

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)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)². “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*)³

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*)³

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)⁴

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*)³

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)⁴

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)⁵

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)⁶.

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 1. Co-occurrence between Adverbs and Types of Propositions

Types of Propositions		The Number of Examples and the Percentage for Each Adverb					
		Maybe (N = 62) S1:56, W ² :6	Perhaps (N = 52) S:21, W:31	Possibly (N = 29) S:12, W:17	Probably (N = 31) S:21, W:10	Likely (N = 4) S:2, W:2	Total (N = 178) S:112, W:66
A. Speaker's behavior, state, or will	S	9 (14.5%) ³ [16.1%] ⁴	3 (5.8%) [14.3%]	3 (10.3%)	2 (6.5%) [9.5%]	0 (0%) [0%]	18 (10.1%) [16.1%]
	W	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	2 (6.9%) [11.8%]	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	2 -1.10% [3.0%]
B. Addressee's behavior or state	S	12 (19.4%) [21.4%]	3 (5.8%) [14.3%]	2 (6.9%) [16.7%]	3 (9.7%) [14.3%]	0 (0%) [0%]	20 (11.2%) [17.9%]
	W	1 (1.6%) [16.7%]	2 (3.8%) [6.5%]	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	3 -1.70% [4.5%]
C. 3 rd person's behavior or state	S	13 (21.0%) [23.2]	3 (5.8%) [14.3%]	1 (3.4%) [8.3%]	4 (12.9%) [19.0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	21 (11.8%) [18.8%]
	W	0 (0%) [0%]	5 (9.6%) [16.1%]	1 (3.4%) [5.9%]	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	6 -3.40% [9.1%]
D. General people's behavior or state	S	1 (1.6%) [1.8%]	0 (0%) [0%]	1 (3.4%) [8.3%]	1 (3.2%) [4.8%]	0 (0%) [0%]	3 -1.70% [2.7%]
	W	0 (0%) [0%]	1 (1.9%) [3.2%]	1 (3.4%) [5.9%]	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	2 -1.10% [3.0%]
E. Speaker's and addressee's behavior or state	S	5 (8.1%) [8.9%]	6 (11.5%) [28.6%]	1 (3.4%) [8.3%]	0 (0%) [0%]	1 (25%) [25%]	12 -6.70% [10.7%]
	W	0 (0%) [0%]	2 (3.8%) [6.5%]	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	2 -1.10% [3.0%]
F. Speaker's and 3 rd person's behavior or state	S	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	1 (3.4%) [8.3%]	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	1 -0.50% [0.9%]
	W	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]	0 (0%) [0%]
G. State of objects or description of situations	S	16 (25.8%) [28.6%]	6 (11.5%) [28.6%]	3 (10.3%) [25%]	11 (35.5%) [52.4%]	1 (25%) [50%]	37 (20.8%) [33.0%]
	W	5 (8.1%) [83.3%]	21 (40.4%) [67.7%]	13 (44.8%) [76.5%]	10 (32.3%) [100%]	2 (50%) [100%]	51 (28.7%) [77.3%]

Note¹: S = Spoken; Note²: W = Written; Note³: () = the percentage out of the total number of examples; Note⁴: [] = 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*)³⁾
- 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)⁴⁾

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
- Is the proposition expressed with each adverb based on or supported by evidence or good reasons?
 - 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*)³⁾
- 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*)³⁾
- c. The reason for proposing 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):

- (i) a. In the garden stood a fountain.
- b. *The garden stood a fountain in.
- c. *The garden stood in a fountain. (academic article, Birner 1994, p.242)⁶⁾

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.

- (5) a. 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)⁷⁾.

- b. Marsh: you say it keeps us at a standstill. In Texas, this could move us way forward. It *probably* depends on which state you're in and how progressive you are. I come from a very conservative state where changing assessment, from reading a paragraph to multiple choice questions to a whole passage was a major event. So it *probably* depends on your perspective as to where you are. (professional conference)⁴⁾

In (5a), the proposition that "a program for teaching standard English cannot be very successful without considering the broader conventions of language and behavior" is supported by the plausible observation about people's preference stated in the previous sentence. Similarly, with respect to "it depends on which state you're in and how progressive you are" and "it depends on your perspective as to where you are" in (5b), the speaker is not wildly guessing the possibility but suggesting it with some plausible reasons.

