Precisifying and non-precisifying uses of adnominal very

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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
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) $\llbracket \text{very tall} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \ x \text{ is tall to degree } d \text{ and } d \text{ is large}$
Problem:
- Distribution of some degree modifiers does not always track that of canonical gradable predicates.
- Some degree modifiers are cross-categorial, 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.
Main observation: two readings available with adnominal *very*.

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

(7) Precisifying
a. the very beginning of the line
b. the very center of the Earth
c. the very salesperson I spoke with yesterday

(8) Non-precisifying
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 \([d*] | [at*] \text{ very } [nn*]\) in COCA (“determiner or article + very + noun”)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Determiner</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>this</td>
<td>108</td>
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<td>that</td>
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<td>their</td>
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<tr>
<td>its</td>
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<td>whose</td>
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<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>my</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>those</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.015</td>
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<tr>
<td>these</td>
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<td>0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>both</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(total) 1000
Overwhelmingly appears in DPs headed by definite or demonstrative determiners.

- First 1000 hits of the search term \([d\star] \mid [at\star] \text{very} \mid [nn\star]\) in COCA ("determiner or article + very + noun")
- Roughly 67% of occurrences were in DPs headed by \textit{the}.
- Another roughly 19% in DPs headed by demonstrative determiners \textit{this}/\textit{that}.
- Almost non-existent with indefinite article.

<table>
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<th>Frequency</th>
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<tr>
<td>both</td>
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<td>0.001</td>
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<td>0.673</td>
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<tr>
<td>(total)</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.

\((9)\)

- a. \(\ldots\) demonstrated through executive orders and all kinds of things that he will have a very activist second term \(\ldots\)
- b. \(\ldots\) would make the Warren court – itself a very activist court – pretty embarrassed \(\ldots\)

- Nurturing is mistagged as a noun.
- Pre-noun modifier a very lot.

\((10)\)

- a. \(\ldots\) At first, it was a very lot of compliments, like you’re one of us, you’re cool, \(\ldots\)
- b. \(\ldots\) I learned there’s a lot to it, a very lot. \(\ldots\)
Adnominal very prefers [+R] nominal concepts

Which nominals does adnominal very prefer?

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

- [±R]: relationality
- [±U]: uniqueness

Nominals are lexically specified as being [±R] and [±U]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[-R]</th>
<th>[±R]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[-U]</td>
<td>sortal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(chair, dog)</td>
<td>(brother, arm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[+U]</td>
<td>individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(pope, US president)</td>
<td>(head, age)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept Type</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>functional</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>beginning, end, top, nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relational</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>edge, notion, reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sortal</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>people, thing, though</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 Kreng 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.
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
Precisifying uses of *very* linked to Lasersohnian 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 \([.]\) 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.

\[
\alpha \approx_{d,C} \beta \text{ iff } \alpha \text{ resembles } \beta \text{ to at least degree } d \text{ in context } C
\]

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

Example:

\[
\begin{align*}
&3 \text{ o’clock}^{d,C} = \{f_{(e,t)} : f \approx_{d,C} 15:00\} \\
&3 \text{ o’clock}^{1,C} = \{15:00\} \\
&3 \text{ o’clock}^{9,C} = \{14:59, 15:00, 15:01\} \\
&3 \text{ o’clock}^{7,C} = \{14:55, \ldots, 14:59, 15:00, 15:01, \ldots, 15:05\}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^1\) Also explored by Anderson (2013) (sorta), Bochnak & Csipak (2014) (-ish), and Beltrama & Hanink (2018) (like).
Basic degree semantics


- 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).

\[(24)\]
\[
a. \quad \llbracket\text{tall}\rrbracket = \lambda d \lambda x. \text{tall}(x, d) \\
\]
\[
b. \quad \llbracket\text{pos}\rrbracket = \lambda G \lambda x. \exists d [ G(d)(x) \land d \geq \text{norm}(G)] \\
\]

\[(25)\]
\[
\llbracket\text{pos tall}\rrbracket = \lambda x. \exists d [ \llbracket\text{tall}\rrbracket(d)(x) \land d \geq \text{norm}(\llbracket\text{tall}\rrbracket)]
\]
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.

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

\[(27) \quad \llbracket \text{very tall} \rrbracket^c = \lambda x. \exists d [\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket(d)(x) \land d \geq \text{norm}(\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket) \land \text{high}(d)]\]
Analysis
[+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 \textit{center} and \textit{beginning}

a. \([\textit{center}] = \lambda x\lambda y[y = \textit{center}(x)]\]
b. \([\textit{beginning}] = \lambda x\lambda y[y = \textit{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.

\[(29) \quad \lbrack center \rbrack^{d,C} = \{ \lambda x \lambda y [y = f(x)] : f_{\langle e,e \rangle} \approx_{d,C} true-center \} \]
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.

\[
\lambda x. \exists d \begin{cases} 
  d > \text{norm}(\lambda d'. [\text{center}]^{d'}) \land \textbf{high}(d) \land \text{CHOICE}\left(\left(\lambda d'. [\text{center}]^{d'}\right)(d)\right)([\text{of the Earth}])(x) 
\end{cases}
\]
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) $\llbracket \text{very idea of } p \rrbracket = \lambda x \left[ \text{idea}(x) \land \text{CONTENT}(x) = p \land \exists y \in \text{scale}_c(p)[y \geq x] \right]$
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)  
\[ [salesperson]^{d, C} = \lambda v \lambda e. y = salesperson(e) \]

- 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*.

\[
[\text{tall}] = \lambda d \lambda x [\text{tall}(x, d)]
\]

(36)  \[
[\text{POS}] = \lambda G_{<d,e>} \lambda x. \exists d [d \geq \text{norm}(G) \land G(d)(x)]
\]

(37)
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.
Acknowledgements

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References


