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# Special issue on English intensifiers

**Edited by**

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## Introduction[1]

DEGREE MODIFIERS, DEGREE WORDS or INTENSIFIERS[2] are linguistic elements which convey the degree or the exact value of the quality expressed by the item they modify. They are typically adverbs, as in *very hot*, *really interesting, greatly appreciate* or *completely absurd*, but adjectives may also fulfil this function, as in *utter nonsense*. As noted by Bolinger (1972: 18), degree words offer a picture of 'fevered invention', and without any doubt constitute one of the major areas of grammatical change and renewal in English (Brinton & Arnovik 2006: 441), especially from the Early Modern English period onwards (Peters 1993). It is therefore no surprise that degree modifiers have attracted so much scholarly attention from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day. Pioneering studies, such as those by Stoffel (1901), Borst (1902) and Fettig (1934), provide comprehensive inventories of intensifying adverbs in both modern and earlier English, as well as valuable insights into how they originated. In the last decade, however, intensifiers have become the object of renewed interest; this can be attributed in part to the development of computerized corpora, and also to advances in theoretical linguistics, more specifically in the study of semantic change and of grammaticalization processes. This renewed interest has focused, for example, on the individual histories of particular degree items as seen from the perspective of grammaticalization, on the competition of different intensifiers within a given period and across time, and on their distribution across different social groups, varieties or registers.

In a recent article on the uses of the adverb *all*, Buchstaller & Traugott (2006: 366) have suggested that 'a full understanding of how degree modifiers function and develop would ideally require as broad an analysis as possible, taking into account structural and functional perspectives as well as considerations such as processing and sociolinguistic selection'. The selection of articles in this special issue addresses the study of intensifiers from some of these different perspectives; it carries six empirical

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[2] The term intensifier is also used in a more restricted sense, only for those elements which scale an established norm upwards (see, e.g., Huddleston & Pullum et al. 2002: 585).

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analyses which cover both present and past stages of the language and is rounded off by a more theoretically oriented contribution which discusses degree modifiers and change within the framework of Cognitive Semantics. Taken together, the seven articles reflect well the different approaches adopted in current work on intensifiers and will hopefully stimulate further research in the field.

While the origin of degree modifiers and their prototypical lexical sources have been examined previously in some of the earlier literature (see, e.g., Peters 1993), the availability of extensive diachronic corpora has now made it possible to reconstruct in detail the different stages in the development of the degree function of individual items and to pay due attention to both syntactic and semantic changes. Two of the articles in the issue follow such an approach, exploring the increasing grammaticalization of the moderator *rather* (Rissanen) and the intensifier *downright* (Méndez-Naya). Both of these case studies provide evidence of one of the prototypical syntactic trajectories for intensifiers, namely the development of adjuncts into adjective/adverb modifiers. In his analysis of *rather* – one of the major moderators in Present-day English – Matti Rissanen draws on a large body of corpus data to show that an Old English adverb originally indicating rapidity of an action or movement ('quickly, immediately, at once') developed, when inflected for the comparative, a contrastive/preferential reading ('I would rather do X than Y'). This metonymic shift is not only relevant for temporal comparative adverbs in English (e.g. *sooner*) but can be shown to operate in other languages as well. The temporal use of *rather* declined in Middle English after the loss of the positive form *rathe*, and the new, preferential sense became more salient. In the frequent expressions *rather* (. . .) *than* and *the rather* the contrastive use is likely to be weakened, thus paving the way for the emergence of the degree function. Politeness is suggested as the possible trigger of the development from contrastive to moderator use, which takes place in the Modern English period, and may also have played a role in the selection of originally positive items as moderators. The earliest noncontrastive examples of *rather* go back to the seventeenth century and in them the adverb has scope over nouns and verbs (subjunct function). It is only in the eighteenth century that the moderator use becomes common, and *rather* comes to be frequently found in connection with adjectives and adverbs, thus becoming a modifier. Rissanen finds that expressions where the contrastive sense is weakened (*the rather*; *rather* (. . .) *than*), as well as the earliest cases of the modifier use, are more common in less formal registers (private correspondence), which leads him to suggest that the development of the moderator could be a change from below. By the nineteenth century the English set of major moderators is complete, but competition with the other members of the paradigm, notably with *fairly*, seems to have pushed *rather* back to its earlier contrastive use, which nowadays is the prevalent function of the adverb.

