

I was only delighted: usage patterns of only in Irish English

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Abstract

Only is widely used as an adverb like *I was there only once*, a conjunction, a postdeterminer, or a diminisher for a subjunct like *I was there, only I didn't have any time*. In addition, in Irish English, *only* can also be used as an adverbial modifier of predicative adjectives in cases where other varieties of English would prefer the modifier *just*, as in *she is only gorgeous*. The current paper investigates how adjective and participle-premodifying *only* is used in Irish English and whether this use is variety specific. The study is carried out on the basis of data from the GloWbE corpus and compares the Irish element of the corpus to other international varieties of English. From this corpus, examples of *only* are culled semi-automatically and investigated manually. The paper argues for a specific usage pattern of *only* in Irish English and provides a qualitative and quantitative analysis of this pattern. It suggests that the use of *only* as a premodifying intensifier is a variety-specific feature in Irish English.

Keywords: Irish English, Corpus Linguistics, premodifying *only*.

1. Introduction

In different varieties of English, including Standard British English, *only* is widely used as an adverb, a conjunction, a postdeterminer, or a diminisher for subjects (Quirk et al., 1985). Instances of these uses are well attested as in, for example, *I was there only once* or *I was there, only I didn't have any time*. However, in Irish English further uses are found which are not described in (Standard British) English grammars. Thus, Filppula describes the use of *only* introducing subordinate concessive clauses, e.g. *and who comes along only Joe Connolly* (Filppula, 1999, p. 209). Further, we can also find so far undescribed uses in which *only* serves to modify predicative adjectives. Such

premodifying uses can be illustrated by examples from mediatised English, as indicated by an example from a television series (1) and one from fictional writing (2).

1. (Context: a girl is trying on a Holy Communion dress; mother to father:) “She's **only gorgeous** isn't she Aedo?”, “She's beautiful.” (*Love/Hate* 04.03, min. 19:24)
2. “Ah, deadly,” Carmel said, “That’s **only deadly**, Francis.” (French, *Faithful Place*, 2010: 349)

While premodifying usage may arguably be specifically Irish, its use, context and semantics have not yet been investigated. This current study is exploratory and it sets out to answer two research questions, first, in which contexts is *only* used in examples of Irish English? and second, how does the use of adjective-modifying *only* in Irish English compare to other international varieties of English? To do so, the study outlines uses of *only* as a modifier of predicative adjectives, using examples from Irish and international varieties of English culled from the GloWbE Corpus of English (Davies, 2013). The investigation of this corpus data shows whether adjective-premodifying *only* can be considered typical of Irish English. To what extent it might even be enregistered, i.e. to what extent it might even be a stereotypical feature of a variety (Agha, 2007; Lucek, 2024), will not be considered here and will form the object of a separate study.

The current study is structured as follows: after this short introduction, standard descriptions of *only* as a modifier are outlined and contrasted with *just* in Section 2. Then, the data and method employed in this study are described in Section 3. Section 4 offers an analysis of uses of *only* in the GloWbE corpus before a discussion is offered in Section 5 and conclusions are drawn.

2. Theoretical Background

Only is a versatile item that has a number of documented uses in British – or American – Standard English. In some of these contexts, an overlap with uses of *just* is observed in the sources. In the following, an overview is given of descriptions of *only* (Section 2.1) and areas of overlap with *just* are sketched in Section 2.2, before adverbial functions that these could take are outlined (Section 2.3).

2.1. Descriptions of *only*

Only has a broad array of functions: it can serve as an adverb, conjunction, preposition or in phrases. An overview of its key uses culled from the OED online (*only*, Dec. 2025) can be found in Table 1. Phrasal uses like *all only*, *only but*, *(it's) only me*, *only not* and *only too* (OED *only* (adv., conj., & prep.), sense P, Dec. 2025) or obsolete uses are not given in the Table. For those, please refer to the OED online (*only*, Dec. 2025).

