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This Is *Totally* Interesting. Intensifiers Between Formal Semantics And Social Indexicality

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of intensification is extremely pervasive in natural language. At an intuitive level, we can define intensifiers as “linguistic devices that boost the meaning of a property upwards from an assumed norm” (Quirk et al. 1985). Examples of such expressions in English include *very, really, awfully, extremely*, along with many others.

(1) Mark is very tall (→ more than just *tall*)
(2) He’s really beautiful. (→ more than just *beautiful*)
(3) John is awfully good. (→ more than just *good*)

Linguists have addressed intensification from multiple perspectives, with two specific areas drawing the bulk of researchers' interests: intensifiers' semantics, and intensifiers' usage in the social landscape.

Concerning the former, linguists have been concerned with capturing the aforementioned “boosting” effect within a compositional, truth-conditional theory of meaning. In particular, recent findings (McCready and Kauffman 2013, Bylinina 2010, Irwin 2013, Beltrama and Bochnak 2013, McNabb 2012) have revealed that the boosting effect can be achieved through a variety of different semantic operations, and that the environments where intensification is found extend well beyond the category of gradable expressions. Concerning the latter, studies within the variationist paradigm have shown that the use of almost any intensifier is not evenly distributed across the social space, but varies across macro-social categories such as gender and age (Macaulay 2006, Tagliamonte 2008, Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005). Moreover, intensifiers are often exploited to construct particular styles and identities, emerging as an intriguing object of investigation for studies within the third-wave paradigm in sociolinguistics (Eckert 2012).

Despite the abundance of work in either subfield, however, a successful integration between these two approaches is currently missing. On the one hand, studies in formal semantics looked at intensifiers as a crystallized and competence-based phenomenon, without much interest in how these expressions are perceived and used in actual language performance. On the other hand, sociolinguistic studies have treated intensifiers as a semantically monolithic category, showing little interest in the nuances lurking beneath the general boosting function, overlooking the semantic, grammar-internal complexity of the phenomenon.
The current paper constitutes a preliminary attempt towards the goal of exploring the relationship between the semantic and the social component of intensification. My leading hypothesis is that speakers, when making use of intensifiers, are exploiting the semantic notion of *gradability* as a stylistic resource to construct social meaning. In particular, I suggest that intensifiers that semantically target non-lexical scales create a suitable attachment site for social meaning, and emerge as considerably more articulated social indexicals than intensifiers that combine with lexically supplied scales.

The paper is divided as follows. In Section 2, I present the basic semantic opposition between lexical and non-lexical intensification. In Section 3, I review the variationist literature on intensifiers, pointing out some important issues that call for further investigation. In Section 4, I explore the relationship between modes of semantic composition and social meaning, suggesting that a principled connection might exist between these two components. In Section 5, I discuss some excerpts from prescriptive grammars, showing that language users are indeed highly sensitive to the same fine-grained distinctions that linguists attempt to formalize in their theories. The discussion will also lay the ground for making a methodological point concerning the usefulness of language ideologies as a source data for formal linguists. Section 6 concludes.

### 2. Intensifiers: two modes of semantic composition

Intensifiers such as *very, totally, so,* have been widely investigated by scholars engaged with providing formal models of meaning composition. Intuitively, these expressions are associated with the function of *boosting* the meaning of another expression (Quirk et al. 1985). Such meaning comes with a straightforward requirement: the modified expression (i.e., the target of the intensifier) must be associated with a *scalar,* non-binary property (Eckardt, 2009). In (4a) and (4b) such requirement is satisfied by the presence of a gradable adjective like *tall* or *big.* By contrast, an absolute property (e.g. *bipedal* or *1-bedroom*) violates the requirement, producing a sentence that is ill-formed and difficult to interpret.

