# Hopefully

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An everyday adverb: one form, many functions

WITH ONLY a few exceptions, such as *then* and *why*, English adverbs are categorized as *content words* that express referential meanings in both the physical and abstract worlds. Like nouns and verbs, they belong to the 'open' class of *lexemes*, in which new words can be created through processes that include compounding, derivation, and borrowing. From compounding come adverbs such as *hopefully* (formed from the noun *hope* and the adjective *full,* plus the suffix *-ly*), and *upstage* (from the preposition *up* and the noun *stage*). By derivation, adverbs are formed from adjectives by adding *-ly* (as in *economical-ly, sufficient-ly,* and *final-ly*). As for borrowing from other languages, we have for example taken a range of expressions from Latin and used them as adverbs (as with *ipso facto, ad nauseam,* and *ad infinitum*).

## Introduction

In most cases, adverbs created through such processes preserve the meanings of their various elements. The meaning of *upstage*, for example, comes from *up* and *stage*, the meaning of *economically* from *economic*(*al*), and the meaning of *ad infinitum* from Latin (strictly translated as 'towards the infinite', but more informally and colloquially defined as 'endlessly').

There is, however, an English adverb – *hopefully* – which, though created through derivation, expresses different ranges of meanings and functions. In many of its current uses, the meaning of this adverb does not directly correspond to the adjective *hopeful* (meaning 'in a hopeful manner'). This adverb deserves special attention not only because of its ranges of meanings but also because of recent criticism about its uses.

Drawing its examples from the British National Corpus, this article aims to examine the grammatical and semantic characteristics of the adverb *hopefully,* at the same time noting that there are no grounds for the current disapproval of its usage as a sentence adverb. There are four main sections. The introduction lays out background to adverbs in general and how scholars treat *hopefully* syntactically. The next section examines possible syntactic positions and functions, while the third considers its semantic characteristics. These sections argue that *hopefully* can be both an adverb of manner and a compact grammatical means of expressing modality and indicating how a speaker deictically views the event that he or she is describing. The article then concludes with first a summary of the key ideas covered then suggestions for further research.

## Different approaches

Scholars differ in their treatment of adverbs like *hopefully* that have rather free-standing positions in sentences. For example, Quirk *et al*, in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (1985), classify these adverbs into three types: *adjunct*, *disjunct*, and *subjunct*. For them, an *adjunct* has the same syntactic weight and balance as such other elements as subject

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DOI: 10.1017/S0266078407001058

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078407001058 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and object, whereas a *disjunct* has a superior role in comparison to other sentence elements. A disjunct is however more detached, its scope extending over the sentence as a whole. A *subjunct* has a lesser role than other sentence elements (pp. 612–613). The authors note, furthermore, that 'the same item can operate in radically different grammatical functions' although 'the semantic function is constant' (647). The following examples are given to show that the same adverb can be a disjunct, subjunct, or sentence adjunct:

(a) He admitted his mistakes *frankly*.
(b) He *frankly* admitted his mistakes.
(c) *Frankly,* he was contemptuous of the pardon.
(d) His *frankly* admitted mistakes were pardoned.
(e) His *frankly* extraordinary attitude dismayed his friends.

In each of these sentences, according to the authors, *frankly* has a different syntactic function. In (a), it is a sentence adjunct, in (b) it is a subjunct, and in (c) disjunct, while in (d) and (e) it is an adjunct and a disjunct that have been incorporated into noun phrases (647).

The problem I perceive with Quirk *et al*'s treatment concerns their classification. Their definitions of adjunct, subjunct, and disjunct are complex and, at one and the same time, vague and non-definitive. For example, I do not agree with their distinct classifications (a) and (b); it is hard to see why *frankly* in (a) is similar in weight and balance to other elements in its sentence, but the same adverb in (b) is not. In a similar vein, it is hard to distinguish *frankly* in (d) from (e) in terms of why in (e) *frankly* is more 'detached' than in (d), and hence a disjunct. Following Quirk *et al*'s classification, *hopefully* may appear in any of the positions of *frankly* in examples (a) to (e) above, but there is still no clear-cut way of distinguishing *hopefully* when functioning for example as an adjunct from the other types.

However, Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey Pullum, in both *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002) and *A Student's Introduction to English Grammar* (2005), treat all adverbs as a kind of adjuncts. They can be of many kinds: manner, place, time, duration, frequency, degree, purpose, result, condition, and concession. So, to them, all instances of *frankly* in examples (a) to (e) above are adjuncts, although they may differ slightly in terms of semantics. It seems that Huddleston and Pullum's treatment of adverbs is more in line with traditional grammarians, while they add more to traditional classifications of adverbs by including modal adjuncts, evaluative adjuncts, and speech-act-related adjuncts.

