

Precisifying and non-precisifying uses of adnominal *very*

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Introduction

Introduction

Canonically, degree modifiers specify to what extent a gradable adjective holds.

- (1)
 - a. extremely dangerous
 - b. extremely large
- (2)
 - a. very tall
 - b. very big
- (3)
 - a. slightly open
 - b. slightly bent

Degree semantics for gradable predicates and degree modifiers

One popular story: Gradable adjectives are lexically endowed with a degree argument, and degree modifiers saturate this degree (cf. Kennedy & McNally (2005) and many others).

(4) $\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket = \lambda d \lambda x. x \text{ is tall to degree } d$

(5) $\llbracket \text{very tall} \rrbracket = \lambda x. x \text{ is tall to degree } d \text{ and } d \text{ is large}$

Cross-categorical degree modification

Problem:

- Distribution of some degree modifiers does not always track that of canonical gradable predicates.
- Some degree modifiers are cross-categorical, but the categories they combine with don't appear to be gradable categories.
- This talk focuses on adnominal uses of *very*, which can combine with non-gradable nouns such as *salesperson*, *top*, and *idea*.
 - (6) a. This is **the very salesperson** I spoke with yesterday.
 - b. We climbed to **the very top** of the mountain.
 - c. **The very idea** excites me.
- This adnominal use of *very* has not (as far as I know) been previously looked at. New observations.

Two readings with adnominal *very*

Main observation: two readings available with adnominal *very*.

- Precising: *very* increases the precision to which a concept is interpreted
- Non-precising: *very* expresses a contextually supplied (evaluative?) scalar notion

(7) Precising

- a. the very beginning of the line
- b. the very center of the Earth
- c. the very salesperson I spoke with yesterday

(8) Non-precising

- a. **The very idea of space travel** excites me.
- b. The **very act of running** in many states is evidence of a guilty conscience. (COCA)
- c. If **the very notion of holiday hosting** has you feeling a bit overwhelmed, get organized with these simple ideas. (Google)

Questions

- ① Where does the sense of intensification come from with *very* when used adnominally?
- ② What varieties of intensification does *very* mark?
- ③ How can the different senses of intensification with *very* be captured?
- ④ How is intensification distributed between at-issue and non-at-issue meaning components?

Roadmap

- Give a description of the landscape of adnominal *very*.
- Propose the beginnings of an analysis for different types of adnominal *very* readings: precisifying readings (related to pragmatic halos) and non-precisifying readings (related to a different contextually available scale).
- **Not a unified analysis!** Step towards a unified analysis of *very*.
- Usual disclaimer: on-going work, with some claims more tentative than others.

Data

Distribution: definite and demonstrative DPs

Overwhelmingly appears in DPs headed by definite or demonstrative determiners.

- First 1000 hits of the search term [d*] | [at*] very [nn*] in COCA (“determiner or article + very + noun”)

Determiner	Count	Frequency
the	673	0.673
this	108	0.108
that	59	0.059
their	28	0.028
our	20	0.02
a	10	0.01
its	7	0.007
whose	11	0.011
your	9	0.009
her	15	0.015
his	22	0.022
my	10	0.01
those	15	0.015
these	12	0.012
both	1	0.001
<i>(total)</i>	1000	

Distribution: definite and demonstrative DPs

Overwhelmingly appears in DPs headed by definite or demonstrative determiners.

- First 1000 hits of the search term [d*] | [at*] very [nn*] in COCA (“determiner or article + very + noun”)
- Roughly 67% of occurrences were in DPs headed by *the*.
- Another roughly 19% in DPs headed by demonstrative determiners *this/that*.
- Almost non-existent with indefinite article.

Determiner Type	Count	Frequency
indefinite	10	0.01
both	1	0.001
possessive	122	0.122
demonstrative	194	0.194
definite	673	0.673
<i>(total)</i>	1000	

Examples with indefinite are spurious

Examples with indefinite determiner are spurious (*a very sort, a very nurturing, a very lot, a very activist, a very kind*).

- Cases of *very* modifying *sort of, kind of*.
 - *Activist* cases involve *activist* as a gradable adjective.
- (9)
- [.] demonstrated through executive orders and all kinds of things that he will have a very **activist** second term [.]
 - [.] would make the Warren court – itself a very **activist** court – pretty embarrassed [.]
- *Nurturing* is mistagged as a noun.
 - Pre-noun modifier *a very lot*.
- (10)
- [.] At first, it was a **very lot** of compliments, like you're one of us, you're cool, [.]
 - [.] I learned there's a lot to it, a **very lot**. [.]