(4a) Mark is **very** tall (scalar)  
(4b) The house is **super** big (scalar)  
(5a) ?? Mark is very bipedal. (non scalar)  
(5b) ?? The house is **super** 1-bedroom (non scalar)

The mode of composition that has been invoked to account for these cases is known as *degree modification* (Kennedy and McNally 2005). In a nutshell, gradable predicates such as *tall* or *big* are modeled as functions which take an individual as input – e.g Mark, the house etc etc – and return a quantitative degree for this individual along a specific dimension (height for *tall,* size for *big*). The role of an intensifier is to combine with such degree and to impose that it counts as really high in a given context. *Very tall,* therefore, means that the individual Mark possesses a high degree of tallness. By contrast, whenever a predicate is not able to “feed” a degree to the intensifier – as is the case with discrete properties like *bipedal* and *one-bedroom* – intensification cannot go through due to a mismatch between the intensifier and the features of the targeted predicate.

If things were so simple, however, intensification would be a rather dull semantic phenomenon. Luckily for the semanticist, however, the picture is considerably more nuanced. Let us now...
consider totally below. In (6a), the scalarity requirement is satisfied by the meaning of the adjective: full refers to an inherently gradable property, whose degrees can be targeted by the intensifier. In the other two examples, though, the meaning of the following word does not supply a degree. Just as it is hard to imagine intermediate stages between going and not going fishing, it is hard to conceive as something being “more or less” San Francisco. Yet, in both cases the intensifier is perfectly interpretable, and hardly comes across as ungrammatical or ill-formed.

(6a) The tank is totally full (Scale: degree of fullness)
(6b) I totally didn’t go fishing (≈ definitely. Scale: speaker’s commitment towards the utterance).
(6c) This bar is totally San Francisco (Scale: stereotypical ranking)

More precisely, in (6b), the intensifier involves a scale associated with the speaker’s degree of certainty in relation to the content of the sentence, along the lines of what adverbs like definitely and absolutely would do (Irwin 2009, McCready and Kauffman 2013). In (6c), instead, totally targets a scale that aggregates the set of stereotypical features normally associated with the city San Francisco. Again, however, note that such ranking does not directly come from the semantic meaning of “San Francisco” – which merely denotes a city in California - but is introduced via a complex reasoning that associates a set of scalar attributes to the city (Bylinina 2010). What these examples show is that, whatever the mechanism that one posits for accounting for them¹, intensification can also happen in the absence of a gradable predicate. We can conclude that at least two different modes of meaning composition exist for intensifiers: (i) a lexical one, where intensifiers boost the scales encoded by a gradable predicate; (ii) a non-lexical one, in which intensification operates over a scale that is introduced via pragmatic reasoning (in (6c)), or by shifting the focus on the speaker’s commitment towards the sentence (in (6b)).

3. Intensifiers and sociolinguistics

In light of these properties, intensifiers emerge as an intriguing phenomenon for semanticists. In particular, casting light on different semantic mechanisms by which intensification can be achieved constitutes a challenging research enterprise for a linguist. However, intensifiers have also long been a fruitful topic of investigation in sociolinguistic research, especially within the variationist paradigm. On a general level, authors engaged in this research program observed two facts. First, intensification systems are unstable and tend to change rapidly in any speech community (Macaulay, 2006; Rickford, 2007; Tagliamonte, 2008; Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005). Second, the use of intensifiers tends to vary across demographic categories, especially age and gender. Concerning the former, intensifiers across the board are generally more frequent among young speakers - adolescents in particular - and tend to decrease in the oldest generations (Labov, 2001, Tagliamonte and D’Arcy, 2009, Kwon 2012), although not all intensifiers display the same strength and direction of correlation. The correlation with age varies from intensifier to intensifier, and from speech community to speech community. ² Moreover, gender has also been claimed to correlate

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¹ “Coercion” and “speaker-oriented” intensification are two solutions that have been proposed in the literature to account for these mismatches (McCready and Kauffman 2013, Bylinina 2010, Irwin 2013)