It is not however my purpose here to judge which view on adverbs is 'accurate'. Rather, I propose to examine the possible meanings of *hopefully* in terms of its syntactic function in a sentence, using the simplest possible grammatical terms. That is, in this article, *hopefully* (no matter where it occurs) will be called an adverb, but each instance of *hopefully* will be distinguished according to its function in a sentence by means of such terms as 'sentence adverb', 'adverb modifying a verb phrase', and so on.

## Syntactic positions of *hopefully*

Having collected data from the British National Corpus, I have found that *hopefully* can occur in the following syntactic roles:

### *1* Hopefully *as an adverb that modifies a verb or a verb phrase, as in:*

(f) She smiled hopefully.
(g) 'We could live together and paint London pale pink,' she said hopefully.
(h) The world is full of stray cats, many of them searching hopefully for a new home.
(i) Dr Tipler argues – hopefully, but unconvincingly – that a natural tendency towards altruism will ensure that this resurrection is pleasant.

In these examples, *hopefully* modifies the verbs in terms of *how* the actions are carried out. For example, in (f) and (g) *hopefully* indicates how the subjects 'smiled' and 'said', respectively, while in (h) and (i) it describes the manner of searching and arguing, respectively. In English, adverbs of manner are usually placed next to the words they modify, and so the position of *hopefully* as an adverb of manner is typically after a verb.

### *2* Hopefully *as an adverb that modifies a phrase (for example, a noun phrase or an infinitive phrase), as in:*

(j) All that lay before a young lady of breeding was duty to parents and hopefully a good marriage.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078407001058 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(k) Whatever happens, the whole family will be at the final – hopefully to cheer me on.

In these examples, *hopefully* modifies a noun phrase and an infinitive phrase, respectively. This is so because the scope of modification only affects what follows *hopefully*. In (j), for example, a lady's duty to the parents is obligatory, while a good marriage is something to be expected but is not necessarily certain. In (k), on the other hand, the family will surely be at the final, and, although the reason for their being there is uncertain, it is probably to encourage the speaker. To modify a phrase in this way, the adverb is usually placed before the phrase to which it relates.

### *3* Hopefully *as an adverb that modifies a predicate, as in:*

(l) Ireland will hopefully solve its political problems with the North and its low labour costs will put it in a good position to compete in manufacturing and assembly.
(m) He should hopefully be a normal size for his age then.

Different from the syntactic functions above, *hopefully* here may modify a predicate (a verb and the complements of the verb). That is, *hopefully* not only modifies *solve* and *be* in (l) and (m) respectively but also modifies the complements of these verbs: that is, the direct object of *solve* and the subject complement of *be*. Modifying a predicate, the adverb usually occurs before the finite verb or between the auxiliary and the finite verb.

### *4* Hopefully *as an adverb that modifies a clause or sentence (sometimes known therefore as a sentence adverb), as in:*

(n) Hopefully it will be easier now I'm freelance.
(o) Hopefully hopefully the baby'll be asleep in a few minutes.
(p) Hopefully we may be able to do that.
(q) Hopefully you won't have to stay here for very long anyway.
(r) Hopefully, the reader has now a sound understanding of money, banks and financial intermediation.
(s) We are going our own ways, but hopefully one day we will get together.
(t) I will be meeting with Duva and hopefully things will be finalized.

In these examples, *hopefully*, placed at the initial position, syntactically modifies the sentence that follows. In (n), for example, *hopefully* modifies the sentence 'It will be easier now I'm freelance', indicating that the whole sentence is what the speaker hopes for. Similarly, in (s), *hopefully* modifies 'one day we will get together', indicating that this proposition is hoped to happen.

However, the position of *hopefully* is not restricted only to the front of a sentence; it may be moved to other parts as well, as in:

(u) This series will, hopefully, tell you all you need to know about what makes a PC tick, what the various bits of one are, and how the various types of PC differ for one another
(v) Banbury's library and museum though are hoping to record your views, and they're going to, hopefully, make some history.

