



# LUND UNIVERSITY

## Between epistemic modality and degree: the case of really

Paradis, Carita

*Published in:*  
Modality in Contemporary English

2003

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Paradis, C. (2003). Between epistemic modality and degree: the case of really. In R. Facchinetti, M. Krug, & F. Palmer (Eds.), *Modality in Contemporary English* Mouton de Gruyter.

*Total number of authors:*

1

### General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

# Between epistemic modality and degree: the case of *really*<sup>1</sup>

Carita Paradis  
Lund University

## Abstract

This paper identifies and explains the emergence of three different readings of *really* in the schematic domains of epistemic modality and/or degree. The different readings arise through the interaction between the ontological notion of [REALITY] and the construal of *really* in relation to the context. The readings are: *really* as a marker of evidentiality (truth attesting), of subjective emphasis and of degree (reinforcement). This paper questions the view that the readings of *really* are positionally/ syntactically motivated. Instead, it proposes that the motivating factors are semantic/ pragmatic in nature. The argument is that *really* is conditioned by the speaker's wish to qualify an expression epistemically with a judgement of truth as perceived by the speaker. This condition thus acts as a motivating force on the type of conceptual representations that *really* evokes and takes scope over as well as on the prosodic salience of *really* itself. It is shown that valence and intonation are the main clues to the interpretation of *really* on the occasion of use.

## 1. Background and major claims

Research on the interpretation of adverbs such as *really*, *just*, *only*, *rather*, *quite*, *apparently* or *absolutely* shows that they are contextually sensitive and highly flexible.<sup>2</sup> This paper takes a closer look at *really* in order to account for its various interpretations. Stenström's (1986) work on *really* forms the starting-point for the investigation. The following examples are from Stenström (1986: 151), where she claims that the different readings of *really* are due to position and syntactic function:

- (1) *this question is really surprising*
- (2) *this is a really surprising question*
- (3) *this is really a surprising question*
- (4) *this really is a surprising question*
- (5) *really this is a surprising question*

Stenström states that when *really* is placed next to the adjective, as in (1) and (2), it is a degree modifier which serves as an intensifier of *surprising*. But, the further *really* is moved to the left, the less is the emphasis on *surprising* and the more it is on the whole *a surprising question*. When *really* is placed in initial position, as in (5), it no longer intensifies a single clause element but is a comment on the whole proposition. Stenström remains vague about the intermediate positions and about the more exact interaction between syntactic position and interpretation. She concludes that what finally decides the function of *really* is the combined effect of position, prosody and the wider context. In contrast to Stenström, I propose that the motivating factors for the readings are semantic/pragmatic in nature rather than syntactic/positional.

Clearly, position is an important clue to the interpretation of *really*, but it is not strictly predictive of differences in readings. Position is a linguistic reflex of the semantics and pragmatics of an utterance. I claim that all the above examples of *really* are epistemic in the sense that they make a comment on the degree of truth of the proposition as perceived by the speaker in the actual situation of use. However, they differ in scope and semantic interaction with their environment. In (1) and (2)

*really* is primarily a degree modifier, which reinforces a gradable property of *surprising*, and in (3), (4) and (5), it is primarily a marker of epistemic stance. *Really* in (3) and (4) is backgrounded in relation to the rest of the clause, while *really* in (5) is both prosodically and discursively more salient. The more precise sources of these differences as well as their effect on the interpretation of *really* are developed in this paper.

The main focus of the present paper is on semantic aspects of *really*.<sup>3</sup> It explores *really* as an epistemic marker of factual and subjective evidence, as well as a degree marker. *Really* is representative of two types of meaning. On the one hand, *really* has descriptive properties, which evoke the concept of [REALITY]. On the other hand, it has procedural properties which govern the perspective in which the speaker wants the hearer to interpret *really* itself, as well as the expression that *really* has in its scope. Position is a formal clue to the interpretation of *really*. Another formal clue to interpretation is intonation, i.e. the presence or absence of the nuclear tone on *really* and the shape of that tone, if there is one. Previous research shows that the intonational possibilities and preferences in the context of adverbials are very complex (Allerton and Cruttenden 1974, 1976, 1978). Both position and intonational contours seem to converge to guide our interpretation.

The purpose of the study is to provide an explanation for the various readings of *really* within the framework of cognitive semantics (Langacker 1987). The potentially wider contribution of the study is to the advancement of cognitive linguistics in the field of adverbs. My argument is that speakers use *really* when they wish to qualify an expression epistemically with respect to their judgments of the truth of the expression in question. This pragmatic condition on how speakers want the utterance to be interpreted is the main motivating factor on what conceptual representations *really* evokes and takes scope over. These conceptual representations provide an independent explanatory basis for the interpretation of the functions of *really*, and position and intonation are formal clues to this process.

The data and the analysis are presented as follows: Section 1.1 gives a short background to the two spoken corpora from which the data have been extracted (COLT and the LLC). Based on a pre-theoretical analysis of the data, Section 2 distinguishes three different readings of *really*, and the linguistic issues addressed in this paper are specified. It also outlines the semantics of *really* within the cognitive framework. In Section 3 the results of the semantic analysis of the various readings of *really* are discussed in detail. Section 4 makes a short presentation of the British nuclear tone approach and accounts for the intonational possibilities for *really*. The results and the analysis are summarized in Section 5.

## 1.1 Material

The data used in this paper are based on COLT – The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language – which forms part of the British National Corpus. COLT consists of half a million words of spontaneous, informal face-to-face conversation among teenagers in London. The recordings were made in 1993, and the material was sampled so as to cover different social groups in London (Haslerud and Stenström 1995; <http://www.hd.uib.no/colt/>). The total number of occurrences of *really* in the corpus is 1,521. 173 occurrences were excluded for various reasons of unclarity.<sup>4</sup>

The study of intonation was carried out in the LLC, The London-Lund Corpus, which unlike COLT is prosodically annotated. Like COLT, the LLC consists of half a million words of spoken British English (for a more detailed description of the LLC, see Greenbaum and Svartvik 1990). It differs from COLT with respect to basically three variables. Firstly, there is a time difference of some twenty years. Secondly, COLT mainly consists of spontaneous conversation, while the LLC consists of both dialogue and monologue, both spontaneous and prepared. Therefore, the texts in COLT are generally much more informal than the ones in the LLC. Finally, the speakers in COLT are mainly teenagers and in the LLC they are all adults. Even though this study makes extensive use of corpus data, its main contribution is of a qualitative nature. The corpus data are primarily used for authentic examples and not so much for statistical purposes. In the light of that, the differences between the two corpora are not considered to affect the main results of this analysis. Two hundred occurrences of *really* were extracted from the informal face-to-face conversations in the LLC, more precisely the first two hundred in Texts S.1 and S.2. The texts in both COLT and the LLC are spontaneous, informal face-to-face conversations. As in COLT, only interpretable occurrences were taken into account.

