

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

BRIDGING THE GAP: INTENSIFIERS BETWEEN SEMANTIC AND SOCIAL MEANING

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS

BY  
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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

JUNE 2016

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For Livia, for *supportarmi e sopportarmi*. Not sure in what order.

Presto ti accorgerai  
com'è facile farsi un inutile software di scienza  
e vedrai  
che confuso problema è adoprare la propria esperienza  
(Francesco Guccini)

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# Acknowledgments

This dissertation would have never been started, let alone completed, without the support and guidance of Chris Kennedy, my main advisor. I will never forget the grin on his face when I first mentioned, not exactly knowing what I was doing, my intention of writing a thesis that would combine formal semantics and sociolinguistics. Not only did he take me seriously; he was flat-out enthusiastic, perhaps genuinely amused, at the idea of a student of his venturing down this unusual path. Nothing speaks to Chris' nature more than what he said in that moment. He has always invited me to embrace the challenge and follow my instincts, even when this could have made things more complicated; and he never allowed me to give up my intellectual autonomy and critical thinking, patiently waiting until I figured out my own way of getting out of trouble. It was his commitment to treating me as an independent, self-reliant scholar, even more than his brilliant comments and suggestions, that made my experience as a graduate student memorable.

I am also deeply indebted to my other committee members. As an advisor and a collaborator, Ming Xiang patiently took the time and effort to train me in the task of collecting and analyzing experimental data. Besides teaching me the basic technical skills, she constantly ensured to stress the importance of paying attention to every little detail, from designing a study to reporting its findings. Her thoroughness, as well as her relentless work ethics, have been truly inspiring. Through dozens of endless meetings, Itamar Francez has mentored my work through his sharp skepticism. His insistence on explicitness and clarity, while preventing him from getting past the first page of any handout that I would hand him, pushed me to critically reflect on any step of my semantic analyses. His unique ability to put the pieces back together right after shattering the

picture that I would come up with crucially helped me sharpen my thinking. Aside from Chris, Laura Staum Casasanto was the first person with whom I discussed my dissertation project. Interestingly enough, that was also our first time we ever met. Her optimism and dedication were crucial in jump starting this research, as well as to revive it when things seemed stagnant. I will be forever grateful for her continued commitment and availability, even when she would have been fully justified in being more protective with her time. Penny Eckert welcomed me at Stanford in the Fall of 2015. I showed up as a fifth year graduate student with no experience in sociolinguistic research, and yet a strong desire to engage with this discipline. Her insightful questions pushed me to revise all my not-so-warranted assumptions; her comments were crucial to inform the central hypotheses and claims of the thesis. I will forever treasure our weekly conversations as one of the most intellectually rewarding moments of these years. Finally, Michael Silverstein played a crucial role in sparking my desire to pursue a doctorate. His “Language in Culture” seminar was by far the most intellectually enriching course I have ever taken. His eloquence, his apparent omniscience and his unparalleled sense of humor made me fascinated with the plurality of perspectives from which language can be studied. The decision to embark on this particular topic would not have been made without the inspiration of his lectures, his papers, and the insights that he shared.

My development as a linguist has been crucially shaped by the interaction with many other scholars, both within and outside my home department. Besides being an inspiring teacher, Susan Gal has been a constant source of mentoring and support, both with respect to my research questions and my professional development. After initiating me to the wonderland of syntactic islands and portobello mushrooms, Karlos Arregi showed me the ropes of abstract writing and conference presenting, empowering me with skills that will hopefully come handy for many years to come. Through many intense meetings and exchanges of written materials, Anastasia Giannakidou and Alda Mari pushed me to explore the study of modality, veridicality, and homogeneity, leading me to discover notions that would have ended up playing a crucial role in the formal proposals outlined in the thesis. I am also grateful to them for inviting me to present at the workshop that they organized in December 2015. Whenever I approached him, Malte Willer was never short of

comments and suggestions. His broad perspective on meaning and linguistic phenomena helped me keep the big picture in sight, even when I was on the verge of getting lost in the details of my analysis. Lenore Grenoble provided much needed help and support, as she helped me navigate the challenges and the tough decisions that I had to face during the job market season. During my first year, Jason Merchant and Jerry Sadock struck me as fantastic instructors. Their classes helped me feel reassured about the decision to pursue a Ph.D, and deeply contributed to shape my interests. Costas Nakassis was a discussant of all the three papers that I presented at the Michigan conference. His comments have always been incredibly insightful and sharp, as they greatly contributed to my efforts to think about the concept of meaning across linguistic and anthropology. I would like to thank Chris Potts, Cleo Condoravdi, Beth Levin and Rob Podesva, who made me feel welcome and engaged during my (too) brief stint at Stanford University. I am especially indebted to Dan Lassiter for the time and effort he has devoted to my work since the early stage of my Ph.D, and for inviting me to present at the Cognition and Language Workshop. As the first invited presentation of my life, that moment did feel special. Elena Castroviejo has been an invaluable source of honest, genuine advice since my first year in Chicago. I am not sure she fully realizes how important her presence has been in my first quarter as a graduate student. Finally, Ivano Caponigro treated me to some of the most scenic meals I have ever had in my life. His advice on my dissertation research and my professional development, as well as his relentless effort to recommend my work to colleagues, have been invaluable. Sole-wrapped scallops overlooking the San Francisco Bay made everything better. I would also like to thank many other people who not only took the time to listen to my questions and ideas, but also provided very insightful comments to help me improve my work. A non exhaustive list includes Eric Acton, Chris Ahern, Patricia Amaral, Mar Bassa, Rajesh Bhatt, Heather Burnett, Lisa Bylinina, Seth Cable, Kathryn Campbell-Kibler, Ailis Courname, Ashwini Deo, Annette D’Onofrio, Regine Eckardt, Ilaria Frana, Bob Frank, Chiara Gianollo, Lelia Glass, Daniel Gutzmann, Jesse Harris, Aaron Hirsch, Dorothea Hoffman, Larry Horn, Patricia Irwin, Kyle Jerro, Tim Leffel, Ruth Maddeaux, Eric McCready, Louise McNally, Marcin Morzycki, Rick Nouwen, Colin Phillips, Teresa Pratt, Jessica Rett, Gareth Roberts, Jacopo

Romoli, Paolo Santorio, Osamu Sawada, Florian Schwarz, Galit Sassoon, Muffy Siegel, E. Allyn Smith, Stephanie Solt, Jon Sprouse, Sali Tagliamonte, Meredith Tamminga, Joseph Tyler, Suzanne Evans Wagner, Gregory Ward, Alexis Wellwood, Raffaella Zanuttini. Finally, I would like to thank Malvina Nissim, Bart Tkaczyk and Milos Petrovic for convincing me well before embarking on this adventure that I would have been able to survive in a Ph.D program, and maybe even enjoy it. Bart is the first person who introduced me to linguistics, in the most serendipitous of all ways. Milos greatly contributed to my intellectual growth, as we engaged in memorable conversations over less memorable dorm food in UC Berkeley I-House. Malvina, and advisor and instructor of mine at the University of Bologna, came up to me after class and just said “I assume you want to go for a Ph.D”. I had known her since the day before, and it felt like she had known me forever.

Needless to say, I would have never made it to the end of my program without the wonderful company of my fellow students. I am especially thankful to Ryan Bochnak, Peet Klecha and Yaron McNabb for being great mentors, inspiring scholars and supportive friends when I took my first steps as a linguist. I learned as much from them as I did from any faculty member. Emily Hanink has been – mirative *like* – the best desk neighbor ever. Julian Grove shared an office with me for six years, and provided help on an unbelievable wide variety of things, ranging from coding stimuli to writing denotations. Helena Aparicio has always been there to listen and support. Katie Franich is simply too awesome a person to be real. Jackson Lee and Tasos Chatzikonstantinou have been loyal cohort buddies in a first year filled with challenges and hurdles. Giovanni Ricci and Britta Ingebretson were great conversation partners and dining companions, whether we were sampling prosciutto in 100% Italian osterie or enjoying gnocchi in Chicago apartments. I likewise owe a lot to many other graduate students in my department, and in particular to Carissa Abrego Collier, Omar Agha, Rebekah Baglini, Leah Chapman, Janet Connor, Josh Falk, Gallagher Flinn, Arum Kang, Jon Keane, Julia Goldsmith-Pinkham, Thomas Grano, Tim Grinsell, Martina Martinovic, Hannah McElgunn, Hilary McMahan, Kate Mooney, Patrick Munoz, Chieu Nguyen, Natalia Pavlou, Asia Pietraszko, Betsy Pillon, Diane Rak, Adam Singerman, Julia Thomas, Tamara Vardomszkaya, Brandon Waldon. Finally, I had the privilege of interacting with great students as an

instructor or a teaching assistant. For a graduate student, their talent for linguistics was somewhat intimidating, yet inspiring. Not sure if I ever taught them anything; but I sure learned a lot from them.

As much as I loved my work environment, my years in Chicago would not have been the same without the company of friends outside of academia. The Italian community in Chicagoland has been a tremendous source of support. I am grateful, in particular, to Pietro Biroli and Cecilia Gamba, great hiking partners in the rugged Midwest; to Eugenia Macchia and Alessandro Manzotti, who shared the perks of living the high life in the West Loop restaurants; to Guglielmo Becuti, Giorgio Grasselli, Massimiliano Ferrara and Zora Baretta for never taking me too seriously; to Francesco Dragone and Alice Larotonda, for paying brief, yet very intense visits; and to Simone Donei, for keeping me company on the press row during topnotch and less topnotch basketball games. A special shout out goes to Stefano Graziotti and Olivier Burtin, with whom I shared unforgettable dining and travel memories. I will be forever indebted to Kristin Leffel for teaching the linguist that *dumplings* and *dumplins* are the same thing after all, and for offering a great tour of northern Denmark, also known as Lexington, KY. Ashley Telman and Jonah Radding are arguably the coolest couple I have ever met. Amy, Lucio and Giulio have been fantastic quasi-in-laws and always helped me keep perspective, even when it looked very hard to do so. I am extremely grateful to V Chaudry, Ryan Lash, Ruby Laurel Fried, Aydin Özipek, Ken Opalo, Vanessa Watters and the many people in the anthropology department of Northwestern University, with whom I have had the privilege of spending most of my free time during the writing process. Elisa Lanari provided bonus meatballs and editing support in the process, and thus deserves a special mention.

Although I rarely saw them in these years, my friends from Italy were always there to provide support, make fun of me or sending me pictures of incredible fish. I am sincerely grateful to David Bianchini, Valentina Calzoni, Marco Caslini, Francesco and Massimo De Buglio, Francesco De Giorgi, Carlo Gerolamo Lai, Gianfranco Lelli, Luca Marozzi, Federica Mescia, Elio Narducci, Andrea Negroni, Michele Pettene, Alberto Piras, Chiara Rapella, Arturo and Riccardo Schena, Luigi Sciubba, Alessio Torri, Bruno Trebbi, Federico Triulzi and the distinguished *Pesca Sel-*

*vaggia* Whatsapp group. Just thanks for being there! A special mention goes to the sports editors that summoned and published my basketball articles throughout these years. They might not realize it, but nothing boosts an academic's ego more than seeing their work published a few hours after submission. Thus, thanks to Mauro Bevacqua, Davide Chinellato, Daniele Labanti, Claudio Limardi, Giuseppe Nigro, Massimo Oriani Dario Vismara for involving me, and teaching me how to do it. Of course, thanks to all those who took the time to read those pieces, and in particular to the college basketball fans who have been part of the #ItalianMadness community. Those crazy April nights shall not be forgotten. Finally, special thanks to Roberto Gotta. A true *Maestro*.

I would have never made to this point without the unfaltering support of my family members. Despite not having a clue about what I was doing, they have never ceased to push me, from the day I decided to come to Chicago to the last days before graduation. I might not be the best person at manifesting my feelings, but I want to be clear that everything I accomplished is owed to them. I am grateful to Mauro and Carlotta for always being there for me. Millino, Jenny and Wanda have been dreamlike grandparents in so many respects. I am delighted that two of them will make it out here for graduation. And Neni, who passed away at the end of my first year, would have been likewise proud of this accomplishment. It would have been perfect if it came in 2015. But I suspect he can live with that. I am forever indebted to Virginia, my sister, for being so good at understanding and accepting even the strangest quirks of my character. Her visits to Chicago have been of the most fulfilling moments of these years. Finally, thanks to Simonetta and Paolo, my parents, for pushing me beyond my comfort zone even when they would have had every interest in doing the opposite. To me, that is the utmost form of love.

Last, *but not least*, Livia Garofalo has been more than a partner throughout these years. She has been a friend, an advisor, a travel mate, a teacher, a source of fun and consolation, a rock. I met her the night before starting my program. I was scared, and so was she, as she was about to begin her adventure as an exchange student. I honestly do not know how, and if, I would have made it without her by my side at any given moment. This Ph.D is hers as much as it is mine. She jokingly says that she got this degree vicariously. I just think she fully earned it.

# Abstract

The ability to convey *meaning* is a fundamental property of human language. Three main aspects, in particular, have drawn the attention of linguists: *semantic* meaning, that is, the content that is conventionally associated with words; *pragmatic* meaning, that is, the integration of semantic meaning with information from the communicative context in which a sentence is used; and *social* meaning (Eckert 2008), the package of stances, socio/psychological features and stereotypes that linguistic forms index about the speakers who typically use them. This dissertation aims to cast light on the interaction between these components by looking at *intensification*, a linguistic phenomenon that cuts across all such domains of meaning. In particular, I focus on two case studies: *totally* in English and *-issimo* in Italian.

In the first part of the dissertation, I provide a formal analysis of the semantic and pragmatic meaning of these two intensifiers. Concerning *totally*, I show in Chapter 2 that the intensifier can either target lexical scales or attitudinal scales. Concerning the attitudinal use, I show that it is crucially tied to two orders of factors: the type of content conveyed by the proposition – and in particular whether such content has subjective or factual nature – and the discourse position in which *totally* is used. In light of this, I model *totally* in terms of a speech-act intensifier, arguing that it serves the purpose of flagging the speaker’s meta-conversational belief that every felicitous continuation of the conversation should involve the addition of *p* to the Common Ground. Concerning *-issimo*, I argue that the contribution of the intensifier across different linguistic environments can be captured by positing a unified meaning, rather than two related ones. I propose that such a meaning involves universal quantification over all the possible metalinguistic choices – or *coun-*

*terstances* – that can be made to resolve the interpretation of context-sensitive predicates. The different effects that we observe emerge as a result of the interaction between this core operation and the different semantic and pragmatic properties of the host.

To investigate the relationship between the semantic/pragmatic features and the social meaning of the intensifiers, I rely on a social perception task, in which listeners are asked to rate the speaker of a sentence along a set of dimensions of social evaluation. Two separate studies reveal an empirical association between the salience of the indexed social meaning and the specific semantic and pragmatic properties of both intensifiers. For *totally*, the salience of the social content appears to be significantly more prominent for non-lexical (e.g., *totally tall*) rather than lexical uses (e.g., *totally full*) across a number of different predicates. A parallel association emerges for *-issimo*, with the suffix emerging as a much stronger carrier of social meaning in cases in which the modified property's extension features fixed, non context-sensitive boundaries (e.g., “dorado fish” as opposed to “tall”), and therefore required the interlocutors to accommodate a source of metalinguistic contingency for the interpretation of the property.

Concerning the principles driving this connection, I suggest that two factors make *-issimo* and *totally* a suitable context for the emergence of social meaning. First, the semantic meaning of both expressions, via different routes, presupposes and fosters a heightened degree of proximity between the speaker and the hearer at the pragmatic level, which renders these expressions particularly apt for being reinterpreted as indexes of social characteristics. Second, both the relevant uses of *totally* and *-issimo* are linguistically *marked* with respect to their lexical counterparts, where markedness emerges in different ways depending on the particular intensifier. Their marked status, in turn, makes these intensifiers stand out as particularly noticeable, creating an effect of surprise and unexpectedness that amplifies the social meaning of the expression in a similar fashion to what has been observed for linguistic forms in the domain of phonological and morphosyntactic variation (Bender 2000; Podesva 2011).

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: meaning at the intersections

The ability to convey *meaning* is a fundamental property of human language. As language users, we all share the intuition that words and sentences are associated with different kinds of *content*, which allow us to rely on language to exchange information, describe the world, build social relationships. It is thus not surprising that the notion of meaning has received considerable scholarly attention from every discipline engaged with investigating the human. Three main aspects, in particular, have drawn the attention of linguists: (i) *semantic* meaning; (ii) *pragmatic* meaning; (iii) *social* meaning.

### 1.1 Varieties of meaning

#### 1.1.1 Semantic meaning

The first component, which I henceforth label the *semantic* component of meaning, concerns the content that is conventionally associated with morphemes, as well as the formal rules whereby we can combine them into sentences. Let us consider, for example, the following words, each of which is associated with the rough semantic meaning indicated on the right hand side of the  $\approx$  sign.

- (1) a. **A**  $\approx$  one
- b. **Dude**  $\approx$  male human being

- c. **Drank**  $\approx$  ingested a liquid substance
- d. **Some**  $\approx$  a nonzero amount of a substance
- e. **Booze**  $\approx$  beer

Yet, semantic meaning is not just about the conventional content associated with atomic morphemes. It also, crucially, involves the combinatory rules that allow us to assemble such morphemes into sentences, and to compute the *truth conditions* that such sentences have, that is, the state that the world must be in for the sentence to be true. Putting the pieces in (1) together, we obtain a set of truth conditions roughly paraphrasable as the following:

- (2) “A dude drank some booze” is true iff one male human being ingested a nonzero amount of beer.

It is precisely the ability of atomic, word-level semantic meanings to combine into more complex sentences that underlies language’s capability to describe the world, allowing us to judge such descriptions as true or false depending on whether the state of the world matches the truth-conditions specified by their content.

### 1.1.2 Pragmatic meaning

While the paraphrase in (2) gets us quite far in the interpretation of the sentence, the message conveyed by this string of words does not boil down to a set of truth conditions. Rather, it is integrated with information from the communicative context in which the sentence is used, including the interlocutors’ intentions, the interlocutors’ world knowledge, and the sentences that were deployed in the previous stages of the conversation. I will henceforth refer to such contextually enriched content as *pragmatic* meaning. For instance, if a sentence like (2) is uttered in a context in which the guy in question is being hospitalized for alcohol poisoning, the conventional meaning of the sentence can further be enriched with the inference that the speaker was being sarcastic, and meant to convey that a large quantity of booze had indeed been consumed. A different context, however, would engender a radically different kind of enrichment. For example, imagine the following

exchange.

(3) Lucy: What happened at the frat party?

John: Oh, a dude drank some booze.

Here, uttering (2) in response to Lucy's question will likely be taken to convey that nothing unusual happened at the party, thus triggering a pragmatic inference that will engender a different interpretation from the one associated with the scenario in which the subject is hospitalized. While many other types of contextual integration can be imagined, the emerging picture is one in which the content of words and sentences is not limited to the semantic meaning conventionally associated with linguistic expressions, but is also crucially affected by how we integrate this content with the information that we know in the context.

### 1.1.3 Social meaning

Words and sentences, however, do not merely convey information about the world or the interlocutors' communicative intentions. They also reveal a rich constellation of cues about *language users* themselves: their social class, their personality, their attitudes, and the particular image of themselves that they intend to project with respect to either of these dimensions. Following Eckert's foundational work (Eckert 2000, 2008), I will refer to this part of content as *social meaning*, defining it as the package of stances, socio/psychological features and stereotypes that linguistic forms index about the speakers who typically use them. In alternative to social meaning, I will also be referring to this content as *social indexicality*, following Silverstein (1976, 2003) (see Chapter 3 for further discussion). Again, a simple sentence like (2) can provide several examples of this dimension of meaning. Consider the term *dude*, for instance. Its use, at least in the cultural context of northern America, would easily trigger an association with specific sociopsychological features such as "laid back", "casual", "young", as well as more defined typologies of speakers. Its use by a member of a fraternity, for instance, would sound considerably more plausible than its use by a distinguished professor (see Kiesling 2004). By the same token, a similar type of content is conveyed by a word like "booze". If we replace it with an expression like "beer", which retains

much of the semantic and pragmatic content of “booze”, but obviously fails to convey the same kind of information about the speaker, suggesting that these two words do *not* convey exactly the same content. In sum, social meaning emerges as another crucial component of what linguistic expressions “say” when they are used in communication, pointing to a third important dimension of the content conveyed by the use of language.

#### **1.1.4 Intersections**

In the history of linguistics, each dimension of meaning has been investigated in great detail. Yet, while outstanding progress has been made in every domain, we are still far from having a complete picture of how these three components of meaning *interact* with one another, and in particular of how the semantic and pragmatic components of meaning relate to the social component. This dissertation aims to make progress towards a better understanding of this issue by looking at *intensification*, a linguistic phenomenon that cuts across all the domains of meaning described above.

### **1.2 Intensifiers at the interfaces**

At an intuitive level, we can define intensifiers as “linguistic devices that boost the meaning of a property upwards from an assumed norm” (Quirk et al. 1985). Examples of such expressions, in English, include *very*, *really*, *so*, *extremely*, along with many others. While all intensifiers can be seen as devices that, roughly speaking, strengthen the meaning of the expression they combine with, their linguistic properties reveal a striking amount of complexity along all dimensions of meaning outlined above. Here, I will focus on two issues in particular.

#### **1.2.1 Issue 1: intensifiers between lexical and non-lexical scales**

Since the seminal work of Bolinger (1972) and Quirk et al. (1985), the notion of intensification has received considerable attention in semantic research. Let us take the following examples, with the intensifiers in italics.

- (4) Mark is *very* tall.
- (5) He's *really* beautiful.
- (6) This room is *awfully* messy.

These expressions share a rather straightforward condition of use: in order to be felicitous they *require* the availability of a scalar, non-discrete dimension (Eckardt 2009), whose intensity they can modulate accordingly. I shall call this requirement the *scalarity requirement*.

- (7) SCALARITY REQUIREMENT: An intensifier modifying S carries the presupposition that S is a gradable property in the first place.

Instances of intensification can be classified in two groups, depending on the particular strategy whereby they fulfill this requirement. The first category, which I dub *lexical* intensification, includes contexts in which the target scale is lexically provided by a gradable predicate. The second category, which I dub *non-lexical intensification*, includes contexts in which no scale is lexically available, and one needs to be recruited from either the broader pragmatic context or other semantic features of the modified expression. I now turn to discuss each of these two varieties.

### **Lexical intensification**

In (4-6) above, the scalarity presupposition is satisfied by the presence of a *gradable* adjective - e.g. *tall*, *messy*, *beautiful* (von Stechow 1984; Bierwisch 1989; Yoon 1996; Heim 2000; Kennedy and McNally 2005; Kennedy 2007 among others). What distinguishes these expressions from other property-denoting predicates is precisely the fact that they inherently encode an ordering within their semantic meaning. This ordering can then be compositionally accessed by specialized modifiers – also known as *degree morphemes* – that can manipulate the particular degree to which the property holds. Evidence for the claim that gradable predicates form a natural class comes from the fact that they felicitously combine with other grammatical constructions that also require that the relevant property have gradient nature, such as comparatives (in (8)) and wh-degree questions

(in (9)). Note that binary, all-or-nothing properties, instead, do not lend themselves to being used felicitously in these environments.

- (8) a. *How* messy is the room?  
 b. Mark is tall-*er* than John
- (9) a. ?? *How* ink-made is that line?  
 b. ?? Mark is *more* bipedal than John

This intuition has been cashed out in different ways. In the current thesis, I follow the so-called degree-based approach (Cresswell 1976; Heim 2000; Kennedy 1997; Kennedy and McNally 2005; von Stechow 1984 among many others), according to which gradable adjectives map their arguments onto abstract representations of measurement, or *degrees*. Such degrees, once ordered with respect to some dimension, such as *height, size, fullness* (Kennedy 2007), form what we normally refer to as a *scale*. In type-theoretic terms, I assume that degrees are independent ontological primitives of type  $d$ , and are encoded as an open argument in the lexical entries of gradable predicates. In particular, I follow Heim (2000) and Kennedy and McNally (2005) in treating *tall* and other gradable adjectives as relations from degrees to individuals of type  $\langle d, et \rangle$ , where “ $d$ ” represents a degree of type  $d$  and “ $x$ ” is an individual of type  $e$ .<sup>1</sup>

$$(10) \quad \llbracket \text{TALL} \rrbracket_{\langle d, et \rangle} = \lambda d \lambda x. \text{tall}(d)(x)$$

If this is the meaning of a gradable predicate, how does an intensifier combine with it? The general idea is that the degree to which the individual features the property must exceed or reach some sort of threshold  $\theta$ , which can either coincide with the maximum point of the scale (e.g., in *full*<sup>2</sup>)

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1. An alternative proposal is to treat gradable adjectives as expressions of type  $\langle e, d \rangle$ , which encode measure functions from individuals to degrees. See Kennedy (2007) for an implementation. It must also be noted that degree-less analyses have been proposed, according to which gradable predicates have the same type as non gradable ones. On this approach gradable predicates still inherently make an ordering available to the semantic composition, but such an ordering is not encoded as part of the semantic representation. See in particular Klein (1980a) and Doetjes et al. (2009). Note that the claims argued for in the dissertation do not hinge on any of the available proposals for modeling the semantics of gradable predicates.

2. Whether the threshold for adjectives *full* coincides with the maximum point on the scale is currently a matter of debate. See Section 5.3.3 for further discussion.

or with a point located on an intermediate point along the scale (e.g., *tall*). For instance, a person counts as *tall* if she exceeds the standard  $\theta$  for *tall* that is fixed by the specific context. This intuition has been implemented by Kennedy and McNally (2005) by suggesting that gradable adjectives in the positive form compose with a silent morpheme POS which saturates the degree argument and provides the relevant standard. The core idea is that intensifiers manipulate the relation between the degree to which the object instantiates the property and such a standard, requiring that the threshold is exceeded by a larger amount than it is exceeded in the positive form. For instance, among the people who are already *tall*, only those who can meet such a new, higher threshold count as *very tall*. This intuition can be implemented in various ways. One proposal, for instance, is to posit that the standard be exceeded by a noticeably large amount (represented by the  $>>$  symbol).

- (11) a.  $\llbracket \text{POS TALL} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \exists d[\text{tall}(x)(d) \wedge d > \theta_{\text{tall}}]$   
 b.  $\llbracket \text{VERY TALL} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \exists d[\text{tall}(x)(d) \wedge d >> \theta_{\text{tall}}]$

The emerging picture is one in which lexical intensification appears to be a fully compositional semantic phenomenon, where the end result is the outcome of the combination of elements that are overtly realized in lexical material.

### Non-lexical intensification

The empirical landscape, however, is more complex. In particular, it has been noted that certain intensifiers can also operate in the *absence* of a gradable predicate. Relevant examples are provided by the English *so* and *totally* (Bylinina 2011; Zwicky 2011; McCready and Kaufmann 2013; Irwin 2014) and the Italian *-issimo*.

- (12) a. Man in “I have drugs” shirt *totally* had drugs.<sup>3</sup>  
 b. *Abbiamo appena preso questa lampugh-issima.*  
 We.have just caught this doradofish-ISSIMO.  
 ‘We just caught this quintessential dorado-fish.’

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3. <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/wtf-florida-man-in-i-have-drugs-shirt-totally-had-drugs-6542858>

c. Jamie has *so* dated that type of guy before.

From Irwin (2014)

In all these cases, there appears to be no argument that provides a lexical scale. Just like having or not having drugs is a discrete event, the state of affairs associated with having dated a guy or being a dorado fish are absolute, rather than gradient. Unsurprisingly, none of these predicates can be embedded in comparative constructions, contrary to the predicates considered in the previous section.

(13) \*The man in “I have drugs” shirt had drugs more than the man in “I have cigarettes” shirt.

(14) \*Jamie has dated John more than Fred.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, despite the absence of a scale, not only does the intensifier sound perfectly natural; it also clearly retains its “boosting effect” on a scalar dimension. Note, moreover, that a similar behavior is featured by other modifiers that, despite not performing an intensifying function, still presuppose the presence of a scale. Well known examples are *-ish* (Sugawara 2012; Bochnak and Csipak 2014) and *metalinguistic comparatives* like *more* (McCawley 1998; Giannakidou and Yoon 2011; Morzycki 2011a).

(15) a. Your problems are *more* financial than legal.

From McCawley (1998)

b. We like the movie ...*-ish*.

From Bochnak and Csipak (2014)

These cases raise a question: if the scale is not provided by a gradable predicate, what is the source of scalarity on which the modifier operates? Broadly speaking, the response advocated by most scholars is that, in such contexts, scalar modifiers track a *pragmatic* attitude that relates the speaker to the overall content of the proposition. While these two dimensions pertain to separate linguistic levels – one operates within the propositional content, the other on the propositional content of the utterance – they share an isomorphic scalar structure which allows them to be “measured” and boosted (or attenuated) by intensifiers. However, while this empirical generalization is certain

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4. An available reading would be one in which one man has a larger amount of drugs than the other, or one in which one relationship lasted for a greater amount of time than the other. But this doesn't mean that the property of “having drugs” or “dating” applies to a larger degree in one case as opposed to the other. Both of them fully instantiate the property.

valuable, much remains to be understood about the semantic and pragmatic properties of non-lexical intensification. On the one hand, notions like “speaker commitment”, “certainty”, “emotive involvement” – all of which have been proposed in the literature on this phenomenon (see Chapter 2) – are intuitively sound ideas to describe the superficial effect that intensification obtains in this context. On the other hand, they cannot by themselves provide a detailed account of the mechanism(s) whereby such scales are supplied to the intensifiers, and how their interpretation is affected by the contextual setting in which the utterance is produced. An equally important issue concerns the extent to which non-lexical intensifiers constitute a homogeneous category. Do intensifiers like *totally*, *so*, *-issimo* all rely on the same core mechanism to access the scale that they target when no gradable predicate is lexically available? Or does each of these morphemes, despite the superficially similar effects, contribute its meaning through a genuinely different mechanism, thus highlighting non-lexical intensification as an internally varied landscape? Casting further light on these issues, and in particular focusing on the relationship between the formal property of non-lexical intensification and the broader communicative contexts in which these intensifiers are used, represents the first major goal of the present dissertation.

### 1.2.2 Issue 2: from scales to *social* meaning

Just as intensifiers constitute a complex and articulated object of study for their semantic and pragmatic properties, they also provide a rich, yet largely unexplored ground for investigating the *social* component of meaning. In the first place, many such expressions emerge as prolific carriers of social meaning. Let us consider two examples to have a better grasp on this observation. The first one is, once again, *totally*.

(16) I *totally* had this hat as a child . . . The bill *totally* quacks when you squeeze it.<sup>5</sup>

The use of *totally* in the context, beside providing a nontrivial semantic and pragmatic contribution, also conveys information about *who* is likely to have made use of the sentence, or, at the very least,

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5. <https://instagram.com/p/zEZEQQqYPY/>

how this person wanted to sound. For instance, most English speakers would promptly associate uses of *totally* as in (16) with a certain set of social qualities and attributes, ranging from demographic traits – e.g., young, perhaps female –, to membership with specific groups – e.g., “Valley Girls” – and more specific effects – e.g., “high emotivity”, “amusement”. It is also important to consider that, moreover, these effects are not completely contingent on a particular sentence, but rather seem to have undergone a certain degree of conventionalization, as shown by the fact that they systematically surface in circulating stereotypes about the users of the intensifier. A telling example comes from the site [www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com), an open repository of stereotypes, caricatural associations and social beliefs that are normally associated with a particular expression, and which represent a viable first step to tap into an expression’s social meaning<sup>6</sup>:

1. It’s a word used by ditzzy young girls that means definitely or for sure.

*He, like, totally dumped me! OMG! Like, you must have been, like, totally shocked!*

2. Valley Girl Speak that means “Of course!”

*You coming to my party?*

*Like, totally!*

3. A word used for emphasis. Makes you sound kinda “cheerleaderish” when you use it. *Ran-*

*dom: I totally failed that maths test.*

*Courtney: Your IQ drops by at least 20 points everytime you say ‘totally’*

4. A word used by girly girls, poppers, and rich spoiled little brats. They use it in sentences, it doesn’t really mean anything, its just their way of speaking. *Are you going to do your makeup now, or in 30 seconds?*

*Like, Totally, OMG!! Of course I’m gonna do it now, I can’t let anyone see me without it, you know, like totally eew.*

5. The smartest comment one can make in the margin of academic articles. *”The hegemonic*

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6. Source: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=totally>

*dialectic surrounding the rising instance of rhetorical myositis ossificans is pedantic beyond belief.” And in the margin: “Totally.”*

*“Are you going to the bar tonight?” Response: “Totally.”*

A similar scenario emerges in connection to a particular use of *so*, which is commonly dubbed “Generation X so” (Zwicky 2011), and has been claimed to be strongly associated with young white women (in the U.S.), “no doubt because of its prominence in the movies *Heathers* (1988) and *Clueless* (1994)” (Zwicky 2011: 4). Precisely the association with a category like “Generation X”, which designates a group of speakers with highly specific social attributes and stylistic features<sup>7</sup>, provides an example of how certain intensifiers come to convey a package of content that goes well beyond their semantic and pragmatic meaning. Moreover, these associations are not only evoked locally. Rather, they circulate within the social space, as shown by the fact that they can be constantly referenced and exploited to create similar effects.

In light of these observations, two main questions emerge from the perspective of social meaning. The first one, quite straightforwardly, involves a more precise characterization of the *social meaning* invoked by these expressions. As we have seen, both *totally* and *so* convey a rather articulated package of information about their typical users, including demographic information, more idiosyncratic social categories and local interactional effects. More interestingly, such a package appears to have undergone a certain degree of conventionalization: it has detached itself from the contingency of a particular occurrence, establishing itself as part of the content that is systematically conveyed whenever the expression is used. Exploring the nuances of this content, as well as the relationship between the different traits that are evoked and the divergences between different types of intensifiers, represents a necessary first step towards mapping the social meaning conveyed by intensifiers.

The second question concerns the relationship between the social meaning and the semantic/pragmatic features of these expressions. While, traditionally, these two areas of investigation

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7. “Born between 1961 and 1981, white, American, highly educated, active, balanced, happy and family oriented, entrepreneurial”, see Ulrich and Harris (2003)

have been seen as little concerned with one another, even a cursory look at the examples above suggests a different picture, providing at least a reasonable cause for suspecting that a principled connection might exist between these two domains. More specifically, we note that those intensifiers that appear to be particularly salient carriers of social meaning occur in contexts in which there is not a gradable predicate supplying a lexical scale. Interestingly, this observation surfaces rather often in the literature and in metalinguistic commentaries, although it tends to be only mentioned in passing. Concerning *totally*, most of the examples listed in the Urban Dictionary entry, as well as the one that I briefly discussed at the beginning of this section, are *not* followed by a predicate that makes an upper-bounded scale available. Concerning *so*, Zwicky observes that “Intensifier *so* has been around as a modifier of scalar adjectives and adverbs for a very long time; *the innovation is its spread to other contexts*” (italics are mine). The intuition is confirmed by the fact that the Oxford English Dictionary introduced an ad hoc entry for this use of *so*, labeling it as *slang* and specifying that it features a predicate “which does not usually admit comparison” (i.e., non gradable). Moreover, a similar nexus between semantic/pragmatic and social features of meaning is also found in languages other than English. For example, as already mentioned, the Italian suffix *-issimo* also features a prominent stylistic meaning when it is used with nouns, where lexical degrees are not immediately available for semantic composition. As Maiden and Robustelli (2000) point out, “it is marginally possible to add *-issimo* to nouns, but the effect might often be jocular or moodish, and such forms are probably best avoided in formal and serious discourse” (Maiden and Robustelli 2000: 201).

