.7%)</td>
<td>24 (77.4%)</td>
<td>2 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Fragment</td>
<td>3 (4.9%)</td>
<td>2 (3.8%)</td>
<td>1 (3.4%)</td>
<td>3 (9.7%)</td>
<td>2 (50%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis on the Use of Synonymous Adverbs: *Maybe, Possibly, Probably, and Likely*
more effectively since the position affects the whole sentence, which may result in a stronger or more sincere statement.

Perhaps:

Perhaps is used when the speaker/writer wants to make an uncertain statement. However, when used in the spoken language, its pragmatic functions, such as hedges, encouragement, suggestion, jokes, sarcasm, request, and so on, are salient. These functions are often irrelevant to the degree of likelihood of the proposition. It seems that perhaps is rather formal and is less used in casual conversations and more used in written texts than maybe.

Possibly:

The speaker/writer uses possibly when he or she states indefinite yet possible matters with all means or circumstances, or in other words, in theory. The propositions expressed with possibly often sound as if they do not have much chance to be true because being controlled by external forces, they are less practical and more hypothetical. The propositions are often based on some sort of reasoning, and they are often impersonal matters, such as states of objects, descriptions of situations, and the like. Because of this association with objectivity, possibly is not as much a pragmatic marker as perhaps, maybe, and probably. However, when it takes the form “I can’t/couldn’t possibly…,” it plays a role of exaggerating the statement or making it more emphatic.

Probably:

Probably is one of the adverbs to express the speaker/writer’s uncertainty toward a proposition he or she states. It is favored in spoken contexts while it is also quite frequently used in written texts unlike maybe. The proposition asserted with probably is often based on some good reasons or evidence, and it is also a characteristic of this word to frequently occur with non-personal propositions. Similarly as maybe and perhaps, it is used pragmatically, such as in hedges and jokes, but its usage seems to be more limited than the other two adverbs. This may attribute to the fact that the collocated propositions are often non-personal.

Likely:

The speaker/writer uses likely when he or she cannot guarantee the truth of a proposition but is highly positive about it. The propositions are usually backed up with some good reasons or evidence, and the contents of the propositions are often non-human matters similarly as possibly and probably. Likely is predominantly used to express the speaker/writer’s view toward likelihood and is not actively used as a pragmatic marker. It should also be noted that its usage as an adverb is nowadays very restricted.

Conclusions

Five adverbs that express uncertainty, namely maybe, perhaps, possibly, probably, and likely have been examined in detail. It is the major objective of this paper to reach a fuller definition of each word than what a dictionary typically provides. Semantic factors appear to be central for discussing the adverbs, but the degree of likelihood turns out to be irrelevant when pragmatic factors are present. Stylistic or syntactic factors should also be considered so as to reveal differences in meaning or strengthen discovered differences. Synonymous words should be treated more carefully in ESL/EFL classrooms so that learners will not simply assume that those words are interchangeable. Teachers are better equipped with amalgamated views for synonymous words to help their students choose the best word in a given context.

References


14) *Lantern Hill*. [Videotape].