Adnominal *very* prefers [+R] nominal concepts

Which nominals does adnominal *very* prefer?

Löbner (1985, 2011) argues for two dimensions in describing nominal concepts:

- [$\pm R$]: relationality
- [$\pm U$]: uniqueness
- Nominals are lexically specified as being [$\pm R$] and [$\pm U$]

	[-R]	[+R]
[-U]	sortal (<i>chair, dog</i>)	relational (<i>brother, arm</i>)
[+U]	individual (<i>pope, US president</i>)	functional (<i>head, age</i>)

- Possible to shift concept type via determiners, plurality, and other functional material.

Adnominal *very* prefers [+R] nominal concepts

Analysis of 30 most frequent types shows preference for [+R] (relational or functional) nominal concepts.

Concept Type		Count	Examples
functional	(type $\langle e, e \rangle$)	18	<i>beginning, end, top, nature</i>
relational	(type $\langle e, et \rangle$)	6	<i>edge, notion, reason</i>
individual	(type $\langle e \rangle$)	0	–
sortal	(type $\langle e, t \rangle$)	6	<i>people, thing, though</i>

Some precisifying uses involve a [-R] concept

Examples with sortal noun aren't due to non-precisifying uses of *very*. Rather, not all examples of precisifying adnominal *very* involve a [+R] concept.

- (11)
- a. **the very salesperson I talked to yesterday**
 - b. You have become **the very thing you swore to destroy**. (*Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*)
 - c. **The very chair that she was sitting in** must have been the chair in which Krenn sat. (Google)

At-issue or non-at-issue meaning contributions

Precisifying uses of *very* make an at-issue contribution to the discourse.

- Diagnosed by the ability of *very NP* to be negated.
- Suggests precisifying *very* primarily make an at-issue, truth conditional contribution to the discourse.

- (12) a. I was at the beginning of the line, but **not the very beginning of the line.**
b. We traveled to the center of the Earth, but **not the very center of the Earth.**
- (13) *The idea of space travel excites me, but not the very idea of space travel.

Some uses are not truth-conditional

Other uses of adnominal *very* are non-truth conditional.

- In non-precisifying uses, *very* makes a not-at-issue contribution.
- Not able to negate contribution of *very*.
- (14) and (15) are very clearly contradictions, suggesting that contribution of *very* is some kind of projective content.

(14) *The idea of space travel excites me, but not the very idea of space travel.

(15) *The act of running in many states is evidence of a guilty conscience, but not the very act of running.

Translational differences

Precisifying uses of *very* can receive a rough paraphrase with *exact*.

- (16) a. the very center of the Earth
- b. the exact center of the Earth
- (17) a. the very spot where Lincoln stood
- b. the exact spot where Lincoln stood

However, non-precisifying uses cannot be paraphrased with *exact*; *mere* is a better approximation of a paraphrase.

- (18) a. The very idea of space travel excites me.
- b. *The exact idea of space travel excites me.
- c. The mere idea of space travel excites me.

Summary

To summarize:

- Restricted to definite or demonstrative determiners.
- Preference for [+R] nominals.
- Two uses: precisifying and non-precisifying. Paraphrase differences.
- Non-precisifying *very* make a non-at-issue contribution to the discourse, while precisifying *very*'s contribution is at-issue.

Degrees and halos

- Precising uses of *very* linked to Lasnikian pragmatic halos.
- *Very* contracts a pragmatic halo in the precisifying cases.
- Degree semantics for pragmatic halos, based on Morzycki (2011).
- No pragmatic halo contraction in the non-precisifying cases.

Pragmatic halos

Looseness (imprecision) in interpretation. Examples in (19) are accepted by speakers in default contexts, even though they are not strictly true.

- (19)
- a. It's 3 o'clock. (uttered at 2:58pm)
 - b. Ok, everyone is here. (uttered by a professor at the start of class when a few students are absent)
 - c. The earth is spherical.

Imprecision can be regulated in context or with modifiers.

- (20)
- a. All the townspeople are asleep. (no exceptions allowed)
 - b. It's exactly 3 o'clock. (cannot be uttered at 2:58pm)
 - c. The earth is perfectly spherical. (recognized by hearers as false)

Lasersohn (1999): Natural language expressions have a “halo” of pragmatically ignorable differences surrounding them.