In sum, the semantic and pragmatic profile of an intensifier appears to be deeply intertwined with the intensifiers’ ability to serve as a carrier of social meaning, highlighting further investigation on this connection as a worthwhile endeavor. On a narrow level, it appears to be a necessary step towards an exhaustive characterization of the phenomenon of intensification. On a broader level, it provides a window into the connection between semantic, pragmatic and social content, opening up a virtually unexplored area for the investigation of meaning. Investigating this issue represents the other major goal of the dissertation.

### 1.2.3 Two case studies

I tackle the two questions discussed above by relying on two case studies, both of which have already been mentioned at various points thus far: *totally* in English and *-issimo* in Italian. The focus on these two expressions is motivated by the fact that they feature a considerable amount of empirical complexity at all levels of meaning, therefore emerging as productive testbeds to look at the two interfaces of our interest. First, they both show a certain flexibility in the type of scale that they can combine with, as shown below.

- (17) a. The bus is *totally* full. Lexical  
b. Man in “I had drugs shirt *totally* had drugs” Non-lexical
- (18) a. *Gianni è alt-issimo.*  
Gianni is alt-ISSIMO.  
‘Gianni is extremely tall’. Lexical  
b. *Abbiamo appena preso questa lampugh-issima.*  
We.have just caught this doradofish-ISSIMO.  
‘We just caught this quintessential dorado-fish.’ Non-lexical

Second, when they are not targeting a lexical scale, they can both express a wide range of different effects. For instance, *totally* can convey that the speaker is surprised or amused; that the speaker is epistemically committed to what she is saying; or, finally, that the speaker just intends to emphasize the proposition. In a parallel fashion, *-issimo* can both convey an effect of *slack regulation* (Lasersohn 1999), suggesting that the modified property should receive a maximally strict interpretation, or signal that an individual represents a property to a quintessential level.

- (19) a. You should *totally* click on that link! It’s awesome.<sup>8</sup> Certainty  
b. Man in “I have no drugs” shirt *totally* had drugs. Surprise  
c. Dionne: Hello? There was a stop sign.  
Cher: I TOTALLY paused.<sup>9</sup> Emphasis

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8. <https://www.facebook.com/TheBiscuitGames/posts/488916347870627> accessed on June 5th 2015

9. From the movie *Clueless*, first cited in Irwin (2014)

- (20) a. *Serve un governo subit-issimo.*  
 is.needed a government immediately--ISSIMO.  
 ‘We need a government right now.’ Slack regulation
- b. *Abbiamo appena preso questa lampugh-issima.*  
 We.have just caught this doradofish-ISSIMO.  
 ‘We just caught this fantastic/great/super dorado-fish.’ Quintessential individual

Finally, as we have just seen, both intensifiers systematically tend to carry a rather salient package of social attributes, at least in particular linguistic contexts.

At the same time, these two expressions are sufficiently different to allow for a sufficiently broad testing ground to explore the issues outlined above. First, they are drawn from different languages, thus providing the opportunity to tackle the questions from a cross-linguistic angle. Second, they are morphologically different: *totally* is a free morpheme, while *-issimo* is a suffix. This difference is likely to have an impact on the freedom with which these two expressions operate at the compositional level, and can therefore help us span a wider array of semantic and pragmatic properties in the domain of intensification.

### 1.3 Main claims

After reviewing the phenomenon of interest, as well as the empirical and theoretical questions that I am pursuing, I turn to an overview of the scope and the claims of the dissertation. I divide my main claims in two areas: one concerning intensification at the semantics/pragmatics interface and one concerning intensification at the socio/semantics interface.

#### 1.3.1 Modeling non-lexical intensification

While *totally* and *-issimo* share the ability to operate both in the presence and in the absence of gradable predicates, they feature important differences in their distribution, their effects and the compositional tier at which they contribute their meaning.

Concerning *totally*, I show in Chapter 2 that the licensing of the non-lexical use of the intensifier is tied to two factors: the type of content conveyed by the proposition – and in particular

whether such content has subjective or factual nature – and the discourse position in which *totally* is used. Moreover, non-lexical *totally* does not contribute to the at-issue meaning of the sentence, but operates on an independent tier. In light of this, I model *totally* in terms of a speech-act intensifier, arguing that it serves the purpose of flagging the speaker’s meta-conversational belief that every felicitous continuation of the conversation should involve the addition of *p* to the Common Ground. Furthermore, I suggest that lexical and non-lexical *totally* share a semantic core of universal quantification and should hence be seen as polysemous, rather than accidentally ambiguous.

Concerning *-issimo*, I argue in Chapter 5 that the contribution of the intensifier across different linguistic environments can be captured by positing a unified meaning, rather than two related ones. I propose that such a meaning involves universal quantification over all the possible contexts of evaluation – or *counterstances* (Kennedy and Willer 2016) – according to which the meaning of a context-sensitive predicate can be interpreted. The different effects that we observe emerge as a result of the interaction between this core operation and the different semantic and pragmatic properties of the host. In particular, applying *-issimo* to vague adjectives like *tall* yields the degree boosting effect; by the same token, applying *-issimo* to non-vague nouns like “dorado fish” gives rise to the inference that the fish in question embodies the quintessential properties of the category.

In conclusion, the two modifiers, despite the common ability to operate at the non-lexical level, crucially differ both in the type of compositional mechanism that they entail, as well as their interaction with the broader pragmatic context. These findings highlight non-lexical intensification as an internally complex and nuanced phenomenon, where different intensifiers rely on different compositional mechanisms to obtain a wide array of pragmatic effects.

### **1.3.2 From semantic to social meaning**

To investigate the relationship between the semantic/pragmatic features and the social meaning of the intensifiers, I rely on a social perception task, in which listeners are asked to rate the speaker of a sentence along a set of dimensions of social evaluation (see Section 3.4.1 and Chapter 3). Two separate studies reveal an empirical association between the salience of the indexed social meaning

and the specific semantic and pragmatic properties of both intensifiers. For *totally*, the salience of the social content appears to be significantly more prominent for non-lexical (e.g., *totally tall*) rather than lexical uses (e.g., *totally full*) across a number of different predicates. Moreover, *within* cases of non-lexical *totally*, the prominence of the social meaning turns out to be lower in situations in which previous linguistic cues provide an explicit justification for the use of *totally* (e.g. a previous question), and higher in situations in which the use of the intensifier is not called for by any element in the linguistic context. A parallel association emerges for *-issimo*, with the suffix emerging as a much stronger carrier of social meaning in cases in which the modified property's extension features fixed, non context-sensitive boundaries (e.g., "dorado fish" as opposed to "tall"), and therefore required the interlocutors to accommodate a source of context-sensitivity for the interpretation of the property.

Concerning the principles driving this connection, I suggest that two factors make *-issimo* and *totally* a suitable context for the emergence of social meaning in particular contexts. First, the semantic meaning of both expressions, via different routes, presupposes and fosters a heightened degree of proximity between the speaker and the hearer at the pragmatic level, which renders these expressions particularly apt for being reinterpreted as indexes of social characteristics. On the one hand, the nature of *totally* as a Common Ground operator targets a shared space in the conversation, underscoring the speaker's engagement with involving the hearer in the co-construction of the conversation. On the other hand, the use of *-issimo* with nouns like *dorado fish* requires that the interlocutors share a joint evaluation about what a quintessential member of the category is and what qualities it should have, thus contributing to bring of the speaker and the hearer "on the same page" from a pragmatic standpoint. Second, both the relevant uses of *totally* and *-issimo* are linguistically *marked* with respect to their lexical counterparts, where markedness emerges in different ways depending on the particular intensifier. Their marked status, in turn, makes these intensifiers stand out as particularly noticeable, creating an effect of surprise and unexpectedness that amplifies the social meaning of the expression in a similar fashion to what has been observed for linguistic forms in the domain of phonological and morphosyntactic variation (Bender 2000;

Podesva 2011 and see Chapter 4 for further details).

The upshot of these findings is that the semantic, pragmatic, and social dimension all conspire to determine what these two intensifiers “say” when used in communication. As such, the results presented in the dissertation push us to embrace a comprehensive view of the notion of meaning, as opposed to one in which the different components described above exist as independent modules.

# Chapter 2

## *Totally*: a semantic and pragmatic analysis

### 2.1 Introduction

I now begin the exploration of the first case study of the dissertation: the modifier *totally* in American English. The present chapter is concerned with the semantic and pragmatic properties of the intensifier, with particular attention towards its non-lexical use. The proposal outlined here will then serve as a background for the discussion of *totally*'s social meaning, as well as the principles that connect the different layers of content. As already mentioned in the introduction, a remarkable property of the intensifier is that it features a widespread distribution. In its most documented use, it combines with gradable predicates that lexicalize upper-bounded scales (Yoon 1996; Rotstein and Winter 2004; Kennedy and McNally 2005), as in (21). In this flavor, which I shall label *lexical totally*, the intensifier can be paraphrased with a maximizer like *completely* or *entirely*.

- (21) a. The bus is *totally* full.  
b. She *totally* agrees with me.

In other cases, *totally* combines with predicates that do *not* lexicalize a scale, as in (22). I shall refer to such non-lexical uses as *attitudinal totally*. The contribution of *totally* in such contexts appears to vary from case to case. In examples like (22a) and (22b) it is generally paraphrased

with epistemically flavored adverbs like *definitely* or *unquestionably*.<sup>1</sup> In contexts like (22c), it conveys a more general sense of emphasis, similar to the contribution of Verum Focus (all caps in (22c) indicates pitch stress). Finally, in (22d) *totally* contributes a reaction of emotive surprise on the part of the speaker.

- |      |   |   |           |
|------|---|---|-----------|
| (22) | a. You should <i>totally</i> click on that link! It's awesome.      | 2 | Certainty |
|      | b. Skiing around Salt Lake is <i>totally</i> awesome.               | 3 | Certainty |
|      | c. Dionne: Hello? There was a stop sign.<br>Cher: I TOTALLY paused. | 4 | Emphasis  |
|      | d. Florida: Man in "I have drugs" shirt <i>totally</i> had drugs.   |   | Surprise  |

Such a versatile distribution raises several questions. First, what is the exact nature of the scale targeted by *totally* in the absence of a gradable predicate? Second, how does the interpretation of such a scale interact with the other components of the linguistic and non linguistic context in which the intensifier is used? Third, what is the relationship between the lexical and attitudinal uses, modulo the empirical differences? In a nutshell, I will argue that attitudinal *totally* operates as a conversational operator, flagging the speaker's meta-conversational belief that every felicitous continuation of the exchange should involve the addition of *p* to the Common Ground. This view, in turn, carries broader theoretical implications: *totally* emerges as a window to detect fine-grained differences between seemingly identical types of assertions, leading to a more nuanced view of how declarative sentences with different kinds of content structure the conversation. Furthermore, I suggest that attitudinal and lexical *totally* share a semantic core of universal quantification and should hence be seen as polysemous, rather than accidentally ambiguous.

The Chapter is structured as follows. In section 2.2 I introduce and review the extant work on non-lexical uses of intensifiers. In section 2.3 I present the empirical picture concerning the

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1. The OED added a dedicated entry in 2005: "In weakened use, as an intensifier: (modifying an adjective) very, extremely; (modifying a verb) definitely, absolutely."

2. <https://www.facebook.com/TheBiscuitGames/posts/488916347870627> accessed on June 5th 2015

3. <http://www.csmonitor.com/1996/1218/121896.feat.travel.1.html>

4. From the movie *Clueless*, first cited in Irwin (2014)

distribution of *totally*, discussing several diagnostics to tease apart lexical *totally* and attitudinal *totally* (in 2.3.1) and outlining the constraints on the distribution of non-lexical *totally*. In section 5.3.2 I consider and reject two possible analyses. In section 2.5 I spell out a proposal for attitudinal *totally*, building on Farkas and Bruce (2010)’s discourse model and on Giannakidou and Mari’s (Giannakidou and Mari 2013, 2015b,c) notion of (non)*homogeneity*. In section 2.6 I focus on the relationship between lexical and attitudinal *totally*.

## 2.2 Background: modeling non-lexical intensification

We have seen in the introductory chapter that certain intensifiers are felicitously used even in contexts that provide no scale encoded in the lexical material. Below I report several examples from the previous section.

- (23) a. We like the movie ... *-ish*. From Bochnak and Csipak (2014)  
b. Jamie has *so* dated that type of guy before. From Irwin (2014)  
c. Your problems are *more* financial than legal. From McCawley (1998)

Examples of this sort attested in English include *so* (Bylina 2011; Zwicky 2011; Irwin 2014), *-ish* (Sugawara 2012; Bochnak and Csipak 2014), *metalinguistic comparatives* like *more* (McCawley 1998; Giannakidou and Stavrou 2009; Giannakidou and Yoon 2011; Morzycki 2011a). Similar cases described in other languages include Italian *-issimo* and Washo *semu* (Beltrama and Bochnak 2015 and Chapter 5) and Hebrew *mamas* (McNabb 2012a).

Concerning these cases, a question naturally arises: if the scale is not provided by a gradable predicate, what is the source of scalarity on which the modifier operates? The common proposal is that such intensifiers have the ability of targeting a *pragmatic* attitude on the part of the speaker that shares the same structure with the orderings encoded by gradable predicates. As such, both lexical and pragmatic orderings lend themselves to being “measured” and manipulated by intensifiers, suggesting that the two versions of scalar modification should be treated as ultimately related, though empirically distinct.

To see a concrete example, let us consider the two denotations that have been suggested for *-ish*. (24) represents the lexical version of the modifier proposed by Sugawara (2012), while (25) its attitudinal cousin as modeled by Bochnak and Csipak (2014). As one can observe, the two denotations are largely parallel. They both consist of two parts: one in which *-ish* requires that the degree on the scale - be that about a gradable adjective G or a gradable attitude R - be *below* a certain standard  $\theta$  (in boldface); and one in which such a degree is nevertheless very close to  $\theta$  (underlined). The differences stem from the fact that, in the attitudinal version, *-ish*, is not measuring the degree to which an individual instantiates a gradable property, but the degree to which a certain speaker (here, represented by the  $\alpha$  variable) holds a gradable attitude towards the proposition. The symbol  $\approx$  represents closeness.

$$(24) \quad \llbracket -ISH_{Lex} \rrbracket = \lambda G_{\langle d, et \rangle} \lambda x. \text{Max}\{d:G(d)(x)\} < \theta(\mathbf{G}) \wedge \underline{\text{Max}\{d:G(d)(x)\} \approx \theta(\mathbf{G})}^5$$

$$(25) \quad \llbracket -ISH_{Non-Lex} \rrbracket = \lambda p_{\langle s, t \rangle}. \text{Max}\{d:R(p)(\alpha)\} < \theta(\mathbf{R}) \wedge \underline{\text{Max}\{d:R(p)(\alpha)\} \approx \theta(\mathbf{R})}$$

Apart from these differences, the denotation for attitudinal *-ish* mirrors the one proposed for lexical *-ish*. In other words, the contribution of *-ish* at the attitudinal level is captured via a straightforward extension of the lexical version to a different domain, with the only difference being that the target scale is no longer supplied by an adjective, but comes from a lexically silent pragmatic attitude.

Yet, as far as what the exact nature of such a pragmatic attitude is, there is hardly consensus among authors. In the case of *metalinguistic comparison*, for instance, Giannakidou and Yoon (2011) suggest that, in non-gradable contexts, *more* (and its Korean and Greek counterparts) tracks the intensity of a speaker's *preference* towards the proposition, where the final sentence can be paraphrased as “The speaker prefers the expression *financial* to the use of the expression *legal*”. Morzycki (2011a), instead, argues that metalinguistic *more* modifies the size of the *pragmatic halo* of the predicate (Lasersohn 1999), proposing a paraphrase as “It is more precise to say that your problem are financial rather than saying that they are legal”. For *-ish* (Bochnak and Csipak 2014) and *so* (Potts 2003; Irwin 2014), authors have proposed that, by-and-large, the attitudinal version of

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5. The full notation with which the author models this effect is the following, where  $d_c$  represents a contextually given degree:  $\theta(\mathbf{G}) - \text{Max}\{d:G(d)(x)\} < d_c$

the modifier targets degrees of speaker's *commitment* towards the proposition, even though it is not clear how such a notion differs, and if it differs at all, from the attitude targeted by metalinguistic comparatives.

In sum, the versatile behavior of these modifiers suggests that scalarity in natural language can be supplied by sources other than gradable predicates. Specifically, the studies above unveil the systematic presence of scalar orderings encoded in the pragmatics, which, on a par with their lexical cousins, can be equally tracked and targeted by modifiers, and can therefore make their way into the process of semantic composition. Yet, while this empirical generalization is certainly valuable, we are still far from an adequate understanding of how scalar modification works in the absence of gradable predicates. One issue, in particular, is particularly pressing: what is the exact nature of such pragmatic scales? While labels like “commitment”, “preference” and “precision” represent intuitively sound notions to capture the relationship between the speaker and the propositional content, they fall short, by themselves, of explaining where the gradience targeted by the modifier comes from. Moreover, while assuming an isomorphism between lexical and attitudinal scales and extending the tools of degree semantics to model the contribution of the latter is a viable and elegant analytical strategy, it does not help us understand, from a conceptual standpoint, what areas of pragmatics are suitable for this extension and what areas, instead, are less permeable to it. As such, a satisfactory understanding of *non-lexical intensification* necessarily involves paying attention to both the compositional and the more general pragmatic aspects of these expressions, paying particular attention to how intensifiers are *constrained* at the pragmatic level, and how they interact with the other components of the context. In the remainder of the present chapter, I aim to address this issue by providing an analysis of attitudinal *totally*.

### **2.3 Attitudinal *totally*: the empirical picture**

I first consider the empirical landscape of *totally*, showing that the attitudinal use differs from the lexical one in two respects. First, it operates at a different compositional level. Second, it features a complex interaction with discourse structure and subjectivity that does not emerge for the lexical

version.

### 2.3.1 Diagnostics

To begin with, the impressionistic difference between the contexts where *totally* is found is supported by a variety of diagnostics, showing that the two uses are differentially encoded in the grammar. First, when *totally* targets a scale supplied by the following predicate, it is challengeable with a denial independently from the rest of the sentence. By contrast, in situations where it operates attitudinally, it cannot be targeted by the denial. This suggests that the contribution of attitudinal *totally* is not part of the at-issue meaning of the proposition.<sup>6</sup>

(26) a. The bus is *totally* full.

B: ✓ **No!** It's basically full, but not completely!

b. She *totally* agrees with me.

B: ✓ **No!** She basically agrees with you, but not 100%!

(27) a. She should *totally* click on that link!

B: # **No!** She should partially click on that link!

B: # **No!** She should click on that link, but you're not committed to saying that!

b. A: Skiing around Salt Lake is totally awesome.

B: # **No!** It's only partially awesome.

B: # **No!** It's awesome, but you are not committed to saying that it's awesome.

Second, attitudinal *totally* is a positive polarity item, as already noted by Irwin (2014) and McCready and Kaufmann (2013). To begin with, it cannot appear in the scope of negation or a negative quantifier. Note that *awesome* in (28d) does not sound as deviant as (28c), but still (28d) is still considerably worse than (28a).<sup>7</sup>

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6. Throughout the dissertation I adopt the following notation to mark the status of linguistics forms/utterances. ✓: well-formed and felicitous; \*: severely grammatically ill-formed sentence; ?? less severely grammatically ill-formed sentence; # pragmatically infelicitous utterance; ?#: pragmatically slightly infelicitous utterance.

7. A potential confound, here, is that certain evaluative adjectives like *awesome* have a mild positive polarity item behavior themselves, and sound slightly degraded under negation for independent reasons. See Morzycki (2012) for

- (28) a. ✓The bus is **not** *totally* full  
 b. ✓I **don't** *totally* agree with you  
 c. \* You **shouldn't** *totally* click on that link.  
 d. ?? Skiing around Salt Lake is **not** *totally* awesome.

Likewise, attitudinal *totally* is strongly degraded in questions (McCready and Kaufmann 2013; Irwin 2014), confirming the idea that it requires positive polarity.<sup>8</sup>

- (29) a. ✓Is the bus *totally* full?  
 b. ✓Do you *totally* agree with me?  
 (30) a. ?? Is skiing around Salt Lake *totally* awesome?  
 b. \* Should I *totally* click on that link?

Note, however, that attitudinal *totally* is sensitive to the type of the speech act even when the speech act does have positive polarity, as already noticed by McCready and Kaufmann (2013). In particular, besides being infelicitous in questions, it is barred in command imperatives and Wh-exclamatives. Adjectives like *awesome* are not testable here since, due to their stative nature, they cannot be turned into imperative form (Dowty 1979).

- (31) ✓*Totally* fill that glass!  
 (32) ?? What a link I *totally* clicked on!  
 (33) ?? *Totally* click on that link!<sup>9</sup>

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further details.

8. It must be observed that in biased (rhetorical) questions *totally* have a better, though still less-than-perfect, status. *Totally* with extreme adjectives is perfectly well-formed. Also, Irwin claims that polar questions are slightly more acceptable than Wh- questions.

- (1) ? Shouldn't you *totally* click on that link?  
 (2) Isn't skiing around Salt Lake *totally* awesome?

9. Note that the example becomes felicitous if it is used to give advice, as opposed to a command. The distinction between advice and pure deontic modality is explored throughout the dissertation, and represents an important axis governing the distribution of *totally*.

A final diagnostic is that lexical *totally* can be replaced by maximizers like *completely* and *entirely*, and can compositionally interact with other endpoint-oriented modifiers like *almost*. By contrast, attitudinal *totally* cannot be replaced by these expression, nor can it interact with approximators. Note that *awesome* features a split with respect to this diagnostic. Concerning replaceability with other maximizers, it is generally felicitous, even though there is variation between maximizers: *completely* sounds rather natural, whereas *entirely* is slightly degraded. When embedded under *almost*, *totally* is strongly degraded, similar to what we observe with *should*.

- (34) a. ✓The bus is *completely/entirely* full.  
 b. ✓I *completely/entirely* agree with you.  
 c. ?? She should *completely/entirely* click on that link  
 d. Skiing around Salt lake is {*?completely/??entirely*} awesome.
- (35) a. ✓The bus is **almost** *totally* full.  
 b. ✓I **almost** *totally* agree with you.  
 c. \*You should **almost** *totally* click on that link!  
 d. ?? Skiing around Salt Lake is **almost** *totally* awesome.

Finally, a less reliable diagnostic for differentiating between the two uses is prosody. While Irwin argues that attitudinal *totally* almost always comes with focal stress, there appears to be no one-to-one correspondence between this particular contour and the semantic flavor of the intensifier. Rather, I will argue that pitch stress on *totally* independently marks the presence of Verum Focus, which is in turn necessary to license the use of *totally* in particular discourse contexts (see Section 2.5.4). Because of this, I will not rely on prosody as a criterion to distinguish between the two uses throughout the dissertation.

Taken together, the properties of attitudinal *totally* are reminiscent of a variety of linguistic expressions which, despite substantial semantic and pragmatic differences between one another, share the feature of targeting a property of the relationship between the speaker and the propositional content, rather than the propositional content per se. Such expressions include expressive

meaning (Kaplan 1999; Potts 2005; Amaral et al. 2007 among others); certain evidentials (Faller 2002; Murray 2014; Rett and Murray 2013) and speaker-oriented adverbs (Ernst 2009; Nilsen 2004). The table below summarizes the results of the tests.

Table 2.1: Lexical vs attitudinal *totally*: diagnostics

Flavor	Negation	Quest	Chal	Imp/Exc	Compl	Almost
Lexical	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Attitudinal	*/??	??	#	??	??	*

### 2.3.2 Semantic and pragmatic constraints

The diagnostics considered thus far merely show that attitudinal *totally* is treated by the grammar in a different way from lexical *totally*. Yet, they offer little indication concerning the semantic and pragmatic constraints governing its distribution. In this section, I turn to discuss this issue, focusing on two kinds of (apparently) independent constraints: subjectivity and discourse position. For convenience, I divide the presentation of the data into two parts. The first part illustrates the distribution of the intensifier in initiating utterances. The second one concerns the distribution in responsive utterances.

#### Discourse-initial utterances

When used out of the blue, *totally* features a strong tendency to be used in sentences that contain predicates whose interpretation heavily relies on a subjective assessment. This can be seen by looking at the two prime types of predicates that can be associated with subjectivity: adjectives and modals.

#### Adjectives

Concerning adjectives, we observe that, among predicates that do not encode an upper-bounded scale, *totally* sounds particularly natural with evaluative adjectives such as *awesome*, *amazing*, *huge*, *great*. As for the effect contributed by the intensifier to the interpretation of the adjective,

Portner and Rubinstein (2016) propose a paraphrase with an epistemic flavor, which they render as “without question”.

- (36) a. Skiing around Salt Lake City is *totally* awesome<sup>10</sup>  
b. This happier camper is *totally* amazing, inside and out.<sup>11</sup>  
c. The fireworks are *totally* huge and you can buy different kinds on every corner.<sup>12</sup>

A corpus search on Glowbe<sup>13</sup>, a resource that is particularly useful for investigating the use of expressions associated with informal registers, confirms that, among adjectives encoding open scales, the distribution of *totally* is skewed towards evaluative and extreme ones. On the other hand, the intensifier is remarkably rare with *dimensional* adjectives like *large*, *tall* and *big* (Bierwisch 1989), which express a measurement with respect to a quantifiable scale.<sup>14</sup> The table reports the 8 most common non upper-bounded adjectives with which *totally* is attested in the Corpus, comparing it to the attestation of *totally* with dimensional predicates<sup>15</sup>. Since the frequency of dimensional adjectives is comparable to the one of evaluative ones, the higher number of attestations of *totally* with evaluative adjectives cannot be seen as an artifact of the frequency of the adjectives.<sup>16</sup>

The crucial property distinguishing evaluative adjectives is that they systematically give rise to the phenomenon commonly labeled as *faultless disagreement* (Kölbel 2002; Lasersohn 2005; Stephenson 2007), which is normally taken to be the signature of perspective dependent meanings.<sup>17</sup> This reflects a situation where two opposing sentences can be used to contradict each other

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10. <https://www.questia.com/newspaper/1P2-33415750/feeling-empowered-while-skiing-in-utah-the-snow-is>

11. <http://sfglobe.com/2015/05/12/k3c/>

12. <http://internchina.com/my-first-spring-festival-in-qingdao/>

13. <http://corpus.byu.edu/glowbe/>

14. Because they need to be interpreted according to a context-dependent standard, these adjectives are also, in a certain sense, subjective. But they are not inherently evaluative as the adjectives listed above. I will come back to this issue later in this section.

15. Concerning *hot*, it is pretty telling that, out of 18 hits, 17 were instances of *hot* as an aesthetic judgment, and only one as an adjective of temperature

16. Since most examples used in this dissertation are from American English, the search was limited to the American English section of the Corpus.

17. As a methodological note, I am aware that the nature and the philosophical foundations of faultless disagreement

Table 2.2: Distribution of *totally* with unbounded adjectives in COCA

Open Scale Adjective	Type	Totally Count	Tot Adj frequency
Awesome	Evaluative	186	25,000
Ridiculous	Evaluative	73	44,000
Amazing	Evaluative	55	40,500
Wonderful	Evaluative	27	32,000
Great	Evaluative	27	34,000
Bad	Evaluative	21	131,000
Hot	Evaluative	18	32,000
Beautiful	Evaluative	8	41,000
Big	Dimensional	1	170,000
Tall	Dimensional	1	40,000
Large	Dimensional	0	90,000

without implying that one of the speakers has said something false or made a pragmatically infelicitous move.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, subjectivity is *not* systematically part of the picture with predicates that license lexical *totally*. This is shown by the observation that most of these predicates fail to license faultless disagreement: one of the two interlocutors is blameworthy for being wrong, and one of the two assertions must be infelicitous, as shown in (37c).<sup>19</sup>

(37) a. **Greg:** Skiing around Salt Lake City is awesome.

**Fred:** No, it's not!

Faultless

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are very much debated in semantics and philosophy, to the point that some authors outwardly question the very existence of such a phenomenon. For the purposes of the current thesis, I refer to faultless disagreement as a diagnostic that distinguishes the contexts of occurrence of *totally* out of the blue. Furthermore, though I rely on Stephenson (2007)'s account of subjective predicates throughout the chapter, I do not intend to make a contribution to the debate surrounding the right formal account for the lexical semantics of subjective predicates. Also, for an account that *tout court* argues against the existence of faultless disagreement, see Stojanovic (2007).

18. Disputes of this kind have also been labeled as *defective* (Egan 2010), given the very low likelihood of finding an objective settlement between the interlocutors.

19. It must be noted that faultless disagreement also surfaces with dimensional predicates like *tall* (Fleisher 2013; Kennedy 2012; Richard 2004), where the dispute is normally taken to be about the standard for the assessment for their truth conditions.

Yet, it has been convincingly argued that the subjectivity of truly evaluative adjectives like *awesome* is qualitatively distinct from the subjectivity associated with vague predicates, which has a markedly metalinguistic flavor about the contextual resolution of the expression. Kennedy (2012) calls the inherent subjectivity associated with *awesome* Qualitative Assessment, whereas the subjectivity associated with vague predicates in general Dimensional Uncertainty. Fleisher (2013) dubs them Mapping Subjectivity and Standards Subjectivity respectively. Interestingly, *totally* only seems to be sensitive to subjectivity of the former kind.

b. **Greg:** This happier camper is amazing, inside and out.

**Fred:** No, it's not!

Faultless

c. **Greg:** Dodo are extinct.

**Fred:** No, they're not.

Factual

Before proceeding any further in the discussion, let me raise and reject two potential objections. The first objection is the following: how can we be sure that, with these adjectives, *totally* is not contributing at the lexical level? This point becomes particularly pressing when one considers that many of these adjectives are members of the class of *extreme* adjectives (Morzycki 2012), which, due to their reference to a property inherently instantiated to a high degree, have been suggested to be lexically upper-bounded, despite the absence of an ontological maximum (Paradis 2001). Yet, three observations suggest that this account cannot be right. First, other maximizers, despite sounding considerably better than they do with regular open scale adjectives, are still not perfectly felicitous with extreme adjectives. Second, extreme adjectives cannot be modified by other endpoint-oriented modifiers like approximators and proportional modifiers (e.g. *partially*) (see Portner and Rubinstein 2016 for a similar point). Third, and most importantly, when *totally* is used with extreme adjectives it still allows for another individual to instantiate the property to a higher degree. This, crucially, is *not* the case for real upper-bounded predicates (see Kennedy and McNally 2005; Morzycki 2012; Portner and Rubinstein 2016 for a similar observation). These considerations suggest that *totally* is not targeting the lexical scale encoded by these adjectives.

(38) a. ? *completely*/?/?100% {awesome, amazing} vs ✓ *completely*/100% full

b. \**almost/partially* {awesome, amazing} vs ✓ *almost/partially* full

c. ✓ This movie was *totally* amazing, but this other one is (even) better.

# This glass is *totally* full, but this other one is (even) fuller.

The second objection is that *totally* might be quantifying over dimensions of evaluation, requiring that the individual at stake count as *awesome* in every respect. As such, it would still be used in a lexical fashion. Though appealing, this idea cannot however be an exhaustive explanation of

the pattern above. First, it is not the case that all adjectives listed above are multidimensional (see Sassoon (2012) for an exhaustive discussion of multidimensionality). *Huge* is a salient example.<sup>20</sup> Its scale appears to be describing the size of the individual, and other dimensions are not relevant. The patterns below confirm this intuition.

- (39) a. #These fireworks are *huge* in some respect.  
b. #These fireworks are *huge* with respect to their height.

Second, if *totally* were quantifying over lexically encoded dimensions, we would expect it to pattern in the way it does with absolute adjectives like *full*. Even though the domain of quantification is different – degrees within a scale vs number of scales – both of them should be equally part of the at-issue content. Yet, as the diagnostics above show, *totally* appears not to interact with the at-issue content when modifying extreme adjectives. In light of this evidence, I conclude that quantification over dimensions, while being an independently available reading of truly multi-dimensional adjectives, cannot be the explanation for the combinability of maximizers with evaluative and extreme adjectives.

### Modals

Let us now consider modals, the second class of predicates with which *totally* is licensed. Once again, *totally* appears to be licensed when the modal is somewhat dependent on a subjective assessment on the part of the speaker (or a relevant anchor), as shown in (40). As for the effect contributed by *totally*, we can, once again, roughly paraphrase it with an epistemically flavored expression like “without question” or the more common gloss “definitely”.

- (40) a. You **should** *totally* click on that link!<sup>21</sup>

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20. I thank Marcin Morzycki for directing my attention to this observation.

21. <https://twitter.com/platelcr/status/561925126485446656>, Accessed June 5 2015

- b. Owners **must** totally be from Chicago! I see Bears, Blackhawks, and Cubs as the decorations in here.<sup>22</sup>
- c. My dad **will** *totally* beat your dad in cruisers.<sup>23</sup>
- d. For what is worth, I **would** *totally* move Tony Allen back into the starting lineup tonight.<sup>24</sup>

While there is hardly consensus on the analysis of these modals – and, once again, the present work is not designed to provide a contribution in this direction – a connection with subjectivity has been separately suggested for all of them. The use of *should* to give advice is dependent on a subjective assessment of whether the prejacent fits the advisee’s goals (Yanovich 2013); the meaning of epistemic *must* is relativized to both the belief state of a particular individual (Stephenson 2007) and, often, a perspective-dependent *best explanation* from that knowledge/evidence (Lassiter 2014). Finally, *will* and *would* require a subjective prediction of the speaker about an event that is not accessible to the speakers, giving rise to a communicative situations similar to those in which opinions about personal taste are compared (for a way of implementing this intuition, see Giannakidou and Mari 2013 on the notion of *subjective veridicality* and *projected truth*, discussed later in the chapter). Conversely, with flavors of modality that do not leave room for subjectivity and are tied to objective criteria of evaluation, the status of *totally* considerably worsens. This is shown by three basic contrasts: advice vs deontic modals based on a set of external laws; epistemic vs deontic *must*; and predictive vs “scheduled” uses of the future (Copley 2002), where the latter make reference to an event that has been already settled, making a subjective assessment irrelevant. For each of the contrasts, the second member is degraded with *totally*.<sup>25</sup>

- (41) a. ✓ Owners *must* *totally* be from Chicago! I see Bears, Blackhawks, and Cubs as the

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22. [http://www.yelp.com/biz\\_photos/dt-kirbys-lafayette?select=tyJmzDm-PtYX5Z.2hTxPCG](http://www.yelp.com/biz_photos/dt-kirbys-lafayette?select=tyJmzDm-PtYX5Z.2hTxPCG), accessed June 5th 2015

23. Bike Tribes: A Field Guide to North American Cyclists. Mike Magnuson

24. <https://twitter.com/herringtonnba/status/573150466990723072> Accessed June 5th 2015

25. A possible reading for some of these modals is one in which *totally* merely conveys an expressive or mirative interpretation. I will argue below that these readings are cases of the mirative interpretation that factual assertions can receive with *totally*, which is independent from subjectivity.

- decorations in here. Epistemic
- b. # Owners must *totally* apply for a special license to stay open all day on Sundays and Saturdays. External obligation
- (42) a. ✓ You *totally* have to watch this movie. It's awesome. Advice
- b. # You *totally* have to watch this movie. It's a requirement for the class stated in the syllabus. External obligation
- (43) a. ✓ My dad will *totally* beat your dad in cruisers. Prediction/Opinion
- b. # My dad will *totally* challenge your dad tomorrow at 3 pm. Scheduled

Unsurprisingly, the modals with which *totally* is licensed, on a par with evaluative adjectives, give rise to patterns of faultless disagreement, where the object of the dispute depends on the particular modal (inference from evidence, prediction, judgment of advisability). This contrasts with modals that rely on objective bases, which instead only license factual disagreement.

