Philosophy and discourse: the rise of « really » and the fall of « truly »

Philosophie et usages discursifs : la montée en puissance de really et le déclin de truly

Anna Wierzbicka
1. Introduction: the meteoric rise of “really” in modern English

One of the most remarkable phenomena in the history of the English language is the spectacular rise of the word really, and the concomitant fall of the word truly. For example, if we consult the Concordance to the works of Shakespeare (Spevack 1970: 2720) we will find only two examples of really, and three of real. Three hundred years later, in a comparable Concordance of the works of Bernard Shaw (1971), we find around twelve hundred instances of really, and around six hundred of real. In the contemporary corpus of spoken English (COBUILD “UK Spoken”), the frequencies of both words are even higher than in Shaw’s corpus. Roughly speaking, in Shaw we find around 600 instances of really (and 300 of real) per million running words, whereas in the COBUILD corpus for spoken English, it is 2300 instances of really per million words. (For real, the figure is circa 200.)

1. In the COBUILD corpus, there is a marked difference in the use of really between spoken and written English. For example, the average for really in “UK books” is only 405.3 per million words, as compared with 2296.3 in “UK spoken”. Clearly, in contemporary English really has become very much part of spoken, colloquial language, of everyday spoken discourse.
If we look at the Shakespearean examples, we see that the meanings of both *really* and *real* appear to be similar, if not the same, as those that we find in contemporary English. The frequencies, however, are minuscule. By contrast, Shakespeare’s corpus contains a sizeable number of occurrences of the word *truly* (179), whereas in the twice as large corpus of Shaw, there are only 51 instances of *truly*, that is, its frequency is seven times lower. In the COBUILD corpus of spoken English (“UK Spoken”), the level of *truly* is still lower: 7 cases per one million words, as compared with Shaw’s 25. Thus, *truly* has come down, and *really*, up; and moreover, *really* has reached frequencies several times higher than those that *truly* could have ever boasted. Looking at Shakespeare’s plays from a present-day perspective, it is surprising to see how concerned his characters were with the question of whether or not somebody’s words were true. To give some examples (from *Measure for Measure*):

Francisca: Are these [privileges] not large enough?
Isabella: Yes, truly. (p. 66)
Isabella: Sir, make me not your story.
Lucio: It is true. (p. 75)
Pompey: Truly, sir, I am a poor fellow that would live. (p. 76)
Isabella: True. (p. 92)
Lucio: But it is certain that when he makes water his urine is congealed ice. That I know to be true. (p. 108)
Duke: You have told me too many [tales] of him already, sir, if they be true; if not true, none were enough. (p. 179)
Pompey: Why, very well. I hope here be truths. (p. 74)
Lucio: They say this Angelo war was not made by man and woman after this downright way of creation. Is it true, think you? (p. 108)
Pompey: For truly, sir, for your kindness I owe you a good turn. (p. 118)
Isabella: Most strange, but yet most truly, will I speak. (p. 134)
Isabella: To make the truth appear where it seems hid, and hide the false [that] seems true. (p.135)
Duke: Confess the truth… (p.137)

In contemporary plays, dialogues of this kind are exceedingly rare — not only because truly is no longer used, but also because the place of true (and also truth) seems to have been taken up, to a large extent, by really.² Some examples (from Simon Gray’s 1981 play Quartermaine’s terms):

Quartermaine: Oh yes. Well, it looks — looks really terrific!! (p.111)
Anita: Anyway, he felt really rotten about messing up your evening. (p.212)
Meadle: Yes, thanks, but — well, you see the trouble is I’ve had a bit of an accident.
Quartermaine: Oh really? Oh Lord. (p.220)
Windscape (whispered): Yes well, it is his first day, Melanie my dear — he didn’t really understand. (p.223)
Loomis: I believe it’s an Ibsen, Hedda Gabler — I believe.
Quartermaine: Oh, is it really? (p.227)
Anita: Yes, Amanda’s been absolutely wonderful, quite a surprise really, because when I first met her at a party a few months ago, I thought she was — well, absolutely charming, of course, but rather — rather feckless, if anything. But it turns out she’s got a really tough brain. (p.730)
Melanie: I really think I’d get on much better with Mr Meadle if he didn’t try so hard to get on with me. (p.236)
Windscape: She must love you really, mustn’t she, or she wouldn’t — wouldn’t resent your being away from her so much (p.243).

² The place of “true” has also been taken up by “right”. For detailed discussion, see Wierzbicka, In press.
Windscape: …it really was most — extraordinary… (p.238)

Windscape: Well, she really does sound a most — a most remarkable… (p.253)

In fact, having chosen, at random, a contemporary play (Simon Gray’s *Quartermaine’s terms*), I have found in it no mentions of “true” (or its cognates) at all; whereas when I chose, at random, one of Shakespeare’s plays, comparable in length (*Measure for Measure*) I found in it some 20 mentions of *true* and its cognates. Moreover, I found in Gray’s play some two dozen examples of *really*, of which in Shakespeare’s play there were none.

