

International conference « The adverb and its boundaries »

University of Neuchâtel, 14-16 mai 2025

Call for abstracts

It is common to lament the incoherence of the adverbial class: the adverb is considered a dustbin category, a collection of heterogeneous elements, gathering what other word classes have rejected (Quirk et al. 1972). This very fact makes an internal definition impossible, and one might wonder whether the adverb should really be taken seriously (Haspelmath 2001). Neither the morphological criterion of invariability, nor the syntactic criterion of incidence — the adverb would apply to a verb, an adjective, another adverb, or even a sentence — nor even the heterogeneous concept of modification (Duplâtre 2024) offers much hope. As for the adverbial, is it necessary to specify that it only adds to the confusion? Can the problems of a morphological class really be solved by diluting it into a functional class? After all, adverbs are part of adverbials and thus assume the function... of an adverb, like any adverbial. However, if they no longer fulfill this function, but instead take on, for instance, an adjectival role (cf. Jespersen's examples (1924: 101): *in after years, the well passengers, the then government*, etc.), are they still adverbs? Clearly not, since adverbs are defined by their inability to modify a nominal head (Haspelmath 1995: 7; Hengeveld 2023: 383).

Yet, solutions do exist: by redefining the concept of incidence as an incidence to an incidence¹ (Guillaume 1988, Van Raemdonck 2024), it becomes possible to detect a functional coherence within the adverbial class. Furthermore, using a quantitative method (Delhem 2022), one can highlight regularities and behavioral similarities, allowing certain elements to be excluded from the adverbial class. Hence, two fundamental questions arise:

¹ Concretely, in *Pierre walks slowly*, *slowly* is incident to the incidence of *walks* to *Pierre*.

1. How does one exit the adverbial class? Consider the case of particles: if one initially posits that an adverb is not a particle and vice versa, one will see that an adverb can transform into a particle by losing part of its semantic content (cf. *There are literally hundreds of prizes to win* (particle) versus *to translate literally* (adverb)). This transformation, leading to grammaticalization, can also be addressed within the broader framework of linguistic evolution (Abraham 1991). This raises the issue of distinguishing between particles and adverbs. What are the criteria? Should we assert, as Hengeveld (2023) does, that a particle cannot be modified, unlike an adverb?
2. How does one enter the adverbial class? Again, the issue can be considered within the framework of historical evolution, as an adverb may originate from another word class (e.g., *hodie* in Latin). Does this entry into the adverbial class involve a semantic shift, as in *He drove the ball home from 15 meters*? Evidently, *home*, in its adverbial use, no longer retains the meaning of the corresponding noun. But can such a generalization be made? A further question arises: can converbs, insofar as they express adverbial subordination (Haspelmath 1995), be integrated into the adverbial class? Or should these “verbal adverbs” (Haspelmath 1995) be considered as adverbials? The first hypothesis would have the merit of expanding the adverbial class, which would no longer resemble a collection of unwanted fossils. Isn't the lack of flexibility and narrowness of the adverbial class the key to the problem? If we abandon the dogma of invariability, which M. Hummel regularly critiques (2017a, 2017b, 2021), might it not be possible, without falling back into the negative definition of the adverbial (which would be neither subject, nor object, nor predicate), to integrate elements as unlikely as modal verbs (Duplâtre 2024)² into the adverb class?

Expelling adverbs into other classes does not solve the problem of the adverb. A residue remains, whose coherence is far from guaranteed, raising the issue of internal boundaries: certain elements oscillate between two semantic classes -- for instance, manner (*she looked directly at us*) and time (*Tell them I'll be there directly*), or aspect (*Nous allons progressivement travailler sur cette question/We will gradually work on this issue*) and manner (*Nous allons travailler progressivement*

² The idea developed in this article is that the modal verb is functionally equivalent to an adverb insofar as it determines the predicative relationship.

sur cette question/We will work gradually on this issue). Are these differences due to positional phenomena, or the lexeme used? Is there proximity between these two semantic classes of adverbs?

Should we reconsider the adverbial class to identify a core acting as a prototype? From a typological perspective, the manner adverb seems a natural candidate for this role (Hengeveld 1992, 2004). However, this hypothesis may face the challenge that many manner adverbs are adjectives (Haspelmath 2001), that derivational suffixes merely block the adjectival function, and that some adjectives do not even need these suffixes to function as adverbs. But by stating this, aren't we reducing the adverb to an adjectival function?

These boundary issues will be at the heart of the Neuchâtel conference, which is open to all linguistic theories. Research on less-studied languages, as well as contrastive and typological perspectives, are strongly encouraged. We also strongly encourage quantitative approaches, as the aim is to base research on a sufficiently convincing amount of data.

Submission of proposals

Communications should not exceed 20 minutes in length and should be submitted in English or French. Abstracts of no more than 300 words, accompanied by a bi-bibliographical note on the speaker, should be submitted via the Scienceconf platform before January 31, 2025: <https://adverbes2025.sciencesconf.org/>

Proposals should present the initial problem, the research hypotheses, the methodology, a theoretical framework (if any), provisional results and some indicative bibliographic references. Acceptance will be notified at the beginning of March 2025.

Keynote speakers

Laurence Rouanne (Universidad Complutense de Madrid)
Ekkehard König (Freie Universität Berlin)

Organisation

Olivier Duplâtre (Sorbonne Université)
Corinne Rossari (Université de Neuchâtel)
Linda Sanvido (Université de Neuchâtel)

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