“Only” is the most commonly misplaced modifier in English

“Only” immediately preceding a verb is usually in the wrong place

Here’s a simple declarative sentence:
“He said that he loved me.”
We can all agree on what the sentence means.

Now look what happens when we randomly perturb the sentence with “only”...
“He said that he loved me.”

_Only_ he said that he loved me.
_Nobody else said it._

He _only_ said that he loved me.
_He didn’t really mean it; he only said it._

He said _only_ that he loved me.
_He didn’t say a word about marriage._

He said that _only_ he loved me.
_He doesn’t know about Serge._

He said that he _only_ loved me.
_He doesn’t want to support me for the rest of my life._

He said that he loved _only_ me.
_He thinks I don’t know about Clarice._

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Here’s a science example:

“A transition only occurred at 130 K in underdoped samples.”

Did the transition only _occur_ (it didn’t persist)?
Or did it occur only at 130 K?
Or only in underdoped samples?

_Only the author knows..._
“Only” immediately preceding a verb is probably in the wrong place

“Thus a single phase slip center only occurs at \( I=I_{\sigma} \) and its dissipative size is \( \lambda_\sigma \geq L \).”

“The occupied electronic states only show features associated with the carbon lattice of the SWNT cage.”

“At last, we will be able to directly probe the TeV energy scale, where it is believed that some new physics should be lurking, although we can only speculate about what form it will take.”

But it’s not only verbs you have to watch out for

“Extensive shielding ensured that only scattering from the marked regions was detected.”

“Usually, the analytical evaluation of \( J(X_p, t; X_p, 0) \), even for time-independent systems, is only possible in very few cases.”

Be careful of your “only”s—they can get you into a lot of trouble!