TABLE 1

Uses of only according to the Oxford English Dictionary Online (only, Dec. 2025)

	Category	Functions	Meaning	Position	Examples
1	Adverb	Limiting a statement	“solely, merely exclusively; nothing more beside; single, solitary fact”	1. premodifying 2. postmodifying 3. away from its head word	1. ... <i>only the Bishops know how much</i> (2002 <i>New York Times</i> 13 June24/1) 2. <i>You and me only</i> (1939 Greene, <i>Confidential Agent i. ii.72</i>) 3. <i>A disease that only affects boys</i> (2001 <i>Linedancer Magazine</i> October 61/2)
2		Correlative construction: <i>not only ... (but)</i>	Contrast to other element	Phrase-/clause-initially	1. <i>Collins not only did reviews, she incorporated bites from interviews into pieces</i> (1987 McCabe, <i>Bad News</i>)

					<i>at Black Rock ix, 169)</i>
3		Emphasizing contrary nature of consequence	1. No other consequence or result or 2) inevitably	1. Followed by infinitive clause or 2. following modal verb	1. <i>He recouerd ..only to be made more miserable</i> (1621 Wroth <i>Countesse of Montgomeries Urania</i> 319) 2. <i>Should I stay ..at home, I would only dissipate my little fortune</i> (1787 Burns <i>Letter to J. Smith</i> 11 June)
4		Expression of time	“not until, not before, only just ”	Preceding or following time expression	1. <i>No, we only arrived today</i> (1930 Coward, <i>Private Lives</i> i. 37) 2. <i>I had only just learned to drive</i> (2000 Shamsie, <i>Salt & Saffron</i> 2001, xviii.186)
5		Restricted extent	“as much as, just ”	Premodifying, often in conditional clause	<i>Now if we could only find a way to roust our cat from the sofa</i> (2001 <i>New York Times</i> 11 November iv. 2/4)
6		Intensifier (South African)	“really, certainly”	Premodifying verb phrase	1. <i>Jislaaik, but you only feel a naartjie riding in the back of a truck with three drums of pig swill ..(sic) for company</i> (1975 ‘Blossom’ in <i>Darling</i> (Durban) 9 April 95) 2. <i>Bliksem, these outjies from the South can only box</i> (1983 <i>Sunday Times Johannesburg</i> 8 May 21)
7	Conjunction	Addition, Restriction	“the only thing to be added, with the exception”	Clause-initial	<i>Nosy cow, I’d flick her the finger only she’s too stuck up to know what it means</i> (2001 Glazebrook <i>The Madolescents</i> 212)
8		Restriction	“were it not that, but that”	Clause-initial	Only I’m an old man now I’d change his tune for him. (1914 Joyce <i>Dubliners</i> 146)

9	Preposition		“except, only for”	Phrase-initial	1. Threaten her and say what he would do to her only for her dead mother’s sake. (1914 Joyce, <i>Dubliners</i> 44) 2. Who else could it be, only Mr. Adams? (1935 O’Casey <i>Pound on Demand in Windfalls</i> 195)
10		With <i>that</i> – clause forming compound conjunction	“except that, were it not that”	Clause-initial	Something like a castle in miniature, only that its windows were modern. (1804 de Acton <i>Tale without Title</i> vol. III. 241)

Table 1 shows that according to the OED (*only*, Dec. 2025), *only* is used as an adverb with various senses centering on exclusivity, correlation, emphasis of consequences or unique time. A colloquial South African intensifier is very interesting as it has emphatic use (Table 1, Line 6). In this context, all examples given in the OED (*only* (adv.), sense 8, December 2025) show it as premodifying a verb or verb phrase. Further, *only* appears in conjunctions with the sense of “the only thing to be added, with the exception” and similar uses (OED, *only* (conj.) Dec. 2025). Prepositional attestations are present in the sense of “except (that), only for”.

One usage of *only* that is specific to Irish English is described by Filppula (1999): *only* denotes conjunctions or conjunctives in cases like *and who comes along only Joe Connolly* (Filppula, 1999, p. 209), in which *only* overlaps with *but* in senses of *who comes along but [...]* in what Filppula calls ‘conjunctive *only*’. Filppula (1999, pp. 213-215) raises the possibility of Irish language structures having exercised an influence on the development of this ‘conjunctive *only*’, and he suggest that cases like *[n]í fhaca mé*

ach... (Not saw I but) “I only saw /I saw but...” may have influenced the genesis of examples like *who comes along only ...* (Filppula, 1999, p. 209).