² Adverbs like very and extremely, for instance, have been found to be strongly associated with older speakers across communities, while adverbs like well in British English (Stenstrom et al., 2002) and really in Canadian English (Tagliamonte 2008) are overwhelmingly used by younger speakers.
with intensifiers distribution. Tagliamonte (2008) suggests that in Toronto currently spreading intensifiers like so and pretty are predominantly used by women, who are generally assumed to be the forerunners of linguistic innovation. These patterns, interestingly, are also reflected in language use in the media. For instance, Tagliamonte observes that in the series Friends, “the once primary intensifier in North America, really, is being usurped by so, which is used more often by the female characters than by the males” (Tagliamonte 2005).

The broad picture emerging from these investigations is one in which the intensifiers’ distribution is strongly conditioned by social factors. At the same time, this body of sociolinguistic work on intensification also features three main issues which deserve serious consideration. First, quantitative studies have overlooked the semantic complexity of intensification, treating very, really, well, bloody, so and other as if they were different, interchangeable phonetic realizations of an underlying “intensifying” morpheme. This assumption, while reasonable in light of the methodological demands of a variationist study, does not do justice to the empirical semantic complexity discussed in Section 2. Second, the variationist approach offers no insight in the actual social meaning of intensification. By seeing language as a mirror of social structures, variationists see linguistic variation as an output of the social hierarchy, and stylistic and gender dynamics as the effects of these categories on speakers’ orientation to their assigned place in that hierarchy (Eckert, 2012). But such an approach leaves crucial questions unanswered. What are different groups of speakers actually doing, on the social level, when using intensifiers? What social purposes do intensifiers serve for them? How are intensifiers used by speakers to construct style and to negotiate identity? And how are intensifiers perceived and evaluated by listeners? Third, analyzing the mere statistical distribution of variables does not take into account that linguistic forms become socially meaningful via the mediation of an enregisterment process (Agha, 2005). Via this process, such forms develop their own life in the social landscape and detach themselves from the actual distributional patterns that constituted the original indexical association, giving rise to a chain of increasingly higher orders of indexicality (Silverstein 2003).

4. Social and semantic meaning: bridging the gap

At first sight, such issues, while equally important for the investigation of natural language, seem to pertain to radically different domains. On the one hand, the semantic complexity of intensifiers emerges as an empirical problem for a semanticist, rather than an issue for a sociolinguist/linguistic anthropologist. On the other hand, intensifiers’ social indexicality, while central to understanding the sociolinguistic life of these forms, seems to be independent of how the meaning of these expressions is composed in the grammar. In this paper, however, I challenge this separation, suggesting that the semantic mechanisms of intensification play an important role in the process by which an intensifier comes to be used and perceived in a socially meaningful way. Specifically, I argue that language users are extremely sensitive to the semantic distinction between lexical and non-lexical gradability (see section 2), and can exploit it in order to inhabit identities, construct styles and draw inferences about the social attributes of the speakers.

To be sure, variationist studies on intensifiers did hint at some processes that could provide an insight into the relationship between intensification and social performance, suggesting that speakers use intensifiers to come across as innovative, emotional, colorful, or a combination of these (Lorenz 2002, Partington 1991, Peters 1994, Martinez and Pertejo 2012). However, these considerations remain at a speculative level, and are systematically pushed to the background with respect to the quantitative analysis of the distributions.
In all fairness, the rift between semantic meaning and social indexicality stems from a long standing – and empirically justified - division of labor within the study of language. Specifically, semantic meaning is considered to be inherent to the grammar of a particular language, and as such entirely based in formalizable, disembodied mechanisms; social indexicality, on the other hand, is seen as the result of semiotic processes that, while related to the linguistic features of the forms, are ultimately mediated by the social and ideological landscape. As a result, the association between the social and the grammatical has implicitly been assumed to be largely arbitrary, so that any kind of grammatical structure is taken to be suitable, in principle, to be associated with any kind of social indexicality. Yet, even a cursory look at some real-world examples of intensifier usage seems to cast some doubt on this assumption. Consider, in particular, the following examples.