## 2. Identifying the readings of *really*

As a starting-point, a pretheoretical categorization of the readings of the 1,521 occurrences of *really* was carried out. This categorization formed the basis for the identification of the relevant linguistic issues. The categorization suggested that the type of representation which *really* takes scope over is responsible for its reading. The assumed representations are (i) the whole proposition, including both statements and questions, (ii) a situation type, in which case *really* qualifies an attitudinal component of the situation denoted by the predicate, and finally (iii) a property, in which case *really* qualifies a scalar component of the property denoted by the adjective. Three different readings of *really* were distinguished in the first survey of the instances in COLT:

|     |   |                                    |
|-----|---|------------------------------------|
| (6) | <i>really, they are quite strange</i>   | [truth attesting of proposition]   |
| (7) | <i>I really appreciate your support</i> | [subjective emphasis of situation] |
| (8) | <i>they are really nice</i>             | [reinforcement of scalar property] |

Despite their different reading, the examples of *really* in (6), (7) and (8) are all expressive of epistemic commitment. They serve a function of epistemic grounding in that they specify an expression relative to the speakers and the addressees and their spheres of knowledge (Langacker 1987: 489). The above three types of *really* all express a judgement of truth from the point of view of the speaker in a given situation. Also *really* in (8) has the effect of emphasizing the truth of the utterance as a natural consequence of reinforcing the degree of a scalar property. Epistemic modifiers presuppose that there is some kind of evidence on which an assertion is based. The evidence that is presupposed by *really* is that of ‘reality’ and by implication ‘truth’. This evidence, however, may be factual or subjective, and frequently it remains implicit.<sup>5</sup>

Among the examples above, there are also differences with respect to what type of reality/truth is in focus, i.e. implied evidence of factual truth and implied evidence of subjective belief. *Really* in (6) expresses epistemic modality in the sense that it expresses the speaker’s judgement of the truth of the proposition based on what is known to be part of reality. *Really* in (7) has the function of emphasizing the subjective judgement of the importance of a situation involved in the proposition in question. It conveys both epistemic modality and subjective emphasis at the same time. In (8) *really* expresses reinforcement with respect to the degree of ‘niceness’. Similar to situations, properties themselves are only indirectly associated with truth via the proposition they occur in. The truth attesting function is there, but it is placed in the background. The reason is that truth pertains to propositions, not to situations and properties. For pragmatic reasons, truth attesting is a prerequisite for both emphasis and reinforcement of degree. The dichotomy between the truth attesting interpretation, on the one hand, and the emphasizing and degree reinforcing interpretations, on the other, is comparable to Lyons’s (1977: 797–799) division into: objective epistemic modality and subjective epistemic modality. Objective epistemic modality expresses an objectively measurable parameter of the truth of an utterance. It is part of what he calls the “it-is-so” component of an utterance. Subjective epistemic modality, on the other hand, expresses a corresponding subjective statement, and it is part of the “I-say-so” component, which is superimposed on the “it is-so” component.

Furthermore, the various applications of *really* in (6), (7) and (8) also differ in interactive function. *Really* in (6) sets the scene for the utterance in terms of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’. *Really* in (7) and (8) are mainly used to show involvement on the part of the speaker. The force behind the use of *really* is to specify the evidential basis for propositions, situations and properties respectively. The type of evidence is assumed to vary according to what *really* takes scope over. Two extremes on the dimension of evidentiality are assumed to correlate with the representations within the scope of *really*, i.e. factual evidence and subjective evidence. The pretheoretical analysis generated three issues for linguistic inquiry:

- What type of evidence, on the cline from factual to subjective, is provided by *really*?
- What types of representations does *really* take scope over and how do they constrain the readings of *really*?
- Are there any intonational differences among the readings of *really* in terms of focalized use and attitudinal meaning?

## 2.1 The conceptual basis of the readings of *really*

The cognitive approach takes language to be an integral part of human cognition, not a modularized, autonomous faculty independent of other cognitive functions. There is direct correspondence between linguistic expressions and conceptual structure. Language users conceive of the world in many different ways in different situations and for different purposes. The meanings of linguistic expressions are perspectival in nature, and polysemy is a natural consequence of our ability to think flexibly.

Linguistic items map on to various concepts in the cognitive network. This network is built up by *domains*, which represent any kind of complex cognitive structure that we store in memory. Two types of domains are distinguished, the *content domain* and the *schematic domain* (Cruse and Toggia 1996: 113–114; Paradis 1997: 48–49; 2001). Content domains involve knowledge of the world, while schematic domains provide the representations for configurative frames. Both these domains are conceptual and mirror our perception of the world. In addition to the two types of domains, there is an operating system that governs the various modes of *construals* which are imposed on the domains when we use language. Unlike domains, construals are not conceptual in kind. Construals are cognitive abilities whose function is to structure the domains activated in production or interpretation of linguistic material. The modes of construal are the actual operators in the creation of specificity, background, perspective, scope and prominence (Langacker 1999: 5).<sup>6</sup>

Meanings in cognitive semantics arise by the activation of conceptual patterns, within both the content domain and the schematic domain. Linguistic items typically activate multiple concepts, both within the realm of content and schematicity. Semantic contrast is due to the actual domains evoked in particular expressions and to the ranking of dominance among the domains, i.e. the various modes of construal in terms of foregrounding and backgrounding. For instance, there is a difference in perspective and prominence in the expressions *half full* and *half empty*, although their referential status may be exactly the same.

All linguistic items are conceptualized against both a content domain and a schematic domain. Lexical items that belong to what we traditionally call open word classes foreground concepts from the content domain, while items that are traditionally regarded as function words foreground concepts from the schematic domain. The schematic domain holds concepts such as different configurations for gradability, modality, aspectuality, countability and so on. *Really* is considered a function word in the traditional sense. Therefore, it seems correct to assume that *really* is an item that foregrounds schematicity at the expense of content proper. Its main role is to open up a mental space against which the relevance of the proposition, the situation or the property is to be viewed.<sup>7</sup> The relevance of what is communicated may be either of a factual or a subjective nature. Even though the schematic domain predominates in *really* it also maps on to the content domain. The content proper of *really* is [REALITY] and by implication [TRUTH]. Presumably, there are differences as to the relative prominence of the content domain and the schematic domain in the various readings of *really*. Truth attesting *really* is assumed to be heavier on content proper in its role as a marker of evidentiality than the emphasizer and degree reinforcer. The predominant schemas then are factuality, subjectivity and scalarity. The prominence of either of these construals accounts for the perspectivization of the message.

### 3. The COLT data

The conversations in the teenage corpus were used for the semantic analysis of *really*. The three readings of *really* are distributed as follows:

**Table 1** The distribution of truth attesting *really*, emphasizing *really* and degree reinforcing *really* in COLT.

| Categories         | Number | %   |
|--------------------|--------|-----|
| Truth attesting    | 316    | 23  |
| Emphasizing        | 437    | 33  |
| Degree reinforcing | 595    | 44  |
| Total              | 1 348  | 100 |

The most common reading of *really* in informal conversation among teenagers is *really* as a degree reinforcer (*they are really nice*). It represents 44% of all the cases. The second most common reading is the emphasizer reading (*I really appreciate your support*), which accounts for 33% of the occurrences. It was found that the category of emphasizers also involves its opposite, which we may call *de-emphasizing*. In fact, 189 out of the 437 emphasizers have a de-emphasizing reading. De-emphasizing *really* is preceded by negation. The force of *really* becomes reversed and the effect is attenuation instead of emphasis (*I don't really appreciate your support*). The least common reading is

*really* as a truth attester (*really they are quite strange*). *Really*, as a truth attester, may also have an attendant intensifying effect on some propositions. However, this is a consequence of the explicit attesting of the truth that *really* has on top of a proposition, which by default relies on a communicative principle of truth. Emphasizer *really* directly strengthens the importance of the situation denoted by the verb, and reinforcing *really* reinforces the degree of a gradable property denoted by an adjective. These differences will hopefully be made clearer as the analysis develops. Finally, it should be noted that the figures in Table 1 are to be regarded as approximations, since there were no sound tracks available at the moment of writing, and it is assumed that intonation plays an important and sometimes crucial role in the interpretation of *really*.