In these examples, *hopefully* still functions as a sentence or clause modifier, notwithstanding non-initial positions. Sometimes it seems difficult to distinguish a sentence modifier from a predicate modifier. For example, some might argue that in (u) *hopefully* modifies the predicate 'tell you all you need to know…', or that in (v) *hopefully* modifies the verb phrase 'make some history'. However, this is not so, because in writing *hopefully* as a sentence modifier is set off from the rest of the sentence by commas, whereas in speech such demarcation is indicated by a pause or a juncture and a different intonation pattern. To place the sentence modifier *hopefully* elsewhere in a sentence (rather than the initial position), is not only a stylistic choice but also an instance of the speaker's process of thought. That is, the speaker is indicating his or her desire in the course of the construction of the sentence.

Having examined the possible syntactic positions of *hopefully*, I shall now move on to its semantic property, in conjunction with the syntactic property just discussed.

## Semantic functions of *hopefully*

Considering *hopefully* as used in examples (f) to (v) above, we may broadly categorize its meanings into two groups: non-modal and modal[1] usages (as follows).

### *Non-modal usage*

Here, *hopefully* gives additional information about the manner in which the action of the



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verb is carried out, and *hopefully* corresponds to the first meaning listed in the *OED*: 'in a hopeful manner'. The adverb strictly retains the original meaning derived from the adjective *hopeful*. Adopting Huddleston and Pullum's terms, *hopefully* used in this sense is an adverb of manner. This non-modal usage is found almost exclusively with *hopefully* as a modifier of a verb or a verb phrase (i.e., syntactic position 1 above).

Since *hopefully* in this case is not modal, the sentence in which this adverb is used is rendered as factual (provided that there are no other words expressing modality in the sentence). It therefore follows that the verb occurring with this non-modal usage can be in either the past or the present tense. This is because what already happened in the past can be talked about as a matter of fact, and so can what is happening at the present time, what is habitual, and what is timeless truth. Considering again the examples (f) to (i), we find that there are only two tenses: present or past. The present tense, as in examples (h) and (i), presents the events as timeless truths, while the past tense, as in examples (f) and (g), describes what already happened – and for this reason is a fact.

Although it is possible to see *hopefully* used without any sense of modality with future time reference, this is rare. Theoretically, sentences such as *She will smile hopefully* are grammatically possible, but are hard to find, and I have never found any examples of non-modal *hopefully* associated with future time in the British National Corpus.

## Modal usage

In the remainder of the syntactic functions – (2) to (4) above – *hopefully* is used as a way of expressing modality. As discussed in the notes at the end of this article, modality establishes a contrast between fact and non-fact. It is how a speaker views or perceives an event: whether he or she perceives it as a truth, a possibility, a wish, a command, or a desire. So, when *hopefully* is used to express the desire for the proposition to happen (as in 'Hopefully, things will get better'), it can be said that the adverb no longer modifies a verb in terms of manner. Rather, it has become a grammatical way[2] of expressing modality. This use of *hopefully* is recent, its first occurrence, according to the *OED,* in 1932.

What is more, it is this use of *hopefully* that is stigmatized by traditional grammarians, and it has been resisted all along. For example, R. L. Trask, in *Language: the Basics* (1999), cites Philip Howard, a well-known British writer on language, describing the use of sentential *hopefully* as 'objectionable', 'ambiguous', 'obscure', 'ugly', 'aberrant', 'pretentious', 'illiterate', and 'introduced by sloppy American academics' (193). I see such criticisms as ungrounded and ignorant, because in English, with the passage of time, words may well undergo expansion in terms of usage, and *hopefully* is one such word. Other adverbs that have undergone similar processes are, to name but a few, *admittedly*, *fortunately, surprisingly,* and *frankly*. However, unlike *hopefully*, these adverbs have not been subjects of criticism.

Concerning the meaning of *hopefully* that comes with this modal usage, the *OED* gives the following meanings: 'it is hoped that' or 'let us hope', while the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2003) defines *hopefully* as: '[sentence adverb] a way of saying what you hope will happen, which some people think is incorrect.'. The two dictionaries are problematic: the definition given in *Longman* is too narrow in that it is restricted only to *hopefully* as a sentence adverb, while the definitions in the *OED* are too broad and simple in that there are contexts in which 'it is hoped that' or 'let us hope' does not fit in.

