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It's well weird

Degree modifiers of adjectives revisited: the nineties¹

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1. Introduction

In a recent publication,² I investigated a set of degree modifiers and the adjectives they combine with in spoken British English, e.g. *absolutely marvellous*, *very nice*, *rather small*, *a bit funny*. My main focus was on semantic and intonational features, but I also paid attention to their use in terms of frequency and collocability in authentic speech. The material that I used was the London-Lund Corpus (henceforth LLC).³ As is well known, LLC is getting old. Most of the texts are from the sixties and seventies, and it would therefore be interesting to compare the results from this study with more recent material.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate degree modifiers and their adjectives in contemporary speech. First, I compare the use of degree modifiers of adjectives in LLC with their use in the Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language (henceforth COLT).⁴ The two corpora are of the same size, i.e. half a million words. However, they differ as to time of recording and speakers. The texts in COLT are all from 1993 and most of the speakers are teenagers, while the LLC texts are over twenty years old, and the speakers are adults. I then analyze the conceptual matching of the modifier–adjective combinations across the corpora. The basic assumption is that the differences with respect to time and speakers have implications for the use of degree modifiers, and we may thus be able to identify changes in their use both in terms of frequency and combinatorial patterning. The following degree modifiers are examined:

<i>a bit</i>	<i>enough</i>	<i>most</i>	<i>terribly</i>
<i>a little</i>	<i>entirely</i>	<i>perfectly</i>	<i>totally</i>
<i>absolutely</i>	<i>extremely</i>	<i>pretty</i>	<i>utterly</i>
<i>almost</i>	<i>fairly</i>	<i>quite</i>	<i>well</i>
<i>awfully</i>	<i>frightfully</i>	<i>rather</i>	<i>very</i>
<i>completely</i>	<i>highly</i>	<i>slightly</i>	
<i>dead</i>	<i>jolly</i>	<i>somewhat</i>	

Clearly, these modifiers display stylistic differences. For instance, *entirely*, *utterly*, *highly*, *somewhat*, *almost* are rather formal. *Very*, on the other hand, is a neutral, common core item, and *awfully*, *pretty*, *a bit*, *terribly* all have an informal ring to them. It seems likely to assume that teenagers would use the more informal modifiers to a greater extent than educated adults some twenty years ago. Teenagers may also be likely to make more use of strongly reinforcing adjectives, since teenagers tend to exaggerate rather than modulate.⁵ The more specific aims and hypotheses will subsequently be stated, but first the theoretical framework that the categorization of the modifiers is based on has to be presented.

2. The cognitive approach

My theoretical approach to the analysis of degree modifiers and their adjectives is cognitive. Inspired by scholars such as Lakoff (1987), Langacker (1987), Taylor (1992, 1995), Cruse (1995) and Cruse & Togia (1996), I assume that meanings of linguistic expressions arise by the activation of conceptual patterns in the cognitive system. Lexical items map onto certain concepts in a cognitive network. In each case it is the linguistic and pragmatic contexts that evoke the relevant conceptual pattern and

determine the interpretation.

In my earlier publication (Paradis 1997:48-51, 64-66), I argue that the concepts are built up by domains that are of two kinds. There is a content domain and a schematic domain (or mode of construal). Content domains involve propositional meaning and mirror our perception of the world, while the schematic domain imposes a specific configurative frame on the content. Gradability belongs in the schematic domain. The interpretation of degree modifiers is dominated by the schematic domain, and the content domain is backgrounded. This characterization accounts for their traditional classification as function words rather than content words. Adjectives, on the other hand, are mainly content words. Their content domain is in the foreground, but they are also configurated according to schematic domains, which are in the background.

Schematically degree modifiers map onto two different modes of construal, one of totality (an ‘either-or’ conception), e.g. *completely* and *almost*, and one of scalarity (a ‘more-or-less’ conception), e.g. *very* and *fairly*. This dichotomy is true of adjectives too. Some gradable adjectives are associated with a definite boundary, or totality, e.g. *identical*, *true* and *dead*, while others are unbounded and conceptualized according to a scale, *long*, *good*, *fast* and *interesting*. There is a subcategory of adjectives that belongs to the totality adjectives, even though they are conceptualized slightly differently. They are the extreme adjectives, e.g. *brilliant*, *magnificent*, *disastrous* and *minute*, which are conceptualized according to a scale, but on that scale they represent the extreme point. For this reason they are conflated with the bounded limit adjectives.

