Brainstorming on Rick Nouwen's "Vacuity and competition in models of intensification"

Scales, degrees and implicature:
Novel synergies between semantics and pragmatics

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May 27, 2021

Empirical take-home message from Nouwen's talk

- ◎ Unbleached intensifiers, e.g. *surprisingly, shockingly*
  - ⊕ Introduce a parallel evaluation that affects the inference of the contextual standard of comparison for A.

- ◎ Bleached intensifiers, e.g. *terribly, pretty, fairly*
  - ⊕ Conventionally linked to a boosting value
  - ⊕ The boosting value is connected to the content of the original unbleached version of the intensifier.

- ◎ (Remnant of) lexical content of the intensifier:
  - ⊕ Negative evaluation [-valence] → H-adverb / excess
    e.g. *terribly/ridiculously tall*
  - ⊕ Positive evaluation [+valence] → M-adverb / right degree
    e.g. *pretty/surprisingly tall*

    (see also the Goldilocks Principle of Evaluation in Nouwen, 2020)

Empirical take-home message from Nouwen's talk

- ◎ Unbleached intensifiers:

    (1)   Utterance: It is {surprisingly/disgustingly} warm.
          QUD: How warm is it?
          Assertion: It is warm.
          Backgrounded information: Speaker S evaluates 'It is
          warm.' as a surprising medium/disgusting high degree
          (of temperature)

- ◎ Bleached intensifiers:

    (2)   Utterance: It is {fairly/terribly} warm.
          Assertion: It is warm to a (remnant: right) medium/
          (remnant: excess) high degree (of temperature).

Bleached vs. unbleached as a continuum

(cf. Castroviejo and Gehrke, 2020)

❶ Fully bleached, conventionalized intensifiers, e.g. *very*, possibly also *pretty, fairly*
- ⊕ Degree modifiers, directly operating on the degree (instead of POS); form part of the assertion
- e.g. account of *pretty, fairly* in Solt and Wilson (to appear)

❷ Fully unbleached intensifiers, e.g. *surprisingly, shockingly*
- ⊕ Secondary evaluation of 'x is POS-A.' by the speaker

❸ In between-cases; e.g. Catalan *ben* '(lit.) well' [BEN]?
- ⊕ Secondary evaluation account in Castroviejo and Gehrke (2015)

Q When does an intensifier become a 'true' degree modifier?

Some ideas on grammaticalization

Grammaticalization path from unbleached to bleached

- ◎ Are evaluatives with 'weak' lexical content (e.g. *good, bad, pretty, ugly*) more prone to become fully bleached?
  - e.g. *very, fairly, pretty*: fully conventionalized
  - e.g. BEN: on its way (vs. French *bien*: further along)
    - (see discussion in Castroviejo and Gehrke, 2016)

- ◎ Are evaluatives which necessarily involve the speaker as an experiencer less likely to become conventionalized?
  - e.g. psych predicates *surprisingly, shockingly, disgustingly*

  Potential issue: *terribly* (bleached intensifier)
  - ⊕ Different morphology? (no *-ing*, no English V with root *terr-*)
  - ⊕ If it is possible to generalize the experiencer to 'anyone' it can get conventionalized?

Link to the PPI behavior of (some) intensifiers?

⊙ No polarity sensitivity: Non-vague degree modifiers

    (3)   The barrel is not completely full.

⊙ Strengthened readings: Bleached vague H-modifiers (litotes)
    or L-modifiers (NPIs)

    (4)   a.   The temperature is not {very / extremely} warm.
                                    $\sim$ rather cold
            b.   The towel is not (even) a bit wet.

⊙ Only echo / metalinguistic reading (litotes impossible)
    ⊕ Unbleached vague (evaluative) modifiers
    ⊕ Bleached M-modifiers

    (5)   a.   ?The temperature is not {surprisingly /
                 disgustingly / annoyingly} warm.
            b.   ?Carla is not fairly tall.

Some ideas on the PPI behavior of (some) intensifiers

(cf. Castroviejo and Gehrke, 2015, 2016, 2020)

- ◎ Fully unbleached ones are bad in entailment-cancelling contexts: Clash between assertion ('x is not POS-A') and evaluation, which requires POS-A to hold?