“So what?” the reader might ask. Does it matter that speakers of English have started to use more and more the word *really* and less and less, the word *truly*? Does it matter that the word *really* has become very widely used in English — much more so than *truly* ever was? And does it matter that the references to “truth” in conversation appear to have become much less common than they used to be?

In this paper, I will argue that these things are indeed highly significant; that *really* does not mean the same as *truly*, and that the phenomenal rise of *really* throws a great deal of light on Anglo culture — both in a historical and comparative perspective. First, however, I need to say a few words about the methodology on which the analysis developed here will be based.

2. ‘NSM’ (Natural Semantic Metalanguage) as a tool for studying languages and cultures

The approach to linguistic description illustrated in this paper (the so-called ‘NSM’ approach) is based on two fundamental assumptions: that every language has an irreducible core in terms of which the speakers can understand all complex thoughts and utterances, and that the irreducible cores of all natural languages match, so that we can speak, effectively, of the irreducible core of all languages, reflecting the irreducible core of human thought.

As Leibniz eloquently argued three centuries ago, not everything can be explained: at some point, all explanations must come to an end,
for a regressus ad infinitum explains nothing. Some things must be self-explanatory (intuitively clear), or we could never understand anything. The explanatory power of any explanation depends therefore on the intuitive clarity of the indefinable conceptual primes which constitute its ultimate foundation.

A natural language is a powerful system in which very complex and diverse meanings can be formulated and conveyed to other people. In the NSM theory of language it is assumed that the intelligibility of all such meanings depends on the existence of a basic set of conceptual primes which do not require any explanations for they are intuitively clear to us (and presumably, innate); and which can be found through in-depth analysis of any natural language.

Cross-linguistic empirical work undertaken within the NSM framework suggests that there are some sixty universal conceptual primes. Using their English exponents, we can present them as follows (cf. Wierzbicka 1996; Goddard 1998, Goddard and Wierzbicka eds. 1994 and In press):

**Table of universal semantic primes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Substantives</td>
<td>I, YOU, PEOPLE, BODY, SOMEONE, SOMETHING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determiners</td>
<td>THIS, THE SAME, OTHER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantifiers</td>
<td>ONE, TWO, SOME, MANY/MUCH, ALL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributes</td>
<td>GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental predicates</td>
<td>THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>SAY, WORD, TRUE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions, events, movements</td>
<td>DO, HAPPEN, MOVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existence and possession</td>
<td>THERE IS, HAVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life and death</td>
<td>LIVE, DIE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Logical concepts
NOT, MAYBE, CAN,
BECAUSE, IF

Time
WHEN, NOW, AFTER,
BEFORE, A LONG TIME,
A SHORT TIME, FOR
SOME TIME; MOMENT

Space
WHERE, HERE, ABOVE,
BELOW, FAR, NEAR,
SIDE, INSIDE; TOUCH

Intensifier, Augmentor
VERY, MORE

Taxonomy, partonomy
KIND OF, PART OF

Similarity
LIKE

The first hypothesis then, is, that in all languages lexical exponents for each of the sixty or so conceptual primes can be found. The second, concomitant, hypothesis is that in all languages conceptual primes can enter into the same combinations. For example, it can be expected not only that in any language lexical exponents can be found for the basic notions PEOPLE, THING, THIS, TWO, ALL, BIG, BAD, DO, SEE, MOVE, HAPPEN and CAN, but also that in any language these elements can be put together to create meaningful combinations such as the following ones:

ALL PEOPLE DO THIS
I SEE TWO THINGS
IF YOU DO THIS, SOMETHING BAD CAN HAPPEN TO YOU

Of course the word order, and the morphosyntactic ‘trappings’ may differ from language to language, but the hypothesis is that the elements, their combinations, and their meaning will be the same. (Cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka, eds., In press.) This means that just as we can have a rudimentary universal lexicon of indefinable concepts we can also have a rudimentary universal grammar of such concepts, and if we have a mini-lexicon and a mini-grammar then we can have a mini-language — a mini-language which is carved out of natural languages
and which can be used for the description and comparison of languages, in their lexicon, in their grammar, and also in the discourse practices associated with them: a ‘natural semantic metalanguage’ (NSM). The same metalanguage can be used for formulating cultural scripts, and for comparing them across languages and cultures.

Since this metalanguage is carved out of natural language (any natural language), the semantic explications and scripts constructed in it are intuitively meaningful and have psychological reality. Consequently, unlike semantic formulae based on various artificial formalisms, NSM formulae are open to verification (they can be tested against native speakers’ intuitions).

3. What is the difference in meaning between “really” and “truly”?  

The word truly is derived from the word true. The word true is the English exponent of the universal semantic prime TRUE. What this means is that we can find a word for TRUE in all languages (or so the evidence suggests), and that this word cannot be defined in any simpler terms within any language. The claim that true is indefinable is not put forward here as an article of faith, but is based on empirical cross-linguistic investigations. Definitions of true or truth which can be found in linguistic and philosophical literature rely usually in complex concepts like ‘correspondence’ and ‘reality’, which are absent from most of the world’s languages. From an NSM point of view, all such language-specific concepts need to be defined in terms of the sixty or so universal primes. To say that true is indefinable means to say that it cannot be defined in terms of the sixty or so human concepts established empirically as universal. The “canonical” frames in which the word for TRUE can appear in all languages include the following two:

This is true.
This is not true.

