Exclusive adverbials focus on the words they modify, restricting the applicability of what is said to a focused sentence constituent. While in OE this class of adverbials was represented by three morphologically related items, i.e. an, for an and þæt an, later periods demonstrate that their number quadrupled (Nevalainen 1991). Despite the extensive research on ME and EModE ane ‘only’, functioning as the most typical exclusive adverbial (Brinton 2017), other exclusives emerging in this period require further investigation. Alongside with ane ‘only’ the present paper reports on the study of ME (EModE) merely, simply, wholly, utterly and plainly, functioning as Focus markers.

Adverbials under analysis infrequently occur in their exclusive meaning in ME texts: e.g. among 3,570 ane instances as little as 4.68% render this adverbial meaning and among 1835 sentences with onlyi, 43.7% exemplify its usage as an exclusive. For other elements the data are as follows: holli ‘wholly’ – 304 out of 2,625 tokens (11.58 %); outreli ‘utterly’ – 178 examples among 419 matches (42.48%); plainly – 127 with reference to 459 illustrations (27.67%); simpli – 108 based on 343 examples (31.49%); mere(ly) 12 out of 193 illustrations (6.22%). EModE findings from EEBO show that only considerably scales up its exclusive meaning – 79.33% (644,109 matches), whereas the same functioning of other ME adverbials remains identical, viz. simply 29.8% (18,346 instances), plainly 18.51% (54,942 tokens), wholly 11.79% (58,957 examples). The usage of exclusive merely tripled (23.08%), whereas utterly is used in 2.61% illustrations.

The instances represent declarative clauses tested in terms of two oppositions: Old vs. New information (Haug et al. 2014), Topic vs. Focus, with regard to different Focus types (Krifka 2007). The investigation studies the most typical word orders (WOs) in terms of highlighting discourse and hearer old information. Thus, to stress upon old information in ME, exclusive post-modifying placement is more characteristic, while adverbial antecedence is typical for marking sentence element that represents new information. Either information-structural type demonstrates a characteristic WO pattern, specifically SVO→ADV (old information) and S(v)V ADV→O (new information). Within EModE this tendency is not so vivid, since WO is more rigidly syntactically defined with prevailing adverbial antecedence.