Towards a Model for Investigating Predicate-Intensifier Collocations.

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Abstract
Adverbial intensifiers express the semantic role of degree. Here, we shall focus on English upgrading intensifiers like very, absolutely, extremely, impossibly. Specifically, what we have mainly aspire at is to develop and apply a simple but efficient model that investigates the motivations behind choosing from among competing intensifiers in a non-haphazard way. Such a model is meant to work as a "combinatory chart" that allows for fair comparison of near-synonymic intensifiers with respect to a number of parameters of variations (or textual preferences) on the morpho-syntactic, lexico-semantic and discourse-pragmatic levels. Its ultimate lexicographic contribution to the issue of predicate-intensifier collocations will be building a combinatory dictionary of English intensifiers – and, later on, a bilingual combinatory dictionary of English and Italian intensifiers.

1. Corpus Data and Methodology
In the current paper we want to depict a model for investigating predicate-intensifier collocations. Upgrading intensifiers constitute an extremely varied lexico-functional category. They boost a quality already present in their predicate (i.e. head) along an imaginary scale of degree of intensity. The modification introduced cannot be objectively measured (e.g. dead gorgeous as against fully developed countries).

The corpus consulted was the BNC (http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/index.html). We only searched the www in the case of poorly or not represented at all intensifiers. Since most intensifiers are polyfunctional words ambiguous between different interpretations, one of which is precisely intensification (e.g. amazingly, just, madly, really), continuous decisions had to be made in order to thin the downloaded solutions.

Collocational restrictions/preferences are a matter of degrees of shared meaning. Of the 320 intensifiers taken from grammars, previous works on the subject, and the OED online (www.oed.com), in Cacchiani (2003) some 120 highly representative instances of each degree and pattern of intensification (cf. §2.2) were detailed with respect to a set of parameters of variations (or contextual preferences) which will be briefly outlined below.
2. Parameters of Variation

2.1 The Morpho-Syntactic Dimension

(a) The Principle of Minimal Distance (van Os 1998). All intensifiers typically occur next to their predicate, mostly before it in English (yet: old enough).

(b) Grammatical category of the predicate. All grammatical categories are intensifiable. Still, individual intensifiers may differ as to the (sub)category selected. For instance, very takes scope over adjectives and adverbs of the positive degree, as in very nice, very luckily, while considerably is typically a modifier of comparatives, as in considerably older.

(c) Modification of the intensifier. Intensifiers may occur in complex collocations (e.g. very very nice indeed), and may be in the scope of negation (e.g. not so bad).

(d) Morphosyntactic features of the predicate. take, for instance, the definite preference of supremely, a Latinate word, for polysyllables, as in supremely disingenuous.

2.2 The Lexico-Semantic Dimension

(a) Structural features of the predicate. On the basis of the underlying type of scale, predicates can be divided into: i. Gradable predicates, like good/bad, or good/poor; ii. Extreme (or superlative) predicates, like gorgeous; iii. Limit predicates, like alone.

(b) Degree of the intensifier. Following Klein (1998), upgrading intensifiers are subdivided here into: i. Absolutives (or completives) obtain degree-fixing intensification when modifying limit and extreme predicates (respectively, absolutely alone and absolutely first class); ii. Intensifiers of the extremely high degree obtain a degree-modifying intensification and combine with gradable predicates (e.g. extremely interesting); iii. Intensifiers of the high degree modify gradable predicates (e.g. very good).

(c) Semantic restrictions on the predicate. Intensifiers may show i. positive as against ii. negative connotations (e.g. perfectly new as against utterly bad) or iii. be neutral in this respect (e.g. really, very).

(d) Lexico-semantic restrictions: Underlying pattern of intensification. Enlarging and adapting Lorenz (1999), we have distinguished the following patterns of intensification: i. Degree intensifiers, or grammaticalized intensifiers (e.g. very, awfully); ii. Comparatives (e.g. extraordinarily); iii. Modals. like genuinely, really, truly; iv. Telic and non-telic intensifiers (respectively, unbelievably and amazingly); v. Semantic feature copying intensifiers, which copy conceptual meaning (as in radiantly cheerful); vi. taboo intensifiers (like bloody, or dam); vii. Phonestemic intensifiers, or "noise metaphors" denoting strong emotional reactions (e.g. in screaming(ly) funny).