From a formal semantics perspective, as Ippolito (2007) in her study on the semantics of *only* points out, and according to traditional analyses (e.g., Horn, 1996), a clause containing *only* asserts that what is stated is not only true but also, abstracting from her words, the “whole truth”. For example, [*o*]nly *John can speak French* means that Bill cannot (Ippolito, 2007, p. 47). To what extent this allows further inferences appears to be under discussion. Thus, Horn (1996, p. 12) outlines that, while [*o*]nly *birds have feathers* this means that *all feathered things are birds*, but not *all birds have feathers*. For our purposes, however, these examples illustrate that formally, Irish examples like the *only gorgeous* in (1), or the *only deadly* in (2) should, semantically speaking, be exclusively “gorgeous” or “deadly”. Yet, the examples from South African English given in Table 1, line 6, indicate an intensifying function that may also be applicable to the Irish English examples in (1) and (2), as will be discussed in Sections 4 and 5. In the following, a competitor of *only*, *just*, will be introduced first.

2.2. Descriptions of *just*

For the adverb *just*, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, *just* (adv.) Dec. 2025) considers its current main uses to be that of a modifier indicating exactness or precision, indicating a point in time, limiting an extent or focusing on a word or phrase. An overview of these uses is given in Table 2. Again, phrases involving *just* are not considered, for those and obsolete senses please consult the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED *just* (adv.), sense P, Dec. 2025).

TABLE 2

Functions of just according to the OED (just (adv.) Dec. 2025)

	Category	Functions	Meaning	Position	Examples
1	Adverb	Modifier of place, degree, manner, amount, time or state.	“exactly, precisely”	Premodifying phrases and adverbs	1. <i>Our headquarters are just next to the capital’s Carnaby Street</i> (2009 <i>Esquire</i> August 10/1)
2		Indicating point in time	1. “exactly, soon, very recently” 2. exactly before this moment	1. Introducing predicate after <i>BE</i> 2. before verb	1. As they were just finishing the hymn... Mel Trotter saw a door at the back of the building opening (1971 Lloyd-Jones <i>Preaching & Preachers</i> (1972) xv. 295) 2. I just heard he’s a MIA (1987 Dorris <i>Yellow Raft in Blue Water</i> (1988) ix 178)
3		Limiting extent or degree: 1 modifying noun phrases, prepositional phrases or adverbs 2. modifying verbs or adverbs; often intensifier of <i>may</i> or <i>might</i>	“only as much as; barely”	Premodifying phrases or words	1. Charles and Rosa stood just inside the door (1953 Wain <i>Hurry on Down</i> 180) 2. It’s so crazy it just might work (2012 <i>New York Times</i> 9 Sept. 22/4)
4		1. Focusing on a word or phrase; 2. emphasizing an action 3. weaken force of argument 4. strengthen an assertion	“absolutely, really”	1-3 Premodifying word or phrase 4. parenthetically	1. they’re never just ‘cars’ at Crewe (1972 <i>Daily Telegraph</i> 20 October 52/1) 2. I’m just going outside and may be some time (1826 Disraeli <i>Vivian Grey</i> vol I. ii xvii. 266) 3. <i>You can just imagine what it feels like...</i> (1971 <i>Rand Daily Mail</i> 10 June 12) 4. ... Didn’t he just. (2010 McGregor <i>Even Dogs</i> 2011 iii.63)