Based on the totality/scalarity configurative modes of conceptualization, degree modifiers fall into two main categories, totality modifiers and scalar modifiers. As Table 1 shows, they also form five paradigms based on their reinforcing and attenuating functions (maximizers, boosters and approximators, moderators, diminishers respectively).

Table 1. Totality modifiers and scalar modifiers combined with levels of degree.

DEGREE	TOTALITY MODIFIERS	SCALAR MODIFIERS
REINFORCERS	maximizer <i>completely (full)</i>	booster <i>very (tired)</i>
ATTENUATORS	approximator <i>almost (full)</i>	moderator <i>quite (tired)</i>
		diminisher <i>a bit (tired)</i>

Maximizers and approximators are both associated with totality and combine with adjectives, which are associated with a boundary. Maximizers have a reinforcing function, while approximators are attenuators. Approximators indicate that the denoted adjective falls short of the expected limit.

Boosters, moderators and diminishers are scalar modifiers, conceptualized against a mode of ‘more-or-less’, and they modify an unbounded gradable property of the adjective they apply to. Boosters reinforce the gradable property denoted by the adjective. Moderators approximate an average range on a scale. They are classified as attenuators with a hedging function (Paradis 1997: 69). Diminishers indicate the lowest possible degree of a certain property and a bit up from that point. Thus, the function of diminishers is not only to indicate a certain degree of a scalar adjectival property but also to add a boundary onto the zero-oriented end of the scale. In the case of *tired* we infer a lowest degree of tiredness and a bit up from there. Consider Figure 1.

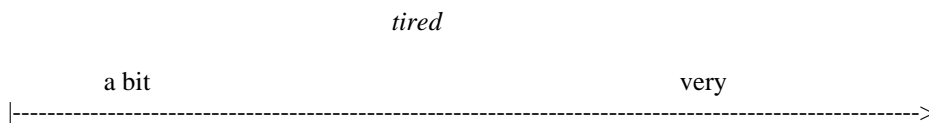


Figure 1. The scale of tiredness .

Diminishers typically combine with adjectives which have a negative content, e.g. *tired*, *expensive*, *difficult*. Their function is to attenuate this non-desired negative property of the adjective.

In combination with neutral adjectives, such as *long*, *short*, *small*, diminishers conjure up an interpretation of non-desired excess. The neutral adjectives have no internal end-point. The end-point is inferred by the diminisher, and they get an interpretation of excess by implication, e.g. *That skirt is a bit short (to wear at work)*, meaning ‘a bit too short’.

Adjectives which are unambiguously positive are strange with diminishers, e.g. *?a bit good*. This is only natural since it is less likely for positive adjectives like *good* than for neutral adjectives like *long* to express non-desired excess.⁶ The degree modifiers in their various categories are given in Table 2, which also serves to sum up the discussion in this section.

Table 2. The five paradigms of degree modifier

TOTALITY MODIFIERS		SCALAR MODIFIERS		
Maximizer	Approximator	Booster	Moderator	Diminisher
<i>absolutely</i>	<i>almost</i>	<i>awfully</i>	<i>fairly</i>	<i>a bit</i>
<i>completely</i>		<i>dead</i>	<i>pretty</i>	<i>a little</i>
<i>dead</i>		<i>enough</i>	<i>quite</i>	<i>slightly</i>
<i>entirely</i>		<i>extremely</i>	<i>rather</i>	<i>somewhat</i>
<i>perfectly</i>		<i>frightfully</i>		
<i>quite</i>		<i>highly</i>		
<i>totally</i>		<i>jolly</i>		
<i>utterly</i>		<i>most</i>		
		<i>terribly</i>		
		<i>very</i>		
		<i>well</i>		

It should be noted that there are two readings of both *quite* and *dead*, one of totality, e.g. *quite impossible* (maximizer), *dead right* (maximizer) and one of scalarity, e.g. *quite big* (moderator), *dead easy* (booster).