Imprecision parameter

Adopt proposal by Morzycki (2011) to represent pragmatic halos compositionally.¹

- Interpretation function $\llbracket \cdot \rrbracket$ comes with a degree parameter.
- Represents a degree of precision, directly connected to the size of the pragmatic halo surrounding a linguistic expression.
- Halo generated via \approx relation.

(21) $\alpha \approx_{d,C} \beta$ iff α resembles β to at least degree d in context C

- High degrees of precision correspond to smaller halos, while lower degrees correspond to larger pragmatic halos

Example:

(22) $\llbracket 3 \text{ o'clock} \rrbracket^{d,C} = \{f_{\langle e,t \rangle} : f \approx_{d,C} 15:00\}$

(23) a. $\llbracket 3 \text{ o'clock} \rrbracket^{1,C} = \{15:00\}$

b. $\llbracket 3 \text{ o'clock} \rrbracket^{.9,C} = \{14:59, 15:00, 15:01\}$

c. $\llbracket 3 \text{ o'clock} \rrbracket^{.7,C} = \{14:55, \dots, 14:59, 15:00, 15:01, \dots, 15:05\}$

¹Also explored by Anderson (2013) (*sorta*), Bochnak & Csipak (2014) (*-ish*), and Beltrama & Hanink (2018) (*like*).

Basic degree semantics

Basic degree semantics assumptions (cf. Kennedy & McNally (2005), Kennedy (2007), Morzycki (2016))

- Gradable adjectives come with a degree argument; relate degree to individuals.
- Degree argument bound by a null morpheme *pos*.
- *pos* is evaluative; asserts that the degree exceeds a contextually defined standard (accessed with **norm**).

- (24) a. $\llbracket tall \rrbracket = \lambda d \lambda x. \mathbf{tall}(x, d)$
b. $\llbracket pos \rrbracket = \lambda G \lambda x. \exists d [G(d)(x) \wedge d \geq \mathbf{norm}(G)]$
- (25) $\llbracket pos tall \rrbracket = \lambda x. \exists d [\llbracket tall \rrbracket(d)(x) \wedge d \geq \mathbf{norm}(\llbracket tall \rrbracket)]$

Degree semantics for *very*

A basic degree semantics for *very* is given in (26).

- *Very* expresses that a degree above the contextual standard (**norm**) holds.
- Note that this is evaluative, as it makes reference to a standard; in order to be *very tall*, one must also be *tall*.

$$(26) \quad \llbracket \text{very} \rrbracket^c = \lambda G \lambda x. \exists d [G(d)(x) \wedge d \geq \mathbf{norm}(G) \wedge \mathbf{high}(d)]$$

$$(27) \quad \llbracket \text{very tall} \rrbracket^c = \lambda x. \exists d [\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket(d)(x) \wedge d \geq \mathbf{norm}(\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket) \wedge \mathbf{high}(d)]$$

Analysis

Relationality and nominals

[+R] nominals have an argument in addition to the referential argument. Treat as type $\langle e, et \rangle$, with unique referential argument.

(28) Tentative proposals for *center* and *beginning*

- a. $\llbracket \textit{center} \rrbracket = \lambda x \lambda y [y = \mathbf{center}(x)]$
- b. $\llbracket \textit{beginning} \rrbracket = \lambda x \lambda y [y = \mathbf{beginning}(x)]$

No syntactically represented degree argument for these expressions!

Precisifying uses

Precisifying adnominal *very*:

- Contracts the pragmatic halo around a linguistic expression.
- An expression like *center of the Earth* is linked to a degree of precision.
- A set of functions that are d -similar to the most precise characterization of the center of the Earth, where d is the degree of precision.

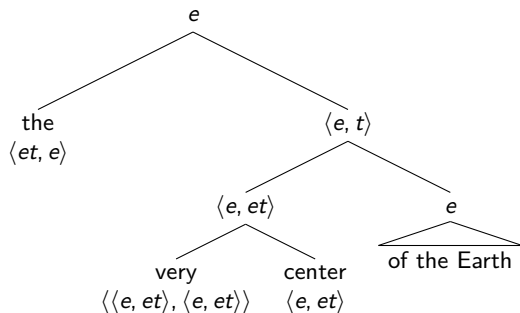
$$(29) \quad \llbracket \text{center} \rrbracket^{d,C} = \{ \lambda x \lambda y [y = f(x)] : f_{\langle e,e \rangle} \approx_{d,C} \mathbf{true-center} \}$$

Analysis of precisifying use

Precisifying adnominal *very*:

- *Very* takes noun as an argument.
- Captures *very*'s sensitivity to [+R] nouns.

