

# Lexico-Functional Categories In Noah Webster's *American Dictionary Of The English Language:* The Case of Intensifiers

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## Abstract

This paper sets out to investigate in what ways and to what extent Webster accounts for different types and degrees of intensification within the enormously varied and ever-changing lexico-functional category of intensifiers, varying along dimensions like connotations, type and degree of expressivity, as well as style and register restrictions. Specifically, we shall investigate inclusion and characterization of intensifiers in Webster's *American Dictionary* against the background of Johnson's *1755 Dictionary* using their electronic editions both as a dictionary and as a corpus. Reference will be also made to the Oxford English Dictionary online up to 1828 for comparison. Essentially, after compiling the intensifiers wordlists of Webster's and Johnson's dictionaries, we shall compare their treatment touching upon definition practices, usage labels and notes, examples and quotations. The main emphasis will be on Webster's lexicographic achievement rather than on his debt to Johnson.

## 1 Intensifiers in Johnson's *Dictionary*

Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* was a landmark in English language and lexicography. Unlike his predecessors, Johnson resorted systematically to usage comments and illustrative quotations from the best writers in order to set a standard of correct usage and style and help slow down language change. Together with definitions, usage comments and quotations enabled Johnson to cover all types of variation within the enormously varied lexico-functional category of upgrading intensifiers (Quirk et al. 1985: *amplifiers*). Next to core items defined via the *to a [quantity/size/degree adj.] degree* paraphrase (e.g. *extremely*), we find polyfunctional or less grammaticalized adverbs that achieve intensification via other mechanisms, most notably: *comparison* (e.g. *remarkably*), *telic* and *non-telic evaluation* (respectively, *unspeakably* and *plaguy*), *semantic-feature-copying* (*eminently best*), or *modality* (e.g. *very*, in its early stages of development from modal adjective).

The *Dictionary* accounts for differences among near-synonymic intensifiers also along other dimensions: expressivity and emphasis (*very* vs. *prodigiously*); connotations (positive vs. negative connotations or neutrality in this respect, e.g. *greatly*, *utterly*, and *much*); syntactic category of the predicate selected (*much* + *comparative*); occurrence in free versus strong collocations (respectively, *much loved* / *humbled* / *afflicted*, etc. vs. *detestably bad*); occurrence in complex collocations extending to the right (*completely witty*, *smart*, *humor-*

ous and polite) or to the left (*so completely full; infinitely, unsupportably miserable*). In particular, occurrence with other intensifying devices (emphatic accent in exclamative sentences, interjections, or complex collocations with emphaziers, intensifiers, focussing adjuncts and words of emotion) and in quotations from relatively more involved genres marked for orality features (e.g. face-to-face conversation) are cues to the type and degree of expressivity and involvement of an intensifier.

## 2 Purposes of the investigation

While criticizing the *Dictionary* on different counts (e.g. illustrative quotations), Noah Webster was strongly influenced and built upon it, most notably its 8th and 11th editions (Landau 2005: 220). His treatment of phrasal verbs is a case in point (Landau 2005): working on Johnson's entries, Webster omitted or replaced definitions and shortened quotations for the sake of conciseness. In the light of this, we shall concentrate on Webster's treatment of intensifiers against the background of Johnson's comprehensive inclusion and accurate description of contemporary intensifiers. Since no relevant changes in the treatment of intensifiers can be observed across the 1st, 4th, 8th and 11th editions, Johnson's 1st edition will be used as a standard of comparison.

## 3 Data analysis and results

Using the CTI's (1998) electronic edition of Webster's *American Dictionary* (henceforth, W) and McDermott's (1996) electronic edition of Johnson's *1755 Dictionary* (henceforth, J), we carried out an entry-by-entry search in order to compile the corresponding intensifiers wordlists. A word search helped catalogue intensifiers omitted from J and W, make continuous decisions on the inclusion of headwords ambiguous between different meanings and gather examples to be used as a small reference corpus. The Oxford English Dictionary online, 2nd edition, up to year 1828 (henceforth, OED) was also used with Borst (1902) as a 'test dictionary', a source of editorial comments and usage information.

Altogether, W returns 89 intensifiers under the corresponding headword as against 213 types in the OED, 8 under other entries and 48 under both. By contrast, J returns around 90 intensifiers under the corresponding headword as against 160 in the OED, 30 plus outside and around 70 under both (Cacchiani, in press). Given the highly idiosyncratic nature of intensifiers and problems in disambiguating the intensifying use of polyfunctional adverbs, as well as the exclusion of overlapping orthographic variants, swear words and expletives and words not well authorized in general, both dictionaries return a fairly comprehensive intensifiers wordlist. By looking at definitions, usage labels and notes and quotations it may be possible to distinguish among competing intensifiers in a non-haphazard way on at least one dimension (cf. §1. above).

### 3.1 Definitions

J provides definitions in the form of synonyms and paraphrases which are repeated verbatim or further expanded in W via extended definitions, synonyms and examples. The following types of definition can be distinguished:

i) The *In / To a [quantity / size / degree adj.] degree* paraphrase, e.g.:

(1) (a) **very**, adv. In a great degree; in an eminent degree.

