Exploring mealinguistic intensification. The case of Extreme Degree Modifiers.

Intensifiers like *flat-out, downright, simply, just* have been claimed to form the natural class of *extreme degree modifiers* (henceforth, EDM) by virtue of their sensitivity to adjectival extremeness (M 2011). We analyze EDMs as *metalinguistic intensifiers*, recasting them as manipulators of degrees of speaker's *preference*. The analysis expands the inventory of metalinguistic degree modifiers besides the well known cases (M 2010, G&S 2009, G&Y 2011, B&C 2014), uncovering a new variety of this class of expressions.

EDMs as extreme degree modifiers - Morzycki observes that EDMs are only compatible with *extreme adjectives* (henceforth, EAs), which denote degrees which are so high to exceed contextual salience (in 1a)). Conversely, regular degree modifiers (e.g. *very* in (1b)) are odd with EAs.

(1)   a. flat-out/just/simply/downright {?? good-big-pretty / ✓ excellent-huge-gorgeous)
        b. very {✓ good-big-pretty / ?? excellent-huge-gorgeous}

In his account, both EDMs and *very* compositionally manipulate the degree argument of a gradable adjective. Their complementary distribution is explained by the fact that EDMs encode a domain widening operator which broadens the set of salient degrees to include the extreme ones, resulting in infelicitousness/redundancy with non extreme adjectives. Conversely, because *very* lacks the domain widening mechanism, it fails to access extreme degrees.

More Data - We first discuss additional data which do not directly follow from Morzycki's analysis.

(**I**) If EDMs manipulate the standard of EAs, they should interact with truth-conditional operators like denials or *but*. Yet, *very* sounds much more natural, while EDMs can only receive a metalinguistic reading.

(2)   a. # Chicago is huge, but NYC is [EDM] huge. vs ✓Chicago is big, but NYC is very big.
        b. # A: This pasta is [EDM] fantastic. B: No! It's fantastic, but not [EDM] fantastic.
            ✓A: This Pasta is very good. B: No. It's good, but not very good.

(**II**) EDMs are productive with saturated degree arguments, where degree morphology shouldn't be licensed.

(3)   a. This instrument is not just more efficient but {✓flat-out/*very} better (COCA).
        b. Economic growth since 1992 has been {✓downright/*very} stranger than anything before (COCA)

(**III**) A corpus search on COCA[1] showed that EDMs, while widely attested with EAs, are also higly productive with non-extreme predicates (underlined here). The hits refer to the three most common adjectives with which the modifier is attested.[2]

(4)   **Downright**:Dangerous (n=62), Hostile(27), <u>Silly</u>(26). **Flat-out**:Wrong (n=66), <u>Good</u>(7), Gorgeous(5).

Morzycki claims that EDMs can be sensitive to discourse, as they can also modify *contextually* extreme adjectives (e.g. *dangerous*). These acquire an extremeness flavor when the property is not expected to hold in the previous discourse or whenever someone is objecting to something that was mentioned earlier. Yet, *pretty* or *nice* hardly encode any extremeness. Moreover, discourse can license EDMs not just through expectations or objections, but also by just mentioning an alternative to the adjective (in (5)), in a context that is not obviously skewed towards negative or positive expectations.

(5)   You have not only been fair to Michelle Obama; you've been **downright nice** to her. (COCA)

(**IV**) EDMs share with perspective dependent modifiers the incompatibility with negation and in If-clauses (I 2014). Note that a gradable adjective with a degree modifier would instead be fine here. That EDMs are perspective-dependent is confirmed by the fact that the judgment described above, while normally anchored to the speaker, can be shifted to the matrix attitude holder under attitude predicates.

(6)   a. ?? Chicago is not {flat-out/downright/simply/just} huge/gigantic. (where not > EDM)
        b. ?? If the pizza is {flat-out/downright/simply/just} fantastic, we will eat the whole thing.
        c. Lee thinks that the pizza was {EDM} fantastic. (EDM ascribed to Lee)

The analysis - We propose that EDMs express a non truth-conditional, perspective-dependent metalinguistic evaluation informally paraphrasable as: If {flat-out/downright/simply/just} P, then the speaker / attitude holder makes explicit that the use of no other alternative expression F would be preferable to the use of P in

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[1]http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/

[2]*Just* and *simply* were excluded because of the ambiguity with an adverbial and a focus particle (≈only) sense.

the context. We model the metalinguistic judgment in terms of: **(a)** An individual anchor α, which represents the source of the judgment (B&C 2014); **(b)** A gradable attitude predicate R, which expresses α's *degree of preference* towards the use of an expression (G&S 2009); **(c)** A focus operator $[[]]_C^f$, which provides a set of weaker contextually salient alternatives F1,F2,Fn to P, all of which are entailed by P .