### 3.1 Truth attesting *really*

Truth attesting *really* takes scope over a proposition whose function is to assert something that may be true or false. The role of *really* is to ensure the truth of the assertion that it takes in its scope, and, in addition, to provide implicit evidence based in ‘reality’. Truth attesting *really* may occur in all adverbial positions in an utterance:

- (9) *really that’s quite good*
- (10) *she loves me really*
- (11) *Sue and Bill really bought the farmhouse they had been dreaming of*

In (9), (10) and (11) the role of *really* can be paraphrased as ‘*in accordance with evidence from reality that’s quite good*’, ‘*in accordance with evidence from reality she loves me*’ and ‘*in accordance with evidence from reality Sue and Bill bought the farmhouse they had been dreaming of*’. *Really* occurs initially in (9), in final position in (10) and medially in (11). In all these examples, *really* takes scope over the whole assertion, and its role is to make the listener interpret the assertion in the light of reality. An assertion is either true or false. What *really* can do in terms of guiding the interpretation of the assertion is to explicitly point out the truth of it. Since what is said is based in reality it is by implication true. Like Blakemore’s (1987) connectives, truth attesting *really* acts as a semantic constraint on the understanding of the utterance. In many of the occurrences, truth attesting *really* creates a contrastive reading (‘in contrast to what you might think...’). The contrastivity is a consequence of the fact that assertive propositions come with assumption of truth, and the explicit marking of truth by *really* tends to create a context where the opposite is presupposed. The underlying contrasting presupposition is particularly strong when *really* is in medial position. In (11), the most natural context would be that for various reasons, the listener did not expect Sue and Bill to buy the farmhouse they were dreaming of. Moreover, this contrastiveness fosters an intensifying effect of the proposition (e.g. *really he shouldn’t be so outspoken*).

In questions, *really* is normally a truth attester. The speaker uses *really* to ask the previous speaker (i.e. the present listener) whether what he or she said (asserted) before is actually in line with reality and truth:

- (12) A: *she is fucked up mentally*  
 B: *really?*  
 A: *mm I think she is mm I think she is what happened was yeah she got divorced when she was fifty with my mum’s dad and then she didn’t she could have got married though she didn’t she’ll say she’s a saint and she’ll say hasn’t got money either and she’s really sad*
- (13) A: *no seriously do you really like ‘em?*  
 B: *what d’ya mean really them?*  
 A: *well what d’ya think of them they’re your friends*  
 B: *as friends? do I fancy them?*  
 A: *no no what d’ya think of them like do they get on your nerves at all?*  
 B: *no*

Both in (12) and (13) the speakers who put the questions are interested in the truth of a previous assertion. As in the assertions (9), (10) and (11), the compatibility of the proposition with reality is the evidence for truth. What triggers the interpretation of truth attesting *really* in both

affirmatives and questions is the fact that it takes scope over a proposition. The propositional scope can be assigned in all adverbial positions. Either *really* occurs in a slot within the actual proposition, or it may in fact be directed to a proposition previously uttered by somebody else.

### 3.2. Emphasizing *really*

Emphasizing *really* is positionally constrained in that it has to be placed adjacent to a verb denoting a situation type that is attitudinal in character or alternatively a situation type that may be capable of undergoing subjective modulation in the context of a trigger element such as *really*. *Really* is most often, but not necessarily, placed before the first verb. Emphasizing *really* is semantically bound to attitudinal verb meanings. By way of its content [REALITY] and the attendant implication of ‘truth’, the invited inference of *really* in combination with attitudinal verb meanings is one of subjective emphasis.<sup>8</sup> There is a valence relation between the attitudinal meaning in the verb and the epistemic meaning of *really*. According to Langacker (1988: 102) “a valence relation between two predications is possible just in case these predications overlap, in the sense that some substructure within the other one is construed as identical to it”. In expressions where *really* has an emphatic effect on a predicate, there is a harmonizing subjective substructure in both elements, which is interpreted as attitudinal emphasis. Naturally, there is no such valence relation between *really* as a truth attester and some specific element in the proposition, since *really* takes scope over the whole proposition in order to attest the truth of it. Consider the following examples of *really* as an emphazier:

- (14) *No, that’s sad, that really is definitely*
- (15) *I meant to be going to the choir tonight but I really can’t be bothered*
- (16) *I do actually really like singing*

On closer inspection of examples (14), (15) and (16), we observe that emphasizing *really* takes scope over a situation type that is a state: ‘is [sad]’, ‘can’t be bothered’ and ‘like’. The meaning of *really* itself is semantically bleached as compared to the foregrounded and distinct [REALITY] notion in truth attesting *really*. The main task of *really* as an emphazier is to convey speaker meaning. The schematic epistemic domain is in the foreground when we interpret *really*. The strength of the valence relation between *really* and the situation type expressed by the verb is primarily attitudinal. In (16) *actually* is the factual modifier of evidence. The juxtaposition of *actually* and *really* highlights their different roles, i.e. *actually* as a marker of evidentiality and *really* as a marker of epistemic subjectivity. The difference between the two is brought out clearly, since co-occurrence of adverbials can only occur when the two have different functions.<sup>9</sup>

The closeness between the situation type and *really* can be observed in its preferred combinatorial links to certain attitudinal stative predicates. Out of the 248 occurrences of *really* as an emphazier (the 189 de-emphasizers are not included in this figure) the most common collocating verbs are:<sup>10</sup>

**Table 2** The types and tokens of the most frequent verb collocates of emphasizing *really* in COLT.

| Verb    | Number | Example   |
|---------|--------|---|
| do(n’t) | 38     | <i>I really don’t mind/know/care/want to/think<br/>it really really does annoy me</i> |
| like    | 19     | <i>I really like her</i>  |
| be      | 15     | <i>I mean he really is a cool guy</i>   |
| want    | 14     | <i>I really want my mum to hear that</i>  |
| hate    | 11     | <i>I really hate her</i>  |
| hurt    | 11     | <i>It really hurts</i>  |
| Total   | 108    |   |

Table 2 shows that the verbs in the first column account for nearly half of the number of emphasizing *really*. All the meanings of the predicates in the examples in Table 2 are attitudinal. *Really* latches on to the attitudinal facet, which it emphasizes, and the invited inference is that the truth of the proposition is thereby attested. The content proper of ‘reality’ is weakened and backgrounded, and the basis for the evidence is clearly mental rather than factual. In other words, emphazier *really* is mainly schematic (configurational), rather than lexical. The lexical weakening is replaced by subjective strengthening. This difference between the truth attesting and the emphasizing readings is a case of *subjectification* (Langacker 1990; Traugott 1995). Both Langacker and Traugott view subjectivity as a

ubiquitous phenomenon based in the cognitive-communicative situation, but they use the term somewhat differently. Langacker focuses primarily on subjectivity as degrees of grounding in the situation construed by speakers, while Traugott uses the term to account for the diachronic shift from the physical world to the mental world. For instance, what is strengthened in *I really appreciate your support*, as compared to *Really, I appreciate your support*, is that the evidence is in the speaker's mental world as opposed to the physical world and consequently the degree of grounding in the communicative situation is stronger.

Emphasizing *really* also combines with adjectival predications (states). These adjectives are either non-scalar (*paranoid*) or represent an extreme point of a scale (*appalling*):

- (17) *I always get really paranoid with people I get off with*  
 (18) *It's really appalling*

Adjectives such as *paranoid* and *appalling* may alternatively combine with totality modifiers such as *absolutely* or *totally* with a near-synonymous effect.<sup>11</sup> Thus, emphasizing *really* maps on to both situation types denoted by verbs and adjectives which have a semantic facet that can be emphasized. There is thus a matching of semantic substructures in *really* and what *really* has in its scope. In the whole material, nine lexical items are employed in 145 out of 248 cases (in 59% of the total uses of *really* as an emphaser). No such pattern was found for truth attesting *really*, since there are no valence restrictions on the lexico-semantic level. It also deserves to be mentioned again that subjective emphasis is only possible in statements. In questions, *really* is a truth attester and takes propositional scope. *Really* may be used as an emphaser in questions where the speaker expresses his or her own judgements and seeks support for his or her own opinions, as in 'Don't you think these adverts for erm, The Vauxhall Corsa are *really* pointless?', 'Isn't it *really* appalling?' 'It is *really* appalling, isn't it?'

When *really* itself is in the scope of negation, i.e. preceded by a negative element, it is a de-emphasizer. It has the function of attenuating or approximating the truth of the application of the situation talked about. The negative element does not necessarily have to be negation proper; it may be a non-assertive element such as *without* ('without *really* being involved, she sorted the problems out'). The result is a hedged statement.