(e) Grammaticalization/ delexicalization (or the extent to which intensifiers underwent semantic bleaching while developing from other classes). Five levels can be distinguished on the basis of width of collocation and stylistic and register restrictions, most notably: i. Highly grammaticalized intensifiers, like very; ii. Conventionalized intensifiers like highly, which collocate widely but are still subject to register restrictions; iii. Relatively less grammaticalized intensifiers (e.g. fabulously wealthy); iv. Co-lexicalized intensifiers typically occurring in strong collocations. They are both fossilized expressions, such as
precious few, and semantic feature copying intensifiers like doggedly insist; v. Lexicalized intensifiers, which still retain their original meaning (e.g. shockingly underpaid).

2.3 The Discourse-Pragmatic Dimension

Roughly speaking, all the variables here apply to the class as a whole rather than to individual intensifiers, which turns out to be one major problem for our combinatory chart.

(a) Expressivity and (b) Speaker's involvement. Intensifiers are always, in different degrees, modal, speaker-oriented adverbs (contrast furiously angry, in which furiously expresses a specific characteristic of behaviour, and dead tired, where dead conveys a more generalized attitude). They may introduce and/or modify an evaluation for good and bad (e.g. greatly admire) and, by implication, may be more or less marked for epistemic evaluation (e.g. dead gorgeous as against very nice). The source domain of an intensifier and its status as a more or less grammaticalized intensifier are responsible not only for its collocational behaviour but also for its expressivity (in both respects, contrast very, the intensifier par excellence, and stunningly beautiful).

(c) Speech act modification. i. Intensifiers may contribute illocutionary force modification of all five speech acts, either aggravation (term from Merletti Barbaresi 1997), as in “You bloody silly donkey”, or mitigation, as in “I would be very grateful to you if ...”.

ii. Second, intensifiers may convey inner and mental states like (self-) approval, disapproval, belief and irony. iii. Such factors connect up with text types (cf. Werlich 1983) and genre conventions (politeness strategies included) and with the components of the communicative situation, as in Biber (1988): participant roles and characteristics; relations among participants; setting; topic; purpose; social evaluation; relations of participants to the text; channel.

3. Towards a Combinatory Dictionary

The intensifiers dictionary we have in mind is to be devised as a reference tool for the advanced learner, the translator and the linguist. All 400 intensifiers in our initial catalogue will be assigned a separate entry within a lexically ordered list. Although the classification proposed is not as clear-cut as might be wished, especially in the case of the discourse-pragmatic parameters, it still gains great merit from bringing together all aspects of and research on intensification, and can well turn into a “combinatory chart”.

As a tentative start-out example, we shall give here the salient information to be so far included in the possible entry for absolutely, which needs to be based on a preliminary definition of the technical terms deployed throughout. Issues for future discussion are: lists of examples; statistical treatment to be given; labelling (e.g. problems relating to using components of the communicative situation as labelling devices, rather than such labels as formal/informal, familiar etc.); advantages of an electronic dictionary which would allow systematic treatment of the discourse-pragmatic dimension (only poorly represented under C) along the lines of Cacchiani (2003), for instance via links to a separate section; layout and typographical conventions.
3.1 (Provisional) Lexical Entry for Absolutely

Absolutely     (BNC: 5,672 hits in 1,787 texts)

A Grammaticalization: conventionalized −> highly grammaticalized intensifier

Pattern: modal −> degree

Degree          absolute degree; extremely high degree
Other uses      manner adjunct: absolutely(versus relatively)
Collocations    (to be listed by frequency)

Synonyms       absolutely, dead, perfectly, utterly (synset in WordNet 1.7.1.)

B Pre/postmodification complex collocations: (just) absolutely (fucking) ridiculous
negation: not absolutely surprised (i.e. not far from surprised)
morphological variation: absofuckinglutely (tmesis); ab flip

Predicates modified: - adjective: alone, right/wrong
                       comparative/superlative: bigger than, the coldest place in
                       adverb: well
                       - verb: adore, decline, refuse
                       - noun phrase: nothing, the spitting images of each other
                       - prepositional phrase: in accordance with

C Connotations       collocates equally with positive and negative predicates

Expressivity       strongest possible of all completives, primarily focusing on the

situation/uses     speaker. Hence, collocations with emotional endpoints, slang

Speech act         included (e.g. absolutely bloody crap), also in headings, ads

intensification    and web URLs

Endnotes

1 The term collocation is meant here as a cover term for all the possible combinations of intensifiers
and their predicates/heads regardless of the degree of idiomaticity of the collocation or of the
restricted versus wide collocability of the intensifier under discussion.
2 See Cacchiani (2003) for the relevant selection criteria.
3 Extensive discussion of all aspects of the model is given in Cacchiani (2003).
4 See Merlini Barbaresi (1997) for a bibliography and an analysis of aggravation and mitigation of
speech acts.

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