(7a) The tank is totally full (Gradable. Source of the scale: scale of fullness)
(7b) The house is very big (Gradable. Source of the scale: scale of size)
(7c) The building is so tall that planes almost touch it (Gradable. Source: scale of height)

(8a) Your attitude is very UChicago. (Non-gradable. Source: stereotypical traits of Uchicago)
(8b) I totally left this at home (Non-gradable. Source: certainty about the proposition)
(8c) I’m so next in line! (Non-gradable. Source: eagerness/enthusiasm about being next)

While the use of an intensifier with a gradable predicate comes across as fairly neutral, the occurrences in (8 a-c) normally index a richer constellation of indexical information. To begin with, these expressions are intuitively labeled as informal, colloquial, fit for spoken registers. Moreover, they normally suggest an association with readily identifiable and specific social and psychological traits. For instance, they are associated with young, white, easy-going, speakers (Staum Casasanto, p.c.). Notably, such traits also stretch as far as including information about regional identity. For instance, a speaker of American English I consulted with added that “these intensifiers sound more Californian than anything else”. Finally, and most importantly, these forms also index more articulated social types and personas. With respect to so, the usage with non-gradable predicates has been dubbed “Generation X so” by linguist Arnold Zwicky, who pointed out a strong association with young white women (in the U.S.), “no doubt because of its prominence in the movies Heather (1988) and Clueless (1994)” (Zwicky 2005: 4). Besides this overarching type, some of the most frequently mentioned social personas associated with these usages of the intensifier include valley girl, surfer, frat party guy, and others. While the specifics of these stereotypes differ, all of them share a common core of indexical values, including informality, youthfulness and some sort of playful disengagement with the standard (Staum Casasanto, p.c.), where the use of nonstandard forms results in a creative and innovative use of language which might at times trigger specific evaluations on the part of the listener.

Telling evidence in support of this idea comes from online resources such as www.urbandictionary.com, which provide a useful database for mining the social stereotypes associated with linguistic forms. Totally, in particular, records five entries, each of which provides a slightly different angle on the social meaning of the intensifier.

1) It’s a word used by ditzy young girls that means definitely or for sure.

    He, like, totally dumped me! OMG! Like, you must have been, like, totally shocked!
2) Valley Girl Speak that means "Of course!"

You coming to my party?
Like, totally!

3) A word used for emphasis. Makes you sound kinda "cheerleaderish" when you use it.

Random: I totally failed that maths test
Courtney: Your IQ drops by at least 20 points everytime you say 'totally'

4) A word used by girly girls, poppers, and rich spoiled little brats. They use it in sentences, it doesn't really mean anything, its just their way of speaking.

Are you going to do your makeup now, or in 30 seconds?
Like, Totally, OMG!! Of course I'm gonna do it now, I can't let anyone see me without it, you know, like totally eew.

5) The smartest comment one can make in the margin of academic articles.

"The hegemonic dialectic surrounding the rising instance of rhetorical myositis ossificans is pedantic beyond belief." And in the margin: "Totally."

"Are you going to the bar tonight?" Response: "Totally."

Needless to say, this discussion is nothing more than a superficial overview, which falls short of providing any systematic, and definitely much needed, analysis of the value of these intensifiers as social indexicals. Moreover, the discussion omits a crucial difference between lexical and non-lexical intensifies. While so, very, and totally in (7 a-c) come with a neutral prosodic contour, their non-lexical counterparts in (8 a-c) are generally found in exclamative sentences, and bear a strong pitch accent on the first syllable of the intensifiers. This, in turn, gives rise to considerable elongation effect for the corresponding vowel, often transcribed with multiple orthographic repetition of the vowel, as in toooootally, or sooooo (See Irwin 2013 and Potts 2005 for further details on this property). For reason of space, these intonational facts will not be treated in the current paper, although they remain a crucial issue to deal with for any exhaustive account of the properties of these expressions.