In both these frames, “this” refers to something that someone has said. The adverb truly, too, refers to something that someone has said, and indicates that this something is true. More particularly, however, it
refers to the speaker’s own words: “when I say this I say something true”. For example:

Truly, I love you. =
I say: I love you
this is true

In questions, truly can refer to the addressee’s words. Roughly:

Do you truly love me? =
you say you love me
is this true?

In addition to the universal use of true (true₁), there is also a language-specific use, as in the case of true love or true friend. Used in this way, true is semantically more complex and it is restricted to “good things” that people would want to believe to be true. Thus, true friend, true love or true scholar are felicitous and well-attested collocations, whereas true enemy, true hatred or true ignoramus are not. Roughly, the meaning of true₂ can be represented as follows:

he is a true friend. =
he is a friend
I know: sometimes when people say something good like this about someone this something is not true
when I say this [that he is a friend] I’m not doing something like this
it is true

In accordance with the NSM theory, this explication (a ‘semantic representation’) is formulated exclusively in terms of simple and universal concepts and conforming to the rules of universal grammar.

Let us now consider the meaning of the words real and really. Judging by the available historical records, real was first used in English with reference to existence. The OED formulates this first meaning of real (real₁) as follows: “having an objective evidence; actually existing as a thing”. This is illustrated with the following seventeenth-century examples:
1. Is’t real that I see? (Shakespeare)
2. That some such apparitions were not imaginary but Real. (Hobbes)
3. Whereat I wak’d, and found Before mine Eyes all real, as the dream had lively shadowed. (Milton)

What does it mean that an apparition is not imaginary but real? Essentially, the OED seems right: it means that something (whatever it is that one sees) exists. But for the paraphrase to sound convincing, one is tempted to add (circularly) the word really and to say that the thing in question «really exists»; in fact, the OED falls into this trap itself, inserting in the paraphrase the word actually. What this shows is that a paraphrase along the lines of «something exists!» is not sufficient and that the word real (real1) includes in its meaning an implicit contrast: something exists, rather than only appears to exist. To account for this implication, we could propose an explication along the following lines:

It (X) is real. =
[I know:]
sometimes a person thinks that something exists
when this something does not exist
[I say:]
when someone thinks that this (X) exists
this someone is not doing something like this
people can know this (that X exists)

The OED distinguishes this sense of real, focussed on the “reality” of something’s existence, from a sense focussed on the “reality” of a state of affairs, a process or an event, which it defines as follows: “actually existing or present as a state or quality of things; having a foundation in fact; actually occurring or happening”. This sense is illustrated, above all, with examples including the collocations real life and real world. If we continue with the format used earlier, this could be represented as follows:

[I say:]
when someone thinks that this (X) is happening
this someone is not doing something like this
people can know this (that X is happening)
Both these senses (or uses) of real distinguished by the OED are still present in English. The second of them, though not the first one, has also a corresponding adverbial use, as in the following example:

Account of such things as have really happened. (1712)

The OED defines really as used in the above sentence as follows: “In a real manner; in reality; in point of, or as a matter of fact; actually.” I will discuss this definition very shortly. Leaving aside several more putative meanings of real and really distinguished by the OED, I will discuss one which is singled out under really and defined as follows: “Used to emphasize the truth or correctness of an epithet or statement; hence positively, indeed”. This is illustrated with the following examples:

This last Bill was really frightful. (1754)
He was really very useful… (1772)
A really pretty maiden… (1857)
I really think this illness is being a good thing for me. (1838)
It is really a pity that this is not true. (1984)

According to all my native-speaker consultants, these examples would be perfectly at home in present-day English, too, and in fact it may well be that the use of really illustrated by them is largely responsible for the extremely high frequency of this word in contemporary English. I also think that the adjective real in collocations like a real hero, a real friend or a real beauty corresponds semantically to (and presumably, is derived from) this use of really. For example, a real hero is not someone who “is real”, but someone who “really is” a hero.

Is there really a difference in meaning between the uses of really in “it really happened” and “it was really very useful”? I think not, or at least I do not see any compelling reasons for postulating polysemy here. Rather, it seems that when the OED defines the first in terms of “reality” (“in reality”) it is attributing to really the meaning of the whole phrase “it really happened”: the putative “reality” is conveyed here by the word happened. The meaning of really in “it really
happened” does not seem different from that in the corresponding negative sentence: “it really didn’t happen”, where no “reality” appears to be referred to at all.

Thus, mutatis mutandis, the definition of “the other really” — “used to emphasize the truth or correctness of…” — seems as applicable to “it really happened” as to “it was really very useful”. In both cases, the speaker is emphasizing, roughly speaking, “the reliability” of his or her words. But contrary to what the OED says, this “reliability”, vouched for by the word really, does not refer to one’s words’ truth (unlike in the case of truly); rather, it refers to certain knowledge (to what people can know). To see this, it is helpful to consider what truly and really are implicitly contrasted with.