The overview in Table 2 shows that *just* can act as an expression of time and restriction of extent (Table 2, Lines 2 and 3), which constitutes some overlap with functions of *only* in contexts like *I had only just learned to drive* (2000 Shamsie, Salt & Saffron 2001, xviii.186, cf. OED, *only*, adv., Dec. 2025) given in Table 1 above, where both *only* and *just* are used and either of them could be omitted. Equally, either *only* or *just* could be employed in *if we could only find a way to roust our cat from the sofa* (2001 New York Times 11 November iv. 2/4, cf. OED, *only*, adv., Dec. 2025). An important meaning component of *just* for the present study of *only* is its emphatic meaning (Table 2, line 4, OED, *just* (adv.), sense 6, Dec. 2025). Studies of the semantics of *just* (e.g. Lee, 1991, p. 57; Zhang, 2025, p. 301) argue that, amongst six different core uses of *just*, the emphatic use of *just* highlights a concept which becomes more prominent as a result of the addition of *just*. Example of this are *[h]e's just amazing/that's just impossible* (Zhang, 2025, p. 301). Zhang (2025, p. 320) concludes that *just* can be seen as a scalar restrictor that helps to reduce fuzziness in expression. In Sections 4 and 5 below it will be argued that in Irish English, *only* can also show comparable uses.

2.3. Adverbial functions

Key uses of *only*, and also of *just*, are as adverbials. Especially in the case of *only*, these adverbial functions often mark subjuncts, that is, the adverbial is used to attach a subordinating message to another clause element (Quirk et al., 1985, § 8.88, p. 566). According to Quirk et al. (1985), subjuncts can function as itemizers, emphasizees, intensifiers or focusers in a narrow orientation. The different adverbial uses, in which *only* and *just* partly also appear, are outlined in Table 3 below.

TABLE 3

Functions of narrow orientation of subjuncts (after Quirk et al. 1985: § 8.88–8.120, p.

567–612). Subcategories are on the right of their higher-level categories.

Superordinate category	Subordinate level 1	Subordinate level 2	Function	Examples
Item(izers) (singling out an entity)	Further subdivisions not relevant for our discussion as <i>only</i> and <i>just</i> not included.			
Emphasizers (reenforcing truth value (§8.99, p. 583))			Emphasize truth of the modified element	<i>Really, just</i> , e.g. 1. <i>I just can't understand it</i> (Quirk et al. 1985: § 8.100, p. 584)
Intensifiers (modify degree of intensity (§8.104, p. 589-590))	Amplifiers (intensify degree (§ 8.105, p. 590))	Maximisers (§ 8.105a, p. 590)	Express top end of entity	<i>Absolutely, completely, fully</i>
		Boosters (§ 8.105b, p. 591)	Signal a generally high degree	<i>Highly, intensely, severely</i>
	Downtoners (restrict degree of intensity (§ 8.88, p. 657, §8.104, p. 589-90))	Approximators (§8.111a, p. 597)	Express approximation	<i>Almost, nearly</i>
		Compromisers (§8.111b, p. 598)	Express slightly lowering effect	<i>Kind of, sort of, rather</i>
		Diminishers (§8.111c, p. 598)	Scale downwards and express 'a small extent'	1. <i>Partly, only, just</i> 2. <i>I was only joking</i> (Quirk et al. 1985: §8.111, p. 598) 3 <i>I was only partly joking</i> (Quirk et al. 1985: §8.113, p. 601)
		Minimizers (§8.111d, p. 598)	Function as negative maximisers	<i>Barely, hardly, in the least.</i>
Focusing (draw attention to a sentence part (§8.116, p. 605))	Restrictive subjuncts	Exclusives (§ 8.116, p. 604)	Restrict application of utterance exclusively to the focus	1. <i>Only, just</i> , e.g. 2. <i>She is charming only to her wealthy clients</i> (§8.116, p. 605)

		Particularisers (§ 8.116, p. 604)	Restrict application predominantly to the focus	<i>Chiefly, mainly,</i>
	Additives (§ 8.116, p. 604)		Utterance is additionally true	<i>Also, even, similarly</i>

Only shares with *just* its functions as a diminisher, restrictive subjunct and a diminisher subjunct. In addition to senses covered by *only*, as also pointed out by the OED (*just* (adv.), sense 6, Dec. 2025) and by formal semantic studies (Lee, 1991, Zhang, 2025), *just* importantly also functions as an emphaser (Quirk et al., 1985, §8.100–8.102). Uses as a time-adjunct (Quirk et al., 1985, § 9.28, p. 684) and as a time-subjunct (Quirk et al., 1985: §8.98, p. 581-582) are less central to the analysis of premodifying *only*.