- ◎ Bleached ones: can get strengthened at the end of the scale (L/H-modifiers) but not when they are M-modifiers ... why?

- ◎ In-between ones: not clear
    - ⊕ Might be bad under negation, but maybe better in other contexts (conditionals, modality)?
    - ⊕ Inherit the PPI behavior of the evaluatives they are derived from? (cf. Nilsen, 2004; Ernst, 2009; Liu, 2012, 2014)
    - e.g. BEN: possibly also different with absolute vs. relative As ...

- ◎ Other possible paths to explore:
    - ⊕ Ban on non-convex meaning (cf. Solt and Waldon, 2019, on *about* + numeral)
    - ⊕ Competition with unmodified version and/or other modifiers (cf. Solt and Wilson, to appear)

- Q What are the competitors?

Possible refinements of Nouwen's empirical observations

◉ Nouwen provides only examples with relative adjectives

(ADV *tall, wide, warm*)

⊕ The lexical content of the intensifier "affects the inference of the contextual standard of comparison for the adjective"

→ M- vs. H-adverbs, depending on positive vs. negative valence

◉ Effect on absolute adjectives could be different; some ideas:

⊕ True degree modifiers might have input requirements and might actually be best with relative adjectives?

→ Relativization with absolute adjectives; e.g. *very* (cf. Kennedy and McNally, 2005)

◉ Unbleached intensifiers operate on POS-A, so the standard should not be affected.

⊕ M-adverbs with relative As? (with -valence ADVs: + excess)

⊕ With absolute As (with maximum or minimum standards) it cannot be an M-adverb ... What is it then?

Some examples with unbleached ADVs

(6)   *x* is surprisingly tall.   +valence ADV / rel. A

  → S expected *x* to be less tall.

  Q Does that mean that the standard for tallness is the same as with '*x* is tall'? Or is it higher? (it is higher than expected ...)

(7)   *x* is disgustingly tall.   -valence ADV / rel. A

  → S asserts that *x* is POS-tall and is disgusted by that height degree.

  Q Does that necessarily mean that the standard for tallness is now higher? Or isn't it rather the same as with '*x* is tall'?

  Q Does the speaker even assert that *x* is POS-tall? (cf. Nouwen, 2020)

(8)   The cup is {surprisingly/disgustingly} full.   abs. A

  ⊕ Our intuition: reached the maximum of full-ness in both cases, just a different evaluation

  ⊕ Excess should not entail exceeding the standard ...

More empirical work on the role of A is needed.

Some examples: Catalan BEN

An unbleached modifier of genuine adjectives, both relative and absolute.

- ◉ Being +valence, the Goldilocks Principle would predict it to express a middle-zone degree.

  (9) ☺ La Carla és ben alta.   ∼ quite/pretty tall
           the Carla is BEN tall
       ☹ L'estadi   es(tà) ben ple.   ∼ completely full
           the stadium is   BEN full

  → Goodness seems to care more about scale structure than valence?

- ◉ When it combines with a -valence A (or any lower-bound A), it necessary expresses excess:

  (10) a. En Pere és ben idiota.   ∼ quite/pretty idiotic
            the Peter is BEN idiotic
        b. La branca està ben torta.   ∼ quite/pretty bent
            the branch is BEN bent

  → The valence of A may also plays a role ...

A last thought: Extreme vs. excess degrees

- ◉ Morzycki (2012) talks about a perspective scale. In his analysis, extreme degrees (of extreme degree adjectives, *gigantic*) are located above the contextually-relevant scale (speedometer metaphor).

- ◉ Nouwen (2020) talks about -valence ADVs as describing excess. "x has an excess of P whenever x has P to at least some degree such that being P to that degree makes the goal unobtainable."

- ◉ Both notions are evaluative / subjective descriptions of possibly the same degree on the scale?

    (11)   It is {extremely / terribly} warm.

- ◉ Beyond valence and/or utterance cost (Bennett and Goodman, 2018), could intensity of emotion also be a predictor of intensifier strength? $\rightarrow$ +valence and high/extreme (not excess) degree compatible.

    (12)   It is {decently / stunningly} warm.

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Thanks!

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