True is opposed to “not true” (and consequently, so is truly). Really, however, is not opposed to “not true”; rather, it is opposed to illusion, error, mirage, imagination, dream. In all these cases the basic contrast is not one between “true” and “not true”, but rather, one between what someone “thinks” and what people can “know”.

What someone says can be “true”, or “not true”, it cannot be “real”. On the other hand, what someone sees, can be “real”, or “not real” (e.g., if one sees it in a dream, or if what one sees is a mirage), but it cannot be “true”. I would argue that the decline of true and truly in Anglo culture, which happened over the last three or four centuries, and the corresponding rise of really and real, points to a fundamental change in the basic intellectual orientation of this culture. Roughly speaking, people’s basic concern appears to have shifted from the question of “what is true?” to that of “what can be known?”. Arguably, this shift corresponds to, and is related to, the emergence and the spread of the “British empiricism”.

4. The retreat from “truth” and the rise of the empiricism

Next to really, one of the most revealing words in modern English is the word evidence. I believe that the two phenomena — the rise of really and the rise of evidence — are related: “evidence” gives people a basis for knowing what “really happened” or what is “really the case”. There is no word for “evidence” in other European languages. The best that the bilingual dictionaries can offer as the supposed equivalent of
the English *evidence* is words like *prove* (Italian), *preuves* (French), *Beweise* (German) or *dowody* (Polish), that is, words which correspond in fact to the English *proofs* (from *prove*).

In fact, however, *evidence* (in the modern sense) does not mean the same as *proof* or *proofs*, and to “prove” something is not the same as to “provide evidence” for it. “Proofs” can be given in mathematics, or in logic, on the strength of pure thinking. “Evidence”, however, requires more than thinking — it requires also some basis in what people can see, hear, touch, smell. It requires an “empirical” basis, or a basis in “empirical reality”.

What is the difference between “reality” and “empirical reality”? And why is it that mathematics and logic do not seem to deal with “reality”, or at least not with the “empirical reality”? Presumably, the main reason is that mathematics and logic rely, or are seen as relying, on pure thinking. By contrast, the “empirical reality” presupposes some basis in people’s “experience” — that is, essentially, in what happens to people; or more precisely, in what people can know because of what has happened to them (and not only because of what they have arrived at by thinking).

The word *evidence* has a long history in English and if one looks at isolated sentences from sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century English it would be easy to mistake them for evidence (!!) of early uses of the concept that is so salient in contemporary English. For example, Shakespeare’s sentence from *Richard III*:

*Where are the evidence that do accuse me?*

sounds very modern in this respect (despite the plural agreement). In fact, however, all the different uses of the word *evidence* pre-dating, roughly speaking, the middle of the seventeenth century appear to be different from the central modern use, which can be illustrated with the following sentences (from the *OED*):

*To find proper evidence for convicting the offender. (1792)*
The weight of evidence appears strongly in favour of the claims of Cavendish. (1878)
Plausible earlier examples of the same meaning cited by the OED include the following:

The plain evidence of the facts is superior to all declarations. (1769)
There is no evidence that any forgeries were attempted. (1794)

Earlier examples of evidence can be interpreted in the sense of, roughly speaking, “evidentness”, “display”, “ground for belief”, or “information given in a legal investigation” (labels offered by the OED), which all overlap, rather than coincide, with the key modern meaning. A few examples (again, from the OED):

Adoration, grounded upon the evidence of the greatness of God. (Hooker, 1594)
It had all the evidence of an absolute victory. (Cromwell, 1644)
They… transported their evidence to another [country], where they knew ‘twas vendible. (Dryden, 1683)
The credibility of the Christian religion, from its intrinsic evidence. (Bradford, 1699)

The most characteristic grammatical frames of evidence in the key modern sense include evidence for, evidence that, evidence in favour of (or against); equally characteristic is the modern collocation conclusive evidence, the earliest example of which cited by the OED is dated 1768. Two characteristic examples (also from the OED):

Conclusive evidence of the impermeability of the strata. (Nature, 1889)
Experiments have been carried out which gave conclusive evidence that positrons are ejected from lead by the [-]radiation. (Science, 1933)

Roughly speaking, evidence in this crucial modern sense refers to reasons why people should think something. The implication is that it is not good to think something simply because someone (else) says so, without having asked oneself what grounds one has for doing so; and that it is good to think something because one knows that people can know something about it. A more precise explication could be sketched along the following lines:
when a person wants to know what happened
it is not good if this person thinks about it like this:
“if I think about it I will know what happened
if I hear what other people say about it
I will know what happened if I think about it"

it is good if this person thinks:
“if I see something I can know something because of this
if something happens to my body I can know something because of this
if I think about it I can know something else because of this
(I don’t have to do anything else)"

Emphasizing the influence of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ British empiricism on the general intellectual climate of the time, historian Felipe Fernández Armesto (1998:153) writes:

Newton’s work was both genuinely pioneering and embedded in the broader context of English and Scottish thought of the time: empiricism — the doctrine that society is observable and verifiable by sense-perception. The success of science surely made possible this distrust of metaphysics.