The Greek orator was so very famous for this, that his antagonist reading over the oration which had procured his banishment, asked them, if they were so much affected by the bare reading of it, how much more they would have been alarmed, had they heard him? Addison. (J)

(1) (b) **very**, adv. As an adverb, or modifier of adjectives and adverbs, very denotes in a great degree, an eminent or high degree, but not generally the highest; as a very great mountain; a very bright sun; a very cold day; a very pernicious war; a very benevolent disposition; the river flows very rapidly. (W)

The quotation in (1a), from J, is an example of good style rather than actual language usage. By contrast, in (1b) Webster uses the same amount of characters to give a definition that makes clear exact degree of intensification, grammatical category of the predicate selected, and neutrality with respect to positive and negative connotations

ii) The *In / To a [evaluative adj.] degree* paraphrase, e.g.:

(2) (a) **excellently**, adv. [from excellent]

1. Well in a high degree.

He determines that man was erect, because he was made with hands, as he excellently declareth. Brown's Vulg. Errors.

That was excellently observed, says I, when I read a passage in an author, where his opinion agrees with mine. Swift.

2. To an eminent degree.

Comedy is both excellently instructive and extremely pleasant; satyr lashes vice into reformation; and humour represents folly, so as to render it ridiculous. Dryd. St. of Inn. Pref. (J)

(2) (b) **excellently**, adv. In an excellent manner; well in a high degree; in an eminent degree; in a manner to please or command esteem, or to be useful. (W)

Unlike J (2a), W (2b) provides a concise dictionary entry in which he accounts for the polyfunctional nature and positive import of this intensifier of the extremely high degree despite crossing out examples.

iii) The *In / To a [evaluative adj.] manner* paraphrase and the *In a manner to [...]* paraphrase, chiefly applying to viewpoint adverbs and manner adjuncts which obtain a semantic-feature-copying type of intensification, e.g.:

(3) (a) **deadly**, adv.

1. In a manner resembling the dead.

Like dumb statues, or unbreathing stones, / Star'd on each other, and look'd deadly pale. Shakesp R. III. Young Arcite heard, and up he ran with haste, / And ask'd him why he look'd so deadly wan. Dryd. Fables.

2. Mortally.

I will break pharaoh's arms, and he shall groan before him with the groanings of a deadly wounded man. Bible Ez. xxx. 24.

3. Implacably; irreconcilably; destructively.

4. It is sometimes used in a ludicrous sense, only to enforce the signification of a word.

Mettled schoolboys set to cuff, / Will not confess that they have done enough, / Though deadly weary. Orrery.

John had got an impression, that Lewis was so deadly cunning a man, that he was afraid to venture himself alone with him. Arbuthnot's History of John Bull. (J)

(3) (b) **deadly**, adv. 1. In a manner resembling death; as deadly pale or wan.

2. Mortally.

With groanings of a deadly wounded man. Ezek. 30.

3. Implacably; destructively.

4. In a vulgar or ludicrous sense, very; extremely; as a deadly cunning man. (W)

W's subentries repeat and further simplify J's entries in the interest of conciseness. Semantic feature copying is at stake in subentry 1., while we have a strong, colloquial intensifier under 4.

iv) *Beyond / without a limit; (In a manner / To a degree) beyond human capacities / that cannot be + past ppl.*, applying to telic and comparative intensifiers, e.g.:

(4) (a) **inconceivably**, adv. [from inconceivable]

In a manner beyond comprehension; to a degree beyond human comprehension.

Does that man take a rational course to preserve himself, who refuses the endurance of those lesser troubles, to secure himself from a condition inconceivably more miserable? South. (J)

(4) (b) **inconceivably**, adv. In a manner beyond comprehension, or beyond the reach of human intellect. (W)

J's definition accounts for the polyfunctional nature of *inconceivably* and the quotation invites an intensifying reading while only partly exemplifying its pattern of intensification (4a). Similarly, shortening the definition and crossing out the example W (4b) does not seem to do justice to the secondary intensifying use and collocational preferences of the adverb.

v) *Synonyms*, e.g.:

(5) (a) **horribly**, adv. [from horrible]

1. Dreadfully; hideously.

What hideous noise was that! / Horribly loud. Milton's *Agonistes*.

2. To a dreadful degree.

The contagion of these ill precedents, both in civility and virtue, horribly infects children. Locke. (J)

(5) (b) **horribly**, adv. In a manner to excite horror; dreadfully; terribly; as horribly loud; horribly afraid. (W)

In (5b) W accounts for the polyfunctional nature of an adverb at a very early stage of development towards another lexico-functional category resolving J's ambivalent treatment (5a) (definition via polyfunctional synonyms and intensifying reading in the quotation under subentry 1, definition via degree paraphrase and manner reading in the quotation under subentry 2). Specifically, W joins the two subentries and suggests a manner reading for the adverb, while providing polyfunctional synonyms and including examples still ambiguous between the two readings.