- (44) a. **Greg:** My dad will beat your dad in cruisers.  
**Fred:** No, I think he's going to lose. Faultless
- b. **Greg:** Joe should watch this movie. He'll love it.  
**Fred:** No, I don't think he should. It's not his kind of movie. Faultless
- c. **Greg:** Owners must be from Chicago! I see Bears, Blackhawks, and Cubs as the decorations in here.  
**Fred:** No, I don't agree. They could just be fans.<sup>26</sup> Faultless
- d. **Greg:** You have to watch this movie. It's a requirement for the class.  
**Fred:** No, you don't have to. It's optional. Factual

Finally, let us consider the status of factual propositions. Thus far, we have seen that, out of the blue, propositions containing subjective predicates are considerably better than those containing

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26. Intuitions about faultless disagreement can be shaky with epistemic modals. Since what is subjective is the inferential component, it is important that the body of evidence and the belief states of the participants remain the same for the disagreement to be really faultless. For a similar point, see Lassiter (2014) arguing against von Stechow and Gillies (2010).

factual ones. Yet, there is an important exception to be noted. While factual assertions describing nondescript, routinary events are clearly odd when intensified with *totally*, their status strikingly improves if we make their content less plausible, or altogether absurd. The symbol << means “sounds worse than”.

(45) Luke *totally* got married at 25 << Luke *totally* got married at 12.

This intuition is confirmed by the retrieval on the web of uses of *totally* with out of the blue factual assertions, all of which describe events that are highly implausible.

(46) Dude *totally* walked off a train. Threw his shit down & camped out.<sup>27</sup>

(47) George W. Bush was *totally* beheaded in “Game Of Thrones”.<sup>28</sup>

(48) Man in “I Have Drugs” Shirt *totally* had drugs.<sup>29</sup>

These cases appear intuitively rather different from those seen so far. First, they sound considerably more informal than the (already informal) uses of attitudinal *totally*, to the point that their acceptability appears to be fluctuating across speakers. Second, they convey a sense of surprise or emotional involvement on the part of the speaker in a way in which uses with subjective predicates do not. Third, while *totally* in the previous contexts conveyed an effect connected to notions like certainty and confidence, the examples above foreground an *emotional* reaction on the part of the speaker, even though the nature of this reaction varies from context to context. This is shown by the fact that, while uses of *totally* with subjective predicates and modals could be (in most cases) paraphrased with *definitely*, this paraphrase breaks down with the cases above. Instead, a better gloss is offered by either mirative constructions (e.g. exclamatives), expressions of overt disbelief or other expressive particles.

(49) a. Man in “I Have Drugs” Shirt *definitely* had drugs.

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27. <http://bartidialloffame.com/dude-totally-walked-off-a-train-threw-his-shit-down-camped-out-embaracado-station/>

28. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/daves4/george-w-bush-was-beheaded-in-game-of-thrones>

29. <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/wtf-florida-man-in-i-have-drugs-shirt-totally-had-drugs-6542858>

- b. # George W. Bush was *totally* beheaded in “Game Of Thrones”.
- (50) a. Believe it or not, George W. Bush was beheaded in “Game Of Thrones”.
- b. WTF! Man in ”I Have Drugs” shirt had drugs.

**Responsive assertions**

The discussion thus far has only involved situations where attitudinal *totally* is used in discourse-initial position, e.g. out of the blue. Things considerably change, however, if *totally* is used in responsive assertions, highlighting an intriguing interaction between discourse structure and subjectivity. Let us consider the following factual assertion, which does not license *totally* out of the blue and, predictably, does not give rise to faultless disagreement.

- (51) a. #Luke *totally* got married at 25. Out of blue
- b. **John:** Luke got married at 25.
- Mark:** No, he didn’t! Factual

The crucial observation is the following: when used in response to discourse moves expressing less than full commitment to the anchor proposition, *totally* is perfectly felicitous with factual assertions, *regardless* of whether the content is outrageous or not. Three types of move, in particular, are systematically able to license *totally* in the ensuing conversational turn: (i) a polar question about *p*; (ii) a tentative assertion of *p*; (iii) asserting the complement of the proposition. This shows that, when certain discourse conditions are met, subjectivity can be overridden as a requirement for using *totally*.

- (52) a. **John:** Did Luke get married at 25? Asks whether *p*
- Mark:** Yes, he TOTALLY got married at 25.
- b. **John:** I can’t remember if Luke got married at 25. Doubt about *p*
- Mark:** Yes, he TOTALLY got married at 25.
- c. **John:** Luke didn’t get married at 25. Asserts  $\neg p$
- Mark:** No! What are you talking about! He TOTALLY got married at 25.

The contrast clearly emerges with modals as well. Recall that, out of the blue, *totally* with deontic modals based on a body of external laws sounds infelicitous. Yet, if embedded in the right discourse context, it becomes perfectly acceptable.

(53) **John:** Do I have to turn in the assignment by 3?

**Mark:** Yes, you **TOTALLY** have to turn in the assignment by 3.

A crucial observation is that in these cases, contrary to the discourse-initial ones, *totally* comes with pitch stress, represented here in all caps. To describe the prosodic profile of this stress, I build on Irwin (2014)'s exhaustive analysis of the following utterance, from the movie *Clueless*, where Cher responds emphatically to Dionne's insinuation that she did not stop. As discussed above, Irwin claims that such a pitch stress is a prosodic signature of attitudinal *totally*. I will instead argue in section 2.5.4 that stress marks the presence of Verum Focus, a crucial requirement to license *totally* in this responsive context.

(54) **Dionne:** Hello? There was a stop sign.  $\neg p$

**Cher:** I **TOTALLY** paused.<sup>30</sup>

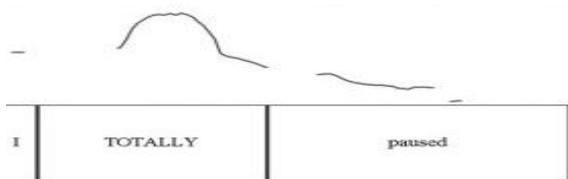


Figure 2.1: Pitch track of *totally* in the exchange from *Clueless*. From Irwin (2014)

Concerning the best gloss for *totally* in this context, note that a subtle contrast emerges depending on the nature of the previous move. If the licensing move is a question or a tentative assertion, *totally* can be paraphrased with *definitely*, and by and large carries the same epistemic flavor that we observe with subjective predicates. Instead, if it counters an assertion that  $\neg p$ , a paraphrase with

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30. From the movie *Clueless*, first cited in Irwin (2014)

*definitely* is not accurate. A better strategy, instead, is to mark emphasis with a different mechanism, such as Verum Focus, but not one that licenses an inference about certainty or confidence.<sup>31</sup>

- (55) a. **John:** Did Luke get married at 25? Question whether *p*  
**Mark:** Yes, he definitely got married at 25.
- b. **John:** I can't remember if Luke got married at 25. Doubt about *p*  
**Mark:** Yes, he definitely got married at 25.
- c. **John:** Luke didn't get married at 25. Asserts  $\neg p$   
**Mark:** # No! He DEFINITELY got married at 25.  
**Mark:** ✓No! He DID get married at 25.

While the subjectivity requirement is bracketed with the discourse moves described above, however, the contrast between factual and subjective assertions surfaces again when *totally* is used in responses that confirm previous fully confident assertions. Here, *totally* is only felicitous in responses to assertions containing an evaluative predicate, regardless of whether it is used as a fragment answer or with the repetition of the previous assertion. Note that, in this case, despite coming in responsive position, *totally* does not carry pitch stress and conveys agreement with the interlocutor.

- (56) a. **John:** Luke got married at 25. Factual assertion  
**Mark:** #Yes, he TOTALLY did.  
**Mark:** # Oh, Totally!
- b. **John:** The House of Cards finale was great. Subjective assertion  
**Mark:** ✓Yes, it *totally* was!  
**Mark:** ✓Oh, *totally*!

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31. The judgment is admittedly subtle here. While some speakers consider (55c) odd altogether, others accept it. Yet, they point out that the effect contributed by *definitely* does convey information about the speaker's epistemic state in a much more obvious way than *totally*.

## Subjectivity and discourse: interim summary

The following table summarizes the distribution of attitudinal *totally* with respect to discourse position and subjectivity, the two main factors that we have seen interacting here. Note that, based on the context, *totally* also contributes a variety of non identical pragmatic effects, ranging from epistemic confidence to surprise to emphasis.

Table 2.3: Distribution of *totally* across assertion types and discourse position

Discourse position	Previous move	Nature of p	Totally licensed	Focal stress	Flavor
Initiating	NA	Factual	#	NA	NA
Initiating	NA	Factual - Outlandish	✓	No	Mirative / Expressive
Initiating	NA	Subjective	✓	No	Epistemic
Reactive	Assert p	Factual	#	NA	NA
Reactive	Question p	Factual	✓	Yes	Epistemic
Reactive	Assert $\neg$ p	Factual	✓	Yes	Emphatic
Reactive	Assert p	Subjective	✓	No	Agreement

## 2.4 Rejecting two analyses

Now that the empirical map has been laid out, it is time to assess the analytical options that are available to account for the meaning of the intensifier. Before putting forward a positive proposal, let us consider two domains that, at first sight, appear to be ideal landing sites for a straightforward extension of lexical *totally* to a pragmatic dimension. Yet, we observe that neither domain can derive the correct distribution of the intensifier.

The first such domain is represented by slack regulation with deontic modals. Recall that *totally*, while acceptable with advice and epistemic modality, is not felicitous in these contexts, regardless of whether the obligation has a legal, circumstantial or teleological flavor.

- (57) a. # The paper must *totally* be submitted by 3 pm.  
 b. # Citizens *totally* have to pay taxes by April 15th.

At first sight, a plausible explanation for these contexts' failure to license *totally* could be grounded in the categorical flavor of these modals. Because they express necessity, they are already maximal, therefore making strengthening redundant. This account, however, falters when one considers that these environments are not impermeable to modification. For instance, they can be modified by adverbs like *absolutely* (Klecha 2014; Brasoveanu and Anand 2010).

- (58) a. The paper *absolutely* must be submitted by 3 pm.  
b. Citizens *absolutely* have to pay taxes by April 15th.

In such contexts, it has been argued that *absolutely* brings about a slack regulation effect (Lasersohn 1999), forcing a more precise interpretation of the obligation expressed by the modal. Interestingly, this effect is similar to what maximizers like *completely* and, indeed, *totally* do with absolute gradable adjectives (Kennedy and McNally 2005; Sassoon and Zevakhina 2012 and see Section 6 below), where the requirement that the scalar maximum be reached likewise invites an interpretation that excludes imprecise readings. While different proposals have been put forward to capture the exact mechanisms through which this effect is achieved (see Klecha 2014 and Brasoveanu and Anand 2010 for recent accounts), the emerging picture is one in which gradable absolute adjectives and deontic modals similarly introduce a pragmatic halo, which can be manipulated and ultimately reduced by particular modifiers. This parallel would lead to individuate deontic modals as a promising direction of extension of lexical *totally*, where everything seems to be already in place for a harmless transfer of *totally*'s semantic core to this domain. Yet, this is not what we observe.

Another reasonable option is to analyze *totally* on a par with epistemic operators such as *certainly* or *definitely*, which, as we have seen, are often invoked as paraphrases of the intensifier in certain contexts. By expressing the degree of probability that a speaker assigns to the truth of a proposition, such modifiers make reference to an upper-bounded scale, with 1 representing maximal probability for *p* to happen (see, among others, Lassiter 2011 for a model to capture the boundedness of probability distributions with respect to epistemic adjectives). As such, it seems to represent a suitable domain of pragmatic extension for *totally*. Yet, we observe that, despite

the superficial similarity to these operators, *totally* is not interchangeable with them. This can be seen for situations with scheduled uses of *will* or counterfactual readings of *would* where the event described by the prejacent is settled, making subjective predictions irrelevant. While epistemic operators are generally felicitous in such contexts, *totally* appears to be misplaced, revealing the presence of a substantial mismatch between the factual nature of the assertion and whatever effect is contributed by the intensifier.

- (59) a. # The date has been set. My dad will *totally* face your dad at 3 pm.  
b. ✓ The date has been set. My dad will *definitely* face your dad at 3 pm.  
c. # If she wins the elections, Hilary Clinton would *totally* become president.  
d. ✓ If she wins the elections, Hilary Clinton would *definitely* become president

The lack of parallel between *totally* and epistemic certainty also emerges as we observe that, conversely, *totally* can be found in contexts that fail to license epistemic operators. The following exchange represents an example. Here, certainty towards the truth of *p* is a rather odd dimension to bring up, given the obvious authority of the speaker on knowing her first name. Yet, *totally* appears to be perfectly felicitous.

- (60) **Josh:** Hi, are you Emily?  
**Emily:** # I'm DEFINITELY Emily  
**Emily** ✓ I'm TOTALLY Emily

To conclude, a simple extension of the maximizing operator encoded by lexical *totally* to a non-lexical dimension fails to capture the distribution of attitudinal *totally*. While environments like deontic modals and scheduled futures make bounded scales and/or pragmatic halos available, the intensifier is not licensed in these contexts, suggesting that another analytic route must be pursued. On a broader level, these observations crucially indicate that the pragmatic variety of *totally*, contrary to what has been proposed for seemingly similar intensifiers, does not boil down to an isomorphic relationship between lexical and attitudinal scales. Whatever ordering *totally* is operating on, it non-trivially interacts with discourse structure and the type of content in the assertion,

suggesting a picture in which pragmatic intensification is also constrained by other components that belong to the pragmatic domain.

## 2.5 Analysis

After exploring and leaving aside these analytical possibilities, it is possible to build a positive proposal to capture the contribution of attitudinal *totally*. The account needs to satisfy three desiderata. First, it needs to capture the non trivial interaction with discourse structure and subjectivity. Second, it needs to capture the different pragmatic effects of the intensifier, ranging from epistemic confidence to surprise and emphasis. Finally, it needs to derive the specific semantic properties discussed in section 2.3.1, including positive polarity, lack of compositional interaction with the at-issue content and speech-act type sensitivity. In a nutshell, I analyze attitudinal *totally* as a Common Ground-managing operator that conveys an attitude roughly paraphrasable as *unquestionably*, or, more explicitly, “from the speaker’s perspective, there should be no option other than adding  $p$  to the Common Ground”. Specifically, I model the attitude conveyed by *totally* in terms of universal quantification over worlds in the CG. The section is organized as follows. In section 2.5.1 I lay out the basic component of the Farkas and Bruce (2010) framework, which will provide the theoretical background for the proposal. In section 2.5.2 I introduce the notion of homogeneous and non-homogeneous spaces, arguing that it is crucial to capture the common properties shared by the environments in which *totally* is licensed. In section 2.5.3 I outline the proposal. In section 2.5.4 I show how it applies to the different environments. Finally, in section 2.6. I compare the contribution of attitudinal *totally* to the one of lexical *totally*.

### 2.5.1 Preliminaries: discourse effects and subjectivity

Let us consider again the two different components that determine the felicity of *totally*: the subjectivity of the proposition and the discourse position of the intensifier. A question naturally arises: What is the common thread tying together the various environments in which *totally* is licensed? At first sight, these two factors pertain to different linguistic levels. While subjectivity is a lexical

property of certain predicates, discourse position pertains to a higher, purely pragmatic dimension. In order to proceed in the right direction, therefore, it is crucial to understand how subjectivity relates to discourse, and how the different discourse moves considered above structure the conversational context. Of particular importance is determining the status of perspective-dependent assertions, which systematically license *totally* regardless of their discourse position, and how they differ from factual assertions and questions. In the remainder of this section, I argue that they occupy a middle ground between these two categories. As argued by Stephenson (2007), they are pragmatically similar to objective ones in pushing towards a convergence between the interlocutors. Yet, they differ from them in allowing for disagreement as a felicitous outcome and projecting a non homogeneous set of possible common grounds, in a similar vein to questions. To see how this is captured formally, I build on the model outlined by Farkas and Bruce (2010), who offer a comprehensive view of how different speech acts structure the context and affect the distinct components of a discourse state. The model, which combines insights from the foundational proposals by Stalnaker (1978), Hamblin (1971) and Carlson (1983), represent a conversational state by means of four main components:

- The *Common Ground* (henceforth, *CG*), which consists of propositions that have already been confirmed by the discourse participants and represents the background against which discourse develops.
- The participants' *Discourse Commitments* (henceforth, *DC*), which include the propositions that have been publicly taken as true by individual participants in a conversation, but which have *not* been added to the *CG*.
- *The Table*, which tracks the propositions that have been raised by a move and whose addition to the *CG* is still "under discussion" among the discourse participants.
- The *Projected Set* (henceforth, *PS*), that is, the set of *possible* common grounds that correspond to the felicitous continuations of the conversation calculated on the basis of what propositions are at issue on the table and what propositions are in the common ground.

Against this background, speech acts are seen as functions that take a proposition and an input conversational state as argument and return an output conversational state (Krifka 2001). On this view, the differences between speech acts can be cashed out in terms of the effect that they have on each of these components between the input and the output state, as I now proceed to discuss.

### Factual Assertions and polar questions

Let us begin with factual assertions and polar questions in discourse initial moves, the most straightforward cases. Because we are dealing with an initiating move, the only part of the model with content is the initial *CG*, which projects a trivially identical *PS*. The other components are instead empty.

When A makes an assertion, several changes ensue. First, the anchor proposition of the assertion, henceforth *p*, is added to A's *DC*. Second, *p* is put on the Table for discussion, and by doing so is made available to the interlocutor for approval or rejection. Third, a new *PS* is projected consisting of the union between *p* and the input *CG*. If she has no objection, *p* is added to the *CG* and, as a consequence, removed from the Table. On this view, assertions can be seen as proposals that are made available for a variety of reactions. They are moves directed at enriching the *CG*, but which do not automatically update it. Rather, the interlocutor's acceptance is required to ratify acceptance and update the *CG*.

(61) A (to B): Luke got married at 25

Table 2.4: Move: Factual Assertion

Discourse component	Before A's assertion	After A's assertion
$DC_A$	$\{\}$	$p$
$DC_B$	$\{\}$	$\{\}$
Table	$\langle \rangle$	$\langle \{p\} \rangle$
<i>CG</i>	$\{CG\}$	$\{CG\}$
<i>PS</i>	$\{CG\}$	$\{CG \cup p\}$

In more formal terms, the assertion operator ASSERT can be modeled as a function from an input context  $K_i$  to an output context  $K_o$ , where A is the author of the assertion,  $DC_{A,o}$  and  $DC_{A,i}$  are

A's output and input context discourse commitments, and  $To$  and  $Ti$  are the output and input Table, respectively.

- (62) •  $ASSERT(p, A, K_i) = K_o$  such that:
- $DC_{A,o} = DC_{A,i} \cup \{p\}$
  - $To = Push(\{p\}, Ti)$
  - $PS_o = PS_i \cup \{p\}$

Let us compare this effect with the one contributed by a polar question. Intuitively, these moves are at the opposite ends of a spectrum. While assertions are purely *informative*, that is, they are proposals for the addition of content, questions are *inquisitive*. They are not so much proposals, as *requests* for a proposal. As a consequence, what is being put on the Table is *not* simply  $p$ , but a set containing both  $p$  and its complement  $\neg p$ . Each of these two alternatives is pragmatically encoded by the question as a felicitous, unmarked continuation of the discourse following the speech act. This, in turn, is reflected in the structure of the  $PS$ , which contains two possible CGs: one in which  $p$  is added, and one in which  $\neg p$  is added. Finally, uttering  $?p$  does not change the speaker's  $PC$  set. If the speaker is asking about  $p$ , it follows that she is not in a position of publicly committing to it individually. Let us show this with a concrete example.

- (63) a. A (to B): Did Luke get married at 25?

Table 2.5: Move: Polar question

Discourse component	Before A's move	After A's move
$DC_A$	$\{\}$	$\{\}$
$DC_B$	$\{\}$	$\{\}$
Table	$\langle \rangle$	$\langle \{p; \neg p\} \rangle$
CG	$\{CG\}$	$\{CG\}$
PS	$\{CG\}$	$\{CG \cup p; CG \cup \neg p\}$

- b. •  $POLAR\ QUESTION(p, A, K_i) = K_o$  such that:
- $To = push(\{p; \neg p\}, Ti)$
  - $PS_o = PS_i \cup \{p; \neg p\}$

Before moving on to the discussion of subjective assertions, it is important to emphasize a crucial difference between assertions and polar questions. As we have seen, neither of these moves automatically updates the *CG*. In light of this, one might wonder why the *Table* and the *PS* are structured differently in the two speech acts. After all, if assertions can be rejected, why not encode the addition of  $\neg p$  as an alternative in the *PS*? This difference is warranted by the observation that a  $\neg p$  answer to a question is an unproblematic move, which contributes to enriching the *CG*. By contrast, rejecting an assertion is a highly disruptive move. First, it undermines the felicity of the assertion itself, implying that the speaker is to blame for producing an infelicitous speech act. Second, it leads the exchange into a *conversational crisis*, where the two interlocutors have inconsistent commitments, and no consistent *CG* can be projected. As a result, this situation can only be solved via retraction or via a mutual negotiation to leave the issue unsettled and “agree to disagree” (Farkas and Bruce 2010). Rejection, while possible in the unfolding of the conversation, is instead *not* pragmatically encoded by an assertion as a possible outcome.

### **Subjective assertions**

Let us now consider the discourse profile of assertions containing subjective predicates. Assertions of this kind have not been addressed by Farkas and Bruce (2010) and, to my knowledge, have not received an explicit treatment within this model in terms of their discourse effects. To account for them, I propose an extension of Bruce and Farkas’ mode building on the theory of subjective predicates proposed by Lasersohn (2005) and then extended in Stephenson (2007) and Malamud and Stephenson (2014). In particular, the authors propose an analysis in which the interpretation of propositions containing a subjective predicate is relativized not only to a world, but also to a *judge* representing the particular perspective with respect to which the predicate is evaluated.<sup>32</sup>

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32. The choice of hardwiring a *judge* argument in the semantics, advocated by Lasersohn (2005) and Stephenson (2007), is not uncontroversial. Judge free semantic accounts have also been proposed (Stojanovic 2007, Pearson 2012). While I follow Stephenson’s account in this chapter, I mostly do so for practical purposes, as judge arguments provide a handy convention for representing the pragmatic behavior of subjective assertions. I do not intend to take a particular position on this debate, or on the deep philosophical underpinning of faultless disagreement. And while exploring this would go beyond the scope of the dissertation, the proposed account of the discourse effects of subjective predicates does not exclude the possibility to capture the very same facts with a judge-free semantics.

Under this view, the content of a sentence is a function from world-time-individual triples  $\langle w, t, j \rangle$  to truth values. Accordingly, the extension of an expression  $\alpha$  can be written as  $\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{w, t, j}$ , where  $w$  is a world,  $t$  is a time, and  $j$  is the judge. Under this view, the semantics of an adjective like *awesome* and of a proposition containing a subjective predicate can be modulated as follows.

- (64) a.  $\llbracket \text{Awesome} \rrbracket^{w, t, j} = [\lambda x. x \text{ is awesome for } j \text{ in } w \text{ at } t]$ <sup>33</sup>  
 b. **Subjective proposition**  $\lambda w \lambda j. p$  is true as judged by  $j$  in  $w$   
 c.  $\llbracket \text{John: "Skiing in Salt Lake is awesome"} \rrbracket^{w, j} = [\text{"Skiing in Salt Lake is awesome for John in } w]$

Introducing the judge variable has two crucial consequences on the discourse profile of these predicates.

On the one hand, it requires the introduction of a new norm of assertion, which Stephenson, following Lasersohn (2005), labels *autocentric*. On this view, the felicity condition of an assertion is merely that the speaker, from their perspective, judges  $p$  as true. Crucially, however, the speaker need not believe that  $p$  is true as judged by the other conversation participants. This requirement makes the norm of assertion for subjective propositions *weaker* than the ones with no perspective-dependent content, as Stephenson explicitly acknowledges (Stephenson 2007: 509). On the other hand, although the norm of assertion is anchored within an individual, assertions are still proposals that can be either accepted or rejected, where finding convergence is inscribed in the general participants' project of enriching the CG of the conversation.<sup>34</sup> With respect to this norm of assertion, propositions containing subjective predicates enter the *CG* if they are agreed upon by all

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33. I will henceforth suppress the  $t$  parameter, since it is not relevant to the following discussion.

34. A different case is represented by *presentational* uses of subjective predicates. Stephenson (2007) brings evaluative predicates embedded under "I find that" or with an overt experiencer as example of this. These can not be challenged even in case the interlocutor has a different view/experience on the matter.

- (1) Mary: How is the cake?  
 Sue: It tastes good to me.  
 Sam: # No, it doesn't! It tastes terrible.

Dechaine et al. (2015) make a similar point, arguing that these constructions merely update the *Origo Ground*, as opposed to the Common Ground. Expressives like *damn* (Potts 2005) most likely behave in a similar way.

participants, that is, if they are true as judged by the *collective* judge that represents the sum of all the individual judges participating in the conversation. With these theoretical assumptions in mind, we can move on to explore the discourse profile of assertions containing subjective predicates. We have already observed that important empirical differences separate subjective and factual assertions. While disagreement on subjective matters is somewhat smooth – or, at least, not obviously dispreferred to an agreeing response – disagreement on factual issues is instead highly troublesome, and leads the conversation into a state of crisis. In the remainder of this section, I present three additional facts supporting the idea that disagreeing responses have different statuses in subjective and factual assertions, suggesting that assertions containing subjective predicates should be assigned an independent discourse profile.

First, while silence following a factual assertion is by default taken as an act of acceptance of the assertion and results in adding *p* to the Common Ground (Farkas and Bruce 2010), subjective assertions always need to be explicitly confirmed to ensure that agreement has been reached. Failure to confirm can be seen as a sign of the interlocutor’s being agnostic, or even as a sign of disagreement, where the interlocutor is refraining from expressing dissent via politeness, but never as a sign of agreement.

- (65) a. **Greg:** My dad will beat your dad.  
**Fred:** [Silence]  
**Greg:** # Good we are on the same page.
- b. **Greg:** The movie was awesome.  
**Fred:** [Silence]  
**Greg:** # Good we are on the same page.

The second difference emerges in the aftermath of negative responses. A denial targeting a factual assertion leads the discourse into an inconsistent condition, which requires to be solved via retraction or an “agree to disagree” resolution. No conversational crisis, however, comes with subjective disagreement. While it is obviously possible for the interlocutors to elaborate further on the sources of their disagreement, a divergence is not strong enough to force a retraction, as shown

by (66a) and observed by Stephenson (2007).<sup>35</sup>

(66) a. **Greg:** The movie was awesome.

**Fred:** No, I didn't like it.

**Greg:** # Oh, sorry, I got it wrong .

b. **Greg:** Luke got married at 25.

**Fred:** No, he didn't. He got married at 27.

**Greg:** ✓ Oh, sorry, I mixed up the dates.

Finally, disagreement with subjective assertions, in some cases, might be in fact *welcome*. In other words, a speaker might just be trying to eliciting their interlocutor's perspective without particular argumentative proposals. Because subjective assessments call for a reaction, be that positive or negative, they are particularly apt to achieve this goal. This is, after all, the purpose of making a comment on a movie during a date, or having sports analysis making predictions about the outcome of games, where the diversity in the judgments is often seen as an added source of interest rather than a problem. It is therefore unsurprising that, in these cases, subjective disagreement can be commented on with a light-hearted, welcoming attitude (in (67a)).<sup>36</sup>

(67) a. **Greg:** The movie was awesome.

**Fred:** No, I didn't like it.

**Greg:** Ahah, that's hilarious! I knew you were the kind of person that doesn't like

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35. Modals like *must* and *will* are tricky, in this sense, because they are sensitive to the belief state of the speakers. Therefore, if one of the interlocutors is in a better position to make the assessment, retraction of the first one is possible. So, Fred could add some piece of evidence that Greg didn't have, like a report coming from very reliable sources that have knowledge of the situation. But this would mean that the two interlocutors would have two different belief states, introducing a confound in the disagreement.

(1) **Greg:** My dad will beat your dad.

**Fred:** No, I don't think he will! My dad has practiced for the past 5 months!

**Greg:** # Oh, ok. Scratch that. I don't think my dad will win then.

36. To have a better idea, if sports commentators are disagreeing on a bracket poll or a mock draft the outcome is usually positive for the editor, with more meat for the debate and no one being seriously at risk of being labeled as incompetent. But if they disagree on a factual issue, e.g. the salary of a player, then things will easily get more tense and the Editor is likely to have a problem, since this would necessarily entail that one of the commentators is wrong and misinformed.

these movies.

b. **Greg:** The movie started at 8 pm.

**Fred:** No, it didn't. It started at 9 pm!

**Greg:** # Oh, that's interesting! We have different perspectives on this.

These empirical facts suggest that subjective and factual assertions, despite being both encoded in the form of declarative sentences, ought not be treated on a par with respect to their impact on discourse. Specifically, I propose that assessments containing subjective predicates partially overlap with both factual assertions and polar questions. On the one hand, they have an *informative* nature, as they convey information about the speaker's view on a particular issue. Similar to assertions, then, they add  $p$  as judged by the speaker to the list of their discourse commitments. On the other hand, they are *inquisitive*, as they summon the other participants' view on the proposition, raising the issue as to whether the proposition is taken to be true by the collective judge of the conversation and should therefore be added to the Common Ground. On a broader level, the upshot of this proposal is that the dichotomy between informative and inquisitive assertions is mediated by a third, mixed type of movement. Crucially, this idea is by no means new in the investigation of meaning. In particular, Giannakidou (2013) proposes the notion of *inquisitive assertion* to categorize assertions that, by virtue of containing modal operators, are *nonveridical*. More precisely, they are mapped onto *non-homogeneous* epistemic spaces, that is, they allow for both  $p$  and  $\neg p$  worlds in the speaker's knowledge state. This makes them different from factual assertions, which, instead, are mapped onto a *homogeneous* epistemic space, namely one that only contains  $p$  worlds. While I will come back extensively to the notion of homogeneity in the remainder of the chapter, I observe that Giannakidou's proposal crucially puts forward the idea that a strict dichotomy between inquisitive and informative speech acts is not sufficient to capture the pragmatic landscape of assertions and questions. In what follows I enrich this intuition by showing that assertions containing subjective predicates also seem to pattern with the modalized assertions discussed by Giannakidou (2013), proposing that, from a discourse perspective, these two types of moves should be treated on a par. I now proceed to implement this proposal within the conversational model that I have been

following, separating out the informative from the inquisitive component of subjective assertions.

Subjective assertions: informative component

Let us consider the following sentence.

(68) **Greg:** The movie was *awesome*.

In accordance with the norm of assertion outlined above, a first consequence of the move is that  $p$  as judged by Greg (henceforth,  $p_{Greg}$ ) is added to Greg’s individual commitments. This effect is exactly the same as would obtain with a regular factual assertion. What is different from factual assertions, however, is that in the case of subjective assertions the same proposition that is added to the speaker’s commitment is *not* put on the Table, as shown by the fact that the hearer has no access to dispute Greg’s own judgment.

(69) **Greg:** The movie was *awesome*.

**Fred:** # No, you didn’t like it!  $\rightarrow p_{Greg}$  cannot be challenged.

The emerging picture is one in which the proposition as judged by Greg never becomes an issue, and thus never penetrates the spaces of the discourse model in which other conversational participants have a say. I capture this by proposing that  $p_{Greg}$  has two effects: it is added to Greg’s commitments, as shown above; and it trivially updates the Common Ground, making all participants aware that Greg regards the movie as awesome.

(70) a. A (to B): The movie was awesome.

Table 2.6: Move: Subjective Assertion, informative component

Discourse component	Before A’s move	After A’s move
$DC_A$	$\{\}$	$\{p_A\}$
$DC_B$	$\{\}$	$\{\}$
Table	$\langle \rangle$	$\langle \rangle$
CG	$\{CG\}$	$\{CG \cup p_A\}$
PS	$\{CG\}$	$\{CG \cup p_A\}$

- SUBJECTIVE ASSERTION, INFORMATIVE COMPONENT( $p, A, Ki$ ) =  $Ko$  such that:
- $Dc_{A,o}: p_A$
- $CGo = \{CGi \cup p_A\}$
- $PSo = \{PSi \cup p_A\}$

### Subjective assertions: inquisitive component

Yet, this shows only a partial picture of the aftermath of a subjective assertion. As we have seen, these moves are not merely presentational, but also crucially call on the hearer, as they pragmatically warrant an explicit responsive move. If the proposition is judged as true by all participants in the conversation, that is if other participants also think that the movie is awesome, a more substantial enrichment of the Common Ground than the one described above will ensue, updating it with the proposition as judged by all conversational participants. If the participants do not judge  $p$  consistently, however, no substantial update will ensue, with the Common Ground being merely enriched with the information that the speaker and the hearers could not find consensus on their evaluation. I capture this component of subjective assertions by suggesting that, in a similar way to polar questions, they partition the Table in two equivalent alternatives. In one such alternative, all participants in the conversations agree to take  $p$  to be true, thus projecting the addition of the proposition to the Common Ground (by assertion norm). Assuming a conversation with A and B as the only participants, I represent this option as  $[p_A \wedge p_B]$ . In the other alternative, it is not the case that a consensus around  $p$  is reached by all participants. This happens if at least one participant does not judge  $p$  to be true. Assuming again a two party conversation, I represent this alternative as  $\neg[p_A \wedge p_B]$ , where the no addition of  $p$  to the Common Ground is projected in the PS.<sup>37</sup> The

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37. This corresponds to what Farkas and Bruce (2010) label *agree to disagree* move following denials to assertions. The crucial difference is that, while “agreeing to disagreeing” with factual assertions is a last resort strategy to avoid conversational crises - crucially, one which is not encoded in the *PS* projected by a factual assertion - it is instead a felicitous continuation for assertions containing a subjective predicate. As such, it contributes to outline the potential common grounds created by the assertion.

effects are modeled below:<sup>38</sup>

(71) a. A (to B): The movie was awesome.

Table 2.7: Move: Subjective Assertion, inquisitive component

Discourse component	Before A's move	After A's move
$DC_A$	$\{\}$	$\{\}$
$DC_B$	$\{\}$	$\{\}$
Table	$\langle \rangle$	$\langle \{[p_A \wedge p_B]; \neg[p_A \wedge p_B]\} \rangle$
CG	$\{CG\}$	$\{CG\}$
PS	$\{CG\}$	$\{CG \cup [p_A \wedge p_B]; CG \cup \neg[p_A \wedge p_B]\}$

- b. • SUBJECTIVE ASSERTION, INQUISITIVE COMPONENT( $p, A, Ki$ ) =  $Ko$  such that:
- $To = push(\{[p_A \wedge p_B]; \neg[p_A \wedge p_B]\}, Ti)$
  - $PSo = \{PSi \cup [p_A \wedge p_B]; PSi \cup \neg[p_A \wedge p_B]\}$

This correctly derives the empirical properties of subjective assertions observed above. First, the inquisitive component encoded by the assertion predicts that subjective assertions pragmatically allow – in a certain sense, require – the addressee to express their own view but not to challenge the proposition as judged by the speaker. Moreover, by encoding both a situation of agreement and a situation of lack of agreement as felicitous continuations of the exchange, the account correctly predicts that the lack of a joint commitment around  $p$ , contrary to what we have seen for factual assertions, does not give rise to a conversational crisis, but is instead compatible with the exchange proceeding smoothly. This is precisely what engenders the intuition that, with these propositions, disagreement is “faultless”: given the inherent perspective dependence of the propositions, a discrepancy in the evaluation is still compatible with both interlocutors making pragmatically savvy moves. Third, the fact that  $p_A \wedge p_B$  is parameterized to both A and B is in line with Stevenson’s claim that the proposition will be added to the Common Ground only if taken to be true by all conversational participants or, more precisely, by the collective judge that represents their sum.

38. With only two conversation participants, these moves can be effectively reduced to the two alternatives on the table being  $p_B$  and  $\neg p_B$ , since A, by virtue of making the assertion, has committed to  $p$  already.

## Outlandish assertions

Finally, let us consider what I dubbed above *outlandish assertions*, the last type of context where *totally* is licensed. In principle, these assertions are exactly like regular factual assertions. They describe events that are not perspective dependent, failing to license faultless disagreement. Yet, we saw that *totally* can modify them, often conveying a flavor of strong surprise or disbelief.