Yet, even such a cursory look is sufficient to draw the attention to two important observations. First, intensifiers seem to have their own socio-indexical life. In other words, they are not just mapped onto the social space via a law-like correlation with a specific demographic profile. While we do have intuitions about the categories of speakers that are most likely to use these expressions, the social significance of intensifiers can only be fully made sense of within a notion of linguistic practice (Eckert 2005). Within this perspective, intensifiers emerge as a semiotic resource that is recruited by language users to model their identity and to construct a style, and by which speakers constantly recreate and redefine social categories. For instance, intensifiers do not evoke an
association with *youth* or *informality* just by virtue of being normally used by speakers of a certain age or within low-formality discourse contexts. Rather, the social meaning of the expression is now established as an independent resource. By using the intensifier in a particular way, a person might exploit the social meaning to *sound* young, or to *sound* informal, or to *sound* Californian, evoking and constructing one or more of such social types in the interactional context.

Second, we can observe an intriguing interplay between the *semantics* and the indexical value of intensification. Modulo issues of intonational contour (see above), within the package of cues that make intensifiers a viable sociosemiotic resource, in fact, the mode of meaning composition seems to play a prominent role. More specifically, non-lexical usages of intensification, in which the targeted scale is *not* supplied by the denotational meaning of the following predicate, appear to index a salient and articulated constellation of social meaning. By contrast, intensifiers which routinely combine with gradable predicates are associated with a less salient indexical value. This observation, at the very least, suggests that language users feature a very high sensitivity to fine-grained semantic distinctions. Not only can they discriminate between lexical and non-lexical compositional modes of intensification, but they can also exploit such opposition for sociolinguistic purposes. Crucially, this observation unfolds a previously unexplored relationship between semantic and sociolinguistic fact. Gradability, and the ways in which it is compositionally implemented, emerges as a linguistic resource that speakers can deploy not just for constructing interpretable sentences, but also for evoking styles, personas, or more specific social attributes.

In this perspective, mechanisms of semantic composition perform a very similar job to the one done by fine-grained acoustic details when it comes to sociophonetic variation. For example, it has been long known that manipulating even subtle phonetic cues alter people's social perceptions/evaluations of a speaker (Campbell-Kibler, 2006; Staum Casasanto, 2008), and that equally minimal variation in the acoustic features of a sound can easily determine a significant difference in terms of social meaning. Eckert (2008), for example, shows that the fronted vs backed pronunciation of six vowels is used by high-schoolers in the Detroit area to build a stylistic differentiation between the school-oriented “jocks” and the school-alienated “burnouts”. Zhang (2005) argues that rhotacization of syllable-final vowels is a salient feature of differentiation between “international” vs “local” managers in Beijing. Deletion or release of word-final stops, also a widely studied phenomenon in variationist sociolinguistics, has been suggested to be used as a resource to build various identity contrasts (e.g. “nerdy” identity, Bucholtz 2001). But other phonological categories can also be exploited for this goal. Podesva (2007) shows that variations in pitch can be used by the same speaker – in this case, a male doctor - to inhabit a “flamboyant gay diva” identity (extremely high frequency of pitch while at a barbecue), as opposed to a less marked “professional physician” identity (more normal frequency while at the workplace).

*Mutatis mutandis,* an analogous, principled relationship appears to hold between the semantic features and the social meaning of certain intensifiers. More specifically, speakers appear to be able to recruit different representations of scalar meaning as a resource for using/perceiving intensifiers in a socially meaningful way, just as they can exploit differences in pitch, roundedness and other phonetic cues for analogous sociolinguistic purposes. Note that such hypothesis is not inconsistent with the idea that the prosodic contour in which such intensifiers are generally found does not play any role. In fact, it is most likely that the strong pitch accent and vowel elongation effects do play
an important part in determining the suitability of these adverbs for the attachment of social meaning. Nevertheless, as the discussion of language ideologies in Section 6 will disclose, it is unlikely that every aspect of the associated indexicality can be reduced to such phonological issues. Instead, the proposed claim is that there is something inherent to semantic gradability that mediates the relation with social indexicality, or at least part of it.