3. Material and method

The material used in this paper is mainly based on LLC and COLT. LLC and COLT differ with respect to basically three variables. Firstly, there is a time difference of some twenty years. Secondly, COLT mainly consists of spontaneous conversation, while LLC consists of both dialogue and monologue, both spontaneous and prepared. The texts in COLT are generally much more informal than the ones in LLC. Finally, the speakers in COLT are mainly teenagers and in LLC they are all adults. In order to give a more varied picture of the use of these degree modifiers in the nineties, the observations in COLT have been backed up with material from the spoken part of the British National Corpus (henceforth BNC), which is also a new, but different, corpus.

BNC is a very large corpus, consisting of 100 million words of British English from the nineties. There are 90 million words of written English and 10 million words of spoken. It is the spoken part only that has been used in the present study. The spoken part of BNC consists of 40% monologue and 60% dialogue. Roughly half of the spoken part of BNC consists of spontaneous conversational English. The rest consists of broadcast interviews, lectures, classroom interaction, business meetings, sales demonstrations, political speeches, council meetings, news broadcasts, legal proceedings and so on. It should be noted that COLT is part of the spoken BNC. In this paper the COLT texts have been excluded from the calculations in BNC, which means that the spoken part of BNC used here consists of 9.5 million words only. For my investigations, I have used the COLT corpus available on the WWW (<http://www.hd.uib.no/colt>).

BNC has been used as back-up evidence in the comparison between LLC and COLT, firstly, because BNC is a much larger corpus and the figures may therefore be more representative of the language of the nineties. Secondly, like COLT it is from the nineties and can therefore be used as evidence of possible language change. Thirdly, it was demographically sampled. It covers all social groups in all parts of the United Kingdom, and there are speakers of all ages. Finally, like LLC, BNC consists of both dialogue and monologue, both spontaneous and prepared speech. For the sake of comparison, the selection of degree modifiers was primarily based on the items investigated in Paradis (1997:33). This selection comprised all the modifiers which were defined as degree modifiers by a semantic-prosodic equivalence criterion, and which occurred more than ten times in combination with adjectives in the positive in LLC. Two additional modifiers were found in COLT and included in the present study. All modifiers have been automatically retrieved from LLC and COLT, and all of them have also been examined manually. The modifiers in BNC have also been automatically retrieved, but only the most obviously multifunctional items have been examined manually. They are *most*, which would otherwise include a lot of examples of the quantifier *most*, such as ‘most British women’, *well*, which could be *well*, the pragmatic marker coincidentally occurring in front of an adjective, and *dead* and *quite* in order to distinguish between the maximizing and the boosting/moderating readings.

4. Aims and hypotheses

This section specifies the aims of the investigation and the hypotheses associated with them:

Aim 1

The first aim is to investigate whether degree modifiers are used to the same extent by the young people in COLT as by the adults in LLC.

Hypothesis 1

The total number of degree modifiers in the two corpora is probably roughly the same, but there are most likely differences in the distribution of the individual degree modifiers.

Aim 2

The second aim is to investigate whether the degree modifiers are of the same configurative type in terms of boundedness/unboundedness.

Hypothesis 2

There are no principled differences in the types of combinatorial patterning of degree modifiers of adjectives. The degree modifiers belong to the same paradigms as in LLC.

5. Distribution of degree modifiers in three corpora

Table 3 shows the occurrences of the degree modifiers in all three corpora. The first column shows the modifiers examined, and the following three columns show the absolute frequencies of occurrence of degree modifiers in LLC, COLT and BNC (spoken). For ease of comparison, the figures are normalized to 1 million words.⁸ The last column shows the frequency of occurrence for the degree modifiers in COLT as a percentage of the combined number of occurrences in both COLT and LLC.

Table 3. The degree modifiers and their frequencies in LLC, COLT and BNC (spoken), and the correlation between COLT and LLC.