If we take a closer look, in particular, such assertions differ from factual assertions in that they require some sort of “extra push” to sound felicitous. This need not be afforded by *totally*, but also by evaluative commentaries like “Believe it or not”, “WTF” or similar. If the bare proposition is asserted out of the blue, it betrays some kind of incongruous pragmatic behavior, as if the speaker were expected to signal to the addressee the highly deviant or remarkable nature of the proposition, prompting the hearer to comment on this.<sup>39</sup>

- (72) a.
- b. **Fred** ✓ WTF! Man in “I have drugs” shirt had drugs.
  - c. **Fred** Man in “I have drugs” shirt had drugs.  
**Lucy:** And you say this as if it was normal?
- (73) a. **Fred** ✓ Believe it or not, John got married at 12 years old.  
b. **Fred** John got married at 12 years old. **Lucy:** And you say this as if it was normal?

A second empirical property of these assertions is that, just like the speaker, the hearer is also expected to signal the special nature of the content with an explicit reaction. Failure to do so will give rise to a pragmatically incongruent state of the conversation, prompting the speaker to comment on the hearer’s lack of reaction.

- (74) a. **Fred** ✓ Believe it or not, John got married at 12 years old.  
**Lucy:** No way! / I can’t believe that!

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39. The contrast is sometimes subtle, and often varies from speaker to speaker and from assertion to assertion.

b. **Fred** ✓ Believe it or not, John got married at 12 years old.

**Lucy:** [Silence]

**Fred:** Wait a minute, you don't say anything?

A final empirical property of these assertions is that they allow the listener to accept the proposition via a seemingly disagreeing response, such as “No way!” or “No, that can't be true!” By contrast, if these answers are produced following a run-of-the-mill factual assertion, they are normally interpreted as rejections of the proposal, and hence all for some further elaboration to manage the ensuing conversational crisis.

(75) a. **Fred:** John got married at 12 years old.

**Lucy:** No way! / No, that can't be true!

Lucy still accepts the proposal

b. ?# John got married at 25 years old.

**Lucy:** No way! / No, that can't be true!

Lucy rejects the proposal

These observations suggest that outlandish assertions, despite their objective content, are not identical to run-of-the-mill factual assertions. In particular, they appear to introduce a remarkably complex update of the Common Ground, which requires some extra meta-discursive work on the part of both participants to be successfully handled and is consistent with reactions that would be seen as rejections in regular assertions. I suggest that the reason why we observe this effect is that the content proposed by these moves presents a clash with the background assumptions about the world shared by the conversants. As Stalnaker (1978) points out, the CG does not only record the propositions that have been explicitly accepted in the exchange. It also encompasses the propositions that are tacitly given for granted by the participants in the exchange, which bear on their world knowledge, their expectations, their assumptions about how events in the world should unfold. Crucially, while most such assumptions can be constantly revised or changed depending on what is added to the Common Ground by the speech acts deployed in a conversation, some of them are so deeply entrenched that they are difficult to remove, giving rise to a clash when a speaker proposes an update that is inconsistent with them. This precisely appears to be the case

for the examples above, where it is reasonable to assume that speakers expect people with a t-shirt “I have drugs” *not* to have drugs; the heads of former presidents of the US *not* appear in a popular TV show; and people *not* to get married when they are 12 years old. I suggest representing such background assumptions as a special property of the Common Ground that is inherited before an outlandish assertion is made, where  $p$  represents the content of the assertion,  $\neg p$  its complement and  $\gg_{plausibility}$  a relationship that compares the consistency of a proposition with the background assumptions of the interlocutor.

(76) Outlandish assertions:

- Asserted content:  $p$
- Special property of the CG:  $\neg p \gg_{plausibility} p$

I suggest that such a negative bias of the content of an outlandish assertion makes it a pragmatically risky move, where the proposal is exceptionally likely to be rejected. This, in turn, does impact the continuation of the conversation in a way that is crucially different from what we have seen for regular assertions. On the one hand, they load the Table with  $p$ , just like any other factual assertion; on the other hand, given the strong inconsistency between  $p$  and the the interlocutors’ assumptions, the assertion exceptionally projects *two* possible continuations: one is acceptance of  $p$ , per regular norm of assertion; the other is rejection of  $p$ , given its implausible nature. In other words, while an outlandish assertion does not directly raise an issue in a way in which a question or a subjective assertion would do, it still forces the hearer to indirectly solve one: either they accept the content of the assertion and overwrite their background assumptions<sup>40</sup>; or they choose to stay with their assumptions, thus preventing  $p$  from making it to the Common Ground. As such, outlandish assertions also present an *inquisitive* component, although in a more indirect way than questions and subjective assertions. It is precisely the pragmatic encoding of rejection as a possible option that requires the use of special metalinguistic commentaries to manage the update, making silence a pragmatically unsuitable route to accept the proposal.

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40. A possible way to achieve this would be to resort to *belief revision*. See McCready (2006, 2008) for a proposal.

(77) a. A (to B): John got married at 12.

Table 2.8: Move: Outlandish Assertion

Discourse component	Before A's move	After A's move
$DC_A$	$\{\}$	$\{p\}$
$DC_B$	$\{\}$	$\{\}$
Table	$\langle \rangle$	$\langle \{p\} \rangle$
CG	$\{CG: \neg p \rangle \rangle p\}$	$\{CG: \neg p \rangle \rangle p$
PS	$\{CG: \neg p \rangle \rangle p\}$	$\{CG \cup p; CG \cup \neg p\}$

- b. •  $OUTLANDISH\ ASSERTION(p, A, K_i) = K_o$  such that:
- $Dc_{A,o}: p$
  - $To = push(\{p\}, Ti)$
  - $PS_o = \{CG \cup p; CG \cup \neg p\}$

### 2.5.2 From assertion types to *totally*: Projected Common Grounds and (non)-homogeneity

This overview has shown that different varieties of assertion, despite sharing the core effect of putting forward a proposal for increasing the Common Ground, place different constraints on how the exchange can proceed, depending on the particular type of propositional content (factual, subjective, outlandish) that they convey. This observation is important on two counts. On the one hand, it reveals a subtle layer of semantic variation between assertion types, complicating the traditional typology of speech act types. Particularly revealing, in this sense, is that the distinction between subjective and objective predicates, lively debated at the level of the lexical semantics, affects how easily a proposal to add  $p$  to the Common Ground can be rejected without disrupting the felicity of the exchange, an empirical fact that judge-based and judge-free theories of subjective predicates alike must account for. On the other hand, the model outlined thus far provides a jumping off point to look into the distribution of pragmatic *totally*. In particular, it allows us to verify if (and how) the different contexts in which the intensifier is found form a natural class, and therefore to cast light on what discourse component the intensifier is tracking. It is precisely on this aspect that the rest of the discussion will focus. The crucial generalization, informally, can be stated as follows:

(78) **Informal generalization** - *Totally* is licensed whenever the assertion projects a *weak* relationship between  $p$  and the Common Ground. This happens when adding  $p$  to the Common Ground requires either a perspective-dependent assessment of the hearer (i.e. with Subjective Assertions) or a revision of the interlocutors' background assumptions (i.e. with outlandish assertions).

In the remainder of the section, I cash out the notion of weak relationship in terms of *non-homogeneity*, pointing to the assertion's Projected Set as the crucial discourse component that tracks the distribution of *totally*. To begin with, let us consider the various types of assertion discussed above. While all these moves are identical in terms of individual commitments - they entail the addition of  $p$  to the speaker's DC - they feature an important difference in the way in which they structure the shared spaces of the discourse. More specifically, they introduce a different relationship between  $p$  and the CG. Let us begin by considering the table below.

Table 2.9: Discourse initial assertions

Discourse position	Nature of p	<i>Totally</i> licensed	Projected <i>PS</i>	<i>PS</i> Hom
Initiating	Factual	#	$CG \cup p$	Yes
Initiating	Factual - Outlandish	✓	$CG \cup p; CG \cup \neg p$	No
Initiating	Subjective	✓	$CG \cup [p_A \wedge p_B]; CG \cup \neg [p_A \wedge p_B]$	No

Regular factual assertions, in which *totally* is ruled out, exclusively encode a projected CG which entails  $p$ . No  $\neg p$  option is allowed for as a continuation of the conversation. On the other hand, the moves in which *totally* is licensed project at least one potential CG that contains at least *some*  $\neg p$  worlds. Subjective assertions allow for felicitous continuations where the speaker and the addressee do not agree on the evaluation of the proposition; outlandish assertions project one PS where  $p$  is not added to the CG. Building on Giannakidou and Mari's formal model of epistemic spaces (Giannakidou 2013; Giannakidou and Mari 2013, 2015c,b; see also Giannakidou 1998, 1999 for the theoretical foundations of the model) I label the PS projected by regular factual assertions *homogeneous* with respect to  $p$ ; conversely, I label the PS projected by subjective and outlandish assertions *non-homogeneous* with respect to  $p$ .

In the authors' original work, the notion of homogeneity is used to model the relationship between the presence of modal operators in the assertion and the speaker's epistemic state. Specifically, Giannakidou and Mari focus on contrasts like the following, where 79 represents a *veridical* assertion, that is, one that entails the truth of  $p$ ; and 80 represents its modalized, *non-veridical* counterpart (here, with epistemic *must*), which does *not* entail the truth of  $p$ .

(79) Ariadne ate breakfast.

(80) Ariadne might be eating breakfast.

To capture the difference between the two sentences above, the authors suggest that they are mapped onto different states of the speaker. On the one hand, veridical sentences are mapped onto *homogeneous* epistemic spaces, that is, sets of worlds in which all worlds are  $p$ -worlds; by contrast, non-veridical ones are mapped onto *non-homogeneous* (or *partitioned*) spaces, that is, sets of worlds in which there is at least one  $\neg p$  world.

(81) A set of worlds  $W$  relative to an epistemic agent  $i$  is homogeneous with respect to  $p$  iff  $\forall w: w \in W_i, p(w)=1$

(82) A set of worlds  $W$  relative to an epistemic agent  $i$  is non-homogeneous with respect to  $p$  iff  $\neg \forall w: w \in W_i, p(w)=1$  Giannakidou and Mari (2013)

In what follows, I propose that the same model can be used to capture the dynamics of conversational spaces, that is, to modulate sets of worlds that are shared between the interlocutors as the conversation, and thus have a collective, rather than individual, nature.<sup>41</sup> More specifically, I propose that the notion of homogeneity can be applied to Common Grounds and Projected Sets, thus providing us with a well-established analytical tool to model the difference between the contexts in which *totally* is licensed and those in which it is not. From a formal perspective, this extension is rather smooth, since both individual epistemic spaces and shared conversational spaces are effec-

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41. A similar extension of the model from the dimension of individual/epistemic spaces to the one of collective/discourse spaces has been proposed by Mari (2015) to account for the distribution of the subjunctive mood in Italian.

tively sets of worlds. Specifically, for a potential Common Ground PCG, I propose the following distinction:

(83) A Projected Common Ground PCG relative to conversational participants A and B is homogeneous with respect to  $p$  iff:

$$\forall w: w \in \text{PCG}_{AB}, p(w) = 1$$

(84) A Projected Common Ground PCG relative to conversational participants A and B is non-homogeneous with respect to  $p$  iff:

$$\neg \forall w: w \in \text{PCG}_{AB}, p(w) = 1$$

Because Projected Sets are, in turn, *sets* of PCGs, let me extend the definition of homogeneity to this discourse component as well.

(85) a. A Projected Set  $\text{PS}_{AB}$  relative to participants A and B is homogeneous with respect to  $p$  iff:

$$\forall \text{PCG} \in \text{PS}_{AB}, \text{PCG is homogeneous}$$

b. A Projected Set  $\text{PS}_{AB}$  relative to participants A and B is non-homogeneous with respect to  $p$  iff:

$$\neg \forall \text{PCG} \in \text{PS}_{AB}, \text{PCG is homogeneous}$$

It is thus possible to understand more clearly in what sense subjective and outlandish assertions form a natural class from the standpoint of discourse structure, despite the different semantic properties of the predicates therein contained. In particular, extending the notion of (non-)homogeneity from individual epistemic spaces to collective discourse spaces allows us to account in a unified way for the common status of these assertions as *inquisitive* moves, which project a continuation in which at least one  $\neg p$  option is available and thus make the relationship between the proposition and the Common Ground *weaker* than for factual assertions. The upshot of this view is that, from the perspective of discourse pragmatics, inquisitive assertions emerge as an internally diverse class of speech acts, which cuts across the distinction between informative, assertoric moves and inquisitive, questioning ones. This category includes assertions containing predicates that are al-

ready mapped onto non-homogeneous spaces at the level of their lexical semantics (i.e., modals), as Giannakidou (2013) already pointed out; at the same time, it also includes assertions containing predicates that are instead homogeneous with respect to each individual speaker (e.g., evaluative adjectives, veridical predicates in outlandish assertions), and that only introduce a partition at the collective level. As we shall see briefly, it is precisely this discrepancy between the addition of *p* to the Common Ground and the options made available by the assertion that justifies the use of *totally* as a device to strengthen the discourse move.

### 2.5.3 The proposal

#### An informal characterization

It is now time to put forward a proposal to capture the contribution of attitudinal *totally*. We just saw that the contexts where the intensifier is not licensed pragmatically encode the addition of *p* as the only possible continuation, projecting a maximally strong relationship between the proposition and the CG. Those in which it is licensed, instead, pragmatically encode a non-homogeneous continuation, projecting a less than maximally strong relationship between *p* and the CG. As a result, the latter moves turn out to be weaker than the former. I argue that *totally* targets precisely this weakness, eliminating the wiggle room that separates the assertion of *p* from a univocal proposal to add *p* to the CG. More specifically, I suggest that the intensifier expresses a speaker's evaluative commentary on how the conversational exchange should proceed, conveying that, in her view, the assertion of *p* should only project a continuation in which *p* is actually added to the CG. I suggest that the closest gloss to capture this effect is a modifier like *unquestionably*, even though this paraphrase is not adequate for all the contexts where *totally* appears. I informally spell out the attitude as follows.

- (86)  $\text{TOTALLY}_{\text{attitudinal}} = \textit{The speaker believes that there should be no option other than adding } p \textit{ to the CG}$

On this view, *totally* is treated as a *conversational* operator with a CG-managing function, together with a class of expressions that has recently garnered attention in the field (Repp 2013). In particular, its contribution is similar to the one associated with Verum Operators like *really* (see Romero and Han 2004; Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miró 2011; Repp 2013). I address the comparison between *totally* and these operators in section 2.5.6).

### The denotation

In more technical terms, by using *totally*, the speaker signals that in her view the projected CG, despite its non-homogeneity, should be actually seen as homogeneous with respect to  $p$ . I model this intuition by suggesting that *totally* combines with an assertion  $A$  and with its anchor proposition  $p$  and universally quantifies over worlds in the set of possible Common Grounds contained in the Projected Set of the assertion, requiring that all of them be  $p$ -worlds. A preliminary denotation, to be augmented throughout the analysis, is proposed below, where PCG is a projected Common Ground and PS is the set of CGs projected by the assertion.

$$(87) \quad \llbracket \text{TOTALLY}_{attitudinal} \rrbracket = \lambda A \lambda p. \forall w \in \text{PCG} \in \text{PS}(A(p)): p(w) = 1 \quad \text{Preliminary}$$

An obvious problem with this denotation is that it operates on the wrong level. More precisely, the strengthening effect of *totally* as modeled here would behave as regular propositional content, directly impacting the relationship between  $p$  and the CG and changing the  $PS$  projected by the assertion. Yet, this cannot be adequate. If it did, we would erroneously predict that a proposition containing *totally* should project a homogeneous  $PS$ , behaving in all respects as a factual assertion. Instead, what *totally* does is to convey that, from the speaker's perspective, the  $PS$  *should* be homogeneous. As such, while targeting a shared space in the conversation, it reflects the speaker's personal attitude towards the conversation, operating on an independent dimension. To reflect this, I follow Romero and Han (2004) in positing that the relationship between conversational operators like *totally* (and, in their account, *really*) and propositions is mediated by  $\text{CONV}_S$ , that is, the set of worlds where all the *conversational goals* of the speaker  $S$  are fulfilled (Romero and Han 2004: 627). Such goals, Han and Romero argue, include attaining maximal information and increasing

the CG of the conversation while preserving truth. In this sense,  $CONV_S$  can be seen as a sort of teleological ‘conversational’ modal base anchored to each participant in the exchange, representing the perspective of the speaker on the conversational exchange she is participating in.

(88)  $w \in CONV_S$  iff S’ conversational goals are fulfilled at  $w$  Romero and Han (2004)

Introducing this notion allows us to relativize the attitude conveyed by *totally* to such a modal base. This, on the one hand, captures the fact that *totally* expresses a subjective attitude which does not directly affect the relationship between  $p$  and the CG projected by the assertion. On the other hand, it correctly predicts that such an attitude is about such a relationship. The revised, yet still preliminary, denotation for *totally* is provided below:

(89)  $\llbracket \text{TOTALLY}_{attitudinal} \rrbracket = \lambda A \lambda p \lambda w. \forall w' \in CONV_S(w) [\forall w'' \in PCG \in PS(Ass(p))(w')]: p(w'') = 1$

The denotation reads as follows: in every world where the speaker fulfils her conversational goals,  $p$  is added to the CG. More specifically, to fulfill the speaker’s conversational goals, the *PS* of the assertion modified by *totally* should be homogeneous with respect to  $p$ . In light of this semantics, we can now see more clearly why the use of *totally* presupposes the presence of a non-homogeneous *PS* to begin with. To be felicitous, such an attitude requires that the option of *not* adding  $p$  to the CG must be encoded as an alternative in the representation of the conversational state. In other words, there needs to be a discrepancy between the addition of  $p$  to the CG and the independent illocutionary force of the assertion, where the assertion by itself is not sufficient to project the addition of  $p$  as the only possible option. If this requirement is not met – as is the case for factual assertions – such an evaluation is completely redundant. I label this general admissibility condition on *totally* the Projected Set Non Homogeneity Condition (henceforth, NHC).<sup>42</sup>

(90) **Projected Set Non Homogeneity Condition**

$\neg \forall w: w \in PCG \in PS(A(p)), p(w) = 1$

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42. This condition is, *mutatis mutandis*, similar to the *Diversity Condition* proposed by Condoravdi (2002) to account for the licensing conditions of modals.

### Attitudinal *totally* as speaker commitment

What remains to be seen, at this point, is the compositional level at which *totally* operates. All we know, thus far, is that the intensifier is not part of the at-issue content. But this category, per se, does not say much as to the exact dimension of discourse that it affects. I argue that *totally* is an *illocutionary* modifier that adds to the speaker's set of Discourse Commitments without directly affecting the shared spaces in the discourse. As such, it modifies a property of the assertion itself, rather than being part of the proposition.

To motivate this claim, I build on recent work by Rett and Murray (Rett 2011; Rett and Murray 2013; Murray 2014; Rett 2015), who have revisited the long standing distinction between *illocutionary* and *locutionary* content (Searle 1969) to propose a distinction between *locutionary* non at-issue content, which is part of the content of the proposition, and *illocutionary* non at-issue content, which is instead directly encoded as part of the felicity conditions of the speech act.<sup>43</sup> While the difference is admittedly subtle, a crucial diagnostic to distinguish between the two is compatibility with types of speech acts. Locutionary at-issue content, by virtue of being part of the proposition, should not be sensitive to the kind of speech act that the proposition takes as argument. On the other hand, expressions contributing at the illocutionary level, by virtue of being part of the felicity conditions of the speech act itself, could in principle *not* be compatible with some speech acts.<sup>44</sup> As we have seen in section 2.3.1, speech-act sensitivity is precisely one of the distinctive features of *totally*. We can clearly see this if we compare the intensifier with an expression that contributes locutionary content like *fucking*, as we notice that the two indeed have a different distribution across different speech act types. While *totally* is restricted to assertions, *fucking* is available in a variety of other speech acts, including imperatives, questions and Wh-exclamatives. In light of these considerations, *totally* can be classified as belonging to the illocutionary type.

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43. Rett and Murray classify a variety of expressions as examples of illocutionary non at-issue content, including the speaker's surprise encoded by exclamative constructions (Rett 2011) and mirative evidentials (Rett and Murray 2013) and the contribution of attitude markers like *alas* or *unfortunately* in English (Rett 2015). Instead, they argue that *expressive content* (Kaplan 1999; Potts 2005; McCready 2010; Gutzmann 2012) belongs to the category of locutionary non at-issue content.

44. Rett (2015) shows that *alas* and *unfortunately* feature precisely this kind of sensitivity, as it is barred in questions.

- (91) a. # Should I *totally* click on that link?  
 b. # Will my dad *totally* beat your dad?  
 c. ✓ Should I *fucking* click on that link?  
 d. ✓ Will my dad *fucking* beat your dad?
- (92) a. # *Totally* click on that link!  
 b. ✓ *Fucking* click on that link!
- (93) a. # What a link you *totally* clicked on!  
 b. # Look who *totally* beat your dad!  
 c. ✓ What a link you *fucking* clicked on!  
 d. ✓ Look who *fucking* beat your dad!

Concerning the exact discourse component that is affected by *totally*, I propose that the intensifier triggers an update of the speaker’s set of Discourse Commitments without affecting any of the shared spaces. Recall that, for each participant in the conversation, discourse commitments include those propositions that the participant has publicly committed to during the conversation up to the relevant time, but which are not shared by all the other participants. The conversational evaluation introduced by *totally* fits the bill. It is indeed publicly available to the other participants, but is nevertheless inherently anchored to the perspective of the speaker and is not available for challenge or discussion.<sup>45</sup> The final representation of the effect of an utterance modified by *totally* is reported below. The contribution of the intensifier is underlined, whereas the non-underlined components represent the regular effects of the assertion, regardless of the presence of *totally*.

- (94) a. **Greg (to Fred):** Skiing in Salt Lake is *totally* awesome.  
 b. • ASSERT(totally(p, Greg,  $K_i$ )) =  $K_o$  such that:  
 •  $D_{C_{Greg}}: \{p_{Greg}\}$

---

45. Such a proposal is similar to the proposal by Rett (2015) to capture for the ‘surprise effect conveyed by propositional exclamation, which indeed shares most of the semantic and pragmatic properties that we have seen for *totally*. An alternative would be to posit that *totally* directly updates the CG, without being put on the Table. This is the account that Rett and Murray propose for expressive content.

- $T(K_o) = \langle [p_{Greg} \wedge p_{Fred}]; \neg [p_{Greg} \wedge p_{Fred}] \rangle$
- $PS(K_o) = \{PCG1 = CG_i \cup [p_{Greg} \wedge p_{Fred}]; PCG2 = CG_i \cup \neg [p_{Greg} \wedge p_{Fred}]\}$
- $DC_{Greg}: \underline{\forall w \in CONV_{Greg} [\forall w' \in PCG \in PS(K_o)(w): p(w') = 1]}$

We can now go back to the examples discussed in the chapter and see how the interaction between the contribution of *totally* and the NHC correctly derives the distribution of the intensifier.

#### 2.5.4 Accounting for the data

I now turn to discuss how the proposal applies to the various environments discussed thus far, showing how, on a case by case basis, the contexts that license *totally* project a non-homogeneous PS, providing room for the intensifier to strengthen the assertion.

#### Discourse initial assertions

For simplicity, let us work with the following three examples.

- |      |    |   |            |
|------|----|---|------------|
| (95) | a. | # <b>Greg</b> : Luke <i>totally</i> got married at 25.                | Factual    |
|      | b. | ✓ <b>Greg</b> : Skiing in Salt Lake is <i>totally</i> awesome.        | Subjective |
|      | c. | ✓ <b>Greg</b> : Man in “I have drugs shirt” <i>totally</i> had drugs. | Outlandish |

As we have seen before, the crucial difference between these two assertions is that they project *PS* with different structures. On one hand, factual assertions encode no alternative scenarios to the acceptance of *p* as a felicitous continuations of the conversation. As such, they project a CG that is already homogeneous with respect to *p*, failing to satisfy the NHC outlined above. In other words, because these speech acts make the conversation already “maxed out” with respect to its possible continuations, an operator that strengthens the relationship between *p* and the CG is correctly predicted to sound redundant.

- |      |    |   |
|------|----|---|
| (96) | a. | <b>Greg</b> : Luke totally got married at 25. |
|      | b. | $p = \text{Luke totally got married at 25}$   |

c. ASSERT(Totally(p,Greg,K<sub>i</sub>)) = K<sub>o</sub> such that:

- Assert(p,Greg,K<sub>i</sub>) = K<sub>o</sub>
- PS(K<sub>o</sub>) = {PCG = CG<sub>i</sub> ∪ p}
- NHC: #
- # DC<sub>Greg</sub>:  $\forall w \in \text{CONV}_{Greg} [\forall w' \in \text{PCG} \in \text{PS}(K_o)(w)]: p(w')=1$

Of course, because assertions do not automatically update the Common Ground, rejection of the proposal is always a possibility for the interlocutor. Yet, contrary to what happens for subjective assertions, this possibility is *not* pragmatically encoded as a felicitous continuation of the speech act. Strengthening the assertion in such a situation would imply pragmatically irrational behavior, suggesting that the speaker is not entirely convinced of the felicity of her own speech act.

On the other hand, assertions containing subjective predicates do provide the option of expressing a different judgment as a felicitous continuation of the conversation. Allowing for the possibility of disagreement implies that the conversation can proceed in two different directions. This, in turn, means that there is at least one projected Common Ground that contains both *p* and  $\neg p$  worlds, which I underlined in the representation below. In such a context, using *totally* is a felicitous mean for the speaker to strengthen the assertion.

(97) a. **Greg**: Skiing in Salt Lake is *totally* awesome.

b. *p* = Skiing in Salt Lake is *totally* awesome (from Greg to Fred)

c. ASSERT(Totally(p,Greg,K<sub>i</sub>)) = K<sub>o</sub> such that:

- ASSERT(totally(p, Greg, K<sub>i</sub>)) = K<sub>o</sub> such that:
- DC<sub>Greg</sub>: {p<sub>Greg</sub>}
- PS(K<sub>o</sub>) = {PCG1=CG<sub>i</sub> ∪ [p<sub>Greg</sub> ∧ p<sub>Fred</sub>]; PCG2= CG<sub>i</sub> ∪  $\neg$ [p<sub>Greg</sub> ∧ p<sub>Fred</sub>]}
- NHC: ✓
- ✓ DC<sub>Greg</sub>:  $\forall w \in \text{CONV}_{Greg} [\forall w' \in \text{PCG} \in \text{PS}(K_o)(w)]: p(w')=1$

It is precisely this added component that derives the characteristic flavor of epistemic certainty that *totally* brings to the assertion with subjective predicates. If the speaker envisions the common

ground as being uniform with respect to  $p$ , they are suggesting that, despite the collective uncertainty surrounding agreement on perspective-dependent issues,  $p$  should be added to the CG of the conversation. Hence, the inference that they are confident in their judgment, even though *totally* encodes no reference to certainty in its core semantics.

Finally, let us consider outlandish assertions. Recall that, because of the particularly deviant content of the proposition, updating with  $p$  creates a clash with the background assumptions inherited from the Common Ground. As a result, the addition of  $p$  turns out to be more problematic than in a regular assertion, giving the hearer the option of accepting the proposal and overriding the assumptions, or rejecting the proposal and continue to adhere to the assumptions. This disjunction in the projected continuations of the conversation introduces the source of non-homogeneity that *totally* can target, underlined below.

- (98) a. **Greg:** Man in “I have drugs shirt” *totally* had drugs.  
 b.  $p$  = Man in “I have drugs” shirt *totally* had drugs.  
 c. ASSERT(Totally( $p$ ,Greg, $K_i$ )) =  $K_o$  such that:
- Assert( $p$ ,Greg, $K_i$ ) =  $K_o$
  - $CG_i$ :  $\neg p \gg \text{plausibility} p$
  - $PS(K_o) = \{PCG1 = CG_i \cup p; \text{PCG2} = \underline{CG_i \cup \neg p}\}$
  - NHC: ✓
  - $\checkmark DC_{Greg,o} : \forall w \in CONV_{Greg} [\forall w' \in PCG \in PS(K_o)(w)]: p(w')=1$

By using *totally*, the speaker can simultaneously acknowledge the deviant nature of the content of the assertion and invite the hearer to eliminate from the CG all the  $\neg p$  worlds that could undermine the addition of  $p$ , paving the way for the assertion of  $p$ . On this view, the basic work performed by *totally* is therefore identical to the one performed with subjective predicates. What changes is the effect conveyed by the modifier. In particular, since there is no uncertainty directly involving  $p$ , the intensifier brings about no effect of strengthened confidence, as shown by the impossibility of using *definitely* as a gloss. Instead, *totally* becomes a vehicle for the kind of emo-

tive reactions that are normally associated with outlandish events, including surprise, heightened emotivity, disbelief et cetera.

Before moving on to discuss responsive uses, let me conclude with a final consideration. A possible weakness of this way of modeling outlandish assertions is the fuzziness of the implication relation. In particular, without a more precise account of what the negative implication between  $p$  and the CG boils down to, it appears to be hard to make predictions concerning the felicity of *totally* with these assertions.<sup>46</sup> I want to observe that this fuzziness is, in a certain sense, desirable. In fact, we see a certain amount of flexibility in the amount of ‘outlandishness’ required to license *totally* in these uses. While cases like the George Bush’ beheading and the “I have drugs” shirt are clearly outrageous, *totally* is also, sometimes, found with propositions that seem to merely exceed expectations, but are not in such a pronounced contrast with plausibility.<sup>47</sup>

(99) Tim Duncan *totally* hired some bro to stalk his wife.<sup>48</sup>

(100) *Totally* met a vegan at my boyfriend’s grad school orientation. I was just so freaking excited I had to share.<sup>49</sup>

A possible way to make sense of these cases is to suggest that the emotive reaction associated with outlandish events is on the way to grammaticalizing as an independent bit of meaning, which no longer requires to be grounded in a bizarre event. Yet, if this process is really underway, it is still far from being complete, as shown by the fact that with routinary assertion *totally* sounds

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46. It is interesting to note that if the complement of a proposition has been explicitly *accepted* as part of the CG, then uttering  $p$  is infelicitous, with or without *totally*. This points to a (perhaps unsurprising) difference between the status of tacit assumptions vs the status of propositions that have been explicitly discussed and accepted, suggesting that *totally* cannot do much to eliminate inconsistencies arising from the latter.

(1) **Greg:** John got married at 20.

**Fred:** Yes, correct.

**Greg** (Later in the exchange): # Oh, by the way, John *totally* got married at 20.

47. Due to the often sarcastic and markedly informal flavors of these uses, it can be at times difficult to tease apart what the licensing factor of *totally* is here, and to which extent it has to do with violation of worldly expectations, as opposed to the sheer expression of an emotive reaction.

48. <http://dailycaller.com/2013/05/30/tim-duncan-totally-hired-some-bro-to-stalk-his-wife/>

49. <http://vegweb.com/community/kitchen-sink/totally-met-vegan-my-boyfriends-grad-school-orientation>

considerably worse than expressives like *fucking* or *damn*. This suggests that the use of *totally* is still constrained by the nature of the event in a way in which true expressives are not. An alternative route would be to posit that, in factual assertions, outlandishness is not a necessary condition to project a non-homogeneous common ground. A state of emotive involvement of the speaker might just as well obtain this effect, licensing *totally*. The connection between emotivity and non-homogeneity is well-attested. In particular, Giannakidou and Mari (2015a) show that in Italian and Greek factive emotive predicates, despite their factual nature, can select for the subjunctive, which is normally associated with non-homogeneous epistemic states. While this might provide the ground for extending their model from the individual to the conversational space that is crucial to the licensing of *totally*, it is also important to note that the intensifier, as suggested before, is not systematically licensed by emotive predicates. I leave this for further investigation.

### Responsive assertions

Let us now turn to the behavior of *totally* in responsive assertions. Recall that the use of *totally* in this context features two main properties. First, the anchor proposition is neither subjective, nor outlandish. Second, in these contexts *totally* has a chiefly emphatic effect, whereby it intuitively reinforces the truth value of the proposition in contrast to the previous move. Paraphrases with epistemic operators or mirative markers are not always adequate, as discussed in section 2.3.2. (101) reports the examples discussed above.

- (101) a. **John:** Did Luke get married at 25? Question whether  $p$   
**Greg:** Yes, he TOTALLY got married at 25.
- b. **John:** I can't remember if Luke got married at 25. Doubt about  $p$   
**Greg:** Yes, he TOTALLY got married at 25.
- c. **John:** Luke didn't get married at 25. Asserts  $\neg p$   
**Greg:** No! What are you talking about! He TOTALLY got married at 25.
- d. **John:** Luke got married at 25. Asserts  $p$   
**Greg:** # Yes! He TOTALLY got married at 25.

An immediate challenge arises: how can these sentences meet the non-homogeneity condition required by *totally*? As the table below shows, it is not the case that the projected PS is homogeneous in all responsive uses of *totally*. Yet, if we consider the PS projected by the previous move, we notice that the correlation between *totally* and non-homogeneity holds. While questions and  $\neg p$  assertions projected a non-homogeneous PS with respect to  $p$ , assertions do not ( $\neg p$  worlds are in bold face). Crucially, *totally* is licensed with the former, but not with the latter.

Table 2.10: Responsive assertions

Discourse position	Previous move	Nature of $p$	Totally licensed	Projected PS	PS projected by previous move
Reactive	Assert $p$	Factual	#	$CG \cup p$	$CG \cup p$
Reactive	Question $p$	Factual	✓	$CG \cup p$	$CG \cup p$ ; $CG \cup \neg p$
Reactive	Assert $\neg p$	Factual	✓	$CG \cup p \cup \neg p$	$CG \cup \neg p$

In light of this pattern, a tempting explanation could be to argue that non-homogeneity is granted by the discrepancy in how the interlocutors see the relationship between  $p$  and the CG. Intuitively, if an interlocutor makes a move that projects a non-homogeneous PS, one could posit that *totally* can indeed track the non-homogeneity of such a PS. The NHC could be just modified to reflect that, if the interlocutor's perspective on the CG manifestly includes at least a  $\neg p$  world, then *totally* can still be licensed, regardless of the PS projected by the responsive assertion.

Yet, while this seems to be on the right track, it is not enough to license *totally*. To see this, let us consider the data on focus again. When introducing the phenomenon, I observed that uses of *totally* in responsive assertions typically comes with focal stress. In this part, I consider the empirical picture more closely, showing two important facts. First, focal stress is obligatory to license *totally*. Lack thereof makes the sentence sound odd.

(102) **John:** Did Luke get married at 25?

**Greg:** # Yes, he *totally* got married at 25.

Second, focal stress does not reflect focus on the intensifier itself. Rather, it marks the underlying presence of Verum Focus (hence, VF), a particular kind of focus that emphasizes the polarity of the proposition in contrast to an antecedent with different polarity (Hohle 1992; Romero and Han

2004; Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miró 2011). This is shown by the fact that *totally* is licensed also when the intensifier itself is de-accented and VF is marked in other ways, such as “do support” or prosodic stress on the auxiliary. That VF can be realized in various ways, and precisely by any expression in the C projection, is a well-documented fact, given the lack of a functional category to express polarity (Lohnstein and Strommer 2009 among others).

(103) a. **John:** Did Luke get married at 25?

**Greg:** ✓ Yes, he *totally* DID get married at 25.

b. **John:** Is Luke planning to get married at 25?