According to Quirk et al. (1985, §10.59, p. 781), in Standard British English, *only* as an adverb predominantly has negative meaning, but in some cases its meaning goes beyond expressing restriction. Like other adverbials, *only* can function as a subordinator or introduce clauses and one key use of *only* is as a subjunct adverbial. *Only* can further express degree, for example in *this play achieves only visually a sharp challenge* (Quirk et al., 1985, § 8.88, p. 567). Quirk et al. (1985, § 8.117, p. 607) point out that as an adjunct of space and time, *only* can either be interpreted as being at a certain time or place and nowhere else or alternatively, it can be interpreted as a diminishing downtoner in a modal sense, as in *John only lives in Islington*, meaning either that he does not live anywhere else, or that he does not live anywhere more prestigious than Islington. Quirk et al. (1985, § 8.116, p. 604) further point to exclusive restrictive subjuncts, like *alone*, *exactly*, *exclusively*, or indeed *only*, which restrict the utterance exclusively to the focused part. In the following, those established grammatical categories are described that are

potentially useful for the analysis of the phenomenon of premodifying *only* in Irish English.

Underlining the interaction between *only* and *just*, Irish English shows examples of *only* as a premodifier of predicative adjectives in contexts where other varieties of English are likely to prefer the modifier *just* as in examples (4) and (5) as compared to (6).

4. It's very primeval. Everything runs on generators.... Just beautiful. (GloWbE, smh.com.au, AUG)
5. Danielle is just gorgeous and a great singer (GloWbE, perezhilton.com, US G)
6. [O]ne of the neighbours pipes up: " You're only gorgeous, love " in a Cork accent (GloWbE IE G ronanpalliser.ie)

In example (6) the restrictive interpretation of *only* as a downtoner or diminisher is certainly not appropriate, and no negative connotations are observable. Instead, here, *only* seems to be used to draw positive attention to a focused adjective and seems to function as an emphasiser or an intensifier, similar to the emphatic function of *just* outlined above (Table 2, line 4, OED *just* (adv.), sense 6.a.iii, Dec. 2025). This function may also resemble the one described for the colloquial South African use (see Table 1, line 6), cited by the OED (*only* (adv.), sense 8, December 2025). In Section 4, similar examples of *only* followed by a predicative adjective, as well as an arguably extended use with a participle, are presented and evaluated. After having outlined the theoretical background to this study, the data and method of the study are now introduced.

3. Data and Method

The data on which this study is based stem from the Corpus of Global Web-based English, GloWbE (Davies, 2013). The GloWbE Corpus consists of 1.9 billion words from 20 varieties of English, namely US American, Canadian, British, Irish, Australian, New Zealand, Indian, Sri Lankan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Singapore, Malaysian, Philippine, Hong Kong, South African, Nigerian, Ghanaian, Kenyan, Tanzanian, and Jamaican English. The Irish component of the GloWbE corpus has the extent of 101,029,231 words. The corpus compiler scraped data from internet pages such as commercial or private websites or blogs and comment sections in the years 2012/13. These GloWbE Corpus data were searched through the search interface of the corpus. First, the search syntax “BE *only* ADJ” was used to find all structures of the verb *be*, followed by *only* and an adjective in this corpus. However, this search returned too many results (24,593 tokens) to process these tokens individually and checks of the results only found examples that did not represent the target structures, such as for example [w]here the van is *only* available to the employee for part of the year ... (IE G taxinstitute.ie).