- (19) *I can't really help it*  
 (20) *it's not really expensive it's not that*

The reasoning behind this effect is as follows. The opposite of 'I can't help it' is 'I can help it'. The two alternatives stand in a complementary relation to each other. There is a definite boundary between them; they represent an 'either-or' relation. The role of (*not*) *really* in (19) is to de-emphasize the boundary between 'can' and 'can't'. The same is true in (20). *Really* is there to soften the fact that something is expensive. The scope of 'not really' is restricted to the situation denoted by 'is expensive'. It is the impact of the situation that is attenuated, not the truth of the whole proposition. The truth of the proposition is hedged by the combination of a negative element and *really*. *Really* is primarily used to attenuate the negative pole of *be*, *do*, *have* and modals as in examples (21) – (25) below:

- (21) *she ain't really anti*  
 (22) *he doesn't really give a toss*  
 (23) *well they haven't really come better off have they?*  
 (24) *I can't really handle rum, that 's why I didn't drink any last night*  
 (25) *it shouldn't really be any, it shouldn't really be much rugby*

### 3.3. Degree reinforcing *really*

Similar to emphasizing *really*, the interpretation of degree reinforcing *really* is based on mappings between concepts within the proposition. Reinforcing *really* takes scope over scalar property concepts denoted by adjectives:

- (26) *Hugh is apparently really rude about everyone especially when he gets drunk*  
 (27) *...will be one big nuclear war which will last really long and finally end the world*



(28) *he thinks he is really cool*

*Really* has the effect of reinforcing the degree of ‘rudeness’, ‘length’ and ‘personality’ in examples (26), (27) and (28). The adjectives *rude*, *long* and *cool* are based on a scale schema and it is this schema that makes it possible for *really* to develop a degree reinforcing function. The invited inference when *really* takes scope over a scalar property of an adjective is that what is real and true with respect to a scalar property implies boosting of this property, i.e. ‘*really* rude’ is ruder than just ‘rude’. The most common scalar collocates in COLT are listed in Table 3. They all occur ten times or more and they make up 44% of all the combinations in the material.

**Table 3** The types and tokens of the most frequent adjective collocates of degree reinforcing *really*.

| Adjective | Number | Example   |
|-----------|--------|---|
| good      | 91     | <i>no Zed’s a really good bloke when he’s sober</i> |
| nice      | 62     | <i>well my dad reckons he’s really nice anyway</i>  |
| funny     | 29     | <i>I think she is like really funny like</i>        |
| bad       | 25     | <i>he had really bad dandruff just now as well</i>  |
| sad       | 14     | <i>Gran I thought your letter was really sad</i>    |
| cool      | 14     | <i>I’ve seen Demolition man cos I’m really cool</i> |
| nasty     | 13     | <i>oh turn that off it’s a really nasty noise</i>   |
| weird     | 13     | <i>she’s got a really weird accent hasn’t she</i>   |
| Total     | 261    |   |

Degree reinforcing *really* could in all these sentences be replaced by *very* with much the same effect. *Really* differs from *very* in that it is not a fully-fledged degree modifier, since it takes propositional truth attesting scope in questions.<sup>12</sup> *Very* is a degree reinforcer both in affirmatives and in questions (Cf. ‘Are you *very* sad’ – ‘Yes, *very*’; ‘Are you *really* sad?’ – ‘Yes, I am’, see also Paradis 1997: 19–21). Degree reinforcing *really* combines with inherently scalar adjectives. In some combinations with verbs that can be graded, *really* comes very close to being a degree reinforcer. For instance, in ‘I *really* love her’ or ‘They *really* enjoyed the party’. However, verbs differ from adjectives in that they can only be externally graded. *Very* cannot be used with verbs, e.g. \*‘I *very* admire you’. Only the combination of *very* and *much* is possible ‘I *very much* admire you’. ‘Much’ is an inherent property of a scalar adjective, while it has to be explicitly expressed with gradable verbs, e.g. ‘How *good* was the book?’ vs. ‘How *much* did you say you *liked* it?’.<sup>13</sup> If we add a degree element, *really* remains the same in combination with verbs, e.g. *I really love her very much* and *They really enjoyed the party very much*. In other words, there are no co-occurrence restrictions between *really* and *very much*, which there ought to have been, had they served the same function. By the same token, if another degree modifier is added to an utterance where *really* is a degree reinforcer (*she is really funny*), *really* takes on a truth attesting or an emphasizing reading (*she is really very funny*), depending on the intonation of the utterance, as we shall see in Section 4.

#### 4. Intonation and the LLC data

Another aspect that is assumed to be a clue to the interpretation of *really* is intonation. The question is what the intonational differences are across the three readings. For this purpose 200 occurrences of *really* were extracted from the LLC, namely from informal face-to-face conversation. The prosodic system used in the LLC is *the nuclear tone approach*, which focuses on the perceptual side of speech, and auditory methods are employed in the analysis of data. Pitch refers to features perceived by the listeners, and segmentation of speech is contour defined in that each tone unit has one peak of prominence marked by the beginning of a nuclear tone. After the nuclear tone, there will generally be a boundary, which is indicated by a number of linguistic features, such as the completion of the nuclear tone in combination with a rapid change of the pitch height of unaccented syllables which normally only occur at the boundaries (for a more detailed discussion, see Cruttenden’s internal and external clues 1994:231–232). In addition to these features, there may be a pause and a lengthening of the final syllable before the boundary. The nuclear tone approach relates the meaning of intonation with respect to the most salient contour, the nuclear tone. This means that nuclear tones are not only minimal units, but also minimal meaningful units. Continuous speech is divided into *tone units*. In each tone unit there are a number of pitch accents, which indicate the most prominent syllables and consequently the most prominent words. One of the pitch accents stands out as the most prominent one. It is the direction of

the pitch starting from that accent, the nuclear tone, that is considered to be the most important part of the tune. (For a more extensive definition of the nuclear tone see Cruttenden 1990 and 1997.)

Five different tones are distinguished in the LLC: *fall*, *rise*, *rise-fall*, *fall-rise* and *level* (Svartvik and Quirk 1980; Greenbaum and Svartvik 1990; Peppé 1995). In some intonational work these tones are divided into falling intonations (including falls and rise-falls) and rising intonations (including rises, fall-rises and levels). In the LLC another system of categorizing is employed. Three different categories of tone are distinguished: simple tones (falls, rises and levels), complex tones (rise-falls and fall-rises) and compound tones which are simple tones and complex tones in various combinations (e.g. fall+rise, fall+fall-rise). Compound tones are binuclear and extend over more than one word, while the complex tones are restricted to one word

For practical reasons, the system of tones in the LLC has been simplified in the present study. As mentioned before, only five tones are distinguished. This system conflates the compound tones and the simple tones in that only the final nucleus of compound tones has been taken into account. For instance, “*they go through surprisingly \slowly /really*” is regarded as a rise.<sup>14</sup> The compound tone in this case starts on the earlier word *slowly* and ends on the later word *really*. I will deliberately remain vague about whether *really* forms a tone unit of its own or if it forms part of what comes before. The reason for this position is that in other analyses, tones on final and initial occurrences of *really* are taken as separate tone units (Cruttenden 1997: 36). The markers of tone unit boundaries are difficult to identify in the particular case of a fall followed by a rise on a final sentence adverb like *really*. Cruttenden’s analysis is that the pattern normally consists of two tone units. If there is a pause or a lengthening of a potentially tone-unit-final syllable, in this case *-ly*, the sequence must be treated as two tone units. In addition to these criteria, Cruttenden also says that it is reasonable to take semantic and syntactic factors into account. Markers of boundaries are often present between final sentence adverbials and the preceding elements, and this is the pattern that should be regarded as the basic pattern. A pattern where no markers of boundaries are present can be considered a special instance of ‘intonational sandhi’, i.e. the merging of two independent tone units. This analysis seems to be the more reasonable one to me.

