On the multifunctionality of *literally* in American youth English

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This study investigates the multifunctionality of the adverb *literally* in American youth speech through the analysis of 23 episodes of *Lol Podcast*, a show hosted by five Americans aged between 15 and 24 and primarily targeting a teenage audience.

The rising frequency of *literally*, recent updates to its dictionary definitions, along with ongoing debates in popular media about its alleged "misuse", all clearly indicate that the term is undergoing a change, as it is now used in contexts that extend well beyond its original meaning of 'in a literal sense'. Recent research suggests that *literally* is developing significant pragmatic versatility as a result of a process of grammaticalization (and pragmaticalization), in which the original meaning is partially blurred in favor of a layering of new discourse functions - a pattern also observed in other emphasizers and degree modifiers (e.g. *really*, *truly*, *absolutely*).

The purpose of the present study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of this semantic-pragmatic shift, examining both the range of functions performed by *literally* in the corpus data and how these functions reflect an evolution toward new, more discourse-oriented meanings. While a number of recent studies have investigated the use of *literally* in British English, this study brings new insights by focusing on authentic spoken data from American young speakers, specifically drawn from *Lol Podcast*. This provides a more targeted perspective on pragmatic innovation in informal interaction among young Americans, as effectively represented by this type of media product.

Adopting a synchronic and corpus-based approach, this study relies on two digital tools for data collection and corpus management, namely *Filmot* e *Sketch Engine*. All the occurrences of *literally* have been analyzed in terms of frequency, syntactic distribution, scope, and semantic-pragmatic function performed in the specific context. The syntactic analysis highlights increasing flexibility in the positioning and syntagmatic distribution of *literally*, including semi-independent and stand-alone uses. Likewise, this study reveals a wider range of pragmatic functions of literally than those previously identified in other studies. Based on *Lol Podcast* data, literally fulfills 10 different functions. Alongside those already observed - such as metalinguistic operator, truth emphasizer, rhetorical emphasizer, intensifier, pragmatic marker, and response marker - the present analysis identifies additional functions, namely mitigator, focalizer, emphasizer of the illocutionary act, and stand-alone question marker. Furthermore, its uses as a pragmatic and response marker are examined here more systematically than in earlier studies.In line with previous findings, the multifunctionality of *literally* can be described as a trajectory from propositional and less-subjective uses, to speaker-based uses – denoting the speaker's subjective stance – and, ultimately, to interpersonal and textual meanings, where it serves as turn-holding, turn-taking, or attention-getting device - often in combination with other filler words, such as *just*, *like*, *you know*. In particular, stand-alone uses, both as affirmative response (e.g. *Yeah literally!*) and question (e.g. *Literally?*), are indicative of advanced intersubjectification.