My hypothesis is that this “distrust of metaphysics” may have contributed to the decline of English speakers’ interest in “truth” (first of all, in Britain) and may have made them feel less comfortable with saying “that’s true” than their contemporaries on the continent did (and continue to do).

In this connection, I have one quibble with Fernández Armesto’s formulations like the following one: “The ascendancy of the senses over other means of truth-finding did not last long, even in the west, but while it endured it made a vital difference: it gave science unique prestige — a place in the prevailing scale of values unmatched in other cultures” (ibid. p.155). In my view, the “ascendancy of the senses” is better described in terms of “knowledge finding” than “truth finding”; in the climate of empiricism people became increasingly inclined to replace the “search for truth” (the title of one of Descartes’ works) with
a “search for knowledge” (based on the evidence of the senses, as well as reason). The spread of “really” as a conversational response in modern English, at the expense, it seems, of “truly” or “this is true”, may be a reflection of this more general trend. (Another reflection of this trend is the rise of “right” as a discourse marker; see Wierzbicka, in press.)

Furthermore, I suggest that this is where the unique Anglo concept of “evidence” was born and was nourished: in the intellectual climate created by the seventeenth and eighteenth century English and Scottish thought. Remarkably, the modern concept of “evidence”, born in British philosophy, has become one of the key concepts in Anglo culture, and the word evidence has become almost a household word in modern English. It is certainly deeply entrenched in law, science, research of any kind (also in the humanities), journalism, not to mention “crimmies” and the like. By its salient presence in English discourse, the word evidence seems to constantly send the message that “thinking” is not enough for “knowing”, that something else is needed. Every time this word is used, the message is reinforced that, to quote our earlier definition of really, “sometimes a person thinks that something is happening when this something is not happening”; “sometimes a person thinks that something exists when this something does not exist”.

Both the words really and evidence assume a gap between “thinking” and “knowing”. “Evidence” is what is needed to fill that gap. And since in daily life one can’t always support everything one says with “evidence”, one can at least acknowledge the addressee’s right to doubt the validity of anything that one affirms; and one can meet this potential doubt with an assurance that in this particular case the thinking does coincide with the knowing: that what is “thought” can be “known”.

This is, I suggest, the basis for the tremendous utility of really in modern Anglo discourse (as witnessed by its extremely high frequency): it provides the speaker with a ready-made tool for responding to the ever-present possibility of doubt. Crucially, this potential doubt is not based on any wide-spread lack of faith in other people’s truthfulness. Rather, it is based on a general assumption that what people think is not necessarily what they know; that “knowledge” requires “evidence”; and that while “evidence” cannot be provided all the time,
often it is desirable that at least an assurance of reliability is offered, alluding to the availability of some sort of “evidence”.

In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that the complex concept of “evidence” is included, as a whole, in the meaning of the word really. Rather, I am suggesting that the meaning of really includes the component “people can know this”. For example, if I say of something that “it is really happening” I am implying that “people can know this”; that is, that there is something “objectively knowable” about whatever I am referring to.

Despite the appearances, the phrase really and truly (now increasingly archaic) is not tautologous. The words can be true but they cannot be “real”. “Reality” (“empirical reality”) seems to be, above all, what can be observed and experienced; and not by a single person but by “people” in general.

The empiricists did not see “knowledge” as an alternative to “truth”, and for example Locke “explicitly aimed to defeat the despairing idea ‘that either there is no such thing as truth at all’; or that mankind hath no sufficient means to attain a certain knowledge of it” (II.2) (The Oxford Companion to Philosophy 1995: 496). At the same time, Locke made “truth” depend on testing and evidence, saying e.g. that “Trial and examination must give [truth] price” (ibid.). As the empiricist ideas spread wider and wider, however, references to “truth” seem to have gradually declined, with the emphasis placed more and more on experience, observation, and evidence, and with David Hume, for example, declaring in his Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding that “A wise man… proportions his belief to the evidence” (also quoted in The Oxford Companion to Philosophy 1995: 337).

It should also be noted that this new intellectual climate appears to have encouraged a great expansion in the use of the word fact. Unlike evidence, fact does have semantic equivalents in other European languages, but the salience of the English word appears to be far greater. The relative frequencies of “fact” and “truth” in English, French, and Italian are not easy to compare because of the polysemy of the French word fait and the Italian word fatto (in both languages, not only ‘fact’ but also ‘done’). The German word Tatsache ‘fact’, however, is not similarly polysemous. The frequencies for ‘fact’ in comparable English and German corpora look as follows (figures per million words):
Thus, the references to ‘facts’ in the English written corpus are twice as frequent as in the German corpus, and in the corpus of spoken language, two and a half times as frequent. Apart from relative frequencies, fact is the only word which lies at the centre of an extended phraseological family, including in fact, as a matter of fact, in point of fact, the simple fact, a brute fact, and so on.

