

Daniel Thom

Dr. Robert Troyer

LING 350

7 March 2016

Term Corpus Research Project

Introduction

In a conversation with a friend a couple months ago, I was given an interesting sentence to ponder: “What would you expect? He’s just a guy.” The dynamic meaning of the word *just* in the sentence made me take a second look. What caught my attention was that *just*, given the context, meant *merely* or *only*. Yet, when I changed the sentence to “he’s just the guy for the job,” the meaning of *just* changed to *exactly* or *precisely*. I was fascinated by this difference in meaning, especially as the two sentences followed a very similar pattern: (just) + (a definite or indefinite article) + (a noun). It was curious to me that the difference of a definite or indefinite article seemed to make the difference in meaning, switching the word between two completely different forms.

When I looked up the most common adjectives preceding this article/noun form in the Corpus of Contemporary English (COCA), such as “out the window” vs. “out a window”, I did not observe the same change in meaning of the word *out* as I had with *just*. There seemed to be something particular about the word *just* that changed meanings with the changing presence of articles. Thus, I wanted to explore the meaning changes with the presence of definite and indefinite articles to find out why this occurred.

Background

This pattern with the changing meaning reminded me of *Lexical Grammar*, an article written by linguist John Sinclair, who noted that “recent research into the features of language corpora give us reason to believe that the fundamental distinction between grammar, on the one hand, and lexis, on the other hand, is not as fundamental as it is usually held to be, and since it is a distinction that is made at the outset of the formal study of language, then it colours and distorts the whole enterprise.” In other words, the rigid language structures often taken for granted may in fact be much more complicated and nuanced than we originally anticipated. I wanted to take this idea and apply it to the meaning of *just* when it is followed by an article and a noun. I had observed some changes in meaning, and while I made some cursory predictions, I was still unsure what was ultimately responsible for the change in meaning.

Before I started my study, however, I went to several dictionaries to see how the word has been traditionally classified and conceptualized. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, the word *just* (as an adjective) had four basic meanings, two of which correlated with the examples “just a guy” and “just the guy”: “exactly, precisely” and “only, simply”. The Online Oxford English Dictionary provided a more thorough definition:

“Of state, identity, or similarity, or of opposition or antithesis; modifying noun phrase with *the*” (OED).

“Limiting the extent or degree denoted by an expression: only as much as, not much more or less than; barely, by a little, by a slight margin. Sometimes preceded by only or (in early use)” (OED).

This second definition also came with a description of use: “modifying noun phrases or pronouns, expressing number or quantity” (OED). However, the meaning and use of these definitions were not connected or made explicit at all. Thus, given Sinclair’s notion of lexical grammar, I took the meaning and use of the word *just* as my linguistic categories to explore. I hoped that, by observing the use of the expression in a corpus, I would be able to more fully connect the definition and meaning of the word with the appropriate context and use. While many dictionaries included definitions (including meaning and use of words), the connection between the two was not made explicit, and the abstract system informing the two was not explained, even in the language learner’s dictionary. This is the connection that I wanted to explore in my study.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Thus, I hypothesized that, when immediately followed by an indefinite article and a noun, the word *just* would reflect the meaning of the word *only* or *merely*, as in “I was just a child at the time.” I further hypothesized that when immediately followed by a definite article and a noun, the word *just* would reflect the meaning of the word *exactly* or *precisely*, as in “He is just the man for the job”.

Methods

Given that the expressions, “just a [noun]” and “just the [noun]” appeared much more frequently in the spoken section of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) than any other section, I decided to use that section of the COCA for my research. While both the fiction and the spoken corpora probably could have worked for the analysis, I wanted to analyze how the phrases are used and the meaning changes in spoken English. Thus, I limited my research to the spoken section of the COCA. I did not limit my search anymore by year because I wanted sufficient examples for my qualitative analysis of the corpus lines.

With every phrase I searched in COCA, I selected the first twenty instances for my analysis. When more than 100 hits were found, I used the sample function on COCA to obtain a randomized set of 100 instances. However, in most situations where the results were less than 100 instances, I simply selected the first twenty (or less if there were not twenty) for qualitative analysis.

