Towards a Model for Investigating Predicate-Intensifier Collocations.

Silvia Cacchiani
Post-doctoral student
Dipartimento di Anglistica, Università di Pisa
Via Santa Maria 67, I – 56126 Pisa (PI)
s.cacchiani@tiscalinet.it

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.[1] 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.[2]

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.[3]

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 *damn*); 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 *stunning(ly) beautiful*).

(c) *Speech act modification.* i. Intensifiers may contribute illocutionary force modification of all five speech acts, either *aggravation* (term from Merlini Barbaresi 1997), as in *"You bloody silly donkey"*, or *mitigation*, as in *"I would be very grateful to you if ... "*.[4] 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 speaker. Hence, collocations with emotional endpoints, slang included (e.g. *absolutely bloody crap*), also in headings, ads and web URLs
	Communicative situation/uses	commonest intensifier in spoken discourse also: in-group membership: *ab brill* (used among the youth)
	Speech act intensification	e.g., aggravation: "Pretty silly idea, *really absolutely crackers*" (related inner and mental state: disapproval, belief)

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.

References

Biber, D. 1988. *Variations across Speech and Writing. Cambridge*: Cambridge University Press.

Cacchiani, S. 2003. *English Predicate-Intensifier Collocations between Semantics and Pragmatics. PhD Thesis (unpublished manuscript).* University of Pisa: Pisa.

Klein, H. 1998. *Adverbs of Degree in Dutch and Related Languages.* Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Lorenz, G. 1999. *Adjective Intensification – Learner versus Native Speakers. A Corpus Study of Argumentative Writing.* Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Merlini Barbaresi, L. 1997. 'Modification of Speech acts. Aggravation and Mitigation', in *Proceedings of the 16th International Congress of Linguistics*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
van Os, C. 1989. *Aspekte der Intensivierung im Deutschen*. Tübingen: Narr.
Werlich, E. 1983. *A Text Grammar of English*. Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer.
WordNet 1.7.1. www.cogsci.princeton.edu/cgi_?bin/wenwn