Possibly may act slightly differently from *likely* and *probably* in terms of whether or not the proposition is well evidenced. Consider the following examples.

- (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)⁸⁾.

- 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*)⁹⁾

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.

Ross: Why? Why would I- why? Why? Why? Why?

Roger: I don't know. *Maybe- maybe* low self-esteem, *maybe- maybe* to compensate for overshadowing a sibling, *maybe* you...

(TV show *Friends*)³⁾

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*)¹⁰⁾

c. *Perhaps* you've been told you have multiple sclerosis.

(magazine *Reader's Digest*)¹⁰⁾

d. Howard Somers had always been afraid of heights.

Perhaps his fear was some sort of an omen.

(magazine *Reader's Digest*)¹⁰⁾

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^t or on^c or, *possibly*, both at the same time

(academic article, Lindstromberg 1998, p.68)⁸⁾.

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)⁴⁾

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*)¹⁰⁾

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*)¹¹⁾

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*)³⁾

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)¹²⁾. 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)¹³⁾. 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*)³⁾

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)⁴⁾

b. Jokes

e.g. 1. Paul: (over intercom) It's, uh, it's Paul.

Monica: Oh God, is it 6:30? Buzz him in!

Joey: Who's Paul?

Ross: Paul the Wine Guy, Paul?

Monica: *Maybe*.

Joey: Wait. Your 'not a real date' tonight is with

Table 2. The Percentages of Spoken and Written Data

	Maybe (N = 62)	Perhaps (N = 52)	Possibly (N = 29)	Probably (N = 31)	Likely (N = 4)
Spoken	90.3% (N = 56)	40.4% (N = 21)	41.4% (N = 12)	67.7% (N = 21)	50% (N = 2)
Written	9.7% (N = 6)	59.6% (N = 31)	58.6% (N = 17)	32.3% (N = 10)	50% (N = 2)

Paul the Wine Guy?

Ross: He finally asked you out?

Monica: Yes!

(TV show *Friends*)³⁾

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*)³⁾

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*)³⁾

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*)¹⁴⁾

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*)³⁾

f. Request

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

(TV show *Friends*)³⁾

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)⁴⁾

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*)³⁾

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*)³⁾

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*)³⁾

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)¹⁵⁾ 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)¹³⁾ 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)¹⁵. 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.

Grandmother wouldn't have forwarded it.
Possibly, it's not too late.

The substitution with *possibly* given in (12b) above is a very odd utterance, which no longer functions as an encouragement. The use of *possibly* is often motivated by non-human factors or existing external power, and thus the adverb does not go with a statement of encouragement driven by an internal warm-hearted behavior.

Observations in the light of pragmatic use can be summarized as follows: 1) *perhaps* is salient in its pragmatic function when used in the spoken language, 2) *possibly* and *likely* are often used independently of pragmatic functions except when *possibly* is used as an exaggerator, and 3) *maybe* and *probably* often exhibit pragmatic functions, but *maybe* seems to be used in a wider range of situations.

Syntactic Factors

In this section, the primary issues are to seek for a preference of each adverb for a syntactic position and to see if such a preference reveals differences in meanings among the five adverbs. Table 4 demonstrates the percentage of each adverb's occurrences in three different positions: a) sentence-initial, b) sentence-medial, and c) in fragments. There are no instances of the adverbs occurring in the sentence-final position in the examined data.

Some words manifest their preferences rather clearly: the initial position for *maybe* and the medial position for *possibly* and *probably*. Yanofsky and Holisky (1979) provide a relevant account by comparing the following two sentences. Imagine that these sentences are uttered at a children's party where everyone is waiting for a magician Jon who is scheduled to arrive one hour ago (p.103)¹⁵.

Table 3. The Pragmatic Use of the Adverbs

Maybe (N = 56)	Perhaps (N = 21)	Possibly (N = 12)	Probably (N = 21)	Likely (N = 2)
67.9% (N = 38)	95.2% (N = 20)	16.7% (N = 2)	71.4% (N = 15)	0% (N = 0)

- (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 4. Syntactic Positions

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

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 character 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.

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