To find possible correct target structures in smaller data sets than the GloWbE Corpus, an individual search has instead been carried out of *only* plus those adjectives attested in fictional sources, which have been shown to generally offer good representations of Irish English (e.g., Walshe, 2009, 2017 for representation in film; Amador-Moreno, 2010; Amador-Moreno & Terrazas Calero, 2017; Terrazas-Calero, 2024 for literary representations). As I first noted premodifying *only* in print in the works of crime fiction writer Tana French, examples of *only* plus adjective were extracted by searching for *only* in the electronic versions of four of her novels: French 2010: *Faithful*

Place; French 2012: *Broken Harbour*; French 2016: *The Trespasser*, French 2019: *The Wych Elm*, all of which are set in the Dublin area.

To allow for an even broader attestation of possible examples, further sources of mediatised data were also searched. From the well-known TV series *Love/Hate*, set in the North of Dublin City, automatically generated transcripts were scraped from those episodes which offered the possibility to autogenerate transcripts. These are Season 2, Episodes 1 and 6, Season 3, Episodes 1 and 6, Season 4, Episodes 2, 3, and 6, and the autogenerated text was verified against the audio materials and corrected manually where necessary. Two further fictional data sources from other parts of the country are provided by the scripts of *The Young Offenders* (the film, rather than the television series), set in Cork city. An existing script obtained from *scripts.com* and claiming to be the original script writer's script has been used. Further, northern data is represented in the form of a transcript of the television series *Derry Girls*, Episodes 1 till 4 of the first season, available on *kaggle.com* and, according to the provider this data was scraped from original Channel 4 subtitles.

From the attestations those examples were counted in which *only* premodifies a predicative adjective. In the process one specific type was noted, *BE only dying*. While this type contains *BE + only* like the targeted predicative adjectives, it has a present participle instead of a predicative adjective. But at the same time, the structure differs semantically from Quirk et al.'s (1985) typical diminishers like *I was only joking* in a way that seems to resemble the target structures. This method provided examples to *BE only* with the following tokens of adjectives, plus the present participle *dying to* (Table 4).

TABLE 4

Most frequent adjectives and present participles premodified by only in the fictional texts.

Adjectives	Total
<i>delighted</i>	10
<i>gorgeous</i>	6
<i>Dying to</i>	3
<i>Starving</i>	2
<i>Beautiful, smashing, over the moon, deadly, hysterical, rotten, gobsmacked, livid, petrified, devastated, terrible</i>	1 each

Most frequent in the fictional texts was *delighted*, followed by *gorgeous*, *dying to*, *starving* and a number of single-attestation adjectives and participles functioning as adjectives. Formally, *delighted* is a past participle, which in the case of *to be only delighted* functions as a predicative adjective. The majority of the modified adjectives have positive semantics – such as *delighted*, *gorgeous*, etc., but there are also premodified adjectives with negative semantics, for example *starving*, *rotten* or *lived*. The analysis of the fictional data itself provides further interesting insights, but for space restrictions these cannot be discussed here and will be treated in a separate study.

The fifteen adjective and participle types (cf. Table 4) obtained by the searches of the fictional data sources were then entered as *only* plus the consecutive adjectives and participles into the GloWbE search interface and all target structures were collected. The results of the searches and their analyses are presented in Section 4 below.

4. Results

In this section, the use of premodifying *only* in the GloWbE corpus is investigated and the results from the Irish component are contrasted with the other varieties of English represented.

In the fictional data, premodifying *only* is most frequently found with *delighted*. Similarly, the search in the GloWbE corpus finds *only* plus *delighted* to have the highest number of attestations in this corpus as well (example 7):

7. When he woke fully and saw what he had, he was **only delighted**, over the moon with what he had... (IE B verlingsweek.com)

In addition to 15 Irish examples, one British and one Nigerian example were also found (8 and 9)

8. So more people started asking for them and I tought maybe there is a business here.mmm so asked to to pay for them and they said that they would be **only delighted** to. (GB B ecademy.com)

9. For any clarification please feel free to contact us and we will be **only delighted** to be of ... (NG G santotravel.net)

Thus, the pattern of *only delighted* is also well attested particularly in Irish web-based data, but only two examples from other countries are found (compare also Table 5).