Crucially, this observation significantly broadens the empirical basis of the linguistic features known to participate in socially meaningful variation. Furthermore, it unfolds a previously unexplored relationship between semantic and sociolinguistic facts, suggesting that the long standing divide between formal and socially-invested approaches to the study of language is less categorical than it has been believed to be.

Yet, despite the relevance of pointing out such a nexus, several important questions remain unsolved. How are semantic mechanisms and social meaning connected? How do we get from one component to the other? And how broad is the empirical association between these two domains? Outlining a formalizable and falsifiable linguistic hypothesis to capture this relationship goes well beyond the scope of this work. The same applies to testing the actual empirical association, although experimental methods currently used in sociophonetics might be a fruitful and promising resource to rely on for this purpose. Instead, in the remaining section of this paper I intend to discuss another relevant sociolinguistic feature of intensification, which could in turn cast light on the relationship between semantic and social meaning: intensifiers are pervasively found in speakers’ metalinguistic discourses, and are often discussed in prescriptive norms on language use. While such issues are not among the most commonly discussed ones in sociolinguistics, I suggest that looking at them could provide really insightful clues to better understand the relationship between the grammatical and the indexical component of these expressions.

5. A look at Language ideologies Despite phonology

Following Silverstein (1979), language ideologies can be defined as “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (193). Particularly prominent among such ideologies are prescriptive grammars, which rationalize linguistic patterns and ways of speaking in terms of a basic opposition between correct and incorrect ones. Traditionally, linguists have been wary of notions such as right or orthodox speech, emphasizing their descriptive, judgment-free approach. Yet, such doctrines can be a useful tool to cast light on the creation of social meaning, especially when it comes to understanding the process whereby linguistic forms come to index social values. As Irvine (2002: 22) points out, ideologies are in fact important mediators between the linguistic and the social realm: “It is a commonplace in sociolinguistics that ways of speaking index the social formations (groups, categories, personae, activity types, institutional practices, etc.) of which they are characteristic. But these indexes must partake in participants’ understandings (i.e. ideologies, italic is ours) of their social world and the semiotic resources available in it.” In light of this view, considering the treatment that intensifiers receive in such discourses will be extremely telling to better understand how intensification can be used as a semiotic resource to produce and perceive social meaning. I will focus on two main kinds of ideological discourse here: a) non-lexical intensification is non-logical; b) intensifiers are...
meaningless and superfluous. The brief overview reveals that not only are speakers sensitive to the fine-grained semantic notions that have been modeled by formal linguists, but they can exploit them in drawing inferences about the social and psychological attributes of language users.

**Intensifiers are (sometimes) illogical**

Consider the following excerpts.

> The word *unique* has the meaning “one of a kind.” Listen to any talk show and you will hear people say that something or other is “very unique,” or “rather unique,” or “somewhat unique.” Such usage corresponds to saying that a woman is “somewhat pregnant.” With unique (as with pregnancy) there is no middle ground. If something is unique, that’s it. To precede the word with an intensifier like “very” or a comparative like “less” or “more,” defeats the purpose. TIP: Preserve the unique usefulness of the word unique by thinking twice before putting a modifier in front of it.

> “Very unique” is not a tautology; it is an illogical statement. Something is either unique or it isn’t. There are no degrees of uniqueness. Latching onto the word “unique” and using modifiers to change it shows an ignorance of the meaning of the term and an inability to come up with different words to use what is actually meant. Again, someone using the sort of phrase as “really unique” just makes themselves look ignorant in my opinion, and I’m sure there are many situations in business and scholastic arenas where this is also true.