### 3.2 Usage labels and notes

Usage labels and notes are consistently used in J in order to provide extensive information relating to the general categories of currency, frequency, region, technical, normative, diastatic, and integration present in modern lexicography (Barnbrook 2005). Table 1 compares usage notes in W with their occurrence in J, and OED until 1828 integrated with information from Borst (1902). Ticks ( ) and crosses (X) indicate presence versus absence of the headword in the dictionary; Q/D and M/D refer to adverbs ambiguous between a quantity or manner reading and an intensifying reading. Exclusions concern words which were obsolete

in the 18th century and no longer in use in the early 19th century (e.g. *right*), information on previous uses of such words typically provided by historical dictionaries (e.g. the frequency of *mighty* in the 18th and 19th c.), and words that entered the intensifiers paradigm only later in the century (e.g. *bloody*, *clean*, *confoundedly*, or *devilishly*). What emerges is systematic recourse to usage notes that repeat J. They account for semantic, register and style restrictions on the use of highly expressive intensifiers of the extremely high degree, which reflects Webster's genuine interest in actual language usage.

	JOHNSON		OED until 1828		WEBSTER	
	Intensifier	Usage notes	Intensifier	Usage notes	Intensifier	Usage notes
(n)						
abominably	√	low familiar language; in formal sense	√	low familiar; formal: low formal; ill sense	√	vulgar
abominably	√		√	obscure	√	not elegant
awfully	√	low current word	√	expressions of reprobation	√(M/D)	low word
awfully	X	indiscreetly used in ludicrous terms	√	intention, strong dislike	√(M/D)	in low sense; sometimes excessively low
awfully	√	sometimes ludicrous to enforce the signification of a word	√	colloquial	√	in low vulgar, ludicrous sense: very extremely
awfully	√	ludicrous	√	chiefly colloquial	√	in popular sense: greatly, extremely, vulgarly
awfully	√		√		√	in low sense; sometimes extremely excessively
awfully	√	most often a negative intensifier	√		√	usually in a bad sense
awfully	√	familiar language: greatly	√		√	in familiar: very
awfully	√	scarcely admitted but in low language	√	especially frequent in 17th and 18th c.	√	admissible in colloquial and familiar language
awfully	√	sometimes used as familiar hyperbole	√	in colloquial use, hyperbolically	√	in familiar
awfully	√	used to enforce the signification of an adjective to a vicious degree; doubled to increase emphasis	√	repeated for emphasis	√	repeated denotes excess emphatically; but this repetition is not in respectable use
(v)						
awfully	√	not etiological but long admitted and established	√		√	
awfully	√	to a great extent or degree, this sense less proper	√		√(M/D)	
(a)						
awfully	√	obscure	√	rare, often ironical	X	
awfully	√	sometimes used ludicrously in low language	X		N	
awfully	√	not to be used but in very low language	√		X	
(c)						
awfully	√		√		√	popular, but never elegant
(s)						
awfully	√		√	colloquial or slang	√	vulgar
(l)						
awfully	√		√		√	not elegant; not used except in vulgar language
(p)						
awfully	X		√	colloquial, vulgar	N	very vulgar
awfully	X		√	low (form); vulgar	√	low word
(d)						
awfully	X		√	of things bad, later used as a coarse interjection	√	in vulgar sense

Table 1. Usage notes in J, OED until 1828 and W.

### 3.3 Examples and quotations

Illustrative quotations in J. provide information on textual and discourse-pragmatic restrictions on the use of intensifiers, hence on register and style restrictions. Accordingly, (Cacchiani, in press) more expressive intensifiers of the extremely high and high degree occurring in familiar, colloquial or vulgar language are found in quotations which show features of spoken, more involved genres (cf. §1.) e.g. (6):

(6) **too**. adv. [...]

2. It is sometimes doubled to increase its emphasis; but this reduplication always seems harsh, and is therefore laid aside.

Oh, that this too too solid flesh woul melt. Shakespeare

Sometimes it would be full, and then / Oh! Too too soon decrease again; / Eclips'd sometimes, that 'twoud' so fall, / There would appear to be no hope at all. Suckling. (J)

This has no counterpart in W, where extended quotations are systematically avoided and most often simplified and replaced by short examples (cf. 1b, 3b, 5b).

## 4 Conclusions

I hope to have minimally demonstrated that Webster provides a successful record of the use of intensifiers in contemporary American English. While building upon Johnson's *Dictionary*, Webster departs from what he called its highly 'personal style' mainly reformulating, simplifying, and crossing out quotations. This brings about a loss of information on the textual and discourse-pragmatic dimensions. However, accurate definitions and careful selection of examples in the *American Dictionary's* concise entries help distinguish effectively among near-synonymic intensifiers. As a result, Webster's *American Dictionary* turns out to be a 'modern' dictionary, used as a source of concise and accurate information, and not of elegance, style and wisdom.

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