Modifier	LLC x 2	COLT x 2	BNC/9.5	%
<i>entirely</i>	46	0	15	0
<i>utterly</i>	20	0	2	0
<i>frightfully</i>	22	0	1	0
<i>dead</i> (maximizer)	6	0	2	0
<i>somewhat</i>	22	0	5	0
<i>terribly</i>	178	2	16	1
<i>most</i>	94	2	13	2
<i>rather</i>	520	8	76	2
<i>fairly</i>	168	6	70	3
<i>awfully</i>	50	2	6	4
<i>highly</i>	30	2	13	4
<i>quite</i> (maximizer)	322	26	96	7
<i>perfectly</i>	86	12	22	12
<i>almost</i>	58	8	13	12
<i>very</i>	2928	532	1241	15
<i>a little</i>	52	10	8	16
<i>extremely</i>	118	24	34	17
<i>jolly</i>	50	12	7	19
<i>absolutely</i>	242	64	69	21
<i>slightly</i>	66	20	23	23
<i>completely</i>	112	58	29	33
<i>totally</i>	68	38	35	36
<i>quite</i> (moderator)	522	382	365	42
<i>pretty</i>	172	156	73	48
<i>a bit</i>	244	282	132	54
<i>well</i>	0	62	2	100
<i>enough</i>	0	12	0	100
<i>dead</i> (booster)	0	6	10	100
TOTAL	6196	1741*	2378	22

* See note ⁹

Teenagers of the nineties in London use the degree modifiers found to be most frequent in LLC to a much lesser extent. In fact, only 22% of the total number of degree modifiers in the two corpora occur in COLT. In order to find out whether these degree modifiers are used less frequently in the nineties in general, the same modifiers were extracted from the spoken part of BNC. 28% of the degree modifiers in BNC and LLC together occur in BNC. This figure should be compared to 22% for COLT in COLT and LLC together

There are several modifiers that do not occur at all or very rarely in COLT, e.g. *entirely*, *utterly*, *frightfully*, *dead* (maximizer), *somewhat*, *terribly*, *most*, *rather*, *fairly*, *awfully*, *highly* and *quite* (maximizer). The reason for this is presumably that most of them are used in formal style, e.g. *entirely*, *highly*, *most*, *utterly*, while others are somewhat old-fashioned and would be stylistically inappropriate in spontaneous conversation among young people, e.g. *frightfully*, *awfully*. The figures of occurrence in COLT are corroborated by the figures in BNC. The tendencies are the same, but less pronounced in BNC. *Pretty* is used almost to the same extent in LLC and COLT. Just one modifier occurs more often in COLT than in LLC and that is *a bit*. However the distribution across the two corpora is fairly even. In the case of both *pretty* and *a bit*, BNC differs extensively from both LLC and COLT. *Pretty* is used to a much lesser extent in BNC. 73 occurrences were found as compared to 172 in LLC and 156 in COLT. The distribution of *a bit* is similar to that of *pretty*. 132 occurrences were found as compared to 244 in LLC and 282 in COLT. Unfortunately, I have no explanation for this.

There are, however, two new modifiers in COLT. They are *enough* in combinations such as *enough old*, *enough funny*, *enough shitted up*, and *well* in combinations such as *well nice*, *well funny*, *well weird*, *well tacky*.¹⁰ *Well* as a degree modifier of adjectives is not found in LLC. A few combinations such as *well qualified*, *well organized*, *well wrapped up*, were found in LLC. *Well* is not a degree modifier in these phrases, but rather an evaluative adverb of manner. Both *well* as an adverb of manner and as a degree modifier have one thing in common in that both of them have scalar properties. My definition of a degree modifier is based on a semantic–prosodic criterion. In Paradis (1997:20), the degree modifiers were tested in a frame where they were assigned contrastive focus. Consider examples (1) to (3):

- (1) A: did you say he was V^{ERY} happy
B: no I said he was FA^{IR}ly happy
- (2) A: did you say he was WE^{LL} nice
B: no I said he was QU^{ITE} nice
- (3) A: did you say he was WE^{LL} organized
B: no I said he was BA^Dly organized

When the nuclear tone goes on the modifier, the degree reading is clearly drawn out and a potential opposite is easily conceived. This works for both *very* and *well* in (1) and (2) respectively. Both of them have clear degree readings and *fairly* and *quite* can be used as contrasting degree modifiers. *Well* in (3), however, is different in that there is no predominant degree function and the contrasting modifier *badly* is unambiguously a specification of manner. The fuzzy borders between manner and degree are particularly obvious in certain other items in combination with verbs, e.g. ‘The road bends *slightly*’.¹¹ Similarly, the combining items *organized*, as well as *qualified* and *wrapped up*, are in the grey zone between verb and adjective.