These passages show, crucially, that speakers are extremely sensitive to the notion of lexical gradability: intensification is only acceptable in the presence of gradable predicates, and should not be found otherwise. To be sure, restricting intensifiers to lexical gradability is, indeed, an ideological move. It reflects a legitimate assumption about how language works, which is shared by various speakers in the social landscape. However, not only is intensifying a non-gradable predicate “incorrect”. It also leads to very specific evaluative inferences about the nature of the speakers who used the expression. Two dimensions are particularly relevant: *logic* and *ignorance*. Concerning the former, applying an intensifier to a non-gradable predicate is seen as a lack of rational behavior on the part of the speaker. Concerning the latter, the unorthodox usage of the intensifier indexes the speaker as *ignorant*, both in language proficiency terms and, by extension, in more general terms. In conclusion, the notion of gradability emerges not just as a semantic category in linguistic theories, but as a well-rooted notion in language users’ experience. Not only are they able to easily detect the difference between lexical and non-lexical usages, but they also socially react to such distinction, as they use it as a semiotic resource to draw a line between correct and incorrect speech.

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4 [http://www.dailywritingtips.com/less-is-more-when-it-comes-to-unique/](http://www.dailywritingtips.com/less-is-more-when-it-comes-to-unique/)

5 [http://www.wikihow.com/Avoid-Using-Tautologies](http://www.wikihow.com/Avoid-Using-Tautologies)

6 This closely resembles the the animosity triggered by metaphorical usages of the adverb *literally*, where what is emphasized is not the truthfulness of the actual semantic content, but speaker’s commitment (Israel 2002).
Intensifiers are superfluous

Another major set of ideological beliefs on intensifiers views intensification as meaningless, and, by virtue of a common sense economy principle, superfluous. Let us consider the following excerpt.

The first step is easy: eliminate all intensifiers. "Intensifiers" are adverbs meant to strengthen other modifiers, whether adjectives or adverbs. But they rarely do. Words like very, extremely, incredibly, exceedingly, remarkably, etc. can all be eliminated because their meanings can be contained in the terms they modify. For example, a monster isn't very ugly"; it's "hideous," "repugnant" or, well, "monstrous." And a child's cheeks don't need to turn "extremely red" when they can turn "scarlet." Nor does a woman need to walk away very quickly"; if she just walks away "quickly" or "fast," we get the picture.7

As it happens with gradability, we notice a rift between “scientific” and “folk” semantics here. Theories of meaning, in particular, showed that (lexical) intensifiers are non-trivially changing the truth-conditions of the modified predicate, making them more stringent, and suggest that non-lexical ones as well are providing some important content. However, despite the obvious contrast, naive speakers' view is not completely disconnected from the facts described by linguists. For instance, we have seen that non-lexical intensifiers, while still carrying some content, are not actually contributing to the descriptive meaning of the sentence. Unsurprisingly, while this particular ideology applies to intensification across the board, it is especially with them that the prescriptive “ban” on intensification appears to be more intense.

This overview of prescriptive norms provides further evidence for the presence of a connection between social meaning and the semantic properties of intensifiers. Specifically, folk rationalizations appear to pick up on specific semantic parameters: (a) the source of the targeted scale and (b) the impact of intensification on the truth-conditional meaning of the sentence. Most strikingly, such bodies of prescriptive grammar are centered on fine-grained distinctions and intuitions about the semantic parameters of intensification that formal linguistic theories aim to model. These very same properties are recruited to ideological discourse by language users and embedded in prescriptive and stylistic norms about language use, once again showing that speakers in social life are as sensitive to semantic mechanism as they are to phonological features or syntactic properties.