**Greg:** Yes, he *totally* IS planning to get married at 25.

These data suggest that the presence of Verum Focus plays a crucial role in the licensing of *totally*. As far as how this happens, I follow the consensus view in the literature in suggesting that a proposition with VF carries two presuppositions: (i) it needs to be given in discourse (Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miró 2011) and (ii) it must have different polarity from its antecedent (Samko Samko; Lai 2012). Against this background, I argue that asserting a proposition under Verum Focus, besides the effects of a regular assertion, has an extra effect on the output context. It introduces a set of alternative relationships between  $p$  and the CG, which include both the PS projected by the assertion and the PS projected by the previous move.<sup>50</sup> Crucially, because the latter is a non-homogeneous set, as shown above, non-homogeneity becomes available to license *totally*. I represent this by suggesting that the output context of an assertion of a proposition under VF introduces the set of alternatives  $ALT(PS(K_o))$ , which contains both the homogeneous PS projected by the assertion and the non-homogeneous PS projected by the previous move (underlined). This is what introduces the  $\neg p$  worlds required by *totally*, licensing the intensifier.

(104) a. **John:** Luke didn’t get married at 25.

**Greg:** No! What are you talking about! He **TOTALLY** got married at 25.

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50. Although this might appear stipulative, it seems like a reasonable assumption to make. If the correct representation of a proposition of the type  $VF(p)$  must encode information about a contrast in polarity with a  $?p$  or  $\neg p$  antecedent, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the discourse effects of the speech act  $Assert(VF(p))$  must also include information about the discourse effects of the antecedent, reproducing the contrast at a discourse level.

b.  $\text{Assert}(\text{totally}(\text{VF}(p), \text{Greg}, K_i)) = K_o$  such that:

- $\text{Assert}(\text{Greg}, p, K_i) = K_o$
- $\text{PS}(K_o) = \{\text{CG}_i \cup p\}$
- $\text{ALT}(\text{PS}(K_o)) = \{\text{CG}_i \cup p; \underline{\text{CG}_i \cup \neg p}\}$
- NHC: ✓
- $\checkmark DC_{\text{Greg}}: \forall w \in \text{CONV}_{\text{Greg}}[\forall w' \in \text{PCG} \in \text{PS}(K_o)(w)]: p(w')=1$

Note that, on this view, having a previous context state with a non-homogeneous PS is a necessary but not sufficient condition to license *totally*. On the one hand, it is not sufficient if the proposition does not have VF marking. In other words, the heavy lifting for licensing *totally* in responsive assertions is precisely carried out by the presence of the alternative PS that VF retrieves and makes salient, and that would be unavailable otherwise. This is shown by the fact that when no VF marking is present, *totally* is not licensed. On the other hand, the non-homogeneity of the previous PS is required in the first place to make VF available. By contrast, when the previous move projects a homogeneous PS, VF is unavailable, making *totally* unavailable as well.

(105) a. **John:** Luke got married at 25.

**Greg:** # Yes! He **TOTALLY** got married at 25.

b. #  $\text{Assert}(\text{totally}(\text{VF}(p), \text{Greg}, K_i)) = K_o$

- $\text{PS}(K_o) = \{\text{CG}_i \cup p\}$
- NHC: #
- #  $DC_{\text{Greg}}: \forall w \in \text{CONV}_{\text{Greg}}[\forall w' \in \text{PCG} \in \text{PS}(K_o)(w)]: p(w')=1$

### 2.5.5 Deriving the properties

Finally, let us consider how the proposed semantics for *totally* accounts for its empirical properties. First, the inability to scope under operators like negations and *almost* immediately follows from the idea that the intensifier is not part of the at-issue content of the utterance, and therefore cannot interact with any operator therein contained. Concerning speech-act sensitivity, recall that *totally*

restricts the felicity conditions of a speech act. As such, it is predicted to be ruled out whenever such a restriction presents an incompatibility with the felicity conditions that are already in place. This can be seen most clearly with questions: the belief that adding  $p$  to the CG is the only possible continuation of the exchange is obviously at odds with the way in which a question structures the context, introducing both  $p$  and  $\neg p$  alternatives. The explanation is less obvious for Wh-exclamatives, which, unlike questions, pragmatically require that the speaker believes the content to be true. I argue that, in this case, the incompatibility does not stem from lack of belief, but from the fact that exclamatives do not raise an issue concerning the relationship between  $p$  and the CG. It has been observed by Zanuttini and Portner (2003) and Chernilovskaya et al. (2012) that, contrary to assertion, exclamatives *cannot* be challenged or confirmed. Chernilovskaya et al. (2012) bring the following example in support of their claim (p. 113). Moreover, they cannot be used to respond to questions.

- (106) a. A: I learned a lot in this course.  
           B: That’s right. Assertion
- b. A: What a big crowd that is!  
           B: # That’ right./# That’s wrong! Exclamative
- c. A: Are there a lot of people?  
           B: #What a big crowd this is! Response

In light of these data, it appears reasonable that an operator that precisely targets the CG results in infelicity in this context, since the CG is automatically updated.<sup>51</sup> Finally, we are left with com-

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51. Note that arguments against the non-deniability of Exclamatives have been put forward in the literature. Castroviejo Miró (2006) suggests that exclamatives license confirmation moves, and as such are similar to assertions. Chernilovskaya et al. (2012) respond to this by suggesting that confirmation, in these cases, is not meant to accept the propositional content in the CG, but simply to share the expressive attitude that is also conveyed by these speech acts. Rett (2011) claims that, in certain cases, exclamatives *can* indeed be denied. Yet, even if this were true, it would not create a substantial problem for accounting for the distribution of *totally*. At the very least, exclamatives would structure the context like a regular, factual assertion, where only a homogeneous *PS* is projected. This would rule out *totally* for the same reason that the intensifier is ruled out in factual, discourse-initial assertions. In general, the question as to how exclamatives relate to the CG is still very much the object of a debate. Zanuttini and Portner (2003) suggest that they presuppose their propositional content, but Rett (2011) and Castroviejo Miró (2006) argue against such an account. Taking a position in this debate, however, goes beyond the scope of the thesis.

mand imperatives. Once again, the literature on this kind of speech act features a lively debate. Yet, one need not commit to a particular theoretical account to see that a structural incompatibility emerges between an operator that manages the CG, like *totally*, and the way in which an imperative changes the context. In particular, command imperatives, by virtue of their performative nature, do not seem to introduce representational content that can be challenged or confirmed by the interlocutor for updating the CG. As such, they are reminiscent of Wh-exclamatives in merely providing automatic updates to the CG, which renders the presence of *totally* redundant.<sup>52</sup>

(107) A: Click on that link!

B: # No! You're wrong

B': # False!

In light of this, the availability of *totally* with second person uses of *should*, which have been argued to share a similar performative component with command imperatives (Yanovich 2013, Lauer and Condoravdi 2012), might strike one as problematic. Yet, I argue that the felicity of *totally* in this context is indeed a welcome observation, if, as Yanovich (2013) explicitly argues, expressions of advice do put on the table the advisability of the recommendation, which he labels *Subject Benefit*. What is not challengeable, instead, is the performative act of attempting to induce the addressee to undertake a certain course of action, similar to what was observed for command imperatives.

(108) a. A: You should click on that link.

✓No! I don't think it's a good idea!

Advisability Challenged

b. A: You should click on that link.

#No! You didn't make the recommendation that clicking on this link would be good.

Recommendation Challenged

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52. Moreover, while challenges from the interlocutors are possible, either in terms of denying the speaker's authority or refusing to abide by it (Condoravdi and Lauer 2011), it seems hard to argue that these are actually encoded as felicitous alternatives, as it instead happens with subjective assertions and questions. In other words, even on a view that imperatives, like assertions, are refutable proposals, for instance targeted at a change in the Hearer's preference structure (Condoravdi and Lauer 2011) or an addition to her To-Do list (Portner 2005), refutation of the proposal appears to be a highly marked option, and one which severely undermines the felicity of the command

## 2.5.6 Different shades of Verum: comparison with other proposals

The analysis proposed for *totally* closely resembles some of the proposals that have been suggested to capture the behavior of other CG-managing operators, with particular attention to Verum. While the literature on the topic is not particularly rich, several well articulated proposals have been laid out. I want to focus on two in particular - Romero and Han (2004)'s analysis of *really* and Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miró (2011) work on Verum Focus - arguing that the behavior of *totally* cannot be fully captured by either of these accounts. This suggests an intriguing picture in which Verum can be realized by a variety of different operators, each of which has a different semantic and pragmatic profile.

Romero and Han (2004) discuss the use of *really* in examples like the following, which they take to be distinct from uses of *really* as a modifier of gradable adjectives.<sup>53</sup>

- (109) a. I *really* am tired.  
b. Did Jorge *really* bring a present?

The authors argue that in the examples above *really* is an epistemic conversational operator, expressing the speaker's *certainty* about whether *p* should be added to the CG. This contribution, they suggest, is not exclusive of *really*, but is more generally contributed by Verum, transferring to any expression that can be used to express it. The proposed denotation is one in which *really*, roughly speaking, means "I am certain that *p* should be added to the CG", combining an epistemic base anchored to the speaker and the already discussed conversational modal base in which the speaker fulfills her conversational goals.

- (110)  $\llbracket \text{VERUM} \rrbracket = \lambda p \lambda w. \forall w' \in \text{Epi}_x(w) [\forall w'' \in \text{Conv}_x(w'), p \in \text{CG}(w'')]$

This denotation is intuitively similar to the one proposed for *totally*. Both *totally* and Verum-*really* are operators managing the CG and expressing the speaker's stance with regard to a proposition's status with respect to it. Yet, by having reference to certainty directly hardwired into its lexical

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53. In this sense, *really* and *totally* are similar. Yet, the distribution of *totally* with gradable adjectives, due to its sensitivity to scale structure, is much more constrained than the one of *really*.

meaning, the former encodes an epistemic component that *totally* lacks. If we look at the distribution of the two expressions, this difference in their meanings makes the right predictions. Romero and Han (2004) argue that *really* can only be used in a context where the issue on the Table is not  $\{p; \neg p\}$ , but rather certainty or lack of certainty about the addition of  $p$  to the CG. These typically emerge in contexts introducing a negative epistemic bias about  $p$  on the part of the speaker. On the contrary, *totally* is not sensitive to epistemic bias, but, more generally, to the polarity of the previous move, which in turn determines the non-homogeneity of the projected CG. This makes the prediction that the distribution of *totally* is broader than the one for *really*: while the former can be used in responses to negative assertions and unbiased questions - both of which have different polarity, none of which introduce an epistemic bias - the latter should not be felicitous in these contexts. The prediction is borne out.

- (111) a. **Greg:** Did Luke get married at 25? Unbiased  
**Fred:** #He REALLY did!  
**Fred:** ✓He TOTALLY did!
- b. **Greg:** Are you sure that Luke got married at 25? Epistemically biased  
**Fred:** ✓He REALLY did!  
**Fred:** ✓He TOTALLY did!
- c. **Greg:** Luke didn't get married at 25.  $\neg p$  assertion  
**Fred:** #No! What are you talking about! He REALLY did!  
**Fred:** ✓No! What are you talking about! He TOTALLY did!

The second account of Verum that I would like to discuss is Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miró (2011)'s analysis of Verum Focus in German. The authors suggest a multi-dimensional analysis for Verum, where the operator combines with a proposition and returns the interpretational instruction to downgrade the corresponding question  $?p$  from the Question Under Discussion. A commonality between their analysis and the one proposed for *totally* is that neither encodes an epistemic component. Instead, confidence and certainty are derived as pragmatic effects of pushing the hearer to accept  $p$  in the CG. In Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miró (2011)'s words, "if the speaker asserts that

p, and at the same time wants to downdate ?p, then s/he must be sure that p should be added to the CG.” At the same time, there is an important difference in the discourse constraints on Verum as analyzed by Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miró (2011) and *totally*. The former, by being anaphoric to a Question under Discussion, is predicted to be infelicitous when uttered out of the blue. *Totally*, on the other hand, is felicitous in discourse-initial assertions, provided that the right conditions are met. It is quite telling, in this sense, that Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miró (2011) argue for the infelicitous status of VF out of the blue by providing an example that would be a perfectly fitting case of outlandish assertion for *totally*.<sup>54</sup>

- (112) SCENARIO: A goat walks in. A sees the goat and is pretty sure that it is a goat. B hasn't seen the goat, yet. Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miró (2011)
- a. A: Da ist/#IST eine Ziege.  
there is/is-#VF a goat
- b. ✓There is *totally* a goat!

Finally, *totally* differs from Verum operators in being restricted to assertions. By contrast, *really* and the operators analyzed by Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miró (2011) and Repp (2013) are less selective in terms of the speech act types with which they can occur. For example, *really* can freely occur in questions, while the examples of VF analyzed by Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miró (2011) are found in imperatives as well.

- (113) a. ✓Should I *really* click on that link?  
b. # Should I *totally* click on that link?

Interestingly, while these have been traditionally seen as modifying propositions which are then passed up to illocutionary operators<sup>55</sup>, I have argued that *totally* directly specifies a property of

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54. An additional difference concerns, again, the different speech act distribution of VF markers in German and *totally* in English, with the former being licensed in questions and imperatives. In this sense, German VF patterns with *really*.

55. Repp (2013) proposes the following template to capture the composition of CG-managing operators: [Illocutionary operator ... [CG-managing operator... [proposition]]]

the speech act, and as such is to be considered part of the illocutionary content. Therefore, the observation that *totally* exhibits a more restricted distribution with respect to speech act types points to another axis of differentiation among CG managing expressions.

In sum, the analyses proposed for *really* and VF marking in German cannot be extended wholesale to *totally*, unveiling a space of variation within the category of conversational, CG-managing operators, where the core function of expressing the status of a proposition with respect to the CG can be performed by a number of different devices, each of which features some unique semantic and pragmatic properties.

### 2.5.7 Summary

The intensifier *totally* in contemporary American English features a use that operates at the discourse level, rather than on a lexical scale. After showing that this use is associated with a variety of effects and is constrained by two orders of factors - subjectivity and discourse structure - I proposed a semantic analysis that captures this distribution, where the common thread tying together the contexts where the intensifier is licensed is the presence of a non-homogeneous projected CG. This analysis derives the variety of effects, including mirativity and epistemic certainty, by proposing that *totally* operates as a CG-managing operator in all the contexts in which it is licensed.

Looking at the broader picture of pragmatic intensification, the current study provides a step towards understanding how scalar modifiers can operate in the absence of a lexical scale. More specifically, the proposed analysis ties the admissibility of the intensifier to the particular relationship between the anchor proposition and the Common Ground projected by an assertion. By doing so, it models the contribution of *totally* while at the same time showing how the intensifier is *constrained* at the discourse level, casting light on how *totally* interacts with other components that independently exist in the pragmatics. In addition, the distribution of *totally* provides a window into the differential discourse effects of various types of assertion, allowing us to detect fine-grained pragmatic differences between apparently identical discourse moves. This is a welcome result from the perspective of studying discourse. Besides revealing a dimension of variation that

has gone largely unnoticed thus far, it also allows us to make a step forward in understanding how different types of propositional content - objective, subjective, outlandish - relate to different types of discourse effects, providing the opportunity of better understanding how distinct dimensions of meaning interact with one another.

## 2.6 Connection with the lexical use

The main outstanding question concerns the relationship between the lexical and the attitudinal use of *totally*. What we have seen thus far is that a plain extension of the semantics of the former is not sufficient to capture the distribution of the latter, as shown in section 5.3.2. In this section I focus instead on the similarities between the two uses, showing that they share universal quantification as a common semantic kernel.

Let us begin with a brief recap on the semantics of lexical *totally*. It has been argued that the intensifier operates over a bounded scale introduced by its argument, and requires that the entity at stake instantiates the relevant property to the maximum degree (Rotstein and Winter 2004; Kennedy and McNally 2005; Kennedy 2007 among others). If the target property does not lexicalize a bounded scale, the presence of *totally* is predicted to be infelicitous.<sup>56</sup>

(114) The glass is *totally* full.

(115) # The glass is *totally* big.

(116) # The glass is *totally* tall

Further evidence supporting the requirement for a bounded scale to be lexicalized by the argument is that, whenever pragmatic *totally* is licensed, other endpoint-oriented modifiers are generally licensed, including maximizers like *completely* and *entirely* or proportional modifiers like

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<sup>56</sup> As mentioned before, for the purpose of the present paper, predicates like *full*, *extinct* and *agree* are treated on a par as licensors of lexical *totally*, disregarding the fine-grained compositional differences in the way in which *totally* modifies interacts with them. Note that non-degree treatments of such predicates are available as well, see among others Toledo and Sassoon (2011). These might be particularly helpful for treating predicates like *extinct*, which introduce a bounded scale but would hardly qualify as examples of predicates encoding a degree argument. Nothing of what will be said in this chapter hinges on adopting a particular framework, in this respect.

*partially* or *half*.

- (117) a. ✓The glass is *completely/entirely/partially* full.  
 b. ✓I *completely/entirely/partially* agree with you.

A way to model this contribution is to follow degree-based accounts (see Heim (2000), Kennedy and McNally (2005) among others) in positing that predicates like *full* have denotations of type  $\langle d, et \rangle$ : they take a degree argument and return a property from individual to truth values. Within this framework, *totally* combines with a gradable adjective G and places a restriction on such a degree, requiring that it must correspond to the maximum degree of the scale S encoded by the adjective (here, abbreviated as  $\max(S_G)$ ). *Mutatis mutandis*, the same account can be extended to the verbal domain (see Kennedy and Levin (2008) for a detailed proposal).

- (118) a.  $\llbracket \text{FULL} \rrbracket = \lambda d \lambda x. \text{Full}(x)(d)$   
 b.  $\llbracket \text{TOTALLY} \rrbracket = \lambda G_{\langle d, et \rangle} \lambda x. \exists d [G(d)(x) \wedge d = \max(S_G)]$   
 c.  $\llbracket \text{TOTALLY FULL} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \exists d [\text{Full}(x)(d) \wedge d = \max(S_{full})]$

Note, however, that the denotation in (118c) is not sufficiently general to capture the whole range of contributions that lexical *totally* brings about. For instance, we observe that *totally* can also modify part/whole relationships or dimensions of meanings in multi-dimensional adjectives (Sassoon 2012), requiring that the modified property holds true with respect to *all* physical parts of the object or *all* dimensions of evaluation of the adjective.

- (119) a. John's face is *totally* red. = Part/Whole  
 b. John is *totally* healthy. = In every respect

I suggest that, to better account for these cases, it is possible to recast a maximizer as an operator that performs universal quantification. This move has no conceptual implications, but necessarily follows from the assumption that gradable adjectives (and, by extension, verbs) are *monotone*, as argued by Heim (2000). If a property holds to a degree d, it also follows that the property holds for all degrees that are ranked lower than d on the scale. The same idea can then be easily applied to parts and dimensions of evaluation.

(120) a. A function  $f$  of type  $\langle d, et \rangle$  is monotone iff:

$$\forall x, \forall d, \forall d', [f(d)(x) = 1 \ \& \ d' < d \rightarrow f(d')(x) = 1] \quad \text{from Heim (2000):}$$

b. if  $d = \max(S) \rightarrow \forall d' \in S, d' < d$

c. if  $\text{Full}(d - \max)(x) = 1 \rightarrow \forall d' \in S_{Full}, \text{Full}(d')(x)$

(121)  $\llbracket \text{TOTALLY}_{lexical} \rrbracket = \lambda G_{\langle d, et \rangle} \lambda x. \forall d \in S_G: G(x)(d) = 1$

Recasting the meaning of *totally* in terms of universal quantification puts us in a better position to treat lexical and attitudinal *totally* in a parallel fashion, suggesting that the two uses should be seen as a case of polysemy, rather than of accidental homophony. Once degrees, parts and worlds in the CG are seen as bounded domains that make universal quantification possible, *totally* emerges as a modifier that, across the different contexts of use, performs the same core operation.

(122)  $\llbracket \text{TOTALLY}_{lexical} \rrbracket = \lambda G_{\langle d, et \rangle} \lambda x. \forall d \in S_G: G(x)(d) = 1$

(123)  $\llbracket \text{TOTALLY}_{attitudinal} \rrbracket = \lambda A \lambda p \lambda w. \forall w' \in \text{CONV}_S(w) [\forall w'' \in \text{PCG} \in \text{PS}(\text{Ass}(p))(w')]: p(w'') = 1$

It is also possible to see that not only the contribution, but also the admissibility conditions of the intensifier are likewise parallel. In both cases, it must be the case that universal quantification is not already entailed by the predicate/assertion in the absence of *totally*. For the pragmatic use, this requirement translates in the Non Homogeneity Condition on the Projected Set, as discussed in section 2.5.2. For the lexical use, things are seemingly more complex, especially for proposals arguing that the semantics of the positive form of upper-bounded adjectives already requires that the maximum on the scale be reached (Kennedy and McNally 2005; Kennedy 2007). The proposed solution is that predicates like *full* typically come with a *pragmatic halo* (Lasnik 1999), which leaves room for the possibility that the maximum is not quite reached, thus allowing for a margin of tolerance in the interpretation of these adjectives. This discrepancy between the maximal truth-conditional meaning and the actual interpretation of the positive form is precisely what renders modifiers like *totally* informative, allowing the modifier to have a strengthening effect by universally quantifying over its domain.<sup>57</sup> To stretch the parallel further, it is possible to

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57. Note that other proposals argue that *full*, despite encoding a bounded scale, does not require that the maxi-

say that pragmatic halos (and pragmatic restrictions on dimensions/parts) represent the at-issue, non-homogeneous counterpart of subjectivity, Verum Focus and outlandishness in the discourse domain. By introducing non-homogeneity, they ensure that the domain targeted by *totally* is not already maxed out, leaving sufficient wiggle room for the intensifier to operate and ultimately justifying its contribution.

While framing the contribution of both lexical and pragmatic *totally* in terms of universal quantification allows us to see the common core shared by the two uses, more work is needed to articulate the relationship between them. First, something more precise needs to be said on the diachronic trajectory of *totally* besides the (rather unsurprising) fact that lexical *totally* predates the pragmatic use (Beltrama 2015). This includes understanding if there has been any intermediate stage in the transition between the two uses, or which class of subjective predicate - adjectives or modals - first began to be modified by *totally* in its pragmatic version.

## 2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided an analysis of pragmatic *totally* in English, modeling its contribution in terms of quantification over worlds in the CG. This analysis emerges as a desirable result in four respects. First, it provides a straightforward way to account for the distributional restrictions on the intensifier. Second, it derives the wide range of pragmatic effects of *totally* - certainty, emphasis and mirativity - in a unified fashion. Third, it maintains the common core of maximality that is featured by the lexical use, showing that the two uses, albeit different, do feature a significant amount of semantic overlapping. Fourth, it represents a step forward in the exploration of intensification at the pragmatic level, an intriguing and yet largely uncharted area.

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num be reached in its positive form (McNally 2011; Toledo and Sassoon 2011). In these cases, accounting for the combinability of these predicates with *totally* does not require resorting to imprecision.

## Chapter 3

# ***Totally*: establishing the association between semantic and social meaning**

### 3.1 Introduction

After providing an analysis of *totally* at the semantics/pragmatics interface, it is now possible to address the other central issue of this work: How do the semantic and pragmatic properties contribute to determining the *social meaning* of an expression? That is, how do the logic, pragmatic and social aspects of meaning conspire to determine what linguistic expressions “convey” when used in communication? The present chapter discusses two perception studies that take a first step in this direction by achieving two goals. First, they illustrate the social qualities and attributes that listeners systematically associate with *totally*; second, they provide evidence that *totally*’s social meaning varies depending on the semantic features of the environment in which it is used. As such, the data discussed in the present chapter contribute to establishing an empirical association between the social and semantic content of *totally*, laying the ground for Chapter 4’s discussion of the principles that underlie this mapping. The chapter is structured as follows. Section 3.2 presents an overview of the sociolinguistic literature on intensifiers. Section 3.3 introduces the conceptual foundations of the notion of *social meaning*. Section 3.4 and 3.5 discuss the two experiments. Section 3.6 summarizes and concludes.

## 3.2 Intensification and sociolinguistic variation

Intensification has long been an object of investigation in *variationist* sociolinguistics. Before plunging in the literature review, I first introduce the general features and goals that define this approach.

### 3.2.1 The variationist paradigm

This variationist paradigm of linguistic research, pioneered by Labov (1966)'s work on phonological variation in New York City, aims at uncovering the systematic correlation between patterns in speech and the demographic (macro)sociological attributes of language users, including social class, age, gender, ethnicity, education. Because such attributes are taken to regulate speakers' access to standard language and exposure to linguistic change (Eckert 2012), they are assumed to be relatively fixed and pre-linguistic in nature, emerging as the lens through which scholars can unveil and understand the patterned nature of variation. In a foundational case study, Labov (1966) showed that the frequency of /r/ dropping in New York City correlated with the socioeconomic status of the speakers, and that employees at stores frequented by higher-status customers (Saks) featured this pronunciation significantly less frequently than employees working in stores with lower-status ones (Klein). Similar correlational patterns have been found with striking systematicity for a great number of other variables and a wide range of social categories. Well known examples are /t-d/ deletion (Labov 1966; Wolfram 1969 among others), velarized vs nasalized realizations of /-ing/ (Labov 1966; Cofer 1972; Woods 1979; Campbell-Kibler 2006), the phonological realization of copular verbs (Labov 1969) and many other phonological and morpho-syntactic variables whose discussion would go far beyond the scope of this work. While most of the linguistic forms investigated within this tradition pertain to the domain of morpho-phonological variation, lexical variation has also been investigated within the variationist paradigm, with intensifiers emerging as one of the most extensively explored categories. I now turn to review this literature.

### 3.2.2 Intensifiers and variation

Among the non-phonological variables investigated in variationist sociolinguistics, intensifiers are arguably the most widely investigated. In particular, it has been pointed out that these expressions are unstable and tend to change rapidly in any speech community (Stöffel 1901; Bolinger 1972; Peters 1994; Robertson 1954; Macaulay 2006; Rickford 2007; Tagliamonte 2008; Tagliamonte and D’Arcy 2009; Brown and Tagliamonte 2012; Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005; Kwon 2012). On a general level, intensifiers across the board are fcmore frequent among young speakers – adolescents in particular – and less frequent in the oldest generations (Labov 2001; Tagliamonte and D’Arcy 2009; Ito and Tagliamonte 2003). More specifically, however, the correlation with age varies from intensifier to intensifier, and from speech community to speech community. Adverbs like *very* and *extremely*, for instance, have been found to be strongly associated with older speakers in Canadian English, which suggests that their diachronic trajectory is on the decline (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003). On the other hand, adverbs like *well* in British English (Stenström et al. 2002), *so* and *really* in Canadian English (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003, Tagliamonte 2008) are overwhelmingly used by younger speakers, and appear to be part of a rising diachronic trajectory. Similar results have been obtained in the study of modifiers that only recently developed a grammatical function as intensifiers, such as *pure* in Scottish English (e.g. *pure good*, “very good”, Macaulay (2006)) and *dead* in American and British English (as in “dead crazy”, Blanco-Suarez 2013). While age represents the most commonly evoked social category to describe the variation patterns of intensifiers, other traditional categories have also been reported to correlate with intensifiers distribution. Concerning gender, Tagliamonte (2008) suggests that in Toronto currently spreading intensifiers like *so* and *pretty* are predominantly used by women, who are generally assumed to be the forerunners of linguistic innovation. These patterns, interestingly, are also reflected in language use in the media. For instance, Tagliamonte observes that in the series *Friends* “the once primary intensifier in North America, *really*, is being usurped by *so*, which is used more often by the female characters than by the males” (Tagliamonte 2005). Social class has also been argued to be a factor conditioning the distribution of intensifiers, although a less influential one than age and

gender. Macaulay 2002 reports that in Glasgow intensifiers are more commonly used by middle class speakers than by lower class speakers, and explains this pattern by appealing to the middle class members' desire to "make clear their opinions and their attitudes".

In addition, the use of intensifiers has also been argued to correlate with features of the context in which they are used. Biber (1988) has looked at the distribution of intensifiers across different textual types (e.g. press reports, academic writing, fiction, humor), observing that intensification is most commonly found in discourse contexts where the speaker/author's communicative intent is to display a high degree of personal involvement. Xiao and Tao (2007) performed a genre-analysis of 33 English intensifiers, looking at the distribution of the morphemes across a wide array of different types of texts, as well as the interaction of this factor with traditional sociological attributes of the speakers. Broadly speaking, their findings confirmed that spoken registers feature a much higher use of intensification than written ones. Yet, the picture is not homogeneous. While expressions such as *really*, *bloody*, *real*, *terribly*, *dead and damn* are indeed more common in oral genres, others (e.g. *enormously* and *incredibly*) show the opposite pattern, pointing to a considerable amount of inter-intensifier variability. More recently, Brown and Tagliamonte (2012) have compared intensification rates of Canadian English in spontaneous narratives and sociolinguistic interviews, showing that intensification is overwhelmingly more common in the former. They explain the finding by arguing that in spontaneous narratives the focus is conventionally shifted from the referential content to the speaker's feelings and her construction of the self (see Schiffrin 1996; Labov and Waletzky 1967 for extensive discussion of narratives as a genre). Finally, Lim and Hong (2012) tested commonly used intensifiers in Mandarin Chinese in terms of their distribution across typical genres, concluding that most intensifiers are predominantly found in spoken genres, although a few of them are actually more common in written ones.

In sum, the extensive research discussed above has contributed to unveiling a variety of important empirical facts concerning intensifiers' patterns of use. First, they provide quantitative evidence that intensifiers are not homogeneously distributed in socio-demographic space. Second, they cast light on the tendency of intensifiers to cluster around sets of coherent "communicative

contexts”, indicating their principled relationship to particular textual genres and registers. Yet, while these results go a long way towards showing that intensifiers are a relevant locus of socially-conditioned variation, they also fall short of addressing two important issues, each of which opens up important possibilities for further investigation

### 3.2.3 Beyond variationist analyses: open questions

#### No account of the semantics

A major finding of this work is that intensifiers vary depending on the nature of the scale that they can target in the semantic composition. Yet, this aspect has been overlooked in the vast majority of the variationist literature on intensification, where authors generally lumped intensifiers under the label of “boosters” or “maximizers”, treating them as interchangeable expressions. On this view, *very*, *really*, *well*, *so* and other are seen as equivalent expressions, just like different phonetic realizations of a sound are equivalent variants of the same underlying phoneme. More specifically, most authors deliberately chose to focus on intensifiers modifying gradable adjectives, leaving out of the picture intensifiers modifying other parts of speech or non-gradable expressions. Crucially, this approach must be understood in light of the methodological demands of variationist sociolinguistics. In particular, what makes intensifiers a particularly complex object of investigation is the difficulty of defining the variable space while complying with Labov (1972)’s *principle of accountability*. This principle, which represents a cornerstone rule for variationist studies, states that, for a particular variable, it is imperative to note not just all occurrences of a given variant, but also all the contexts in which the variant *could* have occurred, but *did not* occur. Only in this way it is possible to provide a reliable quantitative analysis for the frequency of each variant in a specific environment. While this is relatively easy to do with phonemes – for instance, the contexts where /t/ and /d/ might be realized or deleted are just those in which the underlying phonemic representation is present – it is much harder with intensifiers, as Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) make clear.<sup>1</sup>

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1. “It is an easy task to find the intensifiers themselves, but difficult, if not impossible, to find where they could have occurred but did not. In other words, where are the zeros?” (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003: 263).

The decision to restrict the investigation to gradable adjectives – which represent the most frequent environments for intensification – is thus motivated by the need to restrict the contexts of intensification to a manageable set, allowing for a well-informed quantitative treatment of the data. As a consequence of this view, gradable adjectives become the consistent denominator through which to approach the study of intensification in the studies discussed above.

Yet, while the decision to exclusively focus on gradable predicates is a necessary step for a rigorous application of the variationist paradigm, it comes at the expense of an adequate empirical representation of the phenomenon. Not only does restricting the focus to gradable adjectives fail to do justice to the semantic complexity of intensification, and in particular the distinction between lexical and non-lexical uses of intensifiers (see Chapter 1, Section 1.2.1); it also fails to address whether the particular semantic features of an intensifier play any role in determining its sociolinguistic properties, raising the following question: how does the type of targeted scale affect the distribution of an intensifier across demographic space? Before discussing how the case of *totally* can help us cast light on this issue, I discuss another aspect of the sociolinguistics of intensifiers that the variationist literature does not fully address.

### **No discussion of *social meaning***

Existing studies do not discuss what kind of *social meaning* these expressions carry, that is what their use conveys about the social identity, affective disposition and stylistic inclination of their users. They therefore do not address an important dimension of sociolinguistic analysis. Again, the lacuna can be understood to stem from the general principles of the variationist paradigm, in which language forms are seen as straightforward *demographic markers* of the macro-sociological profile of their users (Eckert 2012). Yet, such a perspective provides a partial view on the sociolinguistic profile of linguistic expressions, as pointed out by scholars within the *Third Wave* of sociolinguistic research (Eckert 2012). Under this view, an expression does not simply invoke the demographic categories of the speakers who most commonly use them. Rather, it invokes a complex package of socio-psychological attributes that might very well be associated with such demographic cate-

gories, but have an independent life from them, as they include more local categories, stereotypes and qualities that are systematically evoked whenever the expression is used. While an in depth discussion on the concept of social meaning is provided in the next section, a cursory examination of the following entry from the website Urban Dictionary, already seen in Chapter 1, gives us a sense of how much more than mere demographic information an expression like *totally* conveys.

1. It's a word used by ditzzy young girls that means definitely or for sure.

*He, like, totally dumped me! OMG! Like, you must have been, like, totally shocked!*

2. Valley Girl Speak that means "Of course!"

*You coming to my party?*

*Like, totally!*

3. A word used by girly girls, poppers, and rich spoiled little brats. They use it in sentences, it doesn't really mean anything, its just their way of speaking. *Are you going to do your makeup now, or in 30 seconds?*

*Like, Totally, OMG!! Of course I'm gonna do it now, I can't let anyone see me without it, you know, like totally eew.*

This brief overview is sufficient to raise a number of questions concerning the content that *totally* conveys when used in communication. What does the intensifier "say", on a social level? How has this package of social information come into being? How is its content related to the conventional, *semantic* meaning of the expression? This chapter aims at laying the grounds for a discussion of these aspects, exploring the social meaning associated with *totally* and its relation to the semantic features of the intensifier, thus complementing the findings of the variationist literature.

### **3.3 The notion of *social meaning*: theoretical foundations**

Before diving into the discussion, it is worth considering more closely the theoretical underpinnings of the notion of social meaning. In this section I review the literature on the issue, focusing

on the defining properties of this pervasive, yet fleeting notion.

### **3.3.1 An example**

In his seminal work, Labov (1963) investigates patterns of realization of the diphthong /ay/ among people living on Martha's Vineyard island. On several islands of the Atlantic coast, including Martha's Vineyard, the nucleus featured a markedly raised realization in comparison to mainland dialects. As such, this pattern of variation was originally taken to be a simple marker of geographical identity, which distinguishes people living on the island from those living on the continent. Yet, following a chain of transformations in the local political economy, the height of /ay/ came to acquire a markedly more nuanced meaning than just "from the island". More specifically, a conflict arose between "modern" islanders - who welcomed the arrival of mainland families as a way of developing tourism and enhancing Martha's Vineyard financial viability - and "local" islanders - who intended to maintain the island's economy as based on traditional fishing activities and saw the arrival of the mainlanders as a threat to Martha's Vineyard future and identity. Within this ideological conflict, the realization of /ay/ was appropriated by the contenders as a "symbolic resource in the struggle", as suggested in Eckert (2004)'s revisitation of Labov's study (Eckert 2004: 42). While tourism-oriented islanders featured a lowered realization of the diphthong, in line with the mainland dialects, supporters of the traditional camp hang on to the raised realization, reinterpreting it as a way to express their resistance to the socio-economic transformations looming on the island.