Also well attested is *only* plus *gorgeous*. Here, in other varieties, examples of *only* are often not on target, for example *Aishwarya Rai is not only gorgeous, she is a role model...* (US G marksdailyapple.com). Of the six target structures *BE*, premodifying adjective *only* plus *gorgeous*, five stem from Ireland (e.g., example 10), while one (11) stems from the United States.

10. Grind some black pepper over the top, and taste. I know it all sounds a bit unexpected, but it 's **only gorgeous** as they say! (GloWbE IE G cakeinthecountry.com)

11. this as a base for shadows but I'm sure the look would be **only gorgeous!** # This palette is one for those a fan of slightly shimmerly looks. (US B...smakeup.blogspot.com)

In example (10) the author's addition of *as they say* is interesting as the author distances themselves from the expression by attributing it to other speakers – it is what *they* would say, not what the author themselves would say – while in fact adopting the structure themselves.

Also well attested is *BE only dying to X*, here next to two Irish examples, one Canadian one can also be found. Two near-identical American examples are not true positives (12), while a Canadian example (13) fits the mold:

12. "... and Keep staring at the ground You're like a sick bird That 's **only dying to sing**" (US G metrolyrics.com)

13. Out of concern? Of course not. At this point I'm **only DYING TO KNOW** what happened. (CA G alicebradley.net)

Three further types are found in small numbers of attestation in the GloWbE Corpus, namely *BE only deadly*, *gobsmacked* and *devastated* in three, two and one case respectively (14-16). These less-frequent examples are limited to data from Ireland.

14. of course, I usually mumble hmmm) # Oh hair tutorials would be **only deadly!** (IE G beaut.ie)

15. ... didn't it make me grin from ear to ear and I wer' **only gobsmacked** for the rest of that sunny day. (GloWbE IE G finnians.com)

16. ##3765919 # As a devout Fair City fan I'm **only devastated** I can't watch it when I'm in Canada. (IE B ...gholidayincanada.com)

The further premodified adjectives attested in the fictional data, *petrified/ livid/ starving/ rotten/hysterical/over the moon/beautiful*, were not found in the GloWbE corpus. One example of *BE only smashing* turned out to be a false positive: *He's only smashing Gillard in preferred leader polls* (GloWbE AU G thepunch.com.au). An overview of attestation numbers of *only* plus adjective/participle is found in Table 5.

TABLE 5

BE only ADJ/participle in the GloWbE data

<i>BE + Only + ADJ</i> type	Total examples	Of which true positives	Of which Irish examples	Of which other examples
delighted	17	17	15	1 British, 1 Nigerian
gorgeous	6	6	5	1 US American
dying to	5	3	2	1 Canadian
deadly	3	2	2	0
gobsmacked	2	2	2	0
devastated	1	1	1	0

We can see from Table 5 that those examples of *BE only ADJ/participle* which are frequent in the seed corpus data stemming from fictional sources are also well-represented in the GloWbE Corpus data. Some few international true positive examples

exist in data from the US, Britain, Canada and Nigeria, but overall, the structure seems to be very highly iconic of Irish English usage. This is particularly notable as the Irish component of GloWbE is less than a third of the size of the American and the British components. It is further interesting that in the corpus data, adjectives with positive semantics predominate, but examples with negative semantics, *gobsmacked* or *devastated*, are also found.

5. Discussion

It has been shown in Section 4 above that *only* plus adjective is a well attested pattern in Irish English, which is not described in grammars of English, such as Quirk et al. (1985) or dictionaries, such as the OED. It is well attested in the GloWbE corpus, and also attested in fictional representations of Irish English. Attestations stem from different parts of Ireland, such as Dublin, Cork, or, as shown in example (17) below, Donegal:

17. great live music and the food is traditional Irish cooking at its best: **only gorgeous!** # " No wonder everybody loves Nancy's (GloWbE IE B donegaldaily.com)

The Donegal Daily is not the only newspaper source which provides examples of premodifying *only*, further examples in the GloWbE corpus stem from the Irish Times (example 18).

18. **only** half-chase down kicks. Bounce up out of tackles and show you 're **only dying to** make another one. Convince them you are not going to let up. (GloWbE IE irishtimes.com).