Another way of testing degree modifier status is by adding another degree modifier, since degree modifiers cannot co-occur in the modification of scalar adjectives. It is, for instance, not possible to say **very well nice*, **fairly very good* or **quite extremely nice*.¹² The reason for this is that both the modifiers modify the same adjective and they do so at the same time. Combinations such as *very well qualified* and *very well organized* are acceptable, since *very* modifies *well* and *well* modifies *organized*. *Well tacky*, *well weird*, *well old* are thus all straightforward degree modifiers of the scalar type.

Enough, in expressions such as *enough funny*, *enough old*, *enough shitted up*, however, does not yet fit as neatly into the category of degree modifier as *well* does, but the effect is something like that of a degree modifier. Consider examples (4) and (5):

- (4) It's *enough funny* man I'm telling ya [B135602]
- (5) You're the sly one <unclear> that one Agi. Seeing that it's your brother's birthday. You're *enough*

bad. I don't mind him coming.

[B139506]

Informal investigations among adult speakers of British English show that it is difficult to specify the function of *enough*. The reason is probably that it is so new that it is still in an experimental phase, and it does not convey a clear degree reading. One sign of this is that it is difficult to evaluate its potential in contrastive contexts, and it is hard to find an opposite of *enough*. For instance, it is not clear whether it can be claimed that 'He's FAIRly old' is a potential opposite of 'He's ENOUGH old'. In other words, *enough* does not respond as readily to the semantic-prosodic criterion as *well* and the other degree modifiers do. In spite of this I would like to include *enough* as a potential booster in its infancy. Only time will tell whether it will fall out of fashion or develop into a fully-fledged booster.

Thus, the hypothesis concerning the frequency of use of degree modifiers by teenagers has been proved wrong. The teenagers used degree modifiers much less often than the adults in LLC. There may be several explanations for this. One reason may be that teenagers use other means for reinforcement and attenuation. They may use other words, such as swear words, e.g. *fucking*, *bloody*, or emphasize, such as *real*, *really*, or hedges, such as *sort of* and *kind of*. Another reason may be that they use different types of adjectives that need no modification, or indeed they might use fewer adjectives, i.e. they employ different discourse strategies than the adults in LLC. As already stated, this study rests on the assumption that adjectives are employed to the same extent, which of course may be erroneous. These are all issues that await further research.

6. Conceptual constraints

The second aim of this study was to examine the combinations of degree modifiers and their adjectives in terms of totality/scalarity, boundedness/unboundedness. In accordance with the second hypothesis, the same conceptual types of modifier–adjective combinations were found in COLT as in LLC. The only exception to this was that the scalar readings of *dead* and *quite* seem to be favoured by the teenagers in COLT (and in fact in the BNC texts too) at the expense of the totality reading.

In LLC, *dead* is only used as a maximizer (6 occurrences), *dead right* and *dead against*, while in COLT it is only used as a booster (6 occurrences), *dead easy*, *dead funny*, and in BNC the booster interpretation dominates (10 boosters and 2 maximizers). Due to the fact that there are very few examples in LLC and COLT makes it difficult to arrive at any definite conclusions about it.

A similar loss of boundary seems to be true of *quite*. There is a clear difference in the use of *quite* in the spoken material. There seems to be a decline in the use of the maximizer *quite*, as in *quite impossible*, *quite certain*, *quite outstanding*. In LLC, there are 322 occurrences of maximizer *quite* as compared to 26 in COLT and 96 in BNC. The reason for the very low figure in COLT may be that it consists of spontaneous conversation only, and that the maximizer use may be more common in registers such as political speech, where it is important for the speaker to appear confident and balanced. Yet, when we compare LLC with BNC, we can still see a striking decline in its use.

The moderator *quite*, on the other hand, is more evenly used across the three corpora, 522 in LLC, 382 in COLT and 365 in BNC. Of course, this difference in the occurrence of the two readings of *quite*, may be due to the compositions of the corpora examined, but it may also be a sign of direction of change. Diachronically, there appears to be an on-going change in the use of *quite*. *Quite* comes from the Romance adjective *quit*, which was introduced into Middle English at an early period. In those days *quit* meant 'freed', 'released'. Chaucer used the form *quytly*, in which the notion of release was still present. But, during this period, it was also used in the sense 'entirely', i.e. the bounded/totally interpretation of *quite*. From the beginning of the 18th century there were two interpretations of *quite*, one of 'entirely' and another with the modal meaning of 'really'. From 'really' a weakened sense of 'to a moderate degree' developed, i.e. the unbounded/scalar moderator *quite*. This development shows that the limit feature has become obliterated.

The same type of development might in fact be attributed to the development of *enough* into a potential booster. In its more common function as a telic modifier, it is associated with a definite boundary often implied by the context, e.g. *good enough* (for something), *old enough* (for something). In its capacity of booster, this boundary is erased in favour of a scalar unbounded interpretation as in, e.g. *enough old*, *enough funny*.

In the context of gradability, the eradication of boundaries seems to be important in the development of degree modifiers from one type to the other. This seems to be the most natural path, since it is easier to erase boundaries than to build them up. Schematically, adjectives too are conceptualized as bounded or unbounded. If the gradable property of an adjective is modulated into another type, the shift seems to take the same direction as for degree modifiers. For instance, the adjective *true* is a limit adjective, which combines naturally with totality modifiers, e.g. *absolutely true*, *quite true*, *perfectly true*, but it can easily be modulated into a scalar reading, e.g. *very true*. It is less

common for adjectives to shift their mode of construal in the reverse direction, i.e. from a scalar to a totality reading (Paradis 1997:59-61). It is interesting to speculate on whether this is a general tendency in human language. It would, however, take us far beyond the scope of the present paper.

A couple of other differences in the modifier–adjective combinations across the two corpora were also found. In COLT, there were some occurrences of *a bit* in combination with positive scalar adjectives, such as in example (7) and (8):

- (7) yeah Carrie <name> went and she, as she left he patted her on the bum, which is *a bit friendly*,
and I said to Jess well look, put it this way, cos she's really, she flirts a lot
[B142604]
- (8) Supernintendo's *a bit all right* though [B138501]

In both these examples a negative interpretation is inferred by the context. In (7) *a bit* expresses potentially non-desired excess. *A bit friendly* here means ‘a bit too friendly under the circumstances’. In (8) the positiveness of *all right* is limited by *though*, and the overall feeling is that Supernintendo is not altogether satisfactory. The contextual modulation governs the processing of diminishers with basically positive adjectives, but there is still something strange about them. Again, only time will tell whether these are just temporary transgressions of the predominant combinatorial pattern or a shift in the make-up of the modifier.

One final observation is that it is possible for the teenagers in COLT to combine degree modifiers with heads that are, or used to be, nouns. Consider examples (9) - (11):

- (9) Sorry about stopping the tape but it keeps on cutting out cos your microphone is *absolutely shit*
[B134202]
- (10) Oh God! Rubbish! *Totally rubbish!* You can't even sing. You might sort of like bark.
[B135205]
- (11) [My] drawing's *enough crap* cos I was buzzed when I was doing that [B139506]

Other examples are: *absolutely crap*, *absolutely ace*, *absolutely bollocks*, *quite crap*, *quite rubbish*, *pretty crap*, *a bit shit*, *a bit crap*. They behave like adjectives in that they combine with degree modifiers of the adverb type in the same way as adjectives do. Semantically, they seem to have lost their nominal features of representing entities, and they resemble adjectives as being property concepts.¹³ Jespersen (1968: 75) points out that:

on the whole substantives are more special than adjectives, in the parlance of logicians, the extension of substantive is less, and its intension is greater than that of an adjective. The adjective indicates and singles out one quality, one distinguishing mark, but each substantive suggests, to whoever understands it, many distinguishing features by which he recognizes the person or the thing in question.

The subdivision of nouns and adjectives has to do with how the properties are conceptualized. Nouns designate complex entities or 'kinds of things', while adjectives designate properties. As Jespersen points out nouns tend to involve a large number of properties, whereas adjectives normally designate one property. As nouns, *crap*, *shit* and *rubbish* all focus on one single feature. The mapping–on to an adjectival conceptualization is natural.¹⁴ *Absolutely crap* and *absolutely crappy* are interpreted in much the same way.

The conceptualization of the above properties as nouns or as adjectives reflects very subtle differences in meaning. A slight difference in the interpretation may be discerned if the degree adverb is replaced by a degree adjective, such as in *totally rubbish* compared with *total rubbish* or *absolutely crap* with *absolute crap*. When the modifier is an adverb, the descriptive adjectival interpretation of *rubbish* ('rubbishy') and *crap* ('crappy') is dominant, but when the modifier is an adjective, the nominal entity interpretation takes over.

Interestingly, in the light of the categorization of adjectives into scalar, limit and extreme adjectives, the nouns (*crap*, *rubbish*, *ace*, *bollocks*, etc) can be said to express extreme meanings, in that they are, as it were, figurative expressions for the worst/best possible we can imagine. They should then prefer the company of totality modifiers (maximizers), but they were found with both totality modifiers (*absolutely*, *totally*) and with scalar modifiers (*pretty*, *a bit*). This wavering between the two types of conceptualization is true of adjectives too. There are adjectives which are indeterminate between an

extreme interpretation and an unbounded scalar interpretation. They, too, combine with both maximizers, and scalar modifiers, e.g. *absolutely charming*, *very charming*, *absolutely disgraceful*, *rather disgraceful*, *absolutely crappy*, *rather crappy*.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate whether teenagers in London in the nineties use degree modifiers to the same extent as adults did some twenty years ago. The hypothesis was that they do in terms of frequency, but maybe not in terms of the frequencies for the individual modifiers included in the test.

This hypothesis turned out to be largely wrong. There are far fewer degree modifiers in COLT than in LLC. Only 22% of all the modifiers taken together (COLT + LLC) were in COLT. What then are the reasons for this striking difference? Apart from the fact that the corpora represent differences of speaker age, time of recording, registers, etc, the teenagers may find modification of adjectives superfluous. Either they do not specify the degree of the adjectives, or the use different strategies for this than adults do. Alternatively, adjectives may not be used to the same extent by young people, which will affect the occurrence of modifiers indirectly. In order to account for the possible shortcomings in COLT in terms of the range of text types, BNC was used for comparison. Interestingly, it appears that the overall tendency in COLT is true of the spoken texts in BNC too. Only 28% of the degree modifiers in BNC and LLC together occur in BNC.

There are also differences in the use of the individual modifiers. Some of them occur very rarely, or not at all, in COLT, e.g. *entirely*, *utterly*, *frightfully*, *somewhat*, *terribly*, *most*, *rather*, *fairly*, *highly*, the maximizer *dead* and the maximizer *quite*. The main reason for this is probably that most of them are stylistically inappropriate in very informal spontaneous conversation among teenagers, e.g. *entirely*, *utterly*, *most* and *highly*, while others may have become obsolete, e.g. *awfully* and *frightfully*. The figures of occurrence in COLT are corroborated by the figures in BNC, but again not in such a pronounced way. Two modifiers are used to roughly the same extent in LLC and COLT. They are *pretty* and *a bit*. Only one modifier occurs more often in COLT than in LLC and that is *a bit*, even though the difference is very slight¹⁵

Two new modifiers were found in COLT, *well* and *enough*. Only *well* was found in BNC too. *Well* is a proper degree modifier of adjectives. It applies naturally to the semantic-prosodic criterion for degree modifiers. *Enough*, on the other hand, combines with adjectives in such a way that a degree interpretation is likely, but not unambiguous. *Enough* as a booster may still be in a state of development. It is difficult to get a grasp of its interpretation, and it does not naturally fit into the semantic-prosodic testing-frame used for degree modifiers. Only time will tell whether *enough* in this capacity is just a temporary whim or whether it will develop into a clear-cut member of the booster paradigm.

The second aim was to examine the modifier-adjective combinations with respect to the semantic features that are crucial for a harmonious relationship between them. The hypothesis that the totality modifiers combine with bounded adjectives and scalar modifiers with unbounded adjectives in the same way in COLT as in LLC was proved right. However, two of the modifiers, *dead* and *quite*, seem to have become strengthened in their use as scalar modifiers. This is probably a sign of a shift which involves the eradication of boundaries in favour of an unbounded mode of construal.

This line of development also applies to *enough* as a booster. The most common use of *enough* is as a telic degree modifier, e.g. *good enough*, *long enough*. Obviously, *enough* as a telic modifier is conceptualized against a definite boundary, which has been reached. As a scalar degree modifier the boundary is obliterated in favour of an unbounded conceptualization. Again, the direction of the development is from totality to scalarity, since it is easier to erase than to erect boundaries.

Finally, the degree modifiers in COLT combine with heads that look like nouns but are rather interpreted as adjectives. Several occurrences of such combinations were found, e.g. *absolutely crap*, *absolutely ace*, *totally rubbish*, *a bit shit*, *pretty crap*. The conceptual similarities between nouns like these and adjectives make them easily susceptible to modulation. The centrality of meaning has demonstrated its power, and grammar has to acknowledge its defeat in this battle.

Notes

¹ Thanks to Olof Ekedahl, Jean Hudson, Jan Svartvik and Beatrice Warren for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Additional thanks to Olof Ekedahl for writing the program that made the automatic retrieval of the figures from BNC possible.

² Paradis 1997.

³ For a description of the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken British English, see Greenbaum & Svartvik (1990).

⁴ For a description of the Bergen Corpus of London Teenage language (COLT), see Haslerud & Stenström (1995) and <http://www.hd.uib.no/colt/>.

⁵ The comparison of frequency is based on an implicit, and possibly incorrect, assumption that adjectives are used to the same extent in the two corpora. Due to the lack of a tagged version of LLC, it is difficult to investigate this.

⁶ The interpretation of diminisher-adjective combinations is very complicated. It will not be discussed in detail here. Not only are there combinatorial constraints and preferences of the type described, but there are also significant possibilities for contextual modulation and readiness for understatements. Moreover, the interpretation of them is also very sensitive to intonation (Paradis 1997:121).

⁷ For more information on BNC, see Crowdy (1995) and <http://info.ox.ac.uk/bnc/>.

⁸ Henceforth, when I discuss the occurrences of the various degree modifiers in the corpora, I will use the normalized figures.

⁹ 15 occurrences of *quite* which I could not disambiguate with respect to their function as maximizer and moderator in COLT are only included in the total. I encountered the same difficulty in BNC, but since these figures are used for rough comparison only, I just categorized the occurrences of *quite* in the most relevant way. The occurrences of *quite* in LLC were easier to analyze, since the texts are marked for intonation.

¹⁰ The actual adjectives that collocate with *enough* and *well* in COLT are the following: (Where there is more than one occurrence the number is given in parentheses.)

Enough: old (2), finny, shitted up, quiet, bad.

Well: nice (6), pleased (5), funny (4), drunk (2), shagged, pissed off, wicked, hard, odd, fucked off, wound up, weird, stressed, tacky, gone, early, arsed, whippy.

¹¹ In this context it should be pointed out that there are other degree modifiers, which diachronically have undergone a shift from manner adverbials to degree modifiers, e.g. *awfully, terribly, frightfully* (Peters 1993: 282; Traugott 1995: 44).

¹² It is possible to say *almost completely full*, since *almost* does not modify *full*. *Almost* modifies *completely*. Subordination of scalar degree modifiers in this way is not possible.

¹³ There are many occurrences in the corpus where they also occur in attributive position, which is additional evidence of their affiliation to the category of adjectives. Consider examples (12)–(15):

(12)	what a <i>shit lighter</i>	[B133901]
(13)	it's a <i>crap walkman</i>	[B132902]
(14)	it was a really <i>bollocks match</i>	[B141804]
(15)	if you skimp on it you get a <i>rubbish mark</i>	[B141906]

¹⁴ In Jespersen's terms, adjectivization of nouns means a decrease in intension. For more extensive discussions of 'adjectivhood', see Dixon (1982), Wierzbicka (1986), Thompson (1988), Wetzler (1996).

¹⁵ In the case of *a bit*, BNC differs extensively from both LLC and COLT. *A bit* is used to a much lesser extent in BNC. This state of affairs deserves to be looked into more closely. I have no explanation for this at present.

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