“Fact” (in the present-day sense of the word) is a modern concept. When a modern English translation renders Ovid’s “facta” as “facts”, this is a mistranslation:

Facta canam; sed erunt qui finxisse loquantur. (Ovid, Fasti, Bk. vi, 3)
'I will sing of facts; but some will say that I invented them'. (quoted in Stevenson 1958: 877)

For Ovid, facta meant “what has happened”. The English word fact, however, (as it is used now and has been used for three centuries or so) refers to something that has not only happened but can be known to have happened; and the respect for “facts”, characteristic of modern Anglo culture, is related to its respect for “evidence”, and to the shift of emphasis from “truth” to “reality”.

Both the words evidence and fact include in their meaning a presupposition that not everything that people think or say can be believed; but while evidence focuses on a distrust of mere “thinking”, fact focuses, rather, on a distrust of “words”. A “fact” is “not something that someone merely asserts to be the case but rather, something that can be known to be the case”. Dictionaries and other reference works often define the word fact with reference to “truth”. For example, The Oxford Companion to Philosophy (1995:267) defines “fact” as follows:
Fact. A fact is, traditionally, the worldly correlate of a true proposition, a state of affairs whose obtaining makes the proposition true.

In fact, however, it is not “truth” but “knowledge” that the word fact refers to — knowledge and “happening”, as a prototype of things that “can be known”. I would propose, therefore, the following explication of fact:

It is a fact that X happened =
[I know:] sometimes people say that something is happening when it is not happening
[I say:] if someone says that X happened this someone is not doing something like this
I know that X happened other people can know it

When T. H. Huxley says, in his Lay Sermons (1870: 57), that “A world of facts lies outside and beyond the world of words”, he expresses a thought characteristic of modern Anglo culture as a whole: seen against the background of continental European cultures, it appears to be a culture attuned more to the “world of facts” than to the “world of words”; or so the linguistic evidence suggests.

In 1691, T. Hale wrote that “The said Commissioners are to report to this Board the Truth of the Fact” (OED). In the subsequent half century or so, the notion of “fact” appears to have become increasingly dissociated from the notion of “truth”, and linked more exclusively with the idea of “publicly available knowledge”. Concomitantly, there grew a respect for facts. In 1733, Mathew Tindale wrote that “Matters of fact […] are very stubborn things” (OED); in 1749, Smollett echoed: “Facts are stubborn things”; and also, “Facts are facts, as the saying goes” (OED). In 1782, Paine insisted that “Facts are more powerful than arguments” (OED). And in 1854, Dickens wrote (in Hard Times) that: “In this life we want nothing but facts, Sir; nothing but facts”.

Thus, facts are “stubborn”, facts are “undeniable” (or “incontrovertible”); one cannot argue against “plain facts”; “facts are facts”; facts alone (in contrast to assurances of truth) provide “conclusive evidence”.
When the OED defines fact (in the present-day sense) as “something that has really occurred”, and evidence as “facts tending to prove or disprove any conclusion”, it unwittingly (perhaps) highlights the conceptual link between the words fact, evidence, and really. All three are central to modern Anglo discourse, and — arguably — to modern Anglo ways of thinking.

As noted earlier, although the expression really and truly can still be heard in present-day English, it now sounds rather archaic, and by itself, truly sounds even more so. The conversational responses “that is true” and “that is not true” do occur, of course, in present-day English, but their frequency appears to have greatly declined over the centuries. Instead, new types of discourse have made an appearance and gradually gained ground — especially a type of discourse whose main marker, and main tool, is the word really (and the adjective real in a sense derived from it). This new type of discourse reflects, I would argue, a new intellectual climate which spread in Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and which left its stamp on modern Anglo culture as a whole (to the extent to which it is a whole, with some unifying themes and attitudes).

5. English in a comparative perspective

Is English unique among European languages in having moved away from the “discourse of truth”? The matter requires investigation; judging by the linguistic evidence, however, English does seem to have moved further down this road than the languages of the European continent. Apart from frequencies, which must become the subject of a separate study, it is very striking, from a comparative (European) perspective, that unlike many other European languages, modern English does not have a tag based on the concept TRUE.

For example, in Italian the word vero ‘true’ is widely used as a tag question; in German, nicht wahr? ‘not true?’ has a similar function; in Spanish, verdad? ‘truth?’; in Polish, prawda? ‘truth?’, and so on. Some examples:
Spanish
— ¡Usted no se ríe, verdad? (H. A. Murena, in Franco ed. 1986: 52)
“You’re not amused, are you?” (transl. by Gordon Brotherstan; lit. ‘you’re not amused, truth?’)

Italian
Perché questo matrimonio non si farebbe? Per il lutto della sposa, è vero? (Luigi Pirandello, in Hall ed. 1955: 216)
“Why should this marriage not be performed? Because of the grief of the bride, isn’t that so?” (transl. by Robert A. Hall, Jr; lit. ‘because of the grief of the spouse, is true?’)

German
Sing uns doch auch was vor, wir zahlen schon!! Nicht wahr? (Arthur Schnitzler, in Steinhauer 1964: 208)
“Sing something for us too, we’ll pay you!! — Won’t we!!” (transl. by Harry Steinhauer, p.703; lit. ‘we’ll pay you!! Not true?’)