These attestations show that premodifying *only* is used at a national level, and also in the comparatively formal genre of newspaper writing. While the use of the structure may be

deliberately colloquial, and the use of *as they say* in example (10) suggests a certain dissociation by some speakers, the presence of premodifying *only* in newspapers shows that it is sufficiently accepted to appear in print. Unfortunately, the exact social distribution of premodifying *only* is not clearly visible from the corpus data and further sociolinguistic approaches should be employed to determine its distribution.

International data drawn from the GloWbE Corpus does include relevant examples of *BE only* plus adjective. Typically, examples show restrictive adjective use, like *the only time I was there* (Quirk et al., 1985, § 7.35, p. 430) or focusing subjuncts (Quirk et al., 1985, § 8116, p. 604-605), of the type *not only X but Y*. Some few exceptions that use *only* as a premodifying adjective are also found in other international Englishes (examples 13, 16). Whether these are cases of writers who are connected to Ireland, or whether these are independent international developments is difficult to determine here. Given the paucity of examples, an Irish connection of the writers could be possible.

What the investigated Irish examples have in common, however, is a focus on the adjective or participle, which seems to resemble that which is provided by *just* in its function as an emphasiser and focuser (Lee, 1991; Quirk et al., 1985, §8.100-8.102, p. 583–588; Zhang, 2025; OED *just* (adv.), sense 6.a.iii, Dec. 2025). That *only* can indeed develop such emphatic functions is also in evidence in the South African uses of *only* before verbs cited in OED (*only* (adv.), sense 8, December 2025). As the Irish and South African structures, modifying adverbs in the case of the Irish structure, and verbs in the South African examples, are structurally different, they are likely to rather be an independent than a common development, however.

How this particular use of *only* as a premodifier in Irish English evolved is not yet investigated. Its development may well have been influenced by cases where *only* is used in competition with *just*, as in *I'm just/only small, I'm just/only little ...* as suggested by some of the parallels given in Section 2: *only* can be used to mark focus in various contexts, as in exclusive restrictives, which draw attention to the focused part, as in *she is charming only to her (wealthy) clients* (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 604), and from there on, intensifying uses may develop. Where the structure is used as downtoner, as in *they were only joking* (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 598), exclusive and then emphatic senses could also have developed. *Only* is already used as a downtoner for present participles, so the use of *only* could easily have been extended to emphatic meaning when used with other participles on the analogy of emphatic *just* (Quirk et al., 1985, p. §8.100, p. 584). A sentence like *(he/she) was just dying to be the first...* could thus have been turned into *someone who was only dying to be the first to tell you shocking news* (IE B beaut.ie), with *only* taking over emphatic functions of *just*. The extension of *only* into contexts as described in this paper appear to sufficiently well represented in Irish English that it could be a variety specific, possibly even enregistered (Agha, 2007), feature. However, whether this feature is indeed perceived as typical of any specific, or a general, variety of Irish English has not yet been investigated. The present author is currently engaged in the further investigation of premodifying *only* in literary sources, yet more research on this structure is clearly needed. Further scholarly interest will hopefully determine not only its distribution in other genres than the web-based English investigated here, but also its sociolinguistic distribution.

6. Conclusion

In answer to the research questions, the current study has shown that *only* can be used as an emphatic premodifier of adjectives and participles in web-based Irish English as represented in the GloWbE corpus, and further evidence of its use also exists in fictional data. Premodifying *only* is used in particular as a premodifier for adjectives, and in addition it can also modify further parts of speech. Second, premodifying *only* shows a distribution in Irish English that is distinct from other varieties: high-frequency items like *only delighted* or *only gorgeous* are notably more frequent in Irish English than in other varieties of English in GloWbE, which only show vestiges of the intensifier *only* as adjective premodifiers. However, so far, the study is based on a small selection of high frequency adjectives in the GloWbE Corpus. Further research desiderata, beyond the investigation of its evolution, are the investigation of more and more varied corpus data, as well as sociolinguistic studies examining the distribution of the structure and attitudes towards it.

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