For instance, in example (s), 'We are going our own ways, but hopefully one day we will get together', it is not precise to paraphrase this sentence as 'We are going our own ways, but, let us hope, one day we will get together.' This is because the desire for the reunion might not be mutual. It might be only the speaker who wants the reunion, not the listener. Nor is it better to paraphrase *hopefully* with the passive voice phrase 'it is hoped', because doing so would leave the agent unnamed, or it may be interpreted as having an impersonal meaning. Here is another example in which *hopefully* may be interpreted differently. In example (g), 'Whatever happens, the whole family will be at the final – hopefully to cheer me on', it is best to paraphrase *hopefully* as 'I hope', rather than 'let us hope' or 'it is hoped'. This is because the context implies that it is the speaker's speculation of what he wants to happen at the final. Based on these examples, the adverb *hopefully* not only connotes deontic modality but also demonstrates a shift in terms of reference as to



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who it is that wants the proposition to happen. Therefore, this modal adverb *hopefully* is deictic-like in that the point of reference changes in accordance with the context in which it is used. Four points of reference can be distinguished as follows:

1 When *hopefully* refers to the first-person's or the speaker's desire (i.e. 'I'), as in 'Whatever happens, the whole family will be at the final – hopefully to cheer me on.' This usage should therefore be paraphrased with 'I hope'.
2 When *hopefully* refers to both the speaker's and the listener's desire (i.e. 'we'), as in 'Hopefully our novel will be sold out within a couple of hours.' This usage can be paraphrased with 'Let us hope'.
3 When *hopefully* refers to the general public's (or a collective) desire (i.e. everyone's), as in 'Ireland will hopefully solve its political problems with the North.' Metaphorically, the point of view here may refer to that of the Irish people, the citizens of the UK, citizens of other countries, or anyone who supports peace. This usage can therefore be paraphrased by 'everybody/everyone hopes' or the impersonal construction 'it is to be hoped'.
4 When the reference point is ambiguous, as in 'We are going our own ways, but hopefully one day we will get together.' As above, *hopefully* may refer to only the speaker's desire, or to both the speaker's and the listener's desire.

At this point, the reader should notice that *hopefully* never refers to second and third persons – be it singular or plural. This is so because, as a deictic word and as a means of expressing modality, *hopefully* must at least be anchored in, and thus uttered from, the point of view of a speaker – the first person 'I'. However, the speaker may decide to include other people's point of view in his or her utterance, in which case *hopefully* can be paraphrased as 'let us hope' or 'everyone hopes/it is to be hoped.'

What is interesting in this modal usage of *hopefully* is that as opposed to *hopefully* as an adverb of manner, which is more likely to appear in the present or past tense, *hopefully* which expresses modality is associated with the desire that is likely to happen in the future time (except when it appears in a reported speech or in a narrative where the past tense is used to recount the story, as in example j) above, which has been taken from *The shoemaker's daughter*). This is logical because, as Huddleston and Pullum explain, there is a connection between future time and modality. The speaker is not so sure about what will happen in the future as he can be about the past and the present moment, and as a result whatever he or she thinks about the future is not a fact (*A Student's Introduction to English Grammar*, p. 56). That is why the modal adverb *hopefully* tends to occur with future time reference.

## Conclusion

In this article, I discuss some characteristics of the commonly used adverb *hopefully*. Drawing examples from the British National Corpus, I have examined the possible syntactic positions of *hopefully* and its functions in a sentence. I also consider the semantic aspects of the adverb, arguing that it can function as an adverb of manner, or as a grammatical way of expressing modality. These two categories are important because when used to indicate the manner of a verb, *hopefully* presents the sentence as a matter of fact, but when used to express the desire for a proposition to happen, it presents the sentence as non-factual. As a result, *hopefully* as an adverb of manner tends to be associated more with the present and past time, where facts are expressed, whereas its modality-orientated counterpart tends to be related to future time, about which there is no certainty.

Because all the examples in this article have been gathered from the British National Corpus, it would be interesting to examine how *hopefully* is used in American usage. Similarly interesting is the tracing of the development or semantic expansion of this adverb – from an adverb of manner to a grammaticalized adverb indicating modality. Doing so will shed light not only on how this adverb has changed through time but on how other English adverbs of similar nature have also changed. ■

### Notes

**1** Modality is a semantic category which distinguishes factual from non-factual events, or asserted and non-asserted events (cf. *A Student's Introduction to English Grammar* p. 53). Modality can be expressed by many means, for example, modal verbs (such as *may, might, could, must)*,



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adverbs (*possibly, maybe),* and nouns *(a must, a requirement, a possibility, chance)*.

**2** I claim that *hopefully* has undergone a process of grammaticalization, whereby it has changed from a content word indicating the manner of an adverb to a functional or grammatical word expressing modality. However, such a process of grammaticalization needs to be discussed in detail, which lies beyond the scope of this paper.

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