(30)



Analysis of precisifying use

Precisifying adnominal *very*:

- Sets imprecision degree as exceeding the norm.
- Like the degree modifier *very*, precisifying *very* is evaluative; exceeds contextual standard for precision.
- Choice function chooses from the (narrowed) halo around the denotation of the noun.
- At-issue contribution to the discourse.

$$(31) \quad \llbracket \textit{very center of the Earth} \rrbracket = \\ \lambda x. \exists d \left[\begin{array}{l} d > \mathbf{norm}(\lambda d'. \llbracket \textit{center} \rrbracket^{d'}) \wedge \mathbf{high}(d) \wedge \\ \text{CHOICE}((\lambda d'. \llbracket \textit{center} \rrbracket^{d'})(d))(\llbracket \textit{of the Earth} \rrbracket)(x) \end{array} \right]$$

Non-precisifying uses

Non-precisifying uses:

- Make use of a contextually defined, non-degree scale. Not clearly norm-related.
- Minimum scalar element; in (32), other stronger things besides space travel may also excite.
- Scalar contribution is not at-issue in this case (see previous diagnostics).

(32) The very idea of space travel excites me.

$$(33) \quad \llbracket \text{very idea of } p \rrbracket = \lambda x \left[\begin{array}{l} \mathbf{idea}(x) \wedge \mathbf{CONTENT}(x) = p \wedge \\ \exists y \in \mathbf{scale}_c(p) [y \geq x] \end{array} \right]$$

Discussion and Conclusion

Two modes of precisification?

So far, precisification viewed as a single phenomenon. But, possibly two modes of precisification:

- Some cases of adnominal *very* use a non-relational noun.

- (34)
- a. the very salesperson I talked to yesterday
 - b. I soon let him know that I drove from North Jersey **to get the very dog he just adopted**. (Google)
 - c. He stumbled backward and fell over **the very chair that she had intended to use to reach the pans**. (Google)

- These seem to always require a relative clause or some other implicit restrictor.
- Claim: Reinterpret noun as [+R].
- Mapping from an event/situation (provided by relative clause) to individual.

(35) $\llbracket \text{salesperson} \rrbracket^{d,C} = \lambda e_v \lambda y_e. y = \text{salesperson}(e)$

- Intuition that the N is being interpreted as a role rather than a sortal property. E.g. role of *salesperson* in a particular situation.

Why relations?

Why should *very* be sensitive to concept type?

- Degree word *very* is also sensitive to concept type.
- Not normally described as such, but the canonical *very* is also sensitive to relationality.
- Requires a relation between degrees and individuals.
- However the semantic change happened, we might think of this sensitivity to relationality as a constant part of the meaning of *very*.

$$(36) \quad \llbracket tall \rrbracket = \lambda d \lambda x [\mathbf{tall}(x, d)]$$

$$(37) \quad \llbracket POS \rrbracket = \lambda G_{\langle d, et \rangle} \lambda x. \exists d [d \geq \mathbf{norm}(G) \wedge G(d)(x)]$$

Semantic change?

Etymology of *very*:

- Borrowed from Old French *verai* (“true”) (Modern French *vrai*).
- Semantic change. Possibilities:
 - ▶ Borrowed as adnominal, expanded to degree word.
 - ▶ Borrowed as degree word, expanded to adnominal.
- Prototypicality or norm-related scales with *true* (Morzycki 2012, Knobe et al. 2013).
- Lexical semantic connection with *true* should be investigated.

Connection with *true*?

(38) **I am the very model of a modern Major-General,**
I've information vegetable, animal, and mineral,
I know the kings of England, and I quote the fights historical
From Marathon to Waterloo, in order categorical;
I'm very well acquainted, too, with matters mathematical,
I understand equations, both the simple and quadratical,
About binomial theorem I'm teeming with a lot o' news,
With many cheerful facts about the square of the hypotenuse.

(Gilbert and Sullivan, *The Pirates of Penzance*)

Conclusion

- Described previously unexamined patterns of adnominal *very* wrt (non-)at-issue content and relationality.
- Two types:
 - ▶ Precisifying: *very* modulates a pragmatic halo.
 - ▶ Non-precisifying: *very* involves a contextually supplied scale.
- Degree semantics for *very*, both degree modifier and adnominal precisifying uses.
- Scalar analysis of *very* across the board, but reference to different scales.
- Adds to the growing picture of how modifiers can modulate imprecision (Anderson 2013, 2016, Bochnak & Csipak 2014, Beltrama & Hanink 2018, Sauerland & Stateva 2007).

Thank you!

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