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The roles of intensification in spoken discourse

Much of the recent literature on 'upscaling' degree modifiers has been influenced by Quirk et al's (1985) *A Comprehensive Grammar of English*. Quirk et al's view of intensification was predominantly concerned with the syntactic and semantic restrictions that the modified (usually lexical) item placed on its immediate modifying neighbour. Where they commented on the meaning of these combinations, they focussed solely on the ideational.

The focus on the impact of amplifiers on their immediate environments has continued with many corpus linguistic studies. Whilst authors such as Partington (1998, 2004) and Kennedy (2002, 2003) have concerned themselves with amplifiers more in terms of collocation, semantic prosody and semantic preference, the relative restriction of the amplifier's position in relation to the item it is modifying has meant this area has leant itself well to concordancing. The cumulative effect of this research has been to reinforce a view of intensification based largely on a model from written discourse.

This paper uses data from a corpus of spoken British English (the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English) and attempts to move away from looking at the local effects of degree modifiers to consider how they contribute to the flow of face-to-face conversation. Studying amplifiers, both in general and in spoken discourse in particular, poses a number of problems for the corpus linguist. First, the items under investigation do not constitute a closed class, or as Bolinger (1972: 23) notes, '... virtually any adverb modifying an adjective tends to have or to develop an intensifying meaning.' Second, in conversation intensification often appears 'messy' as modifying and modified elements are separated across turn boundaries and interpersonal meanings are negotiated between speakers.

In '... searching for a method ... to answer questions of a discorsal nature.' (Hunston, 2010: 167) this paper combines frequency lists and plot analyses to show that amplifiers are not distributed evenly or randomly across texts, rather they tend to cluster. Initial scrutiny of these clusters using both concordance lines and qualitative close textual analysis reveals the importance of amplifiers in observation-comment sections of spoken discourse and thus their role in '... creating cultural solidarity between speakers and their listeners.' (McCarthy 1998: 142).

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