In both analyses, the role of *really* comes across as an important unit of discourse for the interpretation of the message. Cruttenden (1997: 72) points out that tone units have sometimes also been called information-units or sense-groups, which suggests that they are basically units of performance: “[t]hey may represent a unit of planning for the speaker [...], they may also represent a unit of presentation by the speaker for the listener, as if the speaker were saying to the listener: ‘get this piece of processing over before we go on’”. This description suits the function of truth attesting *really* very well. Moreover, Cruttenden (1997: 69) points out that tone units very often correspond with adverbials modifying a whole proposition. *Really* in initial or final position is dislocated and has the character of a scene-setting function or an afterthought respectively. It functions as a discursive information unit and is therefore often considered to have a prominent modifying role by the speaker.

Tones are not only a matter of form; they also have an interpretative side to them. Specific interpretations of intonational meanings are due to both nucleus placement and the shape of the nuclear tone. In principle any item can carry the nuclear tone, but some items are more likely to have the nucleus than others. If we divide the vocabulary of English into a simple dichotomy of function items (articles, auxiliaries, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and some adverbs such as epistemic adverbs and degree adverbs) and lexical items (nouns, verbs, adjectives and some other adverbs such as manner adverbs), the prediction, according to the prosodic rule for nucleus placement, is that in the unmarked case the nucleus will fall on the last lexical item of the tone unit, and in the marked case the nucleus will fall on a non-final element and/or a function word.

Nucleus placement mainly concerns discursive meaning. It has to do with presuppositions and the establishment of links between various utterances. Nucleus placement serves to highlight a piece of information, in general newsworthy information as opposed to given information, and it is decisive in manifestations of contrastivity:

- (29) A: *what did you SAY*  
B: *I said it was really EXcellent*

- (30) A: *what did you SAY*  
B: *I said it was REALLY excellent*

In utterances of the type ‘it was (adverb) (adjective)’, some kind of contrastive focus is assigned when the nucleus falls on the adverb. This means that (29) represents non-contrastive focus, whereas (30) represents contrastive focus, which calls up the truth attesting reading of *really*. In cognitive semantics

focus is a conceptual constituent. It is not a constituent based on semantic valence links, but one reflecting degree of interest or informativeness. The symbolic relationship between prosodic form and meaning is iconic, since there is a natural link between prosodic salience and discourse salience. Elements that carry the tone are conceptually and communicatively in the foreground, whereas items that are prosodically non-salient stand in the background (Langacker 1997: 22-23).

The shape of the tone is mainly associated with attitudinal meaning. Generally speaking, a falling intonation is associated with conclusiveness, finality and certainty, while a rising contour suggests inconclusiveness, openness and uncertainty. It is also the pitch direction used by speakers to indicate that the speaker wants to hold the floor and continue to talk.

- (31) *I am s\ure of it*  
 (32) *You could do th\at*  
 (33) *\One type of meaning associated with r/eally# is epist/emic*

The falling tone in (31) expresses certainty and finality. It harmonizes perfectly well with the meaning of ‘certainty’ expressed by *sure*. The falling-rising contour in (32) expresses tentativeness and uncertainty on the part of the speaker. By using a rising intonation the speaker indicates that the utterance should be interpreted as a suggestion rather than an order and his suggestion is open for negotiation. Finally, in (33) there is a fall-rise over the subject of the clause, starting on *one* and ending on *really* and a rising tone on *epistemic*. The function of the rising contours in both cases is inconclusiveness. It indicates that there is more to be said on this topic. After *really* we expect a completion of the message, and after *epistemic* we expect to be informed about the other meanings.

The occurrences of *really* in the LLC are distributed in the following way. There are 103 truth attesters of which 89 carry the tone (86%). There are 89 emphasers (and de-emphasizers), none of which carry the tone, and 8 degree modifiers, also without tone. The distribution of the types of *really* differ radically from the distribution in COLT, where *really* most frequently is a degree modifier. Again, these differences do not affect the overall argument presented here, since the main contribution of the paper concerns semantic/pragmatic properties and general prosodic possibilities. The distributional difference between teentalk and adult language is, however, corroborated by Stenström (2002). Age-grading apart, there is also the possibility of language change from the 1960s/70s (LLC) to the 1990s (COLT). In this study the LLC is used as a source of authentic, impromptu speech for the analysis of general prosodic possibilities, which are considered to be stable over time.

#### 4.1. Truth attesters

Within this category we may distinguish the following types: (i) *really* as a back-channel item, (ii) *really* after an utterance, (iii) *really* before an utterance, (iv) *really* in medial position and finally (v) *really* in questions. The back-channel items all carry the tone, since they are the only lexical item in the tone unit. The interpretation of *really* as a back-channel item becomes clear from the direction of the tone and the context.<sup>15</sup>

- (34) B: *you know I mean he was su\spected of having lung /cancer #  
 and presumably he’s got something equally \fatal #  
 or perhaps it \is lung cancer #*  
 A: */really#*  
 B: *this is all very \sad #*
- (35) B: *he is very /strongly of the /opinion #  
 that we \all ought to go on /teaching #  
 to the end of \term#*  
 A: *\really#*  
 B: *and he thinks it is rather scandalous that we \don’t #*
- (36) C: *it is absolutely \barmy #  
 you can hold the top administrative job in \college #  
 and if you haven’t got a de/gree #*  
 A: *\really*  
 C: *you just can’t set foot beyond a certain you know#*

The rise, as in (34), indicates that A is curious to know more. A wants B to go on with his story. The rise-fall in (35) is an indication of ‘surprise’. The fall in (36) is there in the same capacity as other backchannel items such as *m* and *yes*. In all of these examples *really* is a marker of A being an attentive and supportive listener.

Most of the truth attesters occur at the end of statements. In this position, the typical use is in a separate tone unit. To conform to Cruttenden’s analysis, I have added tone unit boundaries in front of *really*, when there is a tone on *really* in the material. This then means that they carry tone, since they are the only elements in the tone unit. The vast majority of the occurrences come with a rising intonation and only a few with a fall.

- (37) A: *I think it was twenty one p a \bottle #  
I mean that’s only a pint \bottle #  
which is pretty ex\pensive #/really #*  
a: *m #*  
A: *for one \bottle #*
- (38) B: *there was a difference when he was lecturing on a subject that he’d  
\written on# you see this is a this is a \classical subject #\really#  
I don’t think \anybody# as far as \I know# does any work on it \now#*
- (39) A: *I mean they’re unin\telligible# \really#*
- (40) B: *\sometimes # I \think # you /know # \oh # sort of if they’d all just \vanish#  
c  
m*  
B: *(laughs) just \vanish# I wouldn’t care if I never saw one of them a\gain#  
and \other times I think# oh /well#  
it’s quite \pleasant really#  
because they’re all so \odd#*

Obviously truth attesters are salient elements and as such typically occur in a separate tone unit. In most cases it carries tone, as in (37), (38) and (39), while it has been downgraded to no tone in (40). The rising intonation in (37) expresses openness in the sense that the speaker is open to a response from the listener. In (38) the fall-rise has a hedging function. B is uncertain about the accuracy of his statement. The fall in (39) has the opposite effect. It conveys conclusiveness and certainty on the part of the speaker. *Really* in (40) appears in the shade of *pleasant* which carries the main change of the direction of the pitch. In general, when *really* occurs in final position, it is similar to an afterthought. The truth is attested with less force with a rising intonation than with a falling intonation.

*Really* may also come before a statement, but it is not at all as common as in final position. It may or may not carry tone in the same way as when *really* is placed at the end of a statement. The tone used in initial position is the fall.

- (41) A: *and this was \stout# \brackets \Irish style# it says on the \label#  
and r\really# it is one of the most \beautiful drinks#*

Furthermore, there are cases when *really* is medially placed as in (42) and (43):

- (42) A: *the only thing I ever /vary# you \can vary#  
is really well you can vary \anything#  
but the only thing I’m the thing that you \really vary#  
is \hops#*
- (43) A: *but \Rivens board of /studies# is just Rivens and Richard \Cox# who  
are the e\stablished# \members of the de\partment# you \know# and sort of  
belong nowhere \else# \Andrew# who really is in the \English b\od#  
\I who am# really in the archae\ology department# and that’s \it you /see#*

*Really* as a truth attester in medial position takes scope over the proposition and is a factual claim of evidence of truth. When the tone falls on *really* as in (42) a contrastive reading is invoked. In the unmarked case the tone falls on the last lexical element, which in this case would be on *vary*.

Moreover, the falling-rising intonation brings out the contrast to ‘what you might think’ and it indicates an attitude of reserve or hesitation on the part of the speaker. In (43) truth attesting *really* occurs twice. In both cases it does not carry tone. The truth attesting interpretation is invoked because there is no verb denoting a situation that can be attitudinally reinforced, since the nuclear tone in both cases is on *the English bod* and *the archaeology department*, respectively.

*Really* is also a truth attester in questions, where it normally carries the tone, namely the rise. The rising intonation is normally used in questions to show an open attitude and to invite the addressee to answer the question. *Really* is concerned with the truth of the proposition uttered by the addressee.

- (44) B: *I like the e\quipment /mike # its very*  
 a: *oh it's very good quality equipment – indeed it's the [maik] the microphones are very expensive items you know about a hundred pounds each these things*  
 B: */are they /really #*  
 A: */are they r\really #*  
 a: *m*  
 A: *good /\heavens #*  
*I just I mean they look \good #*  
*but I you know I would have said \oh #*  
*a fiver /each or /something/#*

Both the occurrences of *really* in (44) are characterized by openness. B and A make their utterances simultaneously. The occurrence of *really*, uttered by B is interrogative, while the fall-rise uttered by A signals reservation. This turns A's utterance into an utterance ‘with implications’, i.e. there is an implied ‘but’. This implication is made explicit later on when speaker A follows up with *good heavens* with a rise-fall indicating ‘surprise’ and/or ‘intensification’ and then “but [...] I would have said [...] a fiver each”.

Truth attesters are free in terms of lexical valence relations within the propositions. Their importance pertains to the proposition. *Really* guides us how to view the content of the proposition. It is an evidential marker of truth and factuality. *Really* is not bound by intra-propositional semantic harmony, but leads a free life above that level. There is a crucial ‘reality’ reading to it, and situational and discoursal clues are important for its more attitudinal interpretation. The typical use of truth attesting *really* is in a separate tone unit, which may be downgraded to no tone and where the markers of tone unit boundaries may be extremely smoothable to the degree of merging of two tone units. Truth attesting *really* is relatively heavy on content and therefore prone to form a separate tone unit/take the tone. Intonation proves to have an important pragmatic impact. Different tones add different dimensions to the reading of *really*. For instance a falling intonation adds ‘certainty’ to *really*, a rising intonation may invite a comment or an answer and a fall-rise may be a hedging or implicational device. It deserves to be noted again that a rising contour may as well just be an indication of continuation. In other words, there are numerous possibilities for pragmatic flexibility with truth attester *really* on the part of the speaker, both in the direction of intensifying and attenuating the level of certainty expressed over and above the statements.

#### 4.2. Emphasizing *really*

There are two types of subjective epistemic *really*. There is *really* in positive affirmative propositions, which has the effect of adding emphasis, and there is the de-emphasizing *really*, which occurs after a negative element. Emphasizing *really* is found in statements only. Granted the right semantic environment, it may occur in any adverbial position, except initially and finally. This reading is invoked by the presence of a situation type that can be subjectively emphasized. This means that emphasis reading is semantically bound by a valence structure involving a situation type that can be emphasized. Emphasizing and de-emphasizing *really* do not carry the tone.

- (45) b: *you mustn't expect to be entertained you just go in and out and do your thing*  
 A: *no \no I w I would mostly be \reading you see# that's what I'm*  
 b: *sure*

- A: *I I w I w I've decided I I really must learn how to \read again# if I \don't I might as well give the whole thing a\way# go and take a job down a \sewer# and be \done with#*
- (46) A: *it's just \frightening#*  
 c: *m*  
 A: *just really \is#*  
 A: *abso\lutely#*  
 A: *dehy\drating#*

The situation types that *really* take scope over are based on an 'either-or' conception, as in (45) and (46). Either you *must* learn how to read again or not, and either something *is* frightening or not. It is not a matter of the degree of obligation or the degree of the feeling. The emphasis is on the applicability of the situation. The same is true of the de-emphasizer *really*, where *really* itself is within the scope of a negative element. 'Neg + *really*' means that the situation it has in its scope falls short of a boundary expressed by the verb.

- (47) B: *\he said# I'm a\mazed# that dons should \still be# preparing their lectures at the end of the summer \term# and I said well I don't really think this makes any \difference# as far as \I'm con/cerned#*

*Really* in (47) is a de-emphasizer. It is bound in the semantic valence structure within the proposition. The constraints are that it has to be in the immediate scope of a negative element, as in (47), and the situation type has to be one that is associated with a complementary conceptualization, i.e. a situation that makes approximation possible. Emphasizers as well as de-emphasizers are intonationally non-salient, which is typical of epistemic elements (Nuyts 1993). There is not much room for intonation to add attitudinal meaning to the proposition. If *really* carries the tone in a context of a verb that potentially could be emphasized, the reading is one of truth attesting rather than subjective emphasis. A single nucleus on *really* in a proposition is always contrastive and hence has the meaning 'in reality', i.e. a truth attesting reading. Also, it frequently takes the fall-rise, which brings out the contrast.

- (48) A: *Pete B/askerdon# is a s\ad man# he is n\ot a very cl/ever boy# he's not r\eally up to his PhD/#*

*Really* as a truth attester is illocutionary. It is outside the sentence proper making a comment on the truth of the statement, e.g. *From what is known from factual reality it is the case that* "he is not up to his PhD". Bolinger (1989: 186–187) discusses what he calls parenthetical sentence adverbials of the *really* type. He says that what we expect to find in the context of parentheses are three prosodic characteristics: a delimiting pause, lowered pitch and a terminal rise. However, each of these three can be suspended. The shorter the parenthetical expression is the more easily the pause can be skipped. This results in reinterpretation of the adverb. Compare the following examples from Bolinger (1989: 186):

- (49) *She is, truly, affected by what she heard.*  
 (50) *She is truly affected by what she heard.*

The readings of *truly* in (49) and (50) are not equivalent. Bolinger (1989:186) claims that "the speed of the utterance and the consequent shrinking of the pause, plus the position of the adverb, have caused a partial shift of allegiance": *truly* in (50) belongs to *affected* as much as to the frame of the proposition as a whole. One may say that *truly* has evolved into an emphasizee of *affected*. Bolinger also brings up the case of *really* in passing. He says that this is the story of *very* ('verily') and, more recently, of *really*. "Actually, adverbs that comment parenthetically on the truth value of an utterance tend to fuse with the frame sentence anyway and then are no longer recognizable as parentheses". (Bolinger 1989: 187)

#### 4.3. Degree reinforcing *really*

A reinforcing reading is invoked when *really* takes scope over a scalar property. Again there is not much room for intonation to create pragmatic effects. The unmarked use of a degree modifier is that it does not carry the tone (Paradis 1997). This means that reinforcing *really* is similar to the truth emphasizer *really* in being intonationally non-salient. Consider example (51).

- (51) C: *what ^fun#*  
 A: *that's really n\ice# the face jumps \out of the p\ainting#*  
*but I can't at \all tell you what I d/o#*

If it carries the tone, a contrastive reading is created. The preferred tone will be a fall to match the strengthening role of *really*. Speakers make use of the fall when they want to express that they are certain about the truth of the proposition:

- (52) A: *What did you SAY*  
 B: *I said it was really NICE*

- (53) A: *What did you SAY*  
 B: *I said it was REALLY nice*

*Really* in (52) represents non-contrastive focus, whereas *really* in (53) is in contrastive focus. This contrastivity creates ambiguity for the interpretation of *really*. Due to the larger context *really* may either be a truth attester promoting the prominence of the notion of 'reality' and 'truth'. The contrast then lies in the implication 'contrary to what you might think'. Alternatively, it may still be interpreted as a degree reinforcer with a stronger force. The contrast is then 'he is *really* nice, not just *nice* or *fairly nice*'.

Reinforcing *really* is also similar to the emphasizer *really* in that it occurs in statements only. Reinforcing *really* does not occur in questions or in negative statements. Truth attesting is the preferred interpretation in questions ('Is it really GOOD?' or 'Is it REALLY good?').<sup>16</sup> In negative statements it becomes a de-emphasizer, if it has no tone ('He isn't *really* NICE'). Reinforcing *really* is similar to reinforcing degree modifiers such as *very* but is not a fully-fledged member of the paradigm of degree modifier in that it only occurs in affirmatives.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to identify the various readings of *really* in different contexts and to provide an explanation for the different readings. It is argued that *really* is pragmatically conditioned by the speaker's wish to qualify an expression epistemically with judgments of truth. Such pragmatic conditions act as motivating forces on the conceptual representation evoked by *really*. In other words, it is the type of representation that *really* takes scope over that is crucial for its interpretation. Thus, epistemic meaning has conceptual underpinnings in the first place. The readings of examples (6), (7) and (8) – which are here repeated as (54), (55) and (56) – are as follows:

- |      |   |                                    |
|------|---|------------------------------------|
| (54) | <i>really, they are quite strange</i>   | [truth attesting of proposition]   |
| (55) | <i>I really appreciate your support</i> | [subjective emphasis of situation] |
| (56) | <i>they are really nice</i>             | [reinforcement of scalar property] |

In order to be able to conclude and explain the differences in interpretation I will revert to the three questions posed in Section 2. They are:

- What type of evidence, on the cline from factual to subjective, is provided by *really*?
- What types of representations does *really* take scope over and how do they constrain the readings of *really*?
- Are there any intonational differences among the readings of *really* in terms of focalized use and attitudinal meaning?

Firstly, in the case of truth attesting *really*, the evidence reflects the [REALITY] concept evoked by *really*. The evidence is factual in nature and *really* is primarily a carrier of a content-based message. What is real is by implication true. In this capacity, ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ are interpreted as relatively neutral in character. *Really* takes scope over propositions in order to provide factual evidence for the truth of the proposition. The content proper of *really* [REALITY] is foregrounded. Truth attestors are free vis-à-vis the lexico-semantic structures within the proposition. Truth attesting *really* is prosodically salient in that it carries the nucleus most of the time and/or forms a tone unit of its own. The reason for the focalized use is that it is predominantly content-based and in that respect naturally attracts the tone. Since it is free in terms of lexico-semantic constraints, there are many possibilities for various both falling and rising intonations to add attitudinal meaning to what is said. *Really* may come with overlaid meanings such as certainty/uncertainty. It may have an intensifying effect or it may be a hedging device with additional implicational meanings. The main option for *really* in questions is truth attesting, while all three readings may occur in statements.

Secondly, in the case of emphasizing *really*, the evidence of truth is indirect via subjective emphasis made by the speaker. Content-wise *really* is bleached and backgrounded, the schematic function of subjective stance is in the foreground. *Really* takes scope over situations denoted by stative verbs and adjectivals that may be attitudinally emphasized. In other words, emphasizees are bound by semantic valence relations within the proposition. Situation types as such are neither true nor false, but their application and relevance for the truth of the proposition may be emphasized or de-emphasized. This *really* occurs in statements only, in which it is placed in the immediate vicinity of the element it takes scope over. Emphasizing *really* is intonationally non-salient. It assumes a backgrounded position in relation to the propositional content, which is natural for epistemic elements. If it comes with the tone, there will be some kind of contrast involved and it turns into a truth attestor of factual evidence.

Finally, in the case of *really* as a reinforcer, the evidence of truth conveyed is indirect through *really* as a degree operator. Truth is a prerequisite for the reinforcement of a scalar property. The expression of scalar meanings is always subjective. Similar to the emphasizing reading, the content proper of *really* is bleached and backgrounded, and the schematic function of degree and subjective stance is in the foreground. *Really* takes scope over a scalar property denoted by an adjective. *Really* has to be placed before the modified adjective on which it has a reinforcing effect. Degree reinforcers are bound by lexical semantic valence relations within the proposition. Degree reinforcing *really* is intonationally non-salient and it has a backgrounding function, common to degree modifiers and epistemic elements, in relation to the content of the proposition.

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Alan Cruttenden for very valuable comments on aspects of intonation and for judgements of the interpretation of *really* in different prosodic environments. Also, thanks to Fabian Beijer, Nina Bergmark, Anna Wärensby and Beatrice Warren for help with this paper.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Bolinger 1972; Aijmer 1984, 1985; Coates 1987; Stenström 1986, 2002; Ungerer 1988; Nevalainen 1991; Powell 1992; Sanders and Spooren 1996; Paradis 1997, 2000; Cinque 1999; Lorenz 1999, 2002; Schewenter and Traugott 2000; Tsujimura 2001.

<sup>3</sup> In cognitive linguistics, semantics and pragmatics form a continuum where a fixed boundary is not specified (for a comparison between generative and cognitive models in this respect, see Paradis (forthcoming)). This continuum is a result of the fact that the whole scale of empirical findings is important in cognitive linguistics. However, as in all research there is a natural emphasis on regularities at the expense of idiosyncratic and peripheral phenomena. Pelyvás (2001: 154) specifically points out that epistemic elements are prime examples of the difficulty of separating semantics, pragmatics and syntax. For instance, modal auxiliaries obviously play a role in all three in creating the finite clause as well as being a marker of speaker stance and being a carrier of some meaning. The present paper also illustrates the arbitrariness of exact boundaries between semantics, pragmatics, syntax and prosody.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, when *really* occurs in a context where the transcriber was unable to hear, as in “oh Anthony, he *really* & unclear; the Opposer, take US Gold”, or when *really* occurs before a re-start, as in “No I *really*, I’m getting annoyed now”.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that ‘truth’ has nothing to do with truth and truth-conditions as used in objectivist approaches to meaning. ‘Truth’ in the present study relates to the cognitive school of thinking, where meanings are mental entities. It refers to our conceptualization of ‘truth’, not to any objective or possible world truth.

<sup>6</sup> Langacker’s dimensional domains as well as his locational and configurational domains are subsumed under my schematic domain (1987:150–154). I am using *construal* and *mode of construal* for the actual process of employing domains.

<sup>7</sup> A *mental space* is a temporary set up for an utterance or sequence of utterances (Fauconnier 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Traugott’s term “invited inferencing” (1997; 1999) is used synonymously with “implication”. Both are based on context-induced associative reasoning.

<sup>9</sup> Expressions such as ‘?They are *very extremely* nice’ are strange, since *very* and *extremely* are both reinforcing degree modifiers of the same type. ‘It was *almost completely* dark’ is possible, since *almost* and *completely* have different functions. *Almost* is an



---

approximator that modifies the maximizer *completely*. Reduplication of emphasizing adverbs and scalar degree modifiers for further intensification is a possibility though, as in 'It *really really* does annoy me' and 'They are *very very* nice'.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, these utterances are more or less pre-fabricated constructions that are common in informal conversation. In their entirety, many of them are used as pragmatic devices, *I don't know, I don't think, I don't mind* (Tottie and Paradis 1982, Aijmer 1998).

<sup>11</sup> In fact, adjectives like *paranoid* and *appalling* may easily undergo coercion into a scalar reading. For a detailed analysis of the different types of adjectives with respect to schematic properties, see Paradis 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Similar to emphasizing *really*, degree reinforcing *really* may be interpreted as a degree modifier in questions, if *really* expresses the present speaker's judgment (e.g. 'isn't he really nice?').