Peter […] und das tun wir, mein Kind, nicht wahr? (Berblin weiselt.) Nicht wahr? (Frisch 1964: 13)
“Peter […] and we will do this, my child, won’t we?” (lit. not true?)
(Berblin gets pale.) Won’t we? (lit. not true?)

Wirt. Ich bin kein Verräter. Nicht wahr, Professor, nicht wahr? […]
Noch gibt es ein Gastrecht in Andorra, […] Nicht wahr, Professor, nicht wahr? (Frisch 1964:68)
“Innkeeper. I’m not a traitor. Isn’t it true, Professor, isn’t it true? […]
There is still a law of hospitality in Andorra […] isn’t it true, Professor, isn’t it true?” (lit. not true?)

It is true that in French the basic tag question is n’est-ce pas? ‘isn’t it?’ rather than anything based on vrai ‘true’. As a response, however, c’est vrai ‘it’s true’ is widely used in French, too. Furthermore, the word vraiment? ‘truly?’ is widely used in contexts in which in English one would normally use really? Some examples from a “dual-language book” of French stories:
Mon fils, pourquoi m’as-tu quitté?
Vous ai-je vraiment quitté? (André Gide, in Fowlie 1964: 204)
“My son, why did you leave me?
Did I really (lit. ‘truly’) leave you”? (transl. by Wallace Fowlie)

Vous ne vous en doutez peut-être pas, mais vraiment, vous êtes impayable. (Marcel Aymé, in Lyon éd. 1966: 68)
“You may not realize it, but you’re really (lit. ‘truly’) quite ludicrous.” (transl. by Norman Denny)

French uses also the word véritable ‘true’ (derived from vérité ‘truth’) in contexts in which in English one would use the word real, for example:

L’épaisseur des murs était pour lui un véritable régal. (Marcel Aymé, in Fowlie ed. 1964: 258)
“The thickness of the walls was a real (lit. ‘true’) treat for him”. (transl. by Wallace Fowlie)

Seul le peintre Gen Paul […] avait fini par pénétrer sa véritable identité. (Marcel Aymé, in Fowlie éd. 1964: 262)
“Only the painter Gen Paul […] finally saw through to his real (lit. ‘true’) identity.” (transl. by Wallace Fowlie).

It should also be noted that in French one can use the expression c’est vrai ‘it’s true’ as a request for confirmation in contexts in which in English one would normally use a “reversed-polarity” tag question:

Alors, c’est vrai, tu est content? (Marcel Aymé, in Lyon éd. 1966: 86)
“But you do like it, don’t you?” (transl. by Norman Denny)

I conclude from all this that the ascendancy of really in modern English, and the corresponding decrease in the use of true and its derivatives, is indeed a characteristic feature of modern Anglo culture. From a comparative perspective, this ascendancy of really must also be seen as an innovation — an innovation consistent with the emergence of new Anglo key concepts like evidence and with a whole modern
Anglo outlook, shaped, inter alia, by the influence of the writings of the British philosophers. Conversely, from an Anglo point of view, the centrality of “truth” (TRUE) in everyday discourse on the European continent may well be one of the features of the intellectual climate of which speakers of English are usually not consciously aware, but which may contribute to their sense of “the continent” as somehow intangibly different from Britain; and also, from the Anglo culture in America and elsewhere.

6. The “retreat from truth” and the rise of individualism

The ascendancy of the “really” conversational routine(s) in modern English is related to some other phenomena characteristic of modern English discourse. One of the most salient among these phenomena is the use of tag questions, based on reversed polarity and word order, such as “But that’s life, isn’t it?” (Gray p.258), “Christ, you haven’t, have you?” (Gray p.267), or “She must love you really, mustn’t she” (Gray p.243) (see Wierzbicka 1991: 37-41, 224-232). As we have seen in the previous section, tag questions of this kind are often used in English to translate phrases based on the concept TRUE in other European languages, for example:

Alors, c’est vrai, tu es content? (French)
“But you do like it, don’t you?”
(lit. ‘So, it’s true, you’re pleased?’)

Usted no ríe, verdad? (Spanish)
“You’re not amused, are you?”
(lit. ‘You’re not laughing, truth?’)

Sing uns doch auch was vor, wir zahlen schon!! — Nicht wahr?”
(German)
“Sing something for us too, we’ll pay you!! — Won’t we?”
(lit. ‘Sing something for us too, we’ll pay you!! — Not true?’)

As noted in my Cross-cultural Pragmatics (1991:37-38), from a cross-linguistic point of view, English tag questions of this kind appear
to be very common in discourse. (A statistical confirmation of this fact, which seems apparent to the naked eye, requires a separate study.) Apart from their frequency, another striking feature of reverse polarity tag questions is their semantics. As the form of these questions suggests, in using them the speaker is as it were anticipating the addressee’s response, expressing an expectation as to what this response will be, and at the same time leaving the possibility open that the response may be the opposite of what the speaker expects. Thus:

That’s life, isn’t it? =
(a) I say: that’s life
(b) I want you to say something about it now
(c) I think you will say the same
(d) I don’t know this

She must love you, mustn’t she =
(a) I say: she must love you
(b) I think you will say something about it now
(c) I think you will say the same
(d) I don’t know this

The only difference between these two explications lies in component (b): if the tag question carries a rising intonation (shown by the question mark) it indicates that the speaker \textit{wants} the addressee to respond; if it doesn’t carry that intonation, it indicates that the speaker at the most \textit{expects} the addressee to respond (without necessarily soliciting such a response).

Unpacked like this, the English tag question can be seen as a powerful cultural instrument, capable of serving a number of important cultural needs. It opens dialogue, invites cooperation and agreement, and at the same time acknowledges the addressee’s autonomy and freedom of expression: the addressee is invited to say something on the same topic, is expected to concur with the speaker, and yet his or her “right” not to concur is symbolically honoured. Thus, the standard English tag question does not pressure the addressee to acknowledge the truth of the speaker’s words, and in fact it doesn’t raise the question of truth at all: rather, it leaves room for different opinions or different points of
view. It seeks consensus while explicitly leaving room for a possible lack of consensus. This is different — semantically and culturally — from tag questions based on the concept TRUE, as in the following Italian sentences from a novel by Oriana Fallaci (1979):

- Ti chiami Richard Baline, vero? (p.61)
  ‘Your name is Richard Baline, isn’t it? (lit. true?)’
- Ma se continui, mi fai morire. Sorry: non ti faccio ridere, vero? (p.103)
  ‘If you go on like this, I’ll die. Sorry: I’m not making you laugh, am I? (lit. true?)’
- Hai portato a letto Dick, vero? (p.110)
  ‘You slept with Dick, didn’t you? (lit. true?)’
- E poi lo hai fatto scappare, vero? (p.110)
  ‘And then you sent him away, didn’t you? (lit. true?)’

Here, what the speaker wants and expects to hear is not that the addressee will say the same but that the addressee will confirm the truth of what the first speaker has said.

_The Oxford Companion to Philosophy_ (1995: 496) describes John Locke as one of the leading figures of the Enlightenment, who “both then and in our own century […] is valued for a judicious, sober reasonableness, and an individualistic insistence that opinions are to be weighed carefully on their merits by each of us, independently of what others, particularly those in majority or authority, say”. The English tag questions (in contrast, for example, to the Italian ones) can be seen as an instrument serving such an ideology; and it seems likely that they have evolved, and assumed the role they now have in Anglo discourse, in the intellectual climate influenced by thinkers like Locke.

I have quoted earlier Locke’s statement that “trial and examination must give [truth] price”. “Examination” refers here to the “careful weighing of opinions on their merits” by each person, “independently of what others say”; and “trial” refers to observation and experience. I have linked the rise of the “really” conversational routine with one of these two key ideas, and the rise of tag questions, with the other. For
Locke, these two ideas are related. It is interesting to note that the rise of *really* and the rise of tag questions also appear to be related. They both seem to shift the focus of discourse from affirmations of truth to something else: the expression of individual opinions in the case of tag questions, the respect for things that “people can know” in the case of *really*.

Locke was not a relativist. As we have seen, the conviction that opinions are to be weighed carefully on their merits, independently of what others say, did not mean for him that “there is no such thing as truth at all; or that mankind hath no sufficient means to attain a certain knowledge of it”. But a great deal of emphasis was put on the *means* to attain knowledge, and on the need to examine the *merits* of different ideas, on the careful weighing of evidence; on the need to sort out “right” ideas from the “wrong” ones.

The English nineteenth-century historian, Thomas Macaulay (quoted in Stevenson 1958: 1727) has written, characteristically: “Men are never so likely to settle a question rightly as when they discuss it freely”. What is characteristic about this quote is the link it postulates between free expression of individual opinions and “settling questions rightly” (i.e. “rational ethics” and “rational conduct” in general).

The new intellectual climate which evolved in Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and which has led to a wide spread of new ways of thinking and new ways of speaking, has thus left its profound imprint on the English language. The great career of the word *really* is one case in point; the rise of tag questions, is another; a third, related phenomenon, is the great career of the word *right*, which has also claimed a large part of the space previously occupied in English, and still occupied in other European languages, by the concept *TRUE* (and also, of that occupied by the concept *GOOD*). But this, too, is a long story, which needs to be told separately (see Wierzbicka, In press).

Here, let me conclude by proposing an Anglo “cultural script”\(^3\)

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3. The theory of cultural scripts is an offshoot of the NSM semantic theory. The key idea of this theory is that widely shared and widely known ways of thinking can be identified in terms of the same empirically established universal human concepts (with their universal grammar), in terms of which all meanings can be adequately
The script behind “really”
people think many things
sometimes people think that something exists
when this something does not exist
sometimes people think that something is happening
when this something is not happening
it is good if people know
that when they think something about something
they can be doing something like this
at the same time it is good if people can know about
some things
that when they think these things they are not doing
something like this

In other words, it is good to be cautious and undogmatic in one’s opinions and at the same time, it is good to look for certain knowledge — if there are good reasons to think that it can be found.

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