Belén Méndez-Naya studies the development of the low-frequency intensifier *downright*. In line with Lehmann (2002), who argues that lexicalization sometimes precedes grammaticalization, she posits that *downright* first became lexicalized (possibly from a syntactic phrase in which *right* was a focusing modifier), and was then recruited to express degree, thus becoming more grammatical. From a syntactic

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point of view, the adverb *downright* is seen to move along a well-known trajectory for intensifiers: spatial adjunct 'right down' > degree adjunct (with verbs) 'out-and-out' > degree modifier (with adjectives and adverbs) 'completely; extremely'. The first step in this development highlights the importance of context in semantic change and grammaticalization, since it is shown that the degree reading of *downright* may have emerged as an inference in connection with verbs meaning 'cut' and 'burn', later spreading to verbs incompatible with its original spatial sense (e.g. *die/kill downright*), mostly negative items (e.g. *downright hate*). It is also suggested that the adjective *downright* may have played an important role in the establishment of the degree modifier: (i) the reinforcer adjective (*downright nonsense*), far more frequent than the adverbial modifier, may have bolstered an already existing pattern; and (ii) the extension of $downright_{ADV}$ to positive collocates (*downright honest*) could have been triggered by the reanalysis of $downright_{ADJ}$ 'direct, straightforward' from a descriptive adjective > affective adjective > intensifier, in accordance with another well-studied grammaticalization path for intensifiers (cf. Adamson 2000). The history of *downright* also provides a further example of the general tendency for degree words to develop unbounded readings from bounded conceptualizations (cf. Paradis this issue).

Another recent line of research has paid attention to the development of degree adverbs once the intensifier use is established (e.g. Tao 2007). The article by Victorina González-Díaz is a contribution in this direction. Her study is concerned with *very much*, an intensifier which has so far eluded investigation, as it has generally been considered to be a more emphatic variant of *much*. However, González-Díaz suggests that *very much* should be regarded as an intensifier in its own right, since it has encroached upon the territory of *much* and competes with it in most of its functions, though it has a less restricted distribution, and from the Late Modern English period even developed some new uses not available for *much*. She uses both corpus data (HC, ARCHER, a self-compiled corpus of Late Modern English, FLOB and the Internet) and elicitation tests to study these new environments, namely (i) cases in which *very much* is used as an affirmative response; (ii) instances in which *very much* seems to comment on the truth of the proposition (as already observed by Bolinger 1972: 218) and appears in slots usually associated with sentence modifiers (e.g. in initial and final position with prosodic detachment; or in examples like *The fence very much divides the garden into two* or *The final report will very much be the work of Foster himself*). The conclusion is reached that, although the change is not yet complete or well established, *very much* shows some signs of moving from being an internal adverb to a sentence adverb, along the cline of adverbial grammaticalization proposed by Traugott (1995): internal adverb > sentence adverb > discourse particle.

While the other studies in the volume focus mostly on the study of degree adverbs, the article by Ursula Lenker draws attention to a different type of intensification strategy, namely positive scaling of adjectives and adverbs by means of prefixation. So-called booster prefixes resemble adverbial intensifiers not only in their common function, but also in that: (i) they originate in the same source domains as their adverbial counterparts, that is, local/dimensional, quantitative, qualitative and taboo words (Peters 1993);

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(ii) they are also subject to constant change; and (iii) they are associated with certain social groups. Only three intensifying prefixes have usually been recognized for Present-day English (*hyper-*, *super-* and *ultra-*), with a fourth, *mega-*, as in *megacool*, on the rise; by contrast, Old English, like Present-day German, made extensive use of this device. After providing an inventory of potential booster prefixes in Old English, and discussing alternative analyses of coinages as compounds or syntagms of intensifying adverb plus adjective/adverb, Lenker identifies a core of five unequivocal Old English intensifying prefixes, *for-, ofer-, frae/fræ-, heah-* and *or-*, all of which can be classified as members of the local/dimensional domain. Of these five, *for-* stands out as the most productive element according both to type/token frequency and to Baayen's hapax legomenon criterion (Baayen & Renouf 1996). The high productivity of this prefix is taken as a starting point to suggest an alternative etymology for the common Middle English emphasizer *forsooth*, based ultimately on the Old English booster prefix *for-*. The productivity of this word-formation pattern, as well as the co-texts and the distribution of the extant Old English occurrences of *forsoþ*, lends support to this alternative analysis.