<sup>13</sup> Like verbs, comparative and superlative adjectives are externally gradable (Paradis 2001: 53–56).

<sup>14</sup> Indications of direction of tone are placed before the syllable that carries the nucleus.

<sup>15</sup> The letters in front of the extracts from the corpus indicate different speakers. Upper-case letters are used for speakers who were surreptitiously recorded. Their contributions have been prosodically analyzed. Lower-case letters indicate speakers who knew about the recordings, whose task was to keep the conversation going. Their contributions have not been prosodically annotated.

<sup>16</sup> It is possible to get a degree reading in questions too, if the contrast is made explicit, and if the tone is on *really* (Is it REALLY good, or just FAIRLY good?).

## References

- Aijmer, Karin 1984 *Sort of and kind of* in English conversation. *Studia Linguistica* 38: 118–28.
- Aijmer, Karin 1985 *Just*. In: Sven Bäckman and Göran Kjellmer (eds.), *Papers on language and literature presented to Alvar Ellegård and Erik Frykman*, 1–10. Gothenburg: Gothenburg Studies in English 60.
- Aijmer, Karin 1998 Epistemic predicates in contrast. In: Stig Johansson and Signe Oksefjell (eds.), *Corpora and Cross-Linguistic Research*, 277–297. Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi.
- Allerton, David J. and Alan Cruttenden 1974 English sentence adverbials: their syntax and their intonation in British English. *Lingua* 34: 1–30.
- Allerton, David J. and Alan Cruttenden 1976 The intonation of medial and final sentence adverbials in British English. *Archivum linguisticum* 7: 29–51.
- Allerton, David J. and Alan Cruttenden 1978 Syntactic, illocutionary, thematic and attitudinal factors in the intonation of adverbials. *Journal of pragmatics* 2: 155–188.
- Blakemore, Diane 1987 *Semantic Constraints on Relevance*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- Bolinger, Dwight 1972 *Degree Words*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Bolinger, Dwight 1989 *Intonation and Its Uses: Melody in Grammar and Discourse*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Cinque, Guglielmo 1999 *Adverbs and Functional Heads: A Cross-Linguistic Perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Coates, Jennifer 1987 Epistemic modality and spoken discourse. *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 110–131. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Cruse, Alan and Pagona Togia 1996 Towards a cognitive model of antonymy. *Journal of Lexicology* 1: 113–141.
- Cruttenden, Alan 1990 The origin of nucleus. *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 20: 1–9.
- Cruttenden, Alan 1994 *Gimson's Pronunciation of English*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Cruttenden, Alan 1997 *Intonation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fauconnier, Gilles 1997 *Mappings in Thought and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Greenbaum, Sidney and Jan Svartvik 1990 The London-Lund Corpus of spoken English. In: Jan Svartvik (ed.) *The London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English*, 11–17. Lund: Lund University Press.
- Haslerud, Vibecke and Anna-Brita Stenström 1995 The Bergen corpus of London teenager language (COLT). In: Geoffrey Leech, Greg Myers and Jenny Thomas (eds.), *Spoken English on Computer*, 235–242. Harlow: Longman.
- Langacker, Ronald W. 1987 *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Langacker, Ronald W. 1988 The nature of grammatical valence. In: Brygida Rudzka-Ostyn (ed.) *Topics in Cognitive Linguistics*, 91–125. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Langacker, Ronald W. 1990 Subjectification. *Cognitive Linguistics* 1: 2–38.
- Langacker, Ronald W. 1999 *Grammar and Conceptualization*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Langacker, Ronald W. 1997 Constituency, dependency, and conceptual grouping. *Cognitive Linguistics* 8: 1-32.
- Lorenz, Gunter 1999 *Adjective Intensification - Learners vs. Native Speakers: A Corpus Study of Argumentative Writing*. Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi.
- Lorenz, Gunter 2002 *Really worthwhile or not really significant? A corpus-based approach to the delexicalisation and grammaticalisation of intensifiers in Modern English*. In: Ilse Wischer and Gabriele Diewald (eds.) *New Reflections on Grammaticalisation*, 49-68. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins.
- Lyons, John 1977 *Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nevalainen, Terttu 1991 *But, Only, Just; Focusing Adverbial Change in Modern English 1500–1900*. Mémoires de la Société Néophilologique de Helsinki 51. Helsinki: Société néophilologique.
- Nuyts, Jan 1993 Epistemic modal adverbs and adjectives and the layered representation of conceptual and linguistic structure. *Linguistics* 31: 933–969.
- Paradis, Carita 1997 *Degree Modifiers of Adjectives in Spoken British English*. Lund: Lund University Press.
- Paradis, Carita 2000 It's well weird. Degree modifiers of adjectives revisited: The nineties. In: John Kirk (ed.) *Corpora Galore: Analyses and Techniques in Describing English*, 147–160. Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi.
- Paradis, Carita 2001 Adjectives and boundedness. *Cognitive Linguistics*.12.1: 47–65.
- Paradis, Carita (forthcoming) Is the notion of *linguistic competence* relevant in Cognitive Linguistics? *International SCOLA Journal*.
- Pelyvás, Peter 2001 The development of the grounding predication: epistemic modals and cognitive predicates. In: Eniko T.Németh and Károly Bibok (eds.) *Pragmatics and the flexibility of word meaning*, 151-173. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Peppé, Sue 1995 The Survey of English usage and the London-Lund Corpus: Computerising manual prosodic transcription. Geoffrey Leech, Greg Myers and Jenny Thomas (eds.), *Spoken English on Computer*, 187–202. New York: Longman.

- Powell, Mava Jo 1992 The systematic development of correlated interpersonal and metalinguistic uses in stance adverbs. *Cognitive Linguistics* 3.1: 75–110.
- Sanders, Jose and Wilbert Spooren 1996 Subjectivity and certainty in epistemic modality: A study of Dutch epistemic modifiers. *Cognitive Linguistics* 7.3: 241–264.
- Schwenter, Scott A. and Elizabeth Closs Traugott 2000 Invoking scalarity: The development of *in fact*. *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 1.1: 7–22.
- Stenström, Anna-Brita 1986 What does *really* really do? Strategies in speech and writing. In: Gunnel Tottie and Ingegerd Bäcklund (eds.) *English in Speech and Writing*, , 149–163. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.
- Stenström, Anna-Brita 2002 Taking another look at *really*. In: Sybil Scholz, Monika Klages-Kubitzki, Evelyn Hantson and Ute Römer (eds.) *Language: Context and Cognition. Papers in honour of Wolf-Dietrich Bald's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday*. München: Langenscheidt-Longman.
- Svartvik, Jan and Randolph Quirk 1980 *A Corpus of English Conversation*. Lund: Lund University Press.
- Tottie, Gunnel and Carita Paradis 1982 From function to structure. Some pragmatic determinants in impromptu speech. In: Nils-Erik Enkvist (ed.) *Impromptu Speech*, 307–317. Publications of the Research Institute of the Åbo Akademi Foundation nr 78. Åbo.
- Traugott, Elizabeth Closs 1995 Subjectification in grammaticalization. In: Dieter Stein and Susan Wright (eds.) *Subjectivity and Subjectivisation*, 31–54. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Traugott, Elizabeth Closs 1997 Semantic change: an overview. *Glott International* 2:3–6.
- Traugott, Elizabeth Closs 1999 The role of pragmatics in semantic change. In: Jef Verschuren (ed.) *Pragmatics in 1998: Selected Papers from the 6<sup>th</sup> International Pragmatics Conference*, 2: 93–102. Antwerp: International Pragmatics Association.
- Tsujimura, Natsuko 2001 Degree words and scalar structures in Japanese. *Lingua* 111: 29–52.
- Ungerer, Friedrich 1988 *Syntax der Englischen Adverbialen*. Linguistische Arbeiten 215. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.