(7) $[\![\text{EDM}]\!] = \lambda P. \exists\, F: F \in [[P]]_C^f \wedge P \to F, [\forall\, F \in [[P]]_C^f : \mathbf{d{:}R(d)(P)(\alpha)} > \mathbf{d{:}\ R(d)(F)(\alpha)}]_u$

The denotation is composed of two parts: (i) a presupposition that there is at least a salient alternative to P and such alternative is entailed by P (in italics); (ii) a non truth-conditional (type *u*, see G 2011) evaluation whereby α expresses a higher degree of preference for P than to any alternative F (in boldface). In this view, EDMs' distribution is not governed by a selectional restriction for degrees exceeding contextual salience, but is contingent on the satisfaction of the initial presupposition, that is, on the availability of alternatives F which can be compared to P and which are entailed by P. In particular, alternatives can be supplied in two ways: lexically, as is the case for EAs and markedly negative evaluative adjectives, or discursively ($\approx$ Morzycki's contextual EAs).

LICENSING - EAs, be them contextual or lexical, naturally invoke a set of salient alternatives by virtue of their semantics. Such alternatives represent expressions associated with non-extreme, and therefore lower degrees on the scale.

(8) $[[\text{Gorgeous}]]_C = \{$Gorgeous, Nice, Pretty, Beautiful … $\}$ (GORG + WEAKER ALTERNATIVES)

(9) $[\![\text{Downright(Gorg.)}]\!] = \forall\, F \in [[\text{Gorg.}]]_C, [\mathbf{d{:}R(d)(Gorg.)(\alpha)} > \mathbf{d{:}R(d)(\{Ni, Pret, Beaut\dots\})(\alpha)}]_u$

For non-extreme (e.g. *nice*), the meaning of the expression by itself is not enough to evoke alternatives out of the blue, resulting in infelicitous combination with EDMs. Yet, discourse can still license the use of an EDM by explicitly evoking an alternative in the previous context (in (5)).

(10) $[[\text{Nice}]]_C = \{$Nice, Fair$\}$ (NICE + EXPLICITLY MENTIONED ALTERNATIVE)

(11) $[\![\text{Downright(Nice)}]\!] = \forall\, F \in [[]]_C, [\mathbf{d{:}R(d)(Nice)(\alpha)} > \mathbf{d{:}R(d)(Fair)(\alpha)}]_u$

Hardwiring the asymmetric entailment relationship between P and the alternatives Fs into the denotation of the EDM is necessary to rule out weakening uses of EDMs, in which stronger alternatives are excluded. An instance would be an use of *# flat-out nice* where the EDM signals that the speaker prefers the use of *nice* to the use of stronger alternatives like *beautiful* or *gorgeous*.

DERIVING THE OTHER PROPERTIES - On this view, expressions lexicalizing extremeness easily make alternatives available and are therefore natural hosts for EDMs. Yet, EDMs do not compositionally interact with gradability (let alone, extreme degrees). This explains why they can be found with saturated degree arguments (3a-3b). Their nature as truth-conditionally vacuous modifiers correctly predicts that EDMs do not raise the standard of the adjective, cannot be challenged and do not contribute to the asserted content (2). Finally, the speaker-oriented nature of EDMs has been modeled by relativizing the metalinguistic judgment to an anchor, accounting for perspective shifts, and for the incompatibility of EDMs with negation and antecedent of If clauses, like other kinds of non truth-conditional content (P 2007, I 2014).

The broader picture - EDMs represent a novel case of metalinguistic degree modifiers, a category which recently sparked interest in semantics (G&Y 2011, M 2010, B&C 2014). Besides broadening the (thus far, limited) domain of known metalinguistic morphemes, the paper unveils an intriguing amount of complexity within the category, showing that metalinguistic operators (i) extend beyond comparatives and hedges, and (ii) come in a non-truth conditional flavor, besides those which do affect the truth-conditions (B&C 2014).

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