### **3.3.2 From demographic categories to qualities**

The brief discussion of Martha's Vineyard /ay/ raises a question. What kind of social attributes can be recruited as part of social meaning? The first response to this question is that demographic categories, heavily used in traditional variationist sociolinguistics, are no longer a sufficiently fine-grained analytical unit (Silverstein 2003; Eckert 2004; Podesva 2007, 2011; Campbell-Kibler 2006). While they are still involved in the process — diphthongs, for instance, could not be used as

a stylistic resource in Martha's Vineyard if it were not for the original link between raising and the dialect spoken on the island – focusing exclusively on this dimension would leave a crucial part of the social significance of /ay/ unaccounted for. Rather, the evoked social meanings seem to invoke more granular, less predictable *qualities* than mere membership in a particular pre-established group. These sub-demographic categories of social meaning have received a considerable amount of attention in sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropology. Some of them still make reference to particular social groups, which are nevertheless more idiosyncratic and fluid than the traditional demographics. Such units of social meaning have been referred to with a variety of labels, including *social types* (Eckert 2008), *enregistered voices* (Agha 2005), *social personae* (Podesva 2007). For instance, Eckert (1989) shows that the fronted vs backed pronunciation of six vowels is used by high-schoolers in the area of Detroit to build a class-based stylistic differentiation between the school-oriented “Jocks” and the school-alienated “burnouts”. In a similar fashion, Zhang (2005) argues that rhotacization of syllable-final vowels is a salient feature of differentiation between “international” vs “local” managers in Beijing. But social meanings can evoke even more granular attributes, such as individual, highly specific psycho-sociological *qualities* that are socially recognizing as inherent to the identity of language users. For example, Campbell-Kibler (2007) argues that full releases of /t/ convey a social meaning that can be decomposed in a series of atomic traits such as “articulate”, “prissy”, “educated”. Conversely, apical pronunciations of /ing/ are systematically associated not only with geographical origin (the South), but also to more fine-grained identity traits such as lower education and lack of intelligence. Again, while some of these traits are evidently related to macro-sociological membership, they also introduce a separate layer of content that cannot be reduced to the demographic profile of their users. In sum, the social meaning of a linguistic expression emerges as a complex, multi-layered unit, which cannot be predicted merely on the basis of the social distribution of the variable.

### 3.3.3 Orders of indexicality and ideological moves

A substantial amount of sociolinguistic research has focused on the semiotic processes whereby social meaning emerges in connection with particular forms of speech, underlying the fluidity and contingent nature of social meanings. This can be seen by focusing again on the case of Martha's Vineyard, which reveals (at least) two stages through which the variable acquires social significance: (i) an initial spatio-temporal connection between raised /ay/ and the dialect of the island; (ii) a series of ideological moves through which /ay/ becomes invested of new, more specific values (e.g., "loyalty", "tradition"). On a general level, this multi-stage process is captured through Silverstein (2003)'s influential semiotic model of *indexicality*. Following Peirce (1955)'s triadic classification of signs, Silverstein argues that social meanings are related to linguistic forms by an *indexical* semiotic relationship, that is, an association that is ultimately grounded in spatio-temporal contiguity, rather than in arbitrary social conventions.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, Silverstein argues that such a relationship is articulated on different levels, or *orders of indexicality*. The "first order of indexicality" is represented by the association between the use of speech forms and some feature of the speakers that more frequently use these forms (e.g., /ay/ → members of the island of Martha's Vineyard).<sup>3</sup> In the "second order of indexicality", in turn, the original indexical relationship is enriched with new meanings that, through an ideological move, add on the original relationship in a creative fashion (/ay/ → Martha's Vineyard] → "loyalty", "resistance" etc.). It is at this level of indexicality that linguistic forms acquire the complex constellation of attributes, features and social types that constitute their socially recognized social meanings. The emerging picture is one in which, because the move from first to second order indexicality is fueled by an ideological move grounded in a specific sociocultural context, social meanings are necessarily

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2. Peirce proposed a three-way classification of signs as *icons*, where the sign and the object are related by a relationship of inherent similarity (e.g. a portrait); *indexes*, where the sign and the object are related by a relation of spatio-temporal contiguity or causation (e.g., a weathercock indicating the direction of the wind); and *symbols*, where the sign-object relationship is entirely conventional (e.g., "beer" ≈ alcoholic beverage).

3. Despite the fact that a vast amount of variationist sociolinguistic research has exclusively focused on associations of this kind, though, this level of indexicality merely represents the beginning of the emergence of social meaning and, accordingly to Silverstein, its "least interesting" component.

contingent, and cannot be dissociated from listeners' ideological evaluation of either the language users associated with the form or the broader socio-cultural context in which the variable is used.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the presence of different levels of semiosis illustrates why social meanings are related to, yet somewhat independent from their actual demographic profile of their users: while the association between forms and demographic features does indeed start the indexical chain, the subsequent order of indexicality invests the form with a set of novel values and attributes that enrich the first-order mapping in a non-trivial and non-predictable fashion, developing social meanings that can no longer be reduced to the original association.

### 3.3.4 Social and semantic meaning: between fluidity and systematicity

In light of this observation, a question naturally arises: what is the relationship between this kind of content and other kinds of meanings, especially those constituting the object of investigation of scholars in semantics and pragmatics? Despite the common label, semantic and social content have typically been seen as pertaining to independent domains. The distinction is substantiated by a series of well-established empirical differences. First, the two types of meaning do not attach to the same units: phonemes, for example, are devoid of semantic meaning, and yet often carry a rich cloud of social meanings, as discussed at length in the previous sections. Second, semantic and social meaning have a different semiotic status. While the former is conventionally associated with linguistic forms, the latter is only indirectly *indexed* by them.<sup>5</sup> Third, semantic and social meaning are not equally sensitive to the social, cultural and ideological context in which linguistic expressions are used. On the one hand, the conventional meaning of words is relatively fixed within a speech community. Modulo the role of the pragmatic context in shaping and integrating

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4. As Eckert notes, "anyone within the area will have a "take" on the differences between mainlanders and islanders. And the social meaning of the pronunciation of /ay/ will be based in that take".

5. From this perspective, the difference between social and semantic meaning bears an intuitive connection between Grice's distinction between *natural* and *non-natural* meaning (Grice 1957), where the former indicates a causally motivated, non-intentional sign-object relationship (e.g., spots mean measles), while the latter refers to a generally conventionalized relationship, which requires recognition of the speaker's communicative intention to be adequately interpreted (e.g., a linguistic sign). Under this view, social meaning would qualify as a special case of non-natural meaning, where the relationship between sign and object is indexically determined; semantic and pragmatic meaning would instead fall into the category of non-natural meaning, as Grice extensively argues.

the interpretation of every word, the core content of most linguistic expressions essentially remains the same for every person who speaks the language. By contrast, social meaning always originates as the result of ideological moves on the part of language users (Silverstein 2003; Eckert 2008). As such, its interpretation is inherently dependent on the perspective of the listener, as well as their alignment with respect to the specific social groups and characteristics conveyed by the expressions. A word like *dude*, already discussed in Chapter 1, provides an example of this difference. On the semantic level, for every speaker of English this expression invokes a male human being, or a move on the part of the speaker to draw the listener's attention. On the social level, however, its content significantly varies depending on the source of evaluation, with different types of language users normally imbuing it with different values (e.g., "cool solidarity" vs "inarticulateness", Kiesling 2004).

At the same time, recognizing their different status by no means entails that these two types of content are inherently disjointed. In particular, the systematicity of social meanings discussed above has been substantiated by a series of studies that, focusing on different phenomena and methodologies, have pointed to a principled interaction between the emergence of social meaning and language structure and processing. These results suggest that social indexicality is not affected just by the broader ideological context, but also interacts with the deeper components of the grammar and the structural properties of linguistic forms. For example, it has been shown that listeners keep track of fine-grained acoustic or syntactic properties when constructing social evaluations about language users (Squires 2013; Staum Casasanto 2008; Bender 2000); that social meaning plays an important role in guiding speech perception (e.g., Niedzielski 1999; Campbell-Kibler 2010; D'Onofrio 2015); and that listeners in experimental settings react to certain social meanings in the same way in which they react to non-at-issue types of semantic meaning (e.g., presuppositions, see Smith et al. 2010). In addition, the fact that social meanings have a fluid nature and are heavily affected by non-linguistic and ideological factors does not mean that they lack systematicity. In fact, despite their inherent variability, the qualities indexed by linguistic forms are often widely recognized and agreed upon by the vast majority of the members of the speech

community, displaying a degree of generality that transcends the individual differences between speakers and social groups. In particular, it has been suggested that, through the *enregisterment* process (Agha 2005), the indexical relationship between speech forms and social meanings undergoes a certain degree of conventionalization. More specifically, through repeated circulation and use, social meanings “come to be socially recognized as indexical of speaker attributes by a population of language users”, becoming embedded in a “social regularity” (Agha 2005) whereby they develop their own life in the social landscape and circulate beyond the specific contexts and social groups in which they emerged. As a result, the social meanings that have undergone a sufficiently deep trajectory of enregisterment become to a certain extent *conventionalized*, becoming systematically evoked whenever a speaker deploys a certain variable. For instance, the association between velar realizations of /ing/ and lack of education, as shown by Campbell-Kibler (2007), while still subject to variability depending on the perspective of the specific listener, evokes values such as “lack of education” across a fairly large proportion of the population.

In sum, the systematic behavior of social meanings, as well as their demonstrated connection to grammatical and processing mechanisms that also closely interact with semantic content, suggests that the rigid separation between different layers of meaning is at least worth reconsidering under a critical light.

### **3.3.5 Interim summary and emerging questions**

Thus far, I have provided an overview of the theoretical and empirical foundations of the notion of social meaning. The emerging picture is one in which (certain) social meanings, despite their contingent genesis and their inherent amenability to negotiation and perspective dependence, present a non-trivial degree of regularity within a community. More specifically, they emerge as *bits* of content that are conveyed by linguistic forms in a rather systematic fashion, featuring (at least) a superficial resemblance to the more traditional varieties of linguistic content that have been argued to represent the bulk of what forms “say” when used to communicate. In the remainder of the dissertation, I explore this relationship in a systematic fashion, asking whether these various types

of content associated with linguistic expressions inform one another in a principled way, and how they do so. I divide this issue in two subquestions:

1. What is the empirical association between social and semantic meaning?
2. What are the principles that govern this association?

I now proceed to tackle these issues by relying on *totally* as a case study. On the one hand, this word presents a rather complex pattern of semantic variation, as discussed at length in Chapter 2. On the other hand, it superficially features an equally rich constellation of social meanings, as suggested by the circulating stereotypes around its use and by the tendency of intensifiers to embed in sociolinguistically relevant spaces of variation. The first step in tackling the questions above is to provide a more systematic exploration of the social meaning of *totally*. In particular, aside from the stereotypes discussed at the beginning of the chapter, we do not have any systematic evidence as to what the exact social qualities and attributes invoked by its use are. To cast light on this issue, I begin by discussing two perception studies that provide a systematic grasp on such qualities, as well as on how their salience is affected by the particular semantic/pragmatic variant of the intensifier. This will allow us to establish the empirical association between *totally*'s social meaning and its semantic and pragmatic properties, laying the ground for the discussion in Chapter 4.

### **3.4 Experiment 1**

In Experiment 1, I ask whether the social meaning of *totally* changes depending on whether the intensifier targets a scale encoded in a gradable predicate or grounded in the speaker's attitude towards the proposition. Before discussing the details of the experiment, I first provide an overview of the selected methodology.

### 3.4.1 Social meaning and perception studies

Experimental methods have long been used to investigate language attitudes in social psychology. An especially popular technique, in particular, has been the *matched guise* task, first introduced by Lambert et al. (1960) (see Campbell-Kibler 2007 for an overview of the literature). This particular design consists of the collection and measurement of the reactions and attitudes of listeners towards instances of language use, manipulated by the researcher to test the effect of a particular independent variable. Despite their popularity in other fields, it is not until the last ten years that these methods have been systematically applied to test sociolinguistically-related questions (see Campbell-Kibler 2010, Drager 2013 for further details). A crucial assumption of this method is that social evaluation is a proxy into the social meaning of the variable, as it allows us to have access to “what social information listeners can extract from the speech of particular speakers, and which linguistic cues they rely on to do so.” (Campbell-Kibler 2010).<sup>6</sup> This method has two important advantages for our purposes. First, it provides a way to construct a series of controlled conditions in which we manipulate the type of scale targeted by *totally* in different sentences while leaving the rest of the proposition unchanged. This allows us to isolate scale type as the only changing factor across conditions. Second, by providing a way to measure the intensity of social meaning in terms of a series of evaluative scales, this method allows us to detect at a fine-grained level how the perception of the social meaning changes as a function of the semantic/pragmatic features of *totally*. As such, it represents a viable methodology to explore how the perception of social meaning changes in response to a manipulation of the semantic and pragmatic properties of the expressions under investigation.

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6. An obvious disadvantage of this methodology is that it is less ecologically faithful than other techniques for data collection (e.g., ethnography). In particular, it has been suggested by sociolinguists that social meaning is a complex semiotic entity that cannot be separated from the other linguistic and non-linguistic *practices* through humans interact and make sense of the world (Eckert 2000). As such, investigating it through the lens of a set of attributes that rate speech samples presented on a computer screen obviously comes with a price in terms of empirical simplification.

### 3.4.2 Methods

#### Building test scales

While circulating discourse about the use of the intensifier reveals a rich association with demographic as well as more local social categories, no systematic investigation has been carried out to characterize in a precise way what this social meaning is. Hence, we have little to build on when it comes to construct the evaluation scales to use in the experiment. To address this issue, I first conducted a pilot study aimed at collecting open-ended social judgments and commentaries on the use of *totally* with different types of adjectives. The study was designed with the software Qualtrics and subsequently circulated on Amazon Mechanical Turk. 60 subjects, who self-declared to be native speakers of American English and between 18 and 35 years old, were recruited and paid \$ 0.50 for participating.

In the first part of the study, each subject saw in written form a sentence containing either an instance of lexical *totally* or of attitudinal *totally*:

- (124) a. Person A: John is totally bald. Lexical  
b. Person A: John is totally tall. Attitudinal

Following the sentence, the subject was asked to respond to the following questions, which elicited an evaluation of the person uttering the sentence. Such questions involved judgments both at the level of the demographics, as well as at the level of more fine-grained social categories.<sup>7</sup> Responses were left open-ended, with unlimited space.

1. Do you think this person is female or male?
2. How old do you think this person is?
3. What kind of person is this person? What do you think they are like?

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7. Because demographic categories are normally more immediate in tasks of this kind, they were explicitly asked first, so as to steer the responses towards more fine-grained categories in the second part. I thank Annette D'Onofrio for the methodological suggestion.

4. Provide 4 adjectives to describe this person.
5. What things do you think this person likes to talk about?

In the second part, an explicit comparison was invited between the perception of *totally* in the first sentence and the perception in a sentence containing the other semantic flavor of the intensifier. Specifically, subjects who saw (124a) in the first part were now presented with (125a), while subjects who saw (124b) were now presented with (125b).

- |       |                                    |             |
|-------|------------------------------------|-------------|
| (125) | a. Person B: John is totally tall. | Attitudinal |
|       | b. Person B: John is totally bald. | Lexical     |

Subsequently, the following questions were asked.

1. How are person A and person B different?
2. Person A sounds like ... Person B sounds like: ...
3. What kind of people say “totally tall”? What kind of people, instead, say “totally bald”?

Based on the most recurring adjectives in the responses, a total of eight evaluation dimensions were selected as particularly salient in connection to the use of the intensifier. Four of these dimensions express a relationship of social proximity between the speaker and the listener. Following the literature on language attitudes (Lambert et al. 1960) and the ensuing work applying the matched guise paradigm to sociolinguistic research, I will refer to them as *Solidarity* attributes. The other four dimensions tap into what we could loosely define as the prestige of language users, and express a relationship of distance and detachment between the speaker and the listener. While these terminological categories are not unproblematic and do entail a certain degree of empirical simplification<sup>8</sup>, adopting them gives us a criterion to preliminarily group the tested social dimensions in two categories, all the while adhering to a procedure that has been rather standard in other

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8. See in particular Eckert (2000) for a critique of the traditional notions of *status* and *prestige*.

sociolinguistic studies. Based on the participants’ answers, I predict Solidarity traits to be positively affected and Status traits to be negatively affected by the presence of *totally*. The list belows illustrates the eight dimensions used for the experiment.

- **Solidarity:** Friendliness, Coolness, Outgoingness, Excitability
- **Status:** Articulateness, Maturity, Intelligence, Seriousness

### 3.4.3 Stimuli

Two factors were crossed in a 3x4 design. The first factor manipulates the semantic variant of *totally* along the lexical vs attitudinal axis of variation by presenting the intensifier in combination with three distinct classes of adjectives. To cue lexical *totally*, the intensifier was used next to *bounded* adjectives<sup>9</sup>, which lexicalize a bounded scale as part of their lexical meaning (e.g., “bald”, “full”, “straight”). To cue the attitudinal reading, instead, unbounded<sup>10</sup> (e.g., “tall”, “big”, “large”), which offer an attitudinal scale as the only possible target for the intensifier. In addition, *extreme adjectives* (e.g., “awesome”, “amazing”, “great”) were used as an intermediate case between the two other categories. For each class, 12 different adjectives were chosen.

Table 3.1: Factor 1: scale targeted by *totally*

Adjective type	Example	Bounded scale availability
Bounded	Bald, Full, Straight	✓
Extreme	Awesome, Amazing, Great	≈
Unbounded	Tall, Big, Large	No

The second factor manipulates the modifier accompanying the adjective and comes in four conditions: the target intensifier, *totally*; two control intensifiers, *really* and *completely* and the bare, unintensified form. On the one hand, *completely*, contrary to *totally*, has not grammaticalized a use in which it can target attitudinal scale, and is therefore exclusively able to target lexical scales. As such, it should give rise to a mismatch in the type of scale when used with a open-scale

9. Or *maximum standard absolute adjectives*, in Kennedy and McNally (2005)’s terminology

10. Or *relative adjectives*, in Kennedy and McNally (2005)’s terminology

Table 3.2: A full item

Adj type	Int type	Sentence
Bounded	Totally	I just met the new boss. He's <i>totally</i> <b>bald</b>
Extreme	Totally	I just met the new boss. He's <i>totally</i> <b>awesome</b>
Unbounded	Totally	I just met the new boss. He's <i>totally</i> <b>tall</b>
Bounded	∅	I just met the new boss. He's <b>bald</b>
Extreme	∅	I just met the new boss. He's <b>awesome</b>
Unbounded	∅	I just met the new boss. He's <b>tall</b>
Bounded	Completely	I just met the new boss. He's <i>completely</i> <b>bald</b>
Extreme	Completely	I just met the new boss. He's <i>completely</i> <b>awesome</b>
Unbounded	Completely	I just met the new boss. He's <i>completely</i> <b>tall</b>
Bounded	Really	I just met the new boss. He's <i>really</i> <b>bald</b>
Extreme	Really	I just met the new boss. He's <i>really</i> <b>awesome</b>
Unbounded	Really	I just met the new boss. He's <i>really</i> <b>tall</b>

adjective. On the other hand, *really* has a less selective semantics than *totally*. It does not require the availability of an upper-bounded scale, but, as discussed in the semantics literature, can modify virtually any type of scale (McNabb 2012a; Constantinescu 2011). Since all the adjectives used in the experiment are indeed gradable, the intensifier should always operate at the lexical level, showing no semantic difference across the adjective types. In light of these properties, I predict that, if an effect of the semantic type of *totally* is observed on the social meaning, the same effect should not be observed on the two control intensifiers. Finally, as I discuss below, the bare form of the adjective serves as a baseline condition to assess the contribution of each intensifier to the social meaning. Having this contrast is necessary to filter out any effect on social meaning that is contributed by other elements in the sentence, such as the adjectives themselves. 12 items, each with a different set of adjectives, were crossed in a Latin Square Design. The table below provides a full paradigm for an item across all conditions.

### Procedure and statistical analysis

Every subject saw a total of 12 written sentences, one sentence for each condition. Each sentence was followed by a series of questions aimed at assessing solidarity-based and non-solidarity-based traits of social meaning discussed above. They were presented in the form of a 1-6 Likert scale,

where 1 indicated the minimum value and 6 the maximum value. Subjects were explicitly instructed to answer the questions following their instincts and to be very honest and straightforward, even if they felt compelled to provide a particularly negative judgments of the speaker. A full list of the questions, together with the possible answers, is reported below.

(126) **Sentence:** I just met the new boss. He’s totally bald.

1. What age do you the think the speaker is? Tick all the options that apply.  
Kid / Teenager / Adult / Elderly
2. What do you think the speaker’s gender is?  
Male / Could be Either / Female
3. How **articulate** does the speaker sound? 1 .....6
4. How **mature** does the speaker sound? 1 .....6
5. How **intelligent** does the speaker sound? 1 .....6
6. How **serious** does the speaker sound? 1 .....6
7. How **friendly** does the speaker sound? 1 .....6
8. How **outgoing** does the speaker sound? 1 .....6
9. How **cool** does the speaker sound? 1 .....6
10. How **excitable** does the speaker sound? 1 .....6

The study was created with Qualtrics and carried out online. 36 self-declared native speakers of American English, age 18-35, were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk and compensated \$2 for their participation. For statistical analysis, mixed-effects models were run for each attribute with the R statistical package *lmer4* (Bates et al. 2014). The fixed effect predictors included Adjective and Intensifier and their interactions, and the random effects included at least random intercepts for subjects and items. When a higher-level main effect or interaction was significant, I followed up with posthoc comparisons between the relevant conditions specified below. In light of the experimental questions, I am especially interested in comparing each intensifier with the bare form

of the adjective. This would allow me to assess if, and how, each intensifier affects the social meaning for each of the adjective types.

(127) Relevant posthoc contrasts:

- a. {Totally/Really/Completely} Rel Adj vs Bare Rel Adj
- b. {Totally/Really/Completely} Ext Adj vs Bare Ext Adj
- c. {Totally/Really/Completely} Abs Adj vs Bare Abs Adj

The pairwise comparisons were carried out with a Tukey HSD Test by using the *Multcomp* package in R.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.4.4 Results

For each category of tested attributes, I report the summary of the main effect and interactions in a dedicated table.<sup>12</sup> I then report the results of the comparisons specified above in a separate table.

#### Age

Age was first converted into a 1-4 scale. Every life stage provided in the multiple choice response was assigned a numerical score with increasing value, where Kid=1, Teenager=2, Adult=3 and Elderly=4. This ensures that the higher the Age score, the higher the perceived age of the speaker.<sup>13</sup>

The table below reports the summary of the mixed effects model. A main effect of Intensifier is found, reflecting the fact that, in general, *totally* was associated with a lower age perception than the other intensifiers. No main effects of Adjective type or interactions between Adjective and Intensifier type were found.

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11. The function `glht(Model, linfct=mcp(factor="Tukey"))` was used to generate p values.

12. Whether it is desirable to generate *p* values for fixed effect models has been widely discussed recently within the R community. For reporting purposes, the *p* values were generated with the function `summary(aov(model))`.

13. In case multiple life stages were chosen, the average was calculated. For instance, if a subject selected “Kid” and “Teenager”, the resulting score would be  $(2+1)/2=1.5$ , which returns an intermediate value between the two categories.

Table 3.3: Mixed effect model summary for Age perception

Age score	F-value	p-value
Intensifier	3.74	<.01
Adjective	1.36	-
Adj:Int	1.40	-

I now focus on the contrasts between intensified and the bare forms, which allow us to gauge the effect of *totally*, *completely* and *really* in the different linguistic environments in which they were tested.

Table 3.4 reports the differences between the age perception of the sentence with the intensifier and the perception of the sentence with the bare form for the corresponding adjective type. Results for *totally* are in bold face. Significant contrasts between intensified and bare form are indicated with \*.<sup>14</sup> The scores are plotted in Figure 5.1 below.

Table 3.4: Perception for Age attributes: differentials

Attribute	Unbounded				Extreme				Bounded			
	Bare	Tot	Com	Rea	Bare	Tot	Com	Rea	Bare	Tot	Com	Rea
Age	2.55	<b>*-.42</b>	-.20	+.03	2.70	<b>*-.43</b>	-.13	-.09	2.54	-.12	+.18	-.18

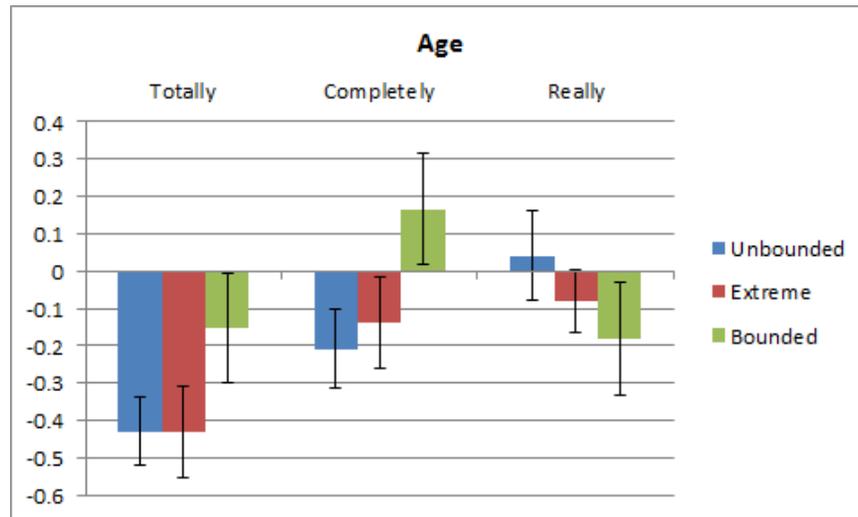


Figure 3.1: Age perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of each intensifier and the bare form. The X-Axis groups the different intensifiers.

14. \*= $p < .05$ , \*\*= $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*= $p < .001$

Concerning *totally*, the intensifier caused a significant lowering of the perceived Age of the speaker when occurring with unbounded and extreme adjectives. No significant effect is found for bounded adjectives. Concerning *completely*, no significant effect is found. Yet, *completely* with unbounded and extreme adjectives display a trend similar to the one of *totally*. Finally, no effect was found across adjective type for *really*.

## Gender

As with Age, Gender was converted into a 1-3 scale, with “Male” =1, “Could be either” = 2 and “Female” = 3. Hence, the higher the resulting score, the higher the likelihood that the person was perceived to be female. Table 3.5 below reports the summary of the mixed effects model. No main effects or interactions are found.

Table 3.5: Mixed effect model summary for Gender perception

Age score	F-value	p-value
Intensifier	1.9	-
Adjective	0.9	-
Adj:Int	0.3	-

The results are plotted in Figure 3.2. While no effect is significant, all intensifiers display a tendency to increase the likelihood with which the speaker is perceived to be female, with the effect appearing to be stronger with unbounded adjectives.

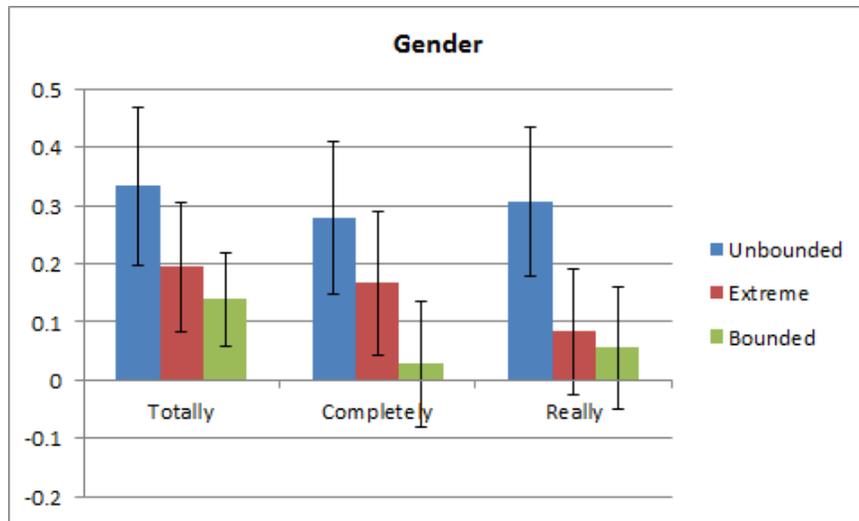


Figure 3.2: Gender perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of each intensifier and the bare form. The X-Axis groups the different intensifiers. Error bars indicate standard errors.

## Solidarity

Table 3.6 reports the summary of the mixed effects models for the Solidarity attributes. For all attributes, an interaction between Intensifier and Adjective was found, reflecting the fact that *totally* with unbounded adjectives is perceived as higher in solidarity. In addition, a main effect of Adjective was found for Excitable, Outgoing and Cool. Finally, a main effect of Intensifier was found for Excitable and Cool.

Table 3.6: Mixed effect model summary for Solidarity attributes

Factor	Excitable		Outgoing		Friendly		Cool	
	F-value	p-value	F-value	p-value	F-value	p-value	F-value	p-value
Intensifier	4.7	<.001	1.4	–	0.6	-	3.5	<.05
Adjective	11.0	<.0001	7.3	<.0001	1.4	-	6.1	<.001
Adj:Int	3.4	<.05	2.3	<.05	2.5	<.05	2.3	<.05

I now focus on the specific contrasts between intensified forms and the bare forms. Table 3.7 reports the differences between the perception of the sentence with the intensifier and the perception of the sentence with the bare form for the corresponding adjective type. Results for *totally* are in bold face. Significant contrasts between intensified and bare form are indicated with

\*. The average differential effects of all the Solidarity attributes are plotted in Figure 3.3.

Table 3.7: Perception for Solidarity attributes: differentials

Attribute	Unbounded				Extreme				Bounded			
	Bare	Tot	Com	Rea	Bare	Tot	Com	Rea	Bare	Tot	Com	Rea
Exc	3.51	<b>+.61</b>	+.25	+.01	3.80	+.34	+.42	-.08	3.19	+.54	-.05	-.08
Out	3.65	<b>**+.74</b>	+.26	+.26	4.34	-.09	+.14	-.48	3.80	+.05	-.39	+.05
Fri	3.68	<b>*+.65</b>	+.37	+.34	4.20	-.26	-.03	-.23	3.94	+.00	-.44	+.17
Cool	3.02	<b>**+.85</b>	+.06	-.02	3.45	-.03	+.26	-.40	2.97	+.17	-.18	+.00
Avg	3.47	<b>**+.72</b>	+.23	+.14	3.95	-.01	+.20	-.30	3.47	+.19	-.26	+.04

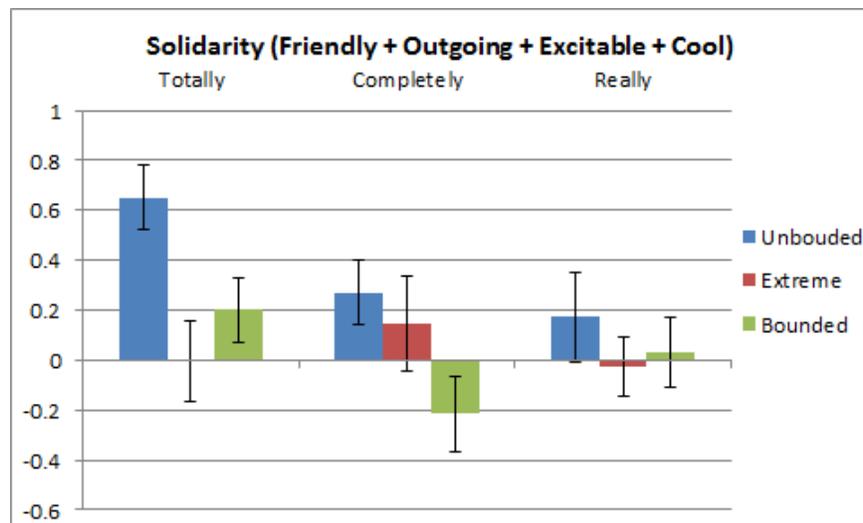


Figure 3.3: Solidarity perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction of each intensifier from the bare form. The X-axis groups the different intensifiers.

For all attributes, *totally* with unbounded adjectives was perceived as significantly higher than the corresponding bare forms. No significant contrasts are found for *totally* with extreme adjectives or bounded adjectives. With the latter, however, *totally* displays a trend to raise the solidarity perception, which is particularly evident with Excitability. Concerning the other intensifiers, no systematic contrast is observed that holds across all the attributes. It can be observed, though, that *completely* with bounded adjectives tends to lower the perception of solidarity.

## Status

Table 3.8 reports the summary of the mixed effects models for the Status attributes. For all attributes, a main effect of Intensifier was found, with *totally* being associated with lower Status perception than the other conditions. A main effect of Adjective was found for Mature, Intelligent and Serious, with bounded adjectives being rated higher than extreme and unbounded ones. Finally, an interaction between Intensifier and Adjective is found for Articulate.

Table 3.8: Mixed effect model summary for Status attributes

Factor	Articulate		Mature		Intelligent		Serious	
	F-value	p-value	F-value	p-value	F-value	p-value	F-value	p-value
Intensifier	6.0	<.001	10.0	<.0001	8.8	<.01	10.9	<.001
Adjective	1.6	—	3.7	<.05	4.3	<.05	3.4	<.001
Adj:Int	3.1	<.01	1.8	—	2.0	—	1.3	—

As was done for Solidarity attributes, I now focus on the specific contrasts between intensified forms and the bare forms. Table 3.9 reports the differences between the perception of the sentence with the intensifier and the perception of the sentence with the bare form for the corresponding adjective type. Results for *totally* are in bold face. Significant contrasts between intensified and bare form are indicated with \*. The average of all Status attributes is plotted in Figure 3.4.

Table 3.9: Perception scores for Status attributes: differentials

Att	Unbounded				Extreme				Bounded			
	Bare	Tot	Com	Rea	Bare	Tot	Com	Rea	Bare	Tot	Com	Rea
Art	3.68	** <b>-.87</b>	-.54	+.23	3.91	** <b>-.86</b>	-.26	-.14	3.47	+.03	+.55	-.02
Mat	3.68	** <b>-.93</b>	-.54	+.11	4.05	*** <b>-1.20</b>	-.43	-.50	3.77	-.42	+.31	-.03
Int	3.60	** <b>-.84</b>	-.37	+.34	4.00	*** <b>-1.03</b>	-.35	-.37	3.77	-.19	+.17	+.08
Ser	4.22	*** <b>-1.01</b>	-.55	-.14	4.25	*** <b>-1.15</b>	-.31	-.12	4.22	-.31	+.00	+.00
Avg	3.80	*** <b>-.90</b>	-.50	+.13	4.05	*** <b>-1.08</b>	-.37	+.01	3.81	-.23	+.26	-.22

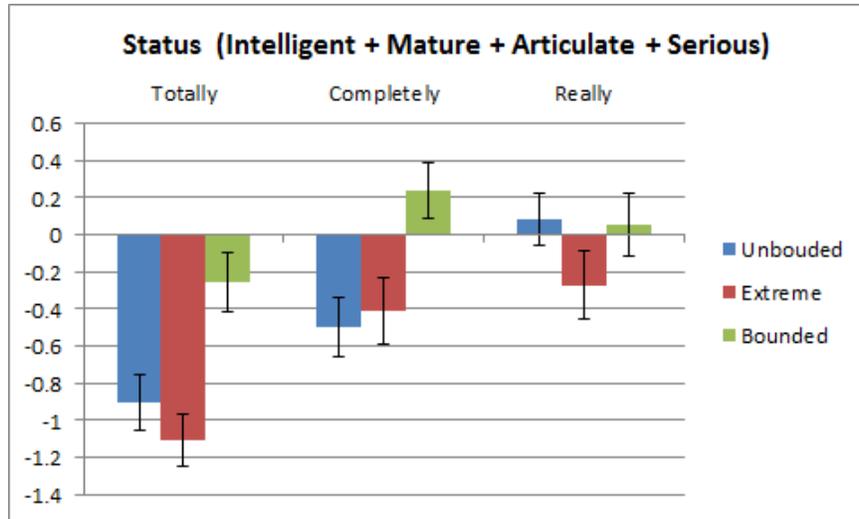


Figure 3.4: Status perception.