One of the directions explored in recent research on degree adverbs is the role of social factors such as social group, sex and age in the diffusion and distribution of intensifiers in a given language community and their interaction with structural factors. The contributions by Nevalainen and Tagliamonte follow this approach. As yet, little research is available on the social embedding of intensifier use and diffusion in earlier English. This is precisely the focus of Terttu Nevalainen's article, which studies the influence of both grammatical and social factors on the choice form in a set of deadjectival adverbs (*exceeding(ly), excellent(ly), extraordinary(ly), extreme(ly), ful(ly)* and *marvellous(ly)*) in the period ranging from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, using data from the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence*. She argues that *-ly* adverbialization can be seen as a process of grammaticalization, and that the spread of the suffixed form to the modifier slot may count as further evidence for the grammaticalization of the *-ly* suffix. Earlier research had suggested that zero intensifiers are favoured in modifier function (i.e. with adjectives and adverbs), while *-ly* adverbs tend to appear with verb and participial heads (i.e. as Quirkian subjuncts). Although this general trend is borne out by the historical data discussed by Nevalainen, she notes a growing use of *-ly* adverbs in modifier function over time. She also finds that this increase is not spread evenly among the individual adverbs investigated, or across the different social groups. These findings suggest a scenario of lexical diffusion of *-ly* adverbialization, with *extremely* leading the change. Moreover, the results indicate that different social groups promote different adverbs; again, this is especially clear in the case of modifier *extremely*, which is favoured by the highest social ranks, women in particular. By contrast, *-ly* adverbs are not promoted by the lower ranks in the period studied, thus anticipating some of the trends of social embedding which have been observed for contemporary English (e.g. Macaulay 2002). Finally, Nevalainen suggests that the social embedding shown by *-ly* adverbialization before the normative era may be one of the reasons behind the prescriptivist

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advocacy of the use of *-ly* modifiers and the proscription of zero adverbs in modifier function.

Renewal and delexicalization of intensifiers in a given language community is the focus of Sali Tagliamonte's article. She undertakes an apparent time study of the intensifier system of Toronto English, testing the relevance of both social factors (age and sex) and contextual determinants (adjective function and type). Her findings reveal the coexistence of three different systems in Toronto at the turn of the twenty-first century as regards the main intensifiers: within the youngest age group (up to 29-year-olds) *really* is the favoured form; the 30- to 49-year-olds show a mixed system with *really* and *very*, while those over 50 favour the use of *very*. Toronto English thus aligns with other varieties of English in promoting *really* as the new default adjective modifier (cf. also Lorenz 2002: 157, who claims that *really* is the most likely candidate to become the next fully grammaticalized intensifier). However, Tagliamonte's study also provides evidence of important sex differences in intensifier use and of quick ongoing change, with *pretty* and *so* emerging as new favourites among the youngest generations of males and females, respectively. Concerning the contextual factors explored, it is shown that the increase in frequency of a given intensifier is preceded by diffusion in terms of adjective type, and that diffusion and collocation with emotional/non-emotional adjectives is a good indication of the status of an intensifier along the delexicalization path. Thus, the completely delexicalized and outgoing *very* collocates widely, even in those age groups where it is receding, and is favoured with non-emotional adjectives. By contrast, a rising form like *so* is intimately associated with emotional contexts and is found across all adjective types only in the youngest generation of speakers. Tagliamonte shows that the new favourites developed their intensifying function long ago, and suggests, in accordance with Mair's idea of 'static grammaticalization' (Mair 2004), that once a form becomes an intensifier it may remain dormant but still be available in the reservoir of forms 'to be co-opted back into the active system' when the need arises.

The study of degree expressions and degree modifiers in particular has been the focus of Carita Paradis' work over the last decade. In her contribution to this issue she summarizes her past research and findings, based on both corpus and psycholinguistic studies, and synthesizes them with her recent theoretical approach to lexical meaning, which is broadly that of Cognitive Semantics, more specifically the model known as LOC (Lexical Meaning as Ontologies and Construals). Here DEGREE is taken to be a configuration which can be associated with most meanings, although degree modifiers are the elements that express it in a more distinctive way. She also emphasizes the importance of another general configuration, BOUNDEDNESS, which, like DEGREE, is relevant for adjectives, verbs and nouns. Linguistic forms which express degree, either in the background (e.g. adjectives) or in the foreground (e.g. degree modifiers), can be either bounded or unbounded. Both corpus and psycholinguistic experiments evidence the trend for degree modifiers to be harmonic with their heads in terms of BOUNDEDNESS (Paradis' BOUNDEDNESS hypothesis), so that scalar modifiers combine with unbounded meanings while totality modifiers combine with bounded meanings.

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Paradis also argues that there is a strong tendency for speakers to invoke unbounded scalar interpretations when given the opportunity, which explains why many totality modifiers have evolved into scalar modifiers over time. Degree modifiers (both adverbs and adjectives) develop from content-foregrounding expressions to items highlighting configuration (DEGREE, BOUNDEDNESS, SCALE). According to Paradis, this change takes place through metonymization, between different senses of the linguistic item, in restricted contexts. When new form–meaning pairings become conventionalized, the relevant construal is one of zone activation, which takes place within routinized senses.

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