Before concluding, two important observations are in order. First, the presence of gradability-specific ideologies shows that, however the acoustic correlates of these intensifiers (vowel elongation, prosodic pitch) might be important in driving the indexical relationship, they cannot be the whole story. The fact that language users have detailed folk-rationalizations of how gradability works – or ought to work – in natural language shows that they are sensitive to very specific semantic parameters, which cannot be reduced to issues of prosody and suprasegmental phonology. This, in turn, provides further evidence to the idea that gradability, and the distinct flavors in which it is compositionally implemented, might serve as an independent, bona fide semiotic resource for the construction of social meaning.

7 http://people.umass.edu/curtis/academics/editingtoolbox/cuttinglard.html
Moreover, these data from language ideologies, though rather unsystematic, contribute to make an important methodological point: prescriptive grammars, or more generally ideologically-informed theories of language, deserve to be taken seriously, as they can prove to be a fruitful mine of data and insights for linguistic theories. As is well known, from day one of every introductory class, students are made familiar with the notion that linguistics is a neutral scientific enterprise. A crucial consequence of this view is that linguists are committed to fiercely debunking stylistic doctrines, language stereotypes, and, in general, any prescriptive conceptualization of linguistic forms in terms of right or wrong, nice or unpleasant, desirable or commendable. Unsurprisingly, such value-laden ideas are in fact normally seen by linguists as absurd, untenable, and ultimately not worthy of being taken seriously. Yet, the materials that we have just seen seem to suggest a different approach, as they show that the attachment of normative and aesthetic judgments to linguistic forms is not entirely arbitrary, but is to a certain extent driven by the very same linguistic features that scientific linguistic theories aim to formalize, and how naïve speakers react to them. In this sense, prescriptive norms emerge as bona fide sociolinguistic phenomena, deeply connected to specific linguistic properties of the linguistic forms at stake, rather than as threatening external impositions that call for eradication. As such, they can be in their own right a fruitful source of data for linguists, as they pick on the same fine-grained linguistic properties and features that linguists aim to account for.

6. Conclusion

Several important observations emerged from the discussion. First, intensifiers are not a semantically homogenous category. While the meaning of these expressions can be roughly generalized as an “upward boosting” of a property, we have seen that different semantic mechanisms are at stake when it comes to modeling the meaning composition of these expressions. In particular, intensifiers can either intensify scales that are lexically supplied by gradable predicates, or scales that are supplied by the context or by some sort of speaker-oriented dimension. Yet, such empirical complexity, which represents an intriguing object of investigation for formal semanticists, has not been addressed in the discipline until very recently, and still presents a number of unexplored issues.

Second, variationist and corpus studies showed that intensification is often embedded in socially-conditioned variation. The distribution of intensifiers correlates with specific macro-social attributes of the speakers – age in particular - and with specific contexts of communication, which are operationalized as registers or textual genres. While not all intensifiers exhibit the same correlations, a general pattern emerges in which intensification appears to be most frequent among younger speakers, spoken genres and more informal/colloquial registers.

Third, intensifiers - besides being quantitative correlates of social categories – routinely carry a salient constellation of social meanings, as they come to index specific social, personal and psychological attributes about the speakers. As such, they appear to be an intriguing case study for

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8 We are obviously aware that linguistic theories, though different in content, are just as ideological as prescriptive ones.

9 Some of the relevant questions include: a) Which categories of non-scalar words can be intensified? b) How do intensifiers differ from each other in their ability to combine with non-scalar words? c) How many different kinds of scales can be fed to intensifiers? (typicality, speaker’s attitude etc.).
sociolinguists, especially with respect to the processes whereby linguistic forms get recruited by speakers to build style and social personae in interaction.

Fourth, and most importantly, there appears to be a motivated connection between the social and the semantic properties of these expressions. This idea, although never explicitly formulated, emerges both from previous linguistic research and from prescriptive norms regulating the use of intensifiers. The existence of such mapping is particularly intriguing from a linguistic perspective, as it challenges the sharp separation between the realm of grammar and the realm of social meaning that has characterized the study of language so far, including semantic mechanisms among the linguistic materials that can be recruited as semiotic resources for sociolinguistic purposes.

References