For all attributes, *totally* with unbounded adjectives and with extreme adjectives is perceived as significantly lower than the corresponding bare forms. No significant contrasts are found for *totally* with bounded adjectives, even though *totally* displays a trend to decrease the perception with these predicates as well. Concerning the other intensifiers, no significant contrast is observed across all the attributes. Yet, we observe that *completely* with unbounded adjectives displays a marked trend to decrease the perception, with effects that near significance (all  $ps < .1$ ). At the same time, we note that *completely* with bounded adjectives displays a trend to raise the status perception, featuring an effect that goes in the opposite direction to the one observed for the other adjective types. No effect is observed for *really*.

### 3.4.5 Discussion

In Experiment 1, I tested the interaction between the salience of *totally*'s social meaning and the type of scale targeted by the intensifier. Concerning Age, Solidarity and Status attributes, we observe that, while for each dimension of evaluation, the direction of the effect of *totally* is consistent across the different adjective types. Yet, the effect is only significant when *totally* comes in the attitudinal variant. In other words, while *totally* by itself carries an indexical package biased towards the association with young, low status and high solidarity speakers, the semantic environment crucially affects this content, making it most salient when a lexical scale is not available and the intensifier operates at the pragmatic level. This suggests that the type of scale targeted by the intensifier indeed acts as a constraint on the intensity of the social meaning, providing initial evidence of an association between the two types of content. At the same time, we observe that the salience of the social meaning does not reflect the continuum in the distinction between lexical and attitudinal uses. Quite the contrary, the social perception of *totally* in this environment is polarized across different dimensions of evaluation. Concerning Solidarity, *totally* has no effect, leaving the perception unchanged from the bare form. Concerning Status and Age, the effect of *totally* is instead comparable to the one observed for unbounded adjectives. I suggest that, to better understand this result, it is important to consider the independent social meaning contributed by Extreme adjectives, a category of expressions that, by virtue of their inherent emotive charge, normally carry a richer indexical baggage than the other two classes of adjectives. In particular, adjectives like *awesome* appear to be independently associated with a rather similar social indexicality to the one of *totally*, especially in terms of its association with high degrees of enthusiasm, emotivity and informality. Concerning Solidarity, in particular, Extreme adjectives differ from other adjectives in featuring remarkably high value *on their own* on all the tested attributes, and in particular on Friendliness and Excitability. This ceiling effect of the bare form, as opposed to the contribution of *totally* per se, could explain why sentences with the intensifier did not record a higher social meaning than sentences without it. As far as Status and Age are concerned, the steep drop associated with *totally* might be related to the fact that combinations like “totally awesome”

have enregistered and are quickly rising as as a crystallized unit. As a result, the indexicality of the construction “totally + extreme adjective” ends up being independently associated with younger speakers and the stereotypes associated with them, displaying a striking similarity to the social meaning of other recent linguistic innovations. A crucial test case to cast light on this proposal is represented by extreme adjectives that are instead normally associated with more formal registers (e.g., *superb*). The prediction would be that these adjectives would not have the same independent indexicality of *awesome*, and should therefore feature a different interaction with intensifiers like *totally* than the one observed above.<sup>15</sup>

Concerning the effect of the other intensifiers, no systematic pattern emerges. As predicted, *really* has a minor impact on all the evaluation scales and presents no significant difference across the tested adjective types. Concerning *completely*, we also observe that the intensifier does not change the social meaning of the bare form in a systematic way. At the same time, it is worth observing that *completely* closely approximates the effect of *totally* on unbounded adjectives, nearing statistical significance with respect to Status attributes. In other words, the impact of the two intensifiers is highly consistent, even though it greatly differs in terms of magnitude. A possible explanation would be that *completely* is also on the way of grammaticalizing an attitudinal meaning. As such, it begins to display the same markedness effects and part of the same social indexicality of *totally*, even though it is not deep enough in the grammaticalization trajectory to trigger such effects as consistently and to the same extent.<sup>16</sup> This hypothesis would fit with the observation that the shift from a bounded to an attitudinal domain is rather common across languages, as discussed by Hoeksema (2011) and Tribushinina and Janssen (2011) on Dutch *helmaal*, although further research is needed to substantiate the parallel between these modifiers and the trajectory of *completely*.

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15. If anything, they should result to be rather unnatural when used with *totally* due to an inconsistent between their formality and the indexicality of the intensifier. I thank Penny Eckert for suggesting this.

16. I thank E. Allyn Smith and Tim Leffel for suggesting, separately and (almost) simultaneously, this explanation.

### 3.5 Experiment 2

As discussed in Chapter 2, the type of scale is not the only relevant dimension of semantic variation involving *totally*. A further layer of distinction is nested *within* attitudinal *totally*, and concerns the degree to which the use of the intensifier as a marker of commitment is called for by the presence of overt linguistic cues in the context. In particular, I suggest that attitudinal *totally* can come in two different types of contexts. In *explicit contexts*, the use of the intensifier is pragmatically called for by an element in the surrounding linguistic material. Examples of such cues are a statement of doubt on the part of the interlocutor, which justifies an emphatic response of the speaker; or a modal (e.g., *will*) that weakens the overall force of the utterance, warranting the use of *totally* as a pragmatic tool to back up the speaker's subjective prediction. By contrast, in *implicit contexts* – such as propositions that do not come in responses and describe straightforward facts – *totally* is not directly motivated by any element in the overt linguistic material. Here, as discussed above, the successful interpretation of the intensifier is contingent on the fact that the interlocutors share an evaluative stance about the content of the utterance as unbelievable, amusing or highly remarkable in some way, and thus worthy of an “extra push” to be added to the Common Ground. The contrast between the two types of context is illustrated below.

(128) a. **Explicit** Dionne: Hello? There was a stop sign.

Cher: I *totally* paused.

b. The Bulls will *totally* lose to the Pistons tonight.

(129) **Implicit**

a. Man in “I have no drugs” shirt *totally* had drugs.<sup>17</sup>

b. Iowa Senator *Totally* Thinks You Should Be Drug Tested For Those Child Support Payments.

In Experiment 2, I test the interaction between the social meaning of *totally* and this distinction, focusing on how the social meaning is affected by whether attitudinal *totally* is pragmatically called

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17. <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/wtf-florida-man-in-i-have-drugs-shirt-totally-had-drugs-6542858>

for or not.

### 3.5.1 Stimuli, procedure and statistical analysis

Following the procedure of Experiment 1, I tested *totally* in sentences coming in 3 critical conditions:

- (130)
- a. An explicit context with a modal (here, *will*);
  - b. An explicit context with a previous discourse of uncertainty (here, a sentence introduced by “I can’t remember if . . .”)
  - c. An implicit context requiring accommodation.

In addition, 2 baseline conditions were used to measure the impact of *totally* in each scenario via subtraction, as done in the previous study. A full paradigm for an item is reported below.

- (131)
- a. Josh will totally get pulled over for texting and driving. **Explicit, modal**
  - b. A: I can’t remember if Josh got pulled over for texting and driving.  
B: Yes, he totally got pulled over. **Explicit, uncertainty**
  - c. Josh totally got pulled over for texting and driving. **Implicit**
  - d. Josh will get pulled over for texting and driving. **Baseline 1**
  - e. Josh got pulled over for texting and driving. **Baseline 2**

10 different items were crossed in a Latin Square Design. I predict that the social meaning indexed by *totally* should be more salient in implicit contexts, where the need for accommodation renders the variant more marked. Every subject saw a total of 10 written sentences, 2 sentences for each condition. Each sentence was followed by the same 10 questions that were asked in Experiment 1. In the instructions, subjects were warned that, in case the presented scenario consisted of a dialogue (see Condition *b*), they should direct their attention to the response. The study was created with Qualtrics and carried out online. 40 self-declared native speakers of American English, age 18-35, were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk and compensated \$2 for their participation.

To investigate whether the nature of the context – explicit vs implicit – affects the social perception of *totally*, I carried out planned t-test comparisons between the implicit context condition and each explicit context condition. To rule out the possibility that having *will* or past tense had any independent effect on social perception, the analysis was carried out on the value obtained by the *subtraction* between each condition and the corresponding baseline condition. The two critical contrasts are summarized below:

- **(Response – Baseline 2) vs (Implicit – Baseline 2)**
- **(Will – Baseline 1) vs (Implicit – Baseline 2)**

### 3.5.2 Results

#### Age

As in Experiment 1, Age was converted in a scale between 1 (youngest) and 4 (oldest). The scores are reported in the table below. The differences between the sentence with *totally* and the corresponding baseline condition are plotted in Figure 3.5.

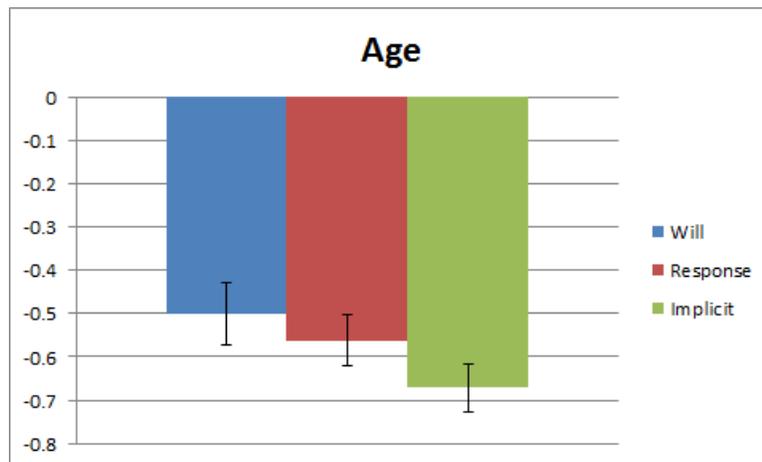


Figure 3.5: Age perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of the sentence with *totally* and the baseline condition without *totally*.

Both the difference between the implicit context and the response condition ( $t(39)=2.4, p<.05$ ) and between the implicit context and the *will* condition ( $t(39)=3.1, p<.01$ ) are significant. No significant difference is found between the two baseline conditions.

**Gender**

As in Experiment 1, Gender was converted in a scale variable with values comprised between 1 (most likely to be male) and 3 (most likely to be female). The scores are reported in the table below. The differences between the sentence with *totally* and the corresponding baseline condition are plotted in Figure 3.6.

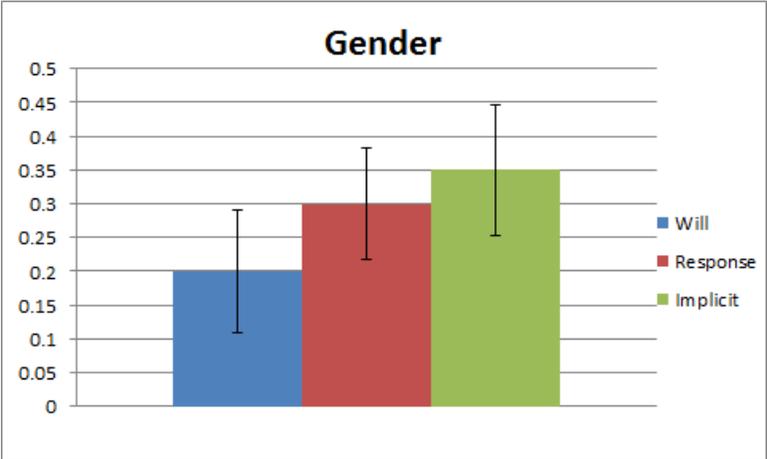


Figure 3.6: Gender perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of the sentence with *totally* and the baseline condition without *totally*.

No significant difference is found between the three critical conditions conditions (all  $ps > .1$ )

### **Solidarity**

Since, contrary to Experiment 1, not all Solidarity attributes behaved consistently, I discuss them separately.

#### Outgoing

The values for Outgoing are plotted in Figure 3.7. *Totally* in implicit contexts is associated with a higher evaluation than *totally* in responses ( $t(39) = 4.7, p < .001$ ) and *totally* with *will* ( $t(39) = 4.3, p < .001$ ).

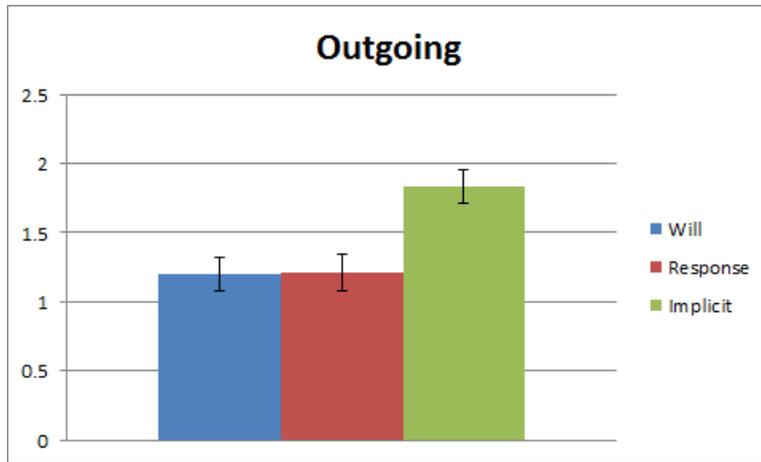


Figure 3.7: Outgoingness perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of the sentence with *totally* and the baseline condition without *totally*.

### Excitable

The values for Outgoing are plotted in Figure 3.8. *Totally* in implicit contexts is associated with a higher evaluation than *totally* in responses ( $t(39) = 4.7, p < .001$ ) and *totally* with *will* ( $t(39) = 4.3, p < .001$ ).

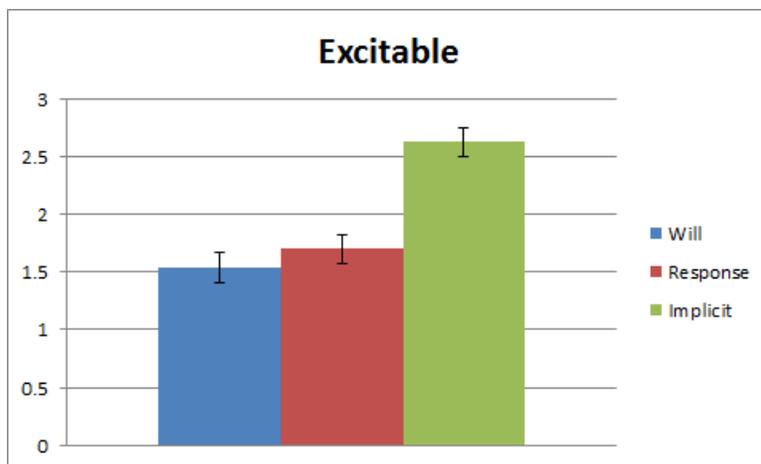


Figure 3.8: Excitability perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of the sentence with *totally* and the baseline condition without *totally*.

### Friendly

The values for Friendly are plotted in Figure 3.9. *Totally* in implicit contexts is associated with a higher evaluation than *totally* in responses ( $t(39) = 2.1, p < .05$ ) and *totally* with *will* ( $t(39) = 4.1, p < .001$ ).

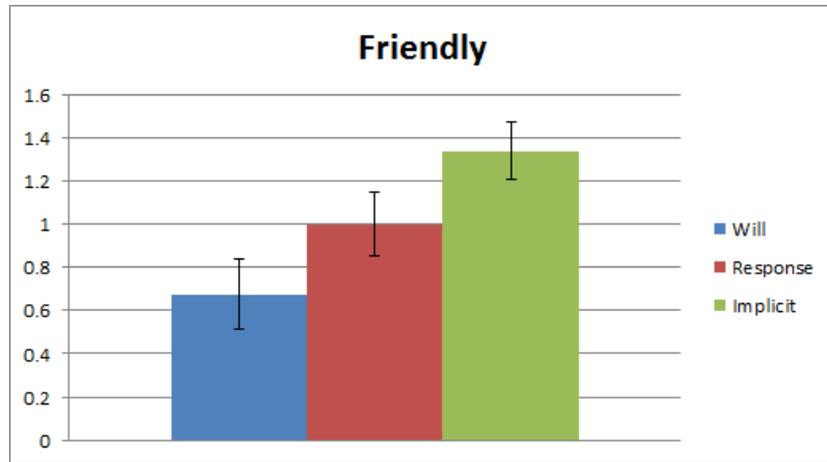


Figure 3.9: Friendliness perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of the sentence with *totally* and the baseline condition without *totally*.

### Cool

The values for Cool are plotted in Figure 3.10. *Totally* in implicit contexts is associated with a higher evaluation than *totally* with *will* ( $t(39) = 2.1, p < .05$ ). No significant difference is found between *totally* in responses and implicit contexts.

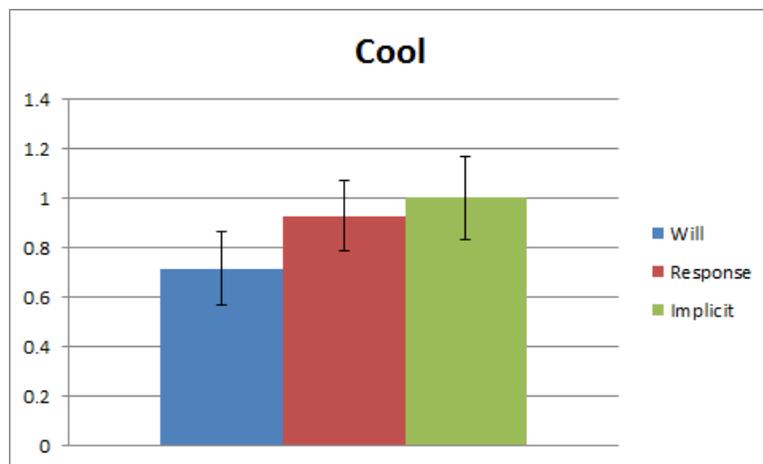


Figure 3.10: Coolness perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of the sentence with *totally* and the baseline condition without *totally*.

## Status

Contrary to Experiment 1, not all the Status attributes behaved in the same way. I thus discuss them separately.

### Serious

The values for Serious are plotted in Figure 3.11. *Totally* in implicit contexts is associated with lower seriousness than *totally* in responses ( $t(39) = 2.7, p < .01$ ). No significant difference is found between *totally* in implicit contexts and *totally* with *will*.

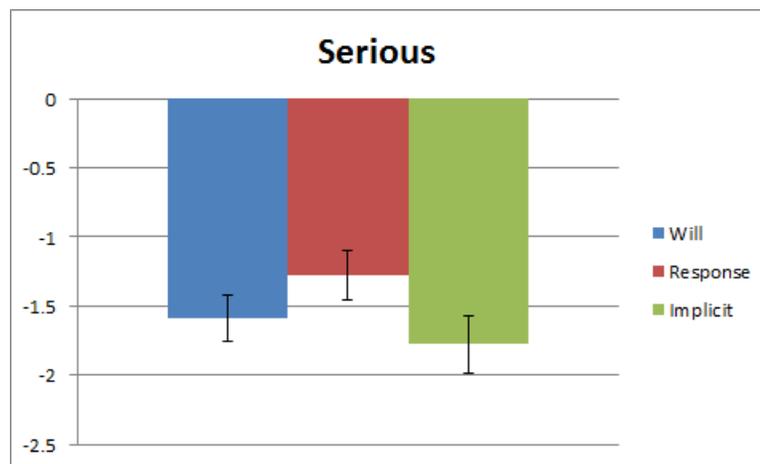


Figure 3.11: Seriousness perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of the sentence with *totally* and the baseline condition without *totally*.

### Mature

The values for Mature are plotted in Figure 3.12. *Totally* in implicit contexts is associated with lower maturity than *totally* in responses ( $t(39) = 2.4, p < .05$ ). No significant difference is found between *totally* in implicit contexts and *totally* with *will*.

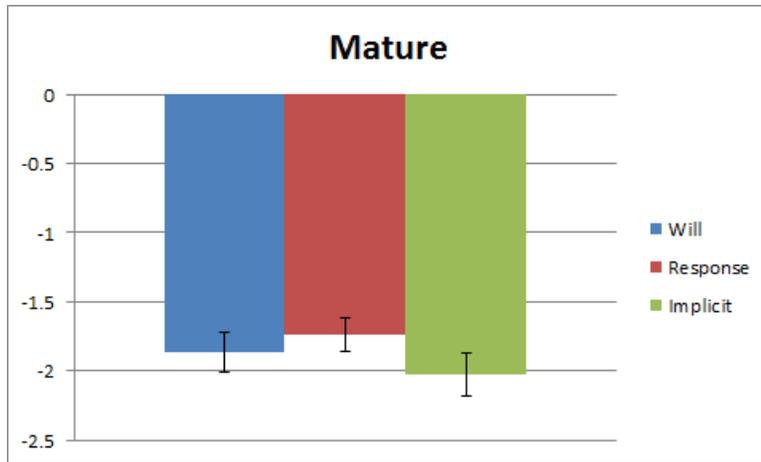


Figure 3.12: Maturity perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of the sentence with *totally* and the baseline condition without *totally*.

### Intelligent

The values for Intelligent are plotted in Figure 3.13. No significant difference is found between the three conditions.

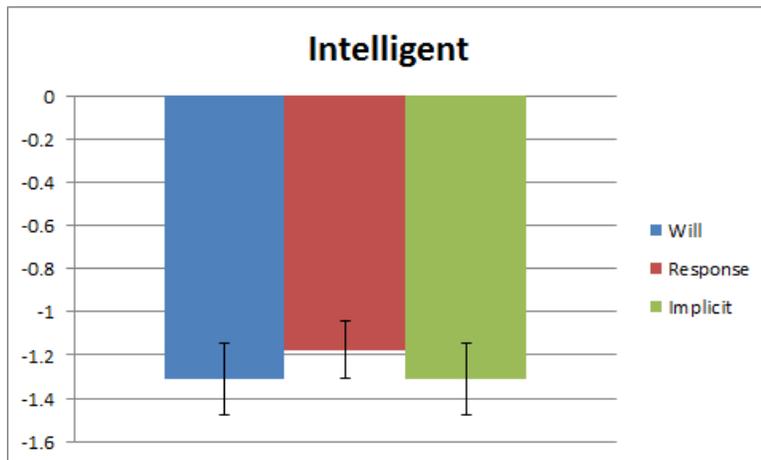


Figure 3.13: Intelligence perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of the sentence with *totally* and the baseline condition without *totally*.

## Articulate

The values for Articulate are plotted in Figure 3.13. No significant difference is found between the three conditions.

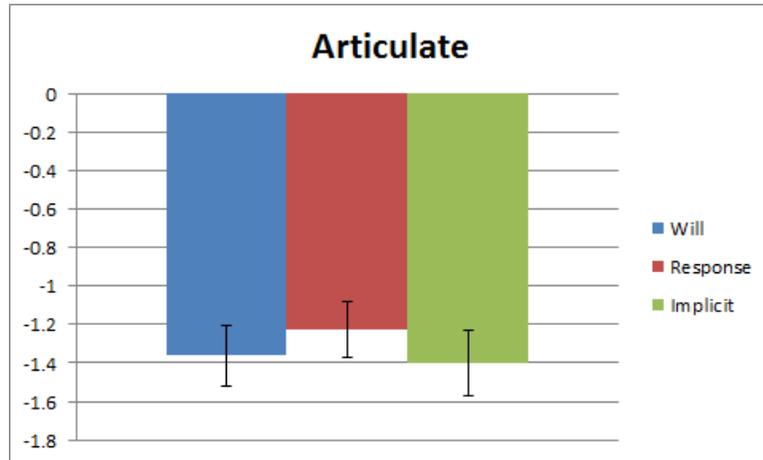


Figure 3.14: Articuteness perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of the sentence with *totally* and the baseline condition without *totally*.

### 3.5.3 Discussion

In Experiment 2, I investigated the effect of the pragmatic context on the perception of attitudinal *totally*'s social meaning. Across the board, users of attitudinal *totally* are perceived as significantly younger, lower in Status and and higher in Solidarity than speakers that use the same sentences without *totally*, confirming the strong effect of the intensifier along these dimensions that already emerged in Experiment 1. However, such effects tend to be stronger in contexts in which *totally* is less pragmatically called for. Looking at the broader picture, this suggests that the salience of the social meaning indexed by *totally* is affected not only by the type of scale targeted by the intensifier, as discussed in Experiment 1, but also by other pragmatic features about the context, outlining a picture in which social indexicality interacts with the semantic and pragmatic features of the variable at multiple levels.

At the same time, the distinction between implicit and explicit contexts does not affect the social perception as consistently and as heavily as the distinction between lexical and attitudinal scales did in Experiment 1. First, a split between Solidarity and Status attributes emerges. Concerning solidarity attributes, *totally* in implicit contexts is consistently associated with a higher score than in explicit contexts. Concerning the status attributes, only two dimensions – Mature and Serious – record a difference between implicit and explicit contexts. The emerging picture is one in which Solidarity attributes are by-and-large more sensitive than Status attributes to the difference between explicit and implicit contexts, both in terms of number of attributes affected and in terms of the magnitude of the effects. Second, we observe that the two implicit contexts – *will* and responses – do not pattern consistently. In particular, while *will* tends to receive higher Status evaluations, it is associated with lower Solidarity scores than responses, even if the differences between these two conditions are never significant.

### 3.6 Summary

As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the experiments discussed in this chapter had a twofold goal: (i) exploring the social indexicality of *totally*; (ii) testing how the salience of such social qualities interacts with the semantic/pragmatic properties of the intensifier. I now summarize the findings concerning each of these two points.

The two experiments reveal that *totally* indexes a constellation of social attributes, which can be grouped in three different categories. First, on a demographic level the intensifier is systematically associated with a perception of the speaker as younger, consistent with the impression suggested by the stereotypical commentaries that associate the use of this morpheme with teenagers and young adults. This finding confirms the status of attitudinal *totally* as a recent innovation of American English (Irwin 2014), which has undergone grammaticalization only in the last twenty years, and is thus not used uniformly across demographic space. At the same time, we find no consistent effect of gender. While *totally* shows a tendency to be more likely to be associated with a female than a male speaker, the effect is considerably more tenuous than the one recorded for Age. This suggests that this particular trait of social meaning, despite the frequent association with markedly feminine social types such as Valley Girl, is somewhat peripheral for *totally*. A possible reason could be that *totally* also triggers the association with masculine types (e.g., Surfer Dude, Frat Boy), even though these are somewhat not as pervasive in the circulating commentaries. The salience of these other categories could explain why, in the absence of further cues, listeners do not show a marked preference for the gender of the speaker.

Second, the intensifier is associated with a high value along all of the tested Solidarity attributes. While different, all these qualities make reference to a high degree of likeability of the speaker, suggesting that *totally* contributes to foster proximity and convergence between the interlocutors. These attributes are those that more closely track variations on the semantic level, as they turn out to be significantly affected by both the distinction between attitudinal and lexical *totally* and the distinction between the different contexts in which attitudinal *totally* is used.

Finally, the intensifier is associated with a low value along the four Status attributes that were

used in the experiment. Yet, as noted above, Status attributes differ from Solidarity ones in not tracking the levels of semantic variation as closely. In particular, while they are all equally and heavily affected by the distinction between lexical and attitudinal scales, only a subset of them is affected by the distinction between explicit and implicit contexts, and to a considerably lesser extent.

In sum, the emerging picture is the following. Concerning the social meaning of the intensifier, *totally* presents a rich social indexicality and is recognized as an index of rather specific speaker qualities which do not exclusively boil down to the demographic profile of its users, featuring a similar degree of internal complexity to other linguistic carriers of social meanings (see Section 3 of this Chapter). Concerning the empirical association between the social and the semantic meaning, we observe that the salience of the indexicality associated with *totally* is sensitive to at least two different axes of semantic/pragmatic variation: the type of scale targeted by the intensifier; and the presence of explicit cues that call for strengthening commitment for cases in which the intensifier targets an attitudinal scale. The co-variation between the salience of the social meaning and such properties represents the first step towards exploring how semantic and social meaning might be related in a principled fashion. In the next chapter, I address the discussion of this mapping, outlining the principles that govern this connection.

# Chapter 4

## *Totally*: explaining the socio-semantic mapping

### 4.1 Overview

In Chapter 3, I have highlighted the notion of social meaning as a highly systematic constellation of speaker qualities conveyed through the use of linguistic expressions. Via two perception studies, I have shown that attitudinal *totally*, but not lexical *totally*, evokes a rather specific configuration of such attributes, unveiling a consistent empirical association between the salience of the social attributes conveyed by *totally* and the specific semantic/pragmatic features of the intensifier in a particular context. In this chapter, I aim to cast light on the principles underlying this empirical association. The discussion is organized around the following questions:

- What semantic/pragmatic features of *totally* contribute to make the intensifier a rich index of social meaning?
- What mechanism(s) does natural language make available to make this social meaning stand out?

Concerning the first question, I argue that the suitability of *totally* to serve as a carrier of social meaning is directly related to the the degree of speaker-hearer convergence that the intensifier fos-

ters by virtue of its semantic/pragmatic features. Concerning the second question, I suggest that the social meaning of *totally* is made salient by the marked status of the intensifier in specific contexts, and in particular by the contrast with less complex alternatives that could have been used to utter the same content. I argue that both factors are manifestations of broader principles that drive the relationship between linguistic forms and social meaning across different types of variation. The chapter is structured as follows. In section 2, I review the current literature investigating the mapping between social meaning and linguistic properties; in section 3, I discuss the interactional implications associated with the use of attitudinal *totally*; in section 4, I illustrate the status of attitudinal *totally* as a marked variant; in section 5, I provide a comparison with seemingly similar expressions – e.g., *Verum Focus*, *definitely* and *actually* – that instead lack the social effects of *totally*. In section 6, I summarize and conclude.

## **4.2 Linguistic constraints on social meaning: previous insights**

A vast amount of research has illuminated the tight connection between the emergence of social meaning and the specific socio-ideological-political contexts in which the variables are used (see Chapter 3). However, acknowledging the importance of the extra-linguistic setting does not entail that social meaning is completely blind to the language-internal properties of its carriers, as the experimental results from the perception of *totally* seem to suggest. As a first step to discussing how the social meaning of *totally* bears on the language-internal properties of the intensifier, I review the proposals that have been put forward to characterize the linguistic constraints on social meaning with respect to a plurality of domains of variation. Two distinct notions, in particular, have been invoked to cast light on this issue: (i) the *markedness* of the expression and (ii) how the use of the expression impacts the relationship between the speaker and the hearer in the conversation. I now proceed to discuss each of them.

#### 4.2.1 Markedness and social meaning salience

Since Wolfram (1969), the notion of *markedness* represents the first non-arbitrary connection between variation and social meaning that has been explored. This concept is notoriously controversial and widely debated in linguistic theory. While an astounding number of approaches and formal treatments for this phenomenon have been proposed (see Haspelmath 2006 for a critical review), in contemporary linguistics the term is invoked for any set of observations in which the unmarked member – which normally is referred to as the “default” member – emerges as more *frequent, natural, simple or predictable* than its marked counterpart.<sup>1</sup>

#### The markedness-social meaning correlation

Concerning social meaning, various studies have pointed out a positive correlation between markedness and the *salience* of social meaning, observing that marked variants of a given variable normally tend to be more powerful social indexes than unmarked ones. In a foundational study, Bender (2000) relies on a matched-guise study to show that users of zero copula are perceived as more strongly associated with African American ethnic identity in environments in which the variant is least frequent, and therefore more marked (i.e., before NPs). Conversely, the perceived intensity of the social meaning decreases in the environments in which copula deletion is more frequent, hence less marked (i.e., before auxiliary verbs), unveiling a principled connection between syntactic environments, frequency of use and the salience of the relevant social meaning. Similar arguments have been provided by the social meanings carried by phonological variables. In a study on intonational contour across communicative settings, Podesva (2011) shows that rising intonation serves as a politeness strategy enabling the speaker to express concern for the hearer, observing that rising

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1. The concept of markedness started out as having a very specific meaning at the early times of structural linguistics. Prominent examples of such asymmetries come from seminal studies in structural phonology, in which the term *markedness* was originally used to describe the relation between a sound that features some property and another sound that lacks them. For example, the sound /d/ is marked with respect to /t/ as it bears an extra feature, namely voicing, that its counterpart does not have (Trubetzkoy 1931 via Hume 2010). In semantics, a similar opposition has been argued to hold between nouns of male and female animals, where the latter is the marked member. In Jakobson (1932)'s well known example, the noun *oslica* (= ‘female donkey’) bears a semantic mark indicating female sex, while *osel* (= ‘donkey’) lacks any such specification, and can therefore be used either to refer to male donkeys, or to the species in general. Similar examples in English include *lion/lioness*, *dog/bitch* and similar.

contours are considerably less frequent than falling ones. By virtue of this, they appear to be a better resource than falling contours for doctors to construct a “caring persona” to put the patients at ease. In addition, Podesva suggests that the markedness of rising contour is grounded not just in its frequentistic distribution, but also in *phonetic detail*, where high values of acoustic frequency independently contribute to make this intonational pattern stand out. Moreover, in a study addressing the social meaning of creaky voice in different linguistic contexts, Callier (2013) provides evidence that creak in mid-phrasal position, a linguistic context where it is less frequent, is perceived more negatively than in phrase-final position, where it is more frequent. Finally, a frequentistic notion of markedness has also been invoked to account for the social meaning of semantic variables. In a study on the modal *finna* in African American English, Grinsell and Thomas (2012) show that this expression has evolved from a progressive with a lexically specific meaning (“be fixing to”) and restricted semantic environment into a proximate future marker. As a result of the semantic shift, the distribution of the expression extended to a number of new grammatical contexts - for instance, inanimate subjects and atelic predicates - which, by virtue of their low frequency, represent a marked environment for the variable. It is precisely in these contexts that the social meaning associated with *finna* becomes more salient.

### **From markedness to salience**

As for the reason why markedness correlates with social meaning salience, there is consensus among authors that, by virtue of their heightened noticeability, marked variants emerge as a more powerful choice for the speaker who wishes to create a particular style and intends to draw the listener’s attention. As such, they are better designed for conveying social meaning than their unmarked counterparts. Concerning the exact characterization of the notion of noteworthiness, most investigators link it to the violation of frequentistic expectations that is associated with the use of marked forms, which therefore stand out as particularly surprising for the hearer. Campbell-Kibler (2007), for example, suggests that “it is likely that those variants which depart more strongly or unexpectedly from a listener’s customary experience are more apt to be noticed and assigned

meaning than those which differ only slightly”.

### **Extending the focus**

Taken together, these studies constitute an important step towards an understanding of how social meaning is constrained, providing us with a criterion that can help us set apart linguistically suitable and less suitable carriers of social content. In particular, the noteworthiness associated with markedness asymmetries provides an elegant explanation of how the circulation of social meaning can be parasitic on forces that are endemic to the linguistic system, as opposed to the ideological forces operating in the socioeconomic landscape. At the same time, these studies share two common limitations. First, by framing the linguistic properties of the variable to patterns in terms of frequentistic distribution and phonetic detail, they abstract from the structural properties of the variable and cannot reveal whether other features of linguistic forms – e.g., those pertaining to their semantics, syntax or pragmatics – also contribute to determining the suitability of an expression to serve as a carrier of social meaning. Second, by exclusively focusing on the fluctuations in the intensity of social meaning, they do not address the question as to whether, in addition to a *quantitative* one, there is also a *qualitative* association between linguistic features and social content. For example, why do certain forms end up conveying certain social attributes as opposed to others? Is there a deeper connection than mere degrees of salience between language-internal features and the nature of the qualities that become indexed as part of the social meaning? The main reason why such issues could not be addressed is that the investigations discussed above are concerned with units with either no independent syntactic/semantic structure – e.g., phonemes – or with a basic meaning unambiguously shared across different variants – e.g., copula deletion – making frequency the only linguistic feature along which the variants at stake significantly vary. As a consequence, in order to address the issues outlined above, the focus must be extended to cases of variation in which the variants do have independent and fully fleshed semantic and pragmatic content, thus providing another layer of linguistic structure that can mediate the connection between social meaning and linguistic features.