For my individual searches, I searched the following terms into COCA spoken corpus in separate searches: “just a [n*]” and “just the [n*]”. [n*] is the search term selected under the POS (part of speech) list for COCA, so this gave me a list of the most frequently occurring phrases (with the most frequent collocating nouns) following this construction recorded in the spoken COCA. (Note: when I refer to particular searches in COCA, I use [noun], not [n*] for clarity on the part of speech, yet the actual search term always includes [n*].) Once I collected a list of twenty lines, I copied the concordance lines onto Microsoft Word and rendered them into a table for

analysis, eliminating the superfluous information, such as year or source. My observations and findings are based off this qualitative analysis. Since my study was primarily qualitative, I did not concern myself with norming data; I was not searching for statistical significance. Instead, I simply started with my two search terms and observed patterns from there, seeking to infer the semantic changes in the language.

Results and Analysis

“Just a [noun]” Findings: General Patterns

I began my analysis with the phrase, “just a [noun],” searching for the top results in the spoken COCA. Figure 1.1 shows the top 20 instances of “Just a [noun]” in the corpus. I quickly realized that “just a [noun]” often collocates with time-related words, as the figure shows. In fact, the most common instance of “just a [noun]” was “just a moment,” with 2702 hits (almost twice as many as any other entry) in the spoken corpus. Even the second entry, “just a couple,” follows a similar pattern, for as figure 1.2 shows, the majority of the words preceding the phrase fall into the same time-related semantic category.

Many of the most popular entries (as figure 1.1 shows) such as “just a moment,” “just a minute,” and “just a second” are all related to relatively short time periods, whereas some of the less frequent searches were of longer time periods, like weeks, years, or months. This led me to compare between the two categories to observe any differences in use. I selected one section at a time, qualitatively observing the collocation lines to search for patterns in meaning or use.

I noticed that, given that the COCA spoken corpus is primarily composed of unscripted conversations from television and radio programs, one of the most frequently occurring phrases was “we’ll be back in just a moment [or minute],” referring to the future. The high frequency of the preposition “in” signified this future context, as the phrase “in just a moment” occurred 2092 times, over 75% of all instances of “just a moment”. While there were also several times, when the same phrases were used to refer to the immediate past as in “just a moment ago” (188 hits out of 2702, less than 7%), the clear majority of them referred to the future.

Figure 1.1 Top 20 Instances of “Just a [noun]” in the spoken COCA

1	JUST A MOMENT	2702
2	JUST A COUPLE*	1144
3	JUST A MINUTE	1072
4	JUST A SECOND	970
5	JUST A LOT	260
6	JUST A QUESTION	224
7	JUST A WEEK	197
8	JUST A YEAR	164
9	JUST A BUNCH	159
10	JUST A MONTH	117
11	JUST A WAY	104
12	JUST A DAY	89
13	JUST A FACT	81
14	JUST A HANDFUL	79
15	JUST A MATTER	76
16	JUST A PART	76
17	JUST A KID	70
18	JUST A REMINDER	68
19	JUST A GUY	62
20	JUST A KIND	62

Note: Time-related words have been bolded, and “couple” was noted as well.

Figure 1.2 Sample of “just a couple” to determine semantic category of hits

1	just a couple of minutes
2	Just a couple of quotes
3	just a couple of seconds
4	just a couple days
5	just a couple of decades
6	Just a couple of years
7	just a couple of things
8	just a couple of minutes
9	just a couple of minutes
10	just a couple of cases

Note: Instances were random, a ten-word sample from the 1144 hits in the corpus; time-related words bolded for saliency

the rebuilding of the theater was a future point in relation to its being burned down, the whole situation was completed and in the past in relation to the speaker. This pattern can be compared to the frequency of “just a year ago,” which occurs 68 times, over 40% of all instances of “just a year”.

This pattern helped in initially developing my understanding of the meaning of the word *just* in this situation. Given that speakers used the word exclusively to refer to the past or future events within a very close time range (as in a minute or moment), I speculated that the speakers tended to only use the phrase when talking about a time period they were certain about. There is a level of certainty the speaker had that the time period was accurate. When referring to a moment or minute, the speaker can predict with probable certainty that the timeframe will be accurate, whereas predicting events a year into the future are much less certain, discouraging speakers from using the future form when referring to longer time periods. Thus, based on these observations and patterns in usage, one of the elements influencing the meaning of the word *just* is the speaker’s certainty; when someone uses the form, “just a [time-related noun],” the speaker expresses certainty to the audience that this stated time period is accurate.

“Just a [noun]” Findings: Comparison of *Just* with *Only*

Given that the meaning of *just* in phrases like “just a man” closely resembles the meaning of *only* or *merely*, I decided to compare the phrases “just a [noun]” with ‘only a [noun]’. The word *only* does not seem to take on the same pattern of semantic change as *just* does when the indefinite article is replaced by a definite one, so I wanted to explore the similarities and discrepancies in meaning between the two words.

As the initial guiding question behind my study was how the meaning of *just* changed with respect to individuals (as in “just a man” or “just a child”), I decided to compare “just a child” with “only a child”. Searching for these phrases in the spoken COCA, I compared individual concordance lines for comparison. There were eight hits for “only a child” and twenty-six for “just a child”. The concordance lines revealed two primary usages of the phrase, one seeming to express sympathy and another to downplay the abilities of the child. The following are fairly representative concordance line examples from “only a child;” the first corresponds with the sympathetic tone

This was sharply contrasted with the words such as “year” or “month,” which refer to a longer time period. While “moment” and “minute” tended to refer to the future, the longer time periods almost never included the “in” preposition to mark the future, occurring only 11 times out of the 164 total hits (less than 7%). And when I looked closer at those collocation lines, none of them actually referred to the future unknown to the speaker but a future point in the past, as in the following instance: “The theater -- known as La Fenice or the Phoenix -- had burned down once before in 1836, but was rebuilt *in just a year*” (COCA spoken; emphasis mine). Thus, while

and the second with the limiting tone. “Fontanne, says Alfred, who was born in 1892, was *only a child* when he lost his father and then his stepfather” (COCA Spoken; emphasis mine) and “James is *only a child*, only a fifth-grade child. I still believe he's too young to work” (COCA Spoken; emphasis mine).

This same pattern is expressed in the phrase “just a child,” as both meanings are used in the concordance lines. Yet the second of the uses – downplaying the abilities or significance of the individual – was more frequent comparatively in “just a child” than “only a child,” as in the phrase, “But Rory is, after all, *just a child*, and his memories sometimes seemed confused” (COCA Spoken; emphasis mine). In this example, the testimony of the child is discounted due to the fact that he is “just a child”. This pattern was much more common in “just a child” than “only a child,” but I did not consider it a significant factor in determining meaning until I compared *just* and *only* in their use of time-related words.

Being that “just a [noun]” typically collocates with time-related words, I then compared the usage of the phrases “just a [noun]” and “only a [noun]” with the words *moment* and *minute* to determine semantic change. I began by searching for the phrase “only a moment,” and six instances appeared in the corpus, as shown in Figure 1.3. As the examples in the figure show, the phrase typically emphasizes the importance of the moment, and the fact that the moment is only for a moment makes it more precious to the speaker. For instance, in the second line, the moment, due to the fact that it is limited, is viewed as a valuable commodity, such that it should be used judiciously. The same is also explicit in examples 1, 4, and 5, as the limitation of time – “only a moment” – is put forth as reason to make the most of and utilize the time that is available. Time is viewed as a limited commodity, and thus, the preciousness of it is emphasized.

Figure 1.3 Spoken COCA Results of “only a moment”: Concordance Lines

1	We are on this earth for only a moment in time. And fewer of us have parents and grandparents to tell us about
2	And, you know, there's only a moment that you have to capture the birthday surprise and the singing and everything.
3	were out of sight for only a moment or less than five minutes, and the immersion was silent.
4	ng -- polls -- polls are only a moment in time. They're also -- depending on the methodology and how the question
5	e Mr. Rohatyn -- we have only a moment -- what could government do right now, quickly, to speed the end of
6	a moment of elation, but only a moment . I feel happy, very happy. To save, you

Note: The phrase “only a moment” bolded for saliency. These are the only six instances of “only a moment” in the COCA Spoken Corpus

This sharply contrasts the usage of “just a moment,” as time is viewed, not as a precious commodity, but as a hindrance of something else that is valued more. Consider the following sentence: “Stay with us. . . . *In just a moment* we'll talk about Cindy McCain, the woman who would be first lady” (COCA Spoken; emphasis mine). In this example, the time – the moment – is viewed as a hindrance between the present and what the audience wants: to hear about Cindy McCain. In this way, the word *just* is used, not to call the audience to utilize the limited time, but to assure them that the time will be short, and they will be able to see the rest of the show shortly.

In essence, with *only*, time is a limited and precious commodity that must be used wisely, but with *just*, time is a hindrance and a barrier, an obstacle from what is really considered precious.

This pattern is further evidenced in the phrases “only a minute” and “just a minute”. As Figure 1.4 shows, out of the 12 instances of “only a minute” in the Spoken COCA, exactly half of those were of the phrase, “only a minute left,” following the pattern in “only a moment,” where *only* is used to emphasize time as a limited commodity. For instance, in number eleven in the Figure, the speaker interrupts his question to qualify it by saying, “I have only a minute left,” as a way of letting the addressee know to limit the answer to fit the allotted time. Moreover, in sentence number six, the speaker apologizes to the addressees for the limited time available to them. In general, though, the pattern in the example phrases is to emphasize the time as a limited commodity, not as a hindrance as in the case of *just*.

Figure 1.4 Spoken COCA Results of “only a minute”: Concordance Lines

1	ER-1-AB# (Voiceover) We have only a minute left , so two more, Maria Menounos, the masks. CARSON-KRESSLEY-1# A minute
2	ible) GUTHRIE: We don't have only a minute left . Mr-DEUTSCH: OK. GUTHRIE: Let's get to this last one, kind of
3	STEPHANOPOU# (Off-camera) We only a minute left ... That's right, but George...
4	nd-Mank) Mr-VAN-ZANDT: We're only a minute or two off of the interstate. So what the police have to consider probably
5	uman contact. MARTIN: Rikk, only a minute left , but same to you. You've been there many, many times
6	I'm sorry, guys, we've got only a minute for you. But what kind of gift would you get your man? Ms-GOODMAN
7	is availability KING Gloria, only a minute . Is the next time we'll see your client when she's in court
8	both very much. We have only a minute left . One more caller, Greenville, South Carolina. Hello CALLER Yes,
9	tches don't last long. After only a minute or so, one of the roosters lies lifeless in the dirt ring. Those
10	SUSTEREN: Gentlemen, we have only a minute left . Your final thoughts, please. JACK TENNER: I hope the judge
11	So you would argue -- I have only a minute left -- you would argue that the Republican plan, which has just passed,
12	SELO: The earth quake lasted only a minute but 36 hours later the death toll is still rising. By mid day officially

Note: The phrase “only a minute” bolded for saliency, along with instances of *left* immediately following. These are the only six instances of “only a moment” in the COCA Spoken Corpus

In fact, when compared to the usage of “just a minute,” the pattern becomes all the more salient, as the word *left* – used in 50% of the phrases, as in “only a minute left” – appears only seven times with the phrase “just a minute,” less than 1% of the total 1087 phrases. Instead, the phrases “just a minute” patterns “just a moment” in the frequent use of the preposition *in* preceding the phrase, 662 times (over 60%) of the total 1087 instances. The presence of the preposition *in* signifies the anticipation for the future event and thus diminishes the significance of the time period, as the time is viewed as a hindrance to the event. Referencing Figure 1.4, it is also interesting to note that this “*in* anticipation” is never used with the phrase “only a minute,” as the speakers seek to emphasize the time period, not pass over it as with the use of *just*.

“Just the [noun]” Findings: Comparison of *Just* and *Exactly* in Use

I began my study of “just the [noun]” by typing the phrase into the Spoken COCA to find any common collocations. However, unlike “just a [noun],” there were no significant collocations like time-related words for further investigation. Figure 1.5 shows the top 20 instances of “just the

Figure 2.1 Top 20 results for “just the [noun]” in Spoken COCA

1	JUST THE WAY	645
2	JUST THE BEGINNING	409
3	JUST THE FACT	192
4	JUST THE KIND	102
5	JUST THE IDEA	74
6	JUST THE TIP	72
7	JUST THE OPPOSITE	59
8	JUST THE PEOPLE	59
9	JUST THE NATURE	53
10	JUST THE PRESIDENT	50
11	JUST THE FACTS	48
12	JUST THE UNITED	42
13	JUST THE THING	37
14	JUST THE SORT	35
15	JUST THE DAY	33
16	JUST THE START	31
17	JUST THE THOUGHT	30
18	JUST THE TRUTH	26
19	JUST THE TIME	23
20	JUST THE MEDIA	22

[noun]” in the Spoken COCA. Thus, instead of exploring specific patterns between instances as I did with the earlier search, I started a comparison between “just the [noun]” and “exactly the [noun].” I chose the word *exactly* because it most closely resembled the meaning of *just* in “he’s just the guy for the job,” it was a common synonym given in dictionary definitions I referenced, and it was more common and ubiquitous in usage than other synonyms like *precisely*.

As I searched through the concordance lines of many of the examples, I was struck by the multiple usages of the phrase, as I anticipated a more consistent meaning like “just a [noun]”. While the meaning of “exactly the [noun]” was fairly consistent, the use of *just* was not, and I was initially confused by the lack of consistency. However, as I started looking more closely at the usage, some patterns started to emerge.

As I hypothesized, the meaning of *just* in “just the opposite,” “just the people,” “just the thing,” and “just the sort” generally resembled the meaning of *exactly*.

Figure 2.2 shows a side-by-side comparison of ten sampled concordance lines for both of the phrases. As the Figure shows, the usage and meaning is very similar, and there is no noticeable difference in the meaning of “just the opposite” and “exactly the opposite”. In each of the instances, the one word could be used interchangeably with the other word, and the meaning would remain constant.

While this pattern was true for several of the phrases that I observed, there were several instances where the meaning of *just* diverged from the meaning of *exactly*, as in the case of “just the president” or “just the United States”. In these situations, the meaning of *just* resembled the meaning of *only* or *merely*, as in the case of “just a minute”.

Figure 2.2 Representative Comparison of Concordance Lines of “exactly the opposite” and “just the opposite”

Exactly the Opposite: Sample Lines		Just the Opposite: Sample Lines	
1	it means exactly the opposite of what the Americans mean.	1	In fact, just the opposite is the case.
2	When this exactly the opposite thing they should be doing is	2	would be just the opposite going on here, but again we don't know
3	This is exactly the opposite of the Black Power Movement.	3	answer, just the opposite is the answer. Pro-growth,
4	to go exactly the opposite direction. For Clinton,	4	ions are just the opposite of that. Like...
5	eral said exactly the opposite . And I'll say. one other thing	5	. . . just the opposite is happening. People's insurance
6	by saying exactly the opposite . Take a look. (BEGIN-VIDEO-CLIP)	6	acts are just the opposite of that. . . .
7	should do exactly the opposite of what he says. And that could	7	that's just the opposite of what we're supposed to do.
8	suit says exactly the opposite . What's your evidence?	8	ad did just the opposite of what his wife had told him.
9	re saying exactly the opposite of that. Sorry about that.	9	maybe just the opposite of what you think.
10	t this is exactly the opposite way you would feel.	10	hat is just the opposite of what you would want if you're

In the concordance lines referencing the president and the United States – two particular entities – *just* almost exclusively meant *only* or *merely*, usually used in comparison to something bigger. In the case of the president, he was generally compared to a larger body of politicians or leaders, as in the following example: “it's not *just the president* getting criticized for this policy. It's going to be Hillary Clinton and Democrats” (Spoken COCA; emphasis mine). Whereas with the United States, the comparison was generally geographic: “It's going to have negative consequences for the world, not *just the United States*” (Spoken COCA; emphasis mine) or “Not *just the United States* but also in France and Germany and throughout Europe” (Spoken COCA; emphasis mine). In all three of these instances, and indeed a large percentage of the concordance lines (83% of U.S. references and 60% of president references), the word *not* precedes the form, a clear indicator of limiting the modified phrase. I noticed this pattern with specific nouns like these – particular entities such as the United States and president which have one possible referent – almost exclusively take on the *only* meaning, despite the definite article.

The same pattern seemed to emerge with many of the other examples, too. For instance, “just the tip” and “just the beginning” exclusively took on the meaning of the indefinite form – “just a [noun]” – instead of following the pattern of “exactly the [noun]”. Again, I was initially confused by this until I started observing patterns in the usage. Whenever “just the [noun]” deviated from the expected meaning, it was referring to a part or specific entity and contrasting that part with a larger whole. In the case of the United States, the country was being selected and

compared to the larger entity of the world. The tip in “just the tip” was being compared to the whole iceberg, as in “just the tip of the iceberg” (Spoken COCA). The beginning in “just the beginning” was being compared to the whole, as in the following: “And Rene, this is really *just the beginning of the problems*, although on the bright side, the airlines are getting ahead” (Spoken COCA; emphasis mine). Thus, I determined that, when “just the [noun]” is used to identify a particular for the sake of comparing it to something larger in scope, then it differs from the expected form and takes on the form of the indefinite form.

“Just the [noun]” and “Just a [noun]” Comparison

After exploring the usage of “just a [noun]” and “just the [noun]” individually, I decided to compare the two of them by using common nouns that are used in both cases: guy (the word that initially inspired the study) and child (for age comparison). Working from my previous definition of *just* with “just a child,” I concluded that the meaning of *just* in this context (referring to young children) was used to downplay the individual, drawing attention to a general lack of significance or credibility.

I searched the phrases “just a guy,” “just the guy,” and “just the child” in the spoken COCA to determine meaning changes and variations of use. As I expected, the meaning of “just a guy” was consistent throughout all the examples I viewed, as pictured in Figure 3.1. In each of the instances, the word *just* means *merely* or *only*, following in the same pattern as “just a child”. The noun, in this case *guy*, is also downplayed and viewed as insignificant, as if the speaker anticipates that another might attribute more to the individual than the speaker deems appropriate. To keep this from happening, the speaker says that the individual is “just a guy;” no more. For instance, in sentence two, the speaker says, “he is just a guy with a big mouth and no results,” implying that there are others who view him as someone more than merely a guy who talks a lot and does not get anything done. Therefore, as with the case of “just a child,” *just* in this diminishes the significance of the object of the phrase.

Figure 3.1 “Just a guy”: A Sample of Spoken COCA Concordance Lines

1	Yeah. I'm just a guy on a street. And sometimes beautiful women
2	To me, he is just a guy with a big mouth and no results.
3	because I'm just a guy as dumb as any other guy, you know. I did
4	y father was just a guy who worked for IBM or the equivalent
5	stuff - just a guy and a guitar, you know, seemingly crying
6	As it is I'm just a guy who wears glasses. The technology of eye
7	m just-- I'm just a guy amongst a lot of estrogen. I'm
8	ck Obama was just a guy running for president, he charmed crowds
9	and he's just a guy shooting the breeze with you.
10	walkin, he's just a guy who has been a community organizer

Note: Phrase “just a guy” bolded for saliency; A representative sample of COCA Spoken usage

I then searched the phrase “just the guy” in the spoken COCA and found less consistent results. In several examples, the meaning of *just* resembled the meaning of *exactly*, whereas in other sentences, the meaning followed the pattern of “just a guy” and seemed to mean *only* or *merely*. Figure 3.2 provides a representative sample of the instances of “just the guy” in the Spoken COCA. As evidenced in the Figure’s concordance lines, there are several clear examples where *just* means *exactly*: sentences 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, and 14. In all these examples, a preposition –

usually *to* or *for* – immediately follows the phrase, signaling purpose or intention. For instance, in sentence 13, there is a task to be done – “a dirty job” – but the speaker has “just [exactly] the guy to do it”. The preposition “to” signals this intention, highlighting a particular individual for a given task or purpose.

This is contrasted with many of the other instances of “just the guy,” where an individual guy is singled out, but the defining features of the guy are what downplay him, making him insignificant. For instance, in sentence 12 in Figure 3.2, the speaker says, “I’m just the guy that did my job,” nothing more. In the larger context of the statement, we learn that the individual was accused of much more, in fact, he “is a defendant who’s been charged with having masterminded a sophisticated, greedy, corrupt fraud that took money out of the pockets of millions of Americans” (Spoken COCA). The defense of the speaker is to draw upon a self-portrait of someone who just did his job, not someone who masterminded a widespread fraud. Thus, the details drawn upon (using the definite article) are not a way of singling him out for greater importance or identifying him for a particular task, but rather as a way of showing that he is less than what others assume him to be.

As with the previous examples with the definite article, the meaning split. Half the time *just* meant *exactly*, and the use of the definite article highlighted particular features of something for identification. Other times, however, the word meant *only* or *merely*, and there was no noticeable change in the phrases with the definite article and the indefinite article.

Figure 3.2 “Just a guy”: A Sample of Spoken COCA Concordance Lines

1	nerd, which he is. Maybe he's just the guy . Here's the biggest question.
2	l security adviser's job. I'm just the guy that's honchoing this
3	ere talking to you. I'm still just the guy next door from, you know,
4	o step out and say, " I'm not just the guy who stood behind Bill Clinton
5	And that shrinking violet is just the guy to do it. You know, he sees
6	ust a jack o'lantern, we have just the guy to help you. Dan Witkowski,
7	r? Joining us this morning is just the guy to answer those questions.
8	w) DOW: (Voiceover) Steve has just the guy in mind... Today's the day.
9	mean, he clearly enjoys being just the guy who is totally self-absorbed
10	b. TORI: Yeah. CRAIG: I'm not just the guy who runs to a motel room,
11	yeah. CHRIS WALLACE: I've got just the guy for you.
12	u, the guy sitting right- I'm just the guy that did my job, and enjoyed
13	is a dirty job, but we've got just the guy to do it. Joining us now,
14	little point, Larry. I've got just the guy to run it: General

Note: Phrase “just the guy” bolded for saliency; extra lines added for distinction between two senses of the meaning of the phrase.

Lastly, I searched for “just the child” in the Spoken COCA, and I found only four results, two of which were insignificant, as the phrases were “just the child’s,” which altered the meaning. Nevertheless, I analyzed the last two sentences and found that, while they used the definite article, the meaning resembled that of the indefinite article. The two sentences are listed as follows:

“It's a commitment that takes more than just the child, it takes you as well.”

“But professional psychotherapeutic help for the whole family, not just the child alone, you separately, is called for here.”

I speculated as to the meaning of this pattern. While the phrase, “Just the guy” occasionally made *just* mean *exactly*, every other example of *just* meant *only* or *merely*. Different than what I had previously hypothesized, *just* followed by a definite article is used to highlight a particular individual or entity. Sometimes this is to highlight their qualities for something or to point to the specificity of the entity, thus resembling the meaning of *exactly*. Other times, however, the word means *only* or *merely*, as specific features are highlighted as a comparison with a larger feature or quality, as in “I’m just the guy who does my job,” not the mastermind behind a national fraud. I assumed that the reason why children are never used in the first of these ways is because, as a child, they are viewed societally as less significant than adults, and individual qualities are not identified as much as they are with adults. Thus, even with the presence of a definite article, the meaning of the word is still *only* or *merely*, as we would be less inclined to use the latter form (which would not be impossible, just less likely) to refer to children.

Figure 3.3 Summary of Findings from Section

Expression	Meaning of “just”
Just a child	Only, merely
Just the child	Only, merely
Just a guy	Only, merely
Just the guy	Only, merely OR exactly

Limitations and Further Research

This study was conducted over the good portion of an academic term, and as such, it was limited in scope. There are many ways this research could be developed that would strengthen its findings and apply to multiple contexts. One possible expansion would be across genre. I limited the study to the Spoken COCA, but I would be curious to extend the study to fiction, magazines, and newspapers, as I believe these would be elucidating with more examples and a broader body of text. I think that, due to the genre, some of the data might be skewed, as there are discipline-specific phrases in television and radio such as “we’ll be back in a minute” that could have skewed my results. Analyzing across genres would help norm my data and make it representative for a larger population.

Furthermore, I limited my study to the word *just* and traced semantic changes with different contexts, specifically analyzing semantic differences with definite and indefinite articles. While this study revealed many of the conceptual and pragmatic influences behind the meaning and use of *just*, I would be interested to see how these influences extend to a larger list of determiners, such as some, these, those, that, and this, in phrases like “just those [plural noun]”. Furthermore, I am convinced that there are other adverbs that are also influenced by similar changes in articles and determiners, and I would like to extend my list and compare with the usage of *just*. These future studies could shed some more light on the results of this study and hopefully sharpen some of my findings.

Conclusion

Summary of Results: Meanings of *Just*

Throughout the study, I slowly developed the meaning of *just* in a number of contexts. But I do not want to lose the forest for the trees due to focusing solely on the close reading of concordance lines. Rather, let us step back and look at the patterns in the language, first looking at the meaning of “just a [noun]”. We found the following:

1. “Just a [noun]” typically collocates with time-related words
2. Unlike “only,” which tends to view the [noun] as a limited and precious commodity to be used wisely, *just* does not but rather tends to view the [noun] as a hindrance or something that is less valuable than something else
3. “Just a [person]” typically diminishes the significance of the person and downplays the significance of them
4. “Just a [noun]” attempts to counter the perceived expectations or significance that the audience might place on the [noun]

To put this all together, the meaning of *just* is heavily influenced by perceptions of the audience’s expectations. With time-related expressions, the speaker (usually the host of a program in this genre) anticipates that the audience wants to continue watching the program uninterrupted by commercials, thus he/she says, “We’ll be back in just a minute” to counter the perceived audience expectation that the commercial break will be long. Thus, in order for the audience not to make more of the three minute break than is necessary, the word *just* is inserted to assure the audience (with confidence) that the program will be back on in a few moments. Likewise, in the context of “just a [person],” the speaker uses *just* as a qualifier of the person to limit any assumptions the audience makes about the individual. While certain qualities or significance might be attributed to the individual, the speaker uses *just* as a way of showing that the individual does not merit those things, when in fact, they are just (or merely) something less significant.

Similarly, we can summarize our findings of “just the [noun]”:

1. There is no consistent collocation with any particular semantic set of words
2. The definite article is used to highlight a specific quality or entity
3. When this specific quality or entity is compared with something larger or greater, the word *just* takes on the meaning of *only* or *merely*.
4. When this specific quality or entity is not used as a comparison, then the entity is not viewed as inferior by comparison, and the word retains the meaning of *exactly*.

To synthesize these points, the meaning of *just* in “just the [noun]” is much less consistent than *just* in “just a [noun],” but that does not mean it is random or less predictable by any means. While the definite article in the phrase enables specific nouns to be selected, those nouns can be selected for two main reasons. One reason is to highlight particular features of the noun for identification of the entity or revelation of a particular purpose or use for that entity, as with “I know just the guy for the job” or “that is just the way it is”. Other times, specific entities are identified for comparison with larger groups or entities, as with “this will not affect not just the president, but all of Congress as well,” or “it is just the tip of the iceberg,” where tip is the specific entity selected to compare with the whole iceberg. In these situations, the audience expectation is also taken into account. For instance, with “it is just the tip of the iceberg,” the speaker assumes that the audience is making a bigger deal of the tip of the iceberg than is justified, given that it is insignificant given the larger context. This is applied to individuals when the speaker says, “he is just the guy who goes to work,” not the one involved in a national security breach, as some might assume (the larger context against which the individual characteristic of going to work is deemed insignificant).

Significance of Results

My study of semantic change are significant in a variety of ways, as they demonstrate Sinclair's notion of lexical grammar and explore the link between meaning and use in language features. Sinclair noted that many of our lexical and semantic categories are very rigid, and before corpus linguistics, many of our theories of language were based on intuitions, not on actual usage. Thus, many of our traditional models – even dictionary definitions – are incredibly simplistic, as they are built off a crude model of language. My hypothesis – that the change of determiners was solely responsible for the semantic change of the word *just* – was also based off this model, as I formulated my speculations on simplistic and surface-level observations. As my study revealed, the guiding principles behind the change in meaning actually has much more to do with speaker/audience relationship and perceptions of expectations than just the mere presence of determiners. Without a corpus, though, those deeper insights might not have been possible, as it was the careful searching of hundreds of concordance lines that revealed these patterns in usage.

Furthermore, my study further revealed the strong connection between meaning and usage when developing definitions. In all the dictionary definitions that I referenced, there were meanings listed and common usages, but these two were almost never connected or explained to the reader. In order to correctly use a word like *just*, a proficient language user must know much more than just a list of common meanings and usages; they must know the conceptual structures that inform and shape the meanings, revealed by the changes in usage. These conceptual models are rarely taught to language learners, and the language learner dictionaries do little to explain definitions – especially of rather abstract words like *just* – in light of these conceptual systems. Further insight into these systems and a deeper understanding and appreciation for the profound connection between meaning and use in language will enable educators and language scholars to make these intuitive structures explicit to language learners, not just listing rules but providing conceptual frameworks.