### 4.2.2 Embracing semantics

As discussed in Chapter 3, social meanings bear an *indexical* relation to linguistic forms (Silverstein 1976, 2003; Eckert 2008): their association to language is grounded in a spatio-temporal contiguity between expressions and users, which is then ideologically re-analyzed as a set of more specific social qualities and identity categories distinctive of particular groups or social types. While the extant literature has discussed in detail how such social meanings emerge in the domain of phonological and, to a lesser extent, morpho-syntactic variation, much less attention has been dedicated to the case of variables that have independent, nontrivial semantic content. Concerning their relationship to social meaning, two questions arise. Do the semantic properties of these expressions play a role in determining the likelihood of a certain expression to be re-analyzed as an index of social qualities? Second, if this is the case, is there a principled semiotic connection between the semantic properties and the particular nature of such qualities (as opposed to others)? Previous studies introduced insights that can serve as an important starting point to begin tackling these issues. In the next sections, I build on Ochs (1992)' notion of *indirect indexicality* and Kiesling and Moore and Podesva's (Moore and Podesva 2009; Kiesling 2009, 2016) recent discussion of *stance* to highlight the interactional effects of linguistic expressions as a crucial intermediate step between the expression's semantic properties and its potential to convey identity-level qualities. I then move on to discuss how these insights have been incorporated in recent studies on the social meaning of semantic variables.

#### **From pragmatics to social relationships**

Building on Silverstein's model, Ochs (1992) argues that understanding what linguistic forms convey at the social level entails understanding how language users rely on these forms to create a certain type of speaker-hearer relationship in interaction. Under this view, the mapping between social identity and linguistic expressions is not direct, but is crucially mediated by the pragmatic effects that such expressions obtain when they are used in conversation. For example, Ochs argues that the association of command imperatives with male speakers in American English is grounded

in the activity of *ordering* pragmatically indexed by the form, which in turn becomes associated with a typical affective disposition of men and triggers the connection with gender identity. In a similar vein, Kiesling (2009) and Moore and Podesva (2009) claim that higher-level identity-based social meanings associated with particular expressions are grounded in the interactional *stances* that these expressions invoke when used in communication. Building on DuBois (2009), Kiesling uses the term *stance* to describe the relationships that language users create in interaction with respect to three core dimensions: (a) how speakers relate to each other in the conversation; (b) how speakers relate towards what is being discussed; (c) and how speakers relate towards the discourse itself. Taken together, such stances are argued to be a “precursor, or primitive, in sociolinguistic variation” (Kiesling 2016: 43): they represent the first social value that is associated with linguistic expressions, which become in turn associated with a broader social meaning in a community over time and repeated use. Moore and Podesva (2009), for instance, show that, in a school in north-west England, tag questions used with different pragmatic functions – e.g., soliciting information; imposing a point of view; reaching agreement – tend to evoke different identity-groups in the school (e.g., Townies, Eden Village Girls, Geeks). The authors argue that such pragmatic effects are crucially responsible for driving the association of these forms with specific identity groups: for example, agreement-seeking tags are argued to be an effective linguistic resource for “Eden Village Girls” to foster the stance of cooperation and internal cohesiveness that distinguishes the members of this category, thus becoming a marker of group identity over repeated use.

### **The importance of semantic meaning**

The lesson from these cases is that the emergence of identity-based social meanings is tightly connected to how speakers use these expressions to position themselves with respect to their interlocutors and the content of what is being discussed. Within this picture, it becomes possible to see why, in the case of semantically contentful forms, the potential of such forms to become indexes of social meaning eventually bears on their conventional meaning. More precisely the “stances” that sociolinguists see as a primitive of social meaning represent pragmatic correlates of semantic con-

tent that every semantic/pragmatic theory needs to model to account for how linguistic expressions are interpreted by speakers in communication. As such, understanding how speakers use linguistic forms to construct stances and relationships cannot be done without having a full grasp on what conventional meaning such forms contribute, what presuppositions they introduce, how they are interpreted, and what effects they have on the discourse structure, all of which represents domains of inquiry squarely within the scope of traditional semantics and pragmatics. The emerging picture is one in which an in-depth study of the semantic/pragmatic features of linguistic expressions can be helpful to understand why certain forms end up being associated with particular social meanings. . I now proceed to review several recent studies that have started to pursue this research endeavor through the lens of formal semantics and pragmatics. The discussion will then serve as a starting point for the analysis of *totally*.

### **Recent studies: from demonstratives to modality**

Acton (2014) and Acton and Potts (2014) build on Lakoff (1974)'s observation that demonstratives like *this* and *that* index a sense of “emotional closeness between speaker and hearer” (p. 351), pointing to a motivated connection between the social meaning and the pragmatic implications of these expressions. Specifically, the authors trace demonstratives' social effects to their presuppositional content, and in particular to the presumption that the addressee must be able to access the referent of the embedded noun phrase by considering the speaker's relation to entities in the discourse context. It is this semantic component that differentiates demonstratives from run-of-the-mill determiners like *your* or *the*, which merely presuppose the existence of a unique referent, and explains why the former are a much more powerful tool than the latter for the construction of a shared emotional background. The following contrast exemplifies the difference.

- (132) a. That left front tire is pretty worn. Lakoff (1974: ex. 32)  
b. Your left front tire is pretty worn. Lakoff (1974: ex. 33)

To support this claim, the authors carry out a corpus study on Experience Project, a social network in which “users can post stories about themselves, add comments to others' stories, and

annotate each other's stories with their opinions and reactions (Acton and Potts 2014: 3)". The crucial observation is that users who employ demonstratives in their confessions, by presupposing perspectival alignment with their potential readers, trigger reactions of solidarity and support in the virtual community to a significantly greater extent than users who employ other determiners. As additional evidence, the authors provide an analysis of television interview data showing that demonstratives are a crucial component of Sarah Palin's communicative style, pointing to a connection between the politician's massive use of these forms and their ability to help establish a relation of proximity with the interlocutor.

Glass (2015) unveils a similar pattern exploring the social/semantic meaning nexus with deontic modals. In particular, she contrasts two variants with a slightly different semantic meaning: (i) *got/have to*, which merely expresses obligation in light of a set of circumstances/body of law; (ii) *need to*, which, besides conveying the obligation, also conveys that, according to the speaker, such an obligation is good for the hearer's well-being. It is precisely the subtle difference at the level of the lexical semantics that explains the different social meaning of these modals, where *need*, in comparison to *have to*, indexes an additional component of care or presumptuousness depending on "whether the speaker is licensed to tell the hearer what's good for him." (Glass 2015: 9). Evidence supporting this claim comes from the observation that, based on results from four different corpora, the use of *need* turns out to be more common from speakers with knowledge about the relevant domain, speakers in authority over the hearer, and speakers who play a mentoring role in the hearer's life.

Finally, Denis et al. (2016) have pointed to a relationship between the pragmatics of tags in Canadian English – with an emphasis on *eh?* and *right?* – and the social implications of the use of these expressions. In particular, the authors have argued that these tags, widely attested across different types of speech acts, are used by speakers to confirm that listeners agree with the felicity of the utterance modified by the tag. For instance, a speaker that is listening to a conference presentation and cannot follow what is being said can turn to the person next to her and utter the following, where *eh?* can be used as a tool to make sure that the interlocutor, in the same context,

would also make the same move.

(133) What's he talking about, eh?

Crucially, the status of *eh* as a felicitous device is contingent on the reciprocal positioning of the interlocutors in the context of utterance. For instance, while using the tag works perfectly if both the speaker and the hearer are confused about the presentation, the authors argue that it would not work as well if the listener is obviously engaged and on board with what the presenter is saying. Canadian tags, thus, represent a case in which the semantic meaning of an expression comes with specific pragmatic correlates in terms of the speaker-listener alignment, requiring that the interlocutors share a similar affective/cognitive disposition in the context of utterance for the expression.

(134) Speaker-listener relationship

- a. ✓ What's he talking about, eh? (Listener also confused)
- b. # What's he talking about, eh? (Listener not confused)

Taken together, these results highlight demonstratives, modals and tags as promising domains to explore the principled connection between the semantic/pragmatic content of a linguistic form and the interactional proximity that the use of these forms presuppose and recreate. While different, these cases suggest that semantic meaning often comes with pragmatic correlates that crucially bear on how the interlocutors are positioning vis-a-vis one another in the context of utterance, and that, in turn, these very pragmatic correlates are conducive to the emergence of social meaning.

### **Markedness and the division of pragmatic labor**

Besides providing a novel angle to consider the relation between social meaning and the internal features of linguistic expressions, exploring the connection between semantic features and interactional effects provides a new way of incorporating the notion of markedness. In particular, the work discussed above shows that the correlation between the salience of social meaning and the markedness of the variant need not be framed in purely frequentistic terms, but can also be grounded in

basic pragmatic principles. More specifically, both demonstratives and *need* emerge as marked with respect to functionally similar competitors that vie for the same slot, and yet provide a simpler semantic contribution: *the/your* for demonstratives; and *have to/got* for *need*. As such, both forms exemplify Horn (1984)'s principle of the *division of pragmatic labor*, according to which, if two forms have the same referential content and different degrees of complexity, the more complex one must have some additional content that motivates its presence, reconciling the apparent violation of Manner with the Cooperative Principle. Within this view, demonstratives are even more marked in contexts in which a determiner could have been left out altogether, thus emerging as completely *unnecessary* for referential purposes. Proper names provide a clear example of this.

(135) That Henry Kissinger sure knows his way around Hollywood!

In such contexts, the proper noun already identifies a unique referent. As such, it makes the speaker-hearer perspectival alignment presupposed by the demonstrative apparently superfluous, similarly to the effect associated with adding *totally* to an utterance that already encodes commitment to enrich the Common Ground. Yet, in this case as well, redundancy does not make the demonstrative infelicitous, but simply more marked: it leads the hearer to accommodate the perspective-alignment presupposition, shifting the locus of perspective alignment from the physical to the affective space. Unsurprisingly, demonstratives used in such contexts are shown to be an especially popular rhetorical device for politicians (in particular, Sarah Palin. See Section 2.2.3) as a stylistic resource to foster a sense of proximity with the listener, indicating that, once again, markedness is functional to the operation of highlighting social meaning.

### 4.2.3 Interim summary

The discussion above has unveiled two distinct principles that govern the relationship between semantic and social meaning. On the one hand, for all the cases considered above social effects are tightly connected to what language users *do* at the interactional level when using these forms. On the other hand, the variants with higher potential for acquiring social meaning are those that feature the higher degree of complexity in comparison to their semantically similar and formally simpler

competitors. On this view, the notion of markedness, now translated in non-frequentistic terms, remains a crucial language-internal factor to boost the salience of social meaning. The emerging picture is one in which two complementary forces are at work in mediating between social and semantic meaning.

- **Pragmatic indexicality:** The types of interpersonal stances/alignment fostered by the use of linguistic forms.
- **Markedness:** A language-internal mechanism that makes a particular linguistic form stand out with respect to an alternative.

At the same time, for both of the forms discussed above, the indexed social meanings appear to be considerably more basic than those described in the previous sociolinguistic literature; in other words, the effects of solidarity and presumptuousness associated with demonstratives and modals, while clearly connected to the stance-taking work of the interlocutors, do not evoke specific social identity features of language users in the way in which, for instance, full stop releases or raised diphthongs do (see Chapter 3 for further discussion). As such, the question arises as to whether the effects described in these two studies really need to be framed in terms of social meaning, or can instead be seen as mere pragmatic correlations of the particular conventional meanings that demonstratives and *need* have. To show that the two principles are indeed crucial to understanding the connection between a form's semantic and social meaning, I now turn to *totally*, a variable that has been shown (see Chapter 3) to index a rich package of specific identity-based social attributes.

### 4.3 **Totally: a tool for inclusiveness**

In this section, I begin by considering the interactional implications of the use of attitudinal *totally* in light of the formal analysis proposed in Chapter 2. The argument focuses on the following question: what are the pragmatic correlates of the use of attitudinal *totally* that bear on and affect the relationship between the speaker and the hearer? More specifically: what kind of speaker-hearer alignment do speakers using *totally* contribute to make? And what kind of attitude towards

the content of the conversation does the intensifier inform? I argue that attitudinal *totally*, by virtue of its semantic and pragmatic properties, presupposes and fosters convergence between the interlocutors, highlighting the conversation as a joint activity aimed at sharing propositions and, most importantly, evaluations about the world and the participants' interests. I now turn to discuss in detail each of these convergence effects.

### 4.3.1 Common Ground building

#### Solving doubts

As argued in Chapter 2, the defining semantic feature of attitudinal *totally* is that it expresses the speaker's viewpoint on the Projected Set of the conversation. As such, the intensifier targets a *shared* discourse space, as opposed to an individual one (Farkas and Bruce 2010): while its contribution originates from the speaker, it also bears on the hearer, carrying crucial implications for the interactional positioning of the interlocutors. On a general level, such an effect of attitudinal *totally* suggests that the intensifier can serve as a tool to bring the interlocutors together, highlighting a stance of proximity between the speaker and the hearer. The intersubjective flavor of *totally* just described emerges when we compare the expression to a modifier like *definitely*, which is instead geared towards marking individual, private commitment towards the proposition. In the exchange below, trivial certainty about one's own name makes the use of *definitely* odd. By contrast, the use of *totally* is still licensed by the uncertainty on the Common Ground explicitly introduced by the previous discourse move and by the goal of addressing the interlocutor's doubt.

(136) **Josh:** Hi, are you Emily?

**Emily:** # I'm DEFINITELY Emily

**Emily** ✓ I'm TOTALLY Emily

As the example suggests, by serving as an explicit marker of the commitment of the speaker to turn *p* into shared knowledge, *totally* signals the speaker's eagerness to involve the hearer in the co-construction of the conversation. By doing so, it highlights the exchange as a joint activity,

underscoring the willingness of the speaker to foster collaboration and engagement with the hearer to the end of enriching the mutual informational gain of the dialogue.

### **Fostering agreement**

The intersubjective flavor of the intensifier becomes relevant for social purposes when the intensifier modifies subjective predicates, which, as discussed in Chapter 2, represent a highly productive environment for *totally*. Due to their perspective-dependent nature, these predicates are particularly vulnerable to disagreement. In fact, as argued in the earlier sections of this work, they differ from regular assertions in offering the opportunity of *not* adding a proposition to the Common Ground as a felicitous option, thus inherently introducing uncertainty about whether *p* will or won't become part of a shared space. In such environments, *totally* works towards signaling an extra effort on the part of the speaker to invite the hearer to agree, emphasizing the goal to find convergence about the proposition in a situation in which such a convergence is linguistically less likely to be realized. This, in turn, contributes to reinforcing the inclusiveness effect indexed by *totally*, opening up the field for the interlocutors to perform relationship work alongside enriching the Common Ground. Because converging on subjective predicates involves not just agreeing on the truth of propositions, but also bears on personal taste, inclinations and attitudes towards the world, a word that specializes in encouraging the enrichment of a shared conversational space also carries important implications for how the interlocutors are positioning themselves vis-a-vis their own identity, emerging as a well designed tool to provide an entry point for social meaning.

### **Creating shareworthiness**

In addition to bringing about the effects discussed above, there is a further pragmatic correlate of the conventional meaning of attitudinal *totally* that contributes to impacting in the mutual relationship between the interlocutors: the intensifier serves as a tool to flag *p* as highly relevant to the interests of both the speaker and the hearer, thus emerging as a tool for the interlocutors to flag the very same proposition as especially shareworthy in light of their conversational goals.

To see how this particular effect comes about, let us consider the pragmatic implications of attitudinal *totally* in greater detail, focusing in particular on how the use of the intensifier relates to the basic principles that govern rational and cooperative communication. Following Grice (1975)'s original formulation of the Cooperative Principle, four maxims need to be obeyed by the interlocutors to ensure that conversation develops in a cooperative fashion: (i) the Maxim of Quality, according to which one should only say what she believes to be true on the basis of adequate evidence; (ii) the Maxim of Quantity, according to which one should provide as much information as is required; (iii) the Maxim of Relation (or relevance), according to which one should contribute information that is relevant in the context; (iv) and the Maxim of Manner, according to which speakers should express themselves in an orderly, unambiguous and perspicuous fashion. Leaving aside Quantity and Manner for the moment (see Section 4 for further details), let us focus on the other two. On the one hand, expressing explicit commitment to adding a proposition to the Common Ground has important implications in terms of Quality Maxim. If a speaker is determined to address the interlocutor's doubts and push for the acceptance of a proposition, and if the same speaker is being cooperative, it follows that she must have especially adequate evidence supporting the truth of her proposal. Else, the move would be highly defective, and ultimately inconsistent with the commitment expressed by the intensifier. On the other hand, the use of *totally* also highlights the pragmatic *relevance* of *p*. This, again, can be understood by looking at the interplay between the semantic contribution of *totally* and basic assumptions about rational communication. If a speaker is cooperative and is going out of her way to turn *p* into mutual knowledge, it doesn't just follow that she must believe *p* to be true; it must also be the case that she believes *p* fares exceptionally high in terms of Relevance, that is, that it fits with the topics that the interlocutors are discussing or might want to discuss. If that was not the case, again, the very move of intensifying the proposition with *totally* would be inconsistent: why would one make the effort of managing the (actual or potential) disbelief of the hearer and overtly support adding *p* to the Common Ground, if she thought that the content of *p* were only moderately relevant?

The implication that a proposition modified by *totally* must have a high degree of relevance

has a crucial consequence from an interactional standpoint. Besides bringing the interlocutors together in the joint activity of building the Common Ground, *totally* can be used to inform how the speaker and the hearer relate to the content of what they are talking about, flagging the very relevance of the proposition to their conversational goals. As such, the intensifier emerges as a tool for the participants to the speech event to acknowledge and comment over the mutual interests that underlie their exchange. In other words: by using the intensifier, the speaker does not merely express her willingness to turn *p* into mutual knowledge; she also indirectly signals that, in her view, *p* represents something in which both the speaker and the hearer are interested, and should ultimately *care* about. This contribution thus highlights another social dimension along which *totally*, by virtue of its semantic/pragmatic contribution, helps create a relationship of proximity between the interlocutors: it actively shapes their agenda, serving as a tool for the speaker to acknowledge and suggest what topics count as worthy of discussion in the exchange. As such, the use of *totally* does not bear just on the mutual alignment between the participants, but also on the participants' positioning with respect to what is being discussed and the discourse itself. More precisely, *totally* projects both the speaker and hearer as *kinds of people*<sup>2</sup> that normally like to discuss certain subjects or events, inviting an attitude of proximity and alignment on a further level than just the mutual acceptance of a proposition as true.

#### **4.3.2 Implicit contexts: a further presupposition**

Thus far, we have seen that *totally* signals an explicit move on the part of the speaker to share a proposition with the interlocutor, conveying eagerness to enrich the Common Ground of the exchange. While I argued that this pragmatic contribution fosters a stance of convergence between the interlocutors, there are additional interactional effects of *totally* that set it apart from otherwise similar Common Ground operators, and can therefore illuminate the intensifier's marked potential to index social meaning with respect to modifiers with a similar function. I focus on one property in particular, which is particularly foregrounded in contexts in which the intensifier is used out

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2. I thank Penelope Eckert for suggesting this term

of the blue and with no modal weakening the sentence: the presupposition of a shared evaluative attitude towards the content of *p*. As I argue below, this presupposition, which also emerges in connection to the semantic contribution of the intensifier, further affects how the participants relate to each other, as well as how they align with respect to what is being talked about. To illustrate how this component comes about, though, it is first necessary to zero in on a distinction that was already introduced in Chapter 2.

### **Explicit vs implicit contexts**

We have seen in Chapter 2 that attitudinal *totally* can be found in different contexts. Let us focus, in particular, on the following contrast:

(137) **John:** I can't remember if Luke got married at 25.

**Mark:** Yes, he **TOTALLY** got married at 25.

(138) a. Man in "I have drugs" shirt *totally* had drugs.

b. Iowa senator *totally* thinks you should be drug tested for child support payments.

In (137), *totally* has an explicit licenser: the previous discourse move stating uncertainty around *p*. By presenting an incongruence between the interlocutor and the speaker's view, such a context calls for the user of the intensifier as a tool to stressing commitment on the part of John, so as to facilitate the resolution of the doubt and allow the exchange to move on. For the purpose of the discussion, I rechristen these environments *explicit contexts*. By contrast, other contexts, for example (138), present no such clue: here, *totally* is used with assertions that describe objective facts and do not address doubts or questions from the interlocutors. As such, the use of *totally* is *least* called for in this particular environment, making the intensifier somewhat unexpected. I label them *implicit contexts*. In such cases, the use of the intensifier is not licensed by any element in the context.

## Presupposing evaluativity

When it comes to the interactional correlates of *totally* in these environments, the difference between explicit and implicit contexts has important consequences. While in explicit contexts the contribution of *totally* is overtly associated with an element of the discourse, implicit contexts demand more pragmatic coordination between the interlocutors, thus impacting their relationship at a deeper level. In particular, *totally* in implicit contexts involves an additional *evaluative* stance about the proposition itself, as I now turn to discuss. To see how this element comes into play, let us first consider a step by step breakdown of the interpretation of a proposition modified by *totally*.

- (139)
1. The speaker asserts “*totally p*” → The speaker expresses commitment to adding *p* to the Common Ground
  2. Adding *p* to the CG is already part of the sincerity conditions of an assertion.
  3. The presence of *totally* needs to be called for by a particular feature of the assertion; else the intensifier will be infelicitous.
  4. **Explicit licensing:** *Totally* is called for by explicit linguistic cues:
    - (a) Either the previous move suggests that the interlocutor is reluctant to add *p* to the CG (e.g., a question, a statement of doubt)
    - (b) Or a subjective modals/predicate weakens the assertion, creating uncertainty about the status of *p* in the CG
  5. **Implicit licensing:** There are no explicit cues calling for the use of *totally*.
    - (a) The content of the proposition must be extremely shareworthy (e.g.: funny, outrageous, absurd)

As discussed in Chapter 2, *totally* is systematically licensed in the presence of explicit cues, regardless of the specific content of the proposition. For the exchange below, for instance, the use of *totally* in Mark’s response is explicitly licensed by John’s statement of uncertainty.

- (140) a. **John:** I can't remember if Luke got married at 25. Doubt about *p*  
**Mark:** ✓Yes, he totally got married at 25.
- b. **Option 1:** The justification of *totally* is called for by explicit cues in the discourse
- (a) ✓Either the previous move expressing uncertainty about *p* by the interlocutor
- (b) Or subjective modals/predicate that weakened the assertion

By contrast, when the intensifier modifies a factual assertion that does not come in a situation of explicit uncertainty about the Common Ground, the status of *totally* appears to be somehow dependent on the particular content of *p*: the more outlandish the content, as in (141b), the more natural the status of *totally*.

- (141) a. # Luke *totally* got married at 25. Implicit, non-outlandish
- b. ✓Luke *totally* got married at 12. Implicit, outlandish

As argued in Chapter 2, the contrast between (141a) and (141b) is due to the fact that, in implicit contexts, *totally* is only called for with propositions whose content is either exceptional or highly shareworthy, and as such present a potentially problematic update for the Common Ground. In such cases, emphasizing commitment to turning the proposition into shared knowledge has a specific pragmatic motivation: it serves as a tool for the speaker to manage the potential resistance of the interlocutor, thus facilitating the process through which the proposition enters the Common Ground. Propositions that feature no such outlandish character, by contrast, do not present any extra hurdle for being accepted by the interlocutor. With them, as a consequence, the extra *push* provided by *totally* is much more likely to sound pragmatically superfluous, and ultimately unwarranted.

- (142) a. Luke totally got married at 12. Implicit, outlandish  
 ✓The content of the proposition must be extremely shareworthy (e.g.: funny, outrageous, absurd)
- b. Luke totally got married at 25. Implicit, non-outlandish

# The content of the proposition must be extremely shareworthy (e.g.: funny, outrageous, absurd)

Crucially, the licensing mechanism of the intensifier in implicit contexts comes with a pragmatic correlate that is not present in explicit contexts, which I refer to as the *shared evaluativity presupposition*. Because the outlandish nature of the proposition is not expressed by any linguistic cue in the context, *p*'s status as a violation of the interlocutors' background assumptions ultimately depends on the interlocutors themselves jointly evaluating it as such. In other words, the felicitousness of *totally* in implicit contexts is contingent on the fact that both the speaker and the hearer see the proposition as outlandish. If this is not the case, that is, if the interlocutor's evaluation of *p* diverges from the speaker's, the use of *totally* will be difficult to justify. This presupposition, which is grounded in *totally*'s semantic meaning as a Common Ground managing operator, has important implications for social meaning: it requires a higher degree of alignment and perspective-sharing between speaker and hearer than was the case for explicit contexts, thus explaining why such specific occurrences of *totally* are so ripe for the emergence of social meaning. In order to see this more clearly, let us consider some examples in detail.

In certain cases, as in (141b) and the example below, the shared evaluation is rather easy to reach: the events described by the utterances are clearly in conflict with presumably everyone's background assumptions about the world, thus satisfying the presupposition placed by *totally*. For instance, it is reasonably safe to assume that every rational language user believes that people with "I have drugs" shirts do *not* actually carry around drugs, licensing the use of *totally* to remark this discrepancy.

(143) Man in "I have drugs" shirt *totally* had drugs.

In other contexts, however, the presupposition of evaluativity introduced by *totally* appears to be less trivial, to the point that satisfying it places a more stringent constraint on the relationship between the interlocutors. Let us consider the following example.

(144) Iowa senator *totally* thinks you should be drug tested for child support payments.

This assertion does not contain explicit cues. As such, the presence of *totally* can only be felicitous if the proposition is construed as outlandish or exceptionally funny. Yet, the shared evaluation is not as easy to find as in the examples above. The proposal of a politician to drug test parents for child support payments is likely to trigger different reactions, a fact that will eventually bear on the felicity of *totally*. Let us imagine, first, that (144) is part of a conversation between Joe and Lucy, two deeply committed liberals whose political ideas are strongly adverse to those of the senator.

(145) **Joe to Lucy** (both liberal): Iowa senator *totally* thinks you should be drug tested for child support payments.

In this case, the shared evaluativity presupposition can be satisfied. For both interlocutors, the drug testing proposal is in conflict with their assumptions and expectations about what rational politicians should propose and think. As a consequence, the use of *totally* is felicitous. Joe uses the intensifier to push Lucy to accept *p* as true, all the while indirectly signaling his disbelief towards it; Lucy, by also seeing *p* as outlandish, can appreciate the pragmatic utility of using *totally* even when no explicit linguistic cues would have seemed to justify its use, all the while accepting Joe's assertion into the Common Ground of the conversation. Now let us imagine a conversation between Joe and Mike, who is instead a fierce conservative and has a view of the world that is highly sympathetic with the one of the Iowa senator.

(146) **Joe to Mike** (one liberal, one conservative): # Iowa senator *totally* thinks you should be drug tested for child support payments.

The use of *totally*, in this case, would be rather defective. On the one hand, Joe uses it with the same purpose with which he uses it in the previous exchange. With an interlocutor like Mike, however, the shared evaluation of *p* as outlandish or exceptionally funny would be impossible to achieve. In fact, in Mike's eyes, a proposition like *p* would be in line with the natural course of events of what politicians should and would do, thus failing to provide sufficient justification for Joe to reiterate his commitment to adding in to the Common Ground. As a result, even though

the use of *totally* would be felicitous from the perspective of the speaker, the lack of evaluative alignment with the interlocutor would still make the intensifier infelicitous.

What this example has illustrated is that, for *totally* to be recognized as felicitous in implicit contexts, both interlocutors must converge in recognizing the proposition as outlandish or funny, and thus as one that calls for the act of strengthening commitment with an intensifier. As such, the felicitous use of *totally* in implicit contexts requires an especially high degree of coordination and mutual attuning between the interlocutors in comparison to explicit contexts, which in the example above eventually bears on the political orientation of the speaker and the hearer. This pragmatic alignment, in turn, presupposes and recreates a particular bond between the interlocutors, contributing to “establishing a we” as the conversation unfolds. Crucially, yet, such a relationship of proximity can bear on a variety of other dimensions, as suggested by the example below.

(147) Wow, John *totally* asked Katie out.

While different from the previous case, the use of *totally* also presupposes a high degree of proximity between the interlocutors. In this case, in order for the preposition to be recognized as deviant enough to justify the presence of the intensifier, the speaker and the hearer need to share a substantial amount of previous, highly specific knowledge about the characters under discussion. Let us imagine, for instance, a context in which Katie has been in an official and deeply committed relationship for years, and as such will almost certainly turn down any date offers made by other people. Moreover, let us imagine that John is known for being unattractive and socially inept at dates, and thus has basically no chance to succeed at his pitch. Under such circumstances, a request for a date would not be just bound to fail; it would also sound extremely shocking to every person with knowledge of the situation, thus justifying the speaker’s move of intensifying the assertion with *totally* to manage the potential resistance of the hearer. Crucially, however, the same justification would be much harder to see for an interlocutor that fails to share as much background knowledge with the speaker. In other words, for a hearer who only knows John superficially, or does not know that Katie is already in a relationship, the presence *totally* would be difficult to make sense of, thus increasing the likelihood for the intensifier to be perceived as unwarranted. In

sum, both examples discussed above show that the felicitous use of *totally* in implicit contexts, by virtue of carrying a presupposition of shared evaluativity about the anchor proposition, requires a high degree of coordination and attuning between the interlocutors, which, depending on the case, can be articulated in terms of a different dimension (e.g., shared political ideology, common familiarity with the characters depicted in the proposition, etc.). As such, the stance of interactional proximity that distinguishes *totally* as a Common Ground operator emerges as more prominent, and ultimately more stringent, in implicit contexts than in explicit ones, providing an example of how the pragmatic correlates of an expression's semantic meaning can be intertwined with the social relationship that two interlocutors establish in a conversation.

### **4.3.3 Interim summary**

In this section, I have argued that attitudinal *totally*, by marking an intersubjective kind of commitment, is a pragmatic tool that fosters epistemic and affective proximity between the interlocutors on three dimensions: (i) the construction of the Common Ground as a joint activity; (ii) the construal of the proposition as shareworthy, and therefore highly relevant to the interlocutors' interests; (iii) a shared evaluation of the proposition as outlandish or funny, in implicit contexts only. As I argue below, the mutual pragmatic engagement between speaker and hearer indexed by *totally* crucially contributes to making this expression a highly suitable candidate to take on broader identity-level categories and social qualities about its users, part of which are indeed based on high levels of solidarity. Before moving to discussing this aspect, however, I discuss another property of attitudinal *totally* that casts light on its status as a salient social meaning carrier: its status as a linguistically marked variant.

## **4.4 Totally: a markedness continuum**

In this section, I argue that the degree of convergence indexed by *totally* in its various uses correlates with a markedness continuum, where the variants of the intensifier associated with the strongest proximity effect appear to be the most linguistically marked. In section 4.4.1, I focus

on the distinction between attitudinal and lexical *totally*. In section 4.4.2, I focus on the contrast between *totally* in explicit versus implicit contexts.

#### 4.4.1 Attitudinal *totally*: from redundancy to markedness

According to the analysis proposed in Chapter 2, the two basic variants of *totally* differ in terms of the dimension that they target: lexical *totally* quantifies over a scale provided by the lexical meaning of a bounded predicate; attitudinal *totally* quantifies over the world in the possible continuations of the assertion, signaling the speaker's commitment to adding the asserted proposition to the Common Ground. I argue that this distinction at the semantic level corresponds to a markedness asymmetry between the two uses of *totally*.

On the one hand, lexical *totally* modifies a property within the propositional content, restricting the interpretation of the modified predicate in a non-trivial fashion. Let us consider the example below:

(148) John's personality is different from Katie's personality.

(149) John's personality is *totally* different from Katie's personality.

*Totally* crucially increases the informativity of the utterance, changing the truth conditions of the proposition. While (148) is satisfied whenever the two personalities are at least slightly different from one another, or differ from one another only in one respect of their personality; (149), by contrast, is only satisfied in a scenario in which the two personalities differ by the highest possible amount, or count as different in every possible respect of evaluation of the personality. Crucially, the same happens in situations in which *totally* operates over a part/whole relationship, requiring that the whole surface of an object feature a particular property. Let us consider the following example.

(150) The shirt is spotted.

(151) The shirt is *totally* spotted.

While the first sentence is true if just the right hand side of the shirt is spotted, the presence of *totally* in the latter requires that every area of the shirt features spots. As such, the intensifier changes the propositional content, and hence the informativity of the assertion, in a nontrivial fashion. Finally, lexical *totally* affects the content of the proposition also when occurring next to closed-scale adjectives such as *full*.

(152) The glass is *full*.

(153) The glass is *totally* full.

While different formalizations of the effect of lexical *totally* in these contexts have been offered (see Chapter 2 for details), it has been suggested that also in this environment lexical *totally* changes the extension of the modified predicate, thus affecting the propositional content in a nontrivial fashion. In particular, Sassoon and Zevakhina (2012) and Toledo and Sassoon (2011) claim that a sentence like (152) would be true if the glass in question is at least as full or fuller than any of its salient counterparts, that is, than any alternative instantiation of the glass that we are willing to consider under normal circumstances; (153), by contrast, would be true if the glass is fuller than any of its counterparts, *including* those that are full to such a high degree (e.g., *full* to the very brim) that we would normally ignore them for computing the truth conditions of the positive form. Under this account, maximizers like *totally* and *completely* are operators that *widen* the comparison class of the predicate. As such, they shift upwards the standard that we use to determine whether the adjective holds true or not, strengthening the interpretation and affecting its truth conditions.<sup>3</sup>

In sum, lexical *totally* is never informationally redundant: it systematically affects the truth conditions of the modified predicate or, at the very least, the strictness of its interpretation. The same, however, does not apply to attitudinal *totally*. First, this version of the intensifier does not affect the propositional content, as shown by the fact that it operates on an independent composi-

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3. Under other accounts (Kennedy and McNally 2005; Kennedy 2007), *totally* has been claimed not to change the truth conditions of the predicate, at least in a strict sense. On this view, *full* already encodes maximality when occurring in its positive form. Yet, even under such accounts the modification by *totally* nevertheless makes the interpretation of the predicate more restrictive. By excluding those “close-enough” cases that, as part of *full* pragmatic halo (Lasersohn 1999), would count as true in the positive form, the intensifier crucially changes the extension of the predicate, thus bringing about a significant effect on the informativity of the utterance.

tional tier. Second, and most importantly, the contribution of *totally* is already part of the sincerity conditions of each assertion. Barring obviously defective contexts of communication, the assertion of a proposition is in fact by default accompanied by the commitment of adding *p* to the Common Ground. In a more general sense, all cooperative interlocutors are working towards the goal of enriching the amount of mutual knowledge, coordinating their moves to maximize the number of propositions that they mutually accept as true (Stalnaker 1978). Within this view, attitudinal *totally* appears to lexicalize a move that already underlies the speech act that it modifies. As such, the very same message, from a truth-conditional perspective, could have been conveyed by an utterance without *totally*, resulting in the minimal pair below:

- (154) A: Is your name Emily?  
a. B: Yes, it's *totally* Emily.  
b. B: Yes, it's Emily

The contrast between (154a) and (154b) exemplifies a well known case of markedness asymmetry: (154a) is an utterance that, *ceteris paribus*, could have been made in a simpler way. As such, the use of *totally* in this particular context emerges as inherently salient. More precisely, the availability of a simpler, roughly equivalent counterpart makes *totally* appear as a violation of the Manner Maxim, that is, a word that adds to the complexity of the utterance without changing its content in a substantial way. Contrasts like these have been widely discussed in the pragmatic literature. In particular, Horn (1984) claims that the violation does not make the utterance *per se* infelicitous. Rather, following the principle of the *division of pragmatic labor*, it makes the (seemingly) redundant element stand out to the listener, imbuing its presence with special pragmatic significance: assuming that the speaker is being cooperative and that the contribution of the modifier is already encoded in a plain assertion, then there must be a special reason that justifies the speaker's act of going out of her way to push a proposition in the Common Ground. The emerging picture is one in which, in light of this markedness asymmetry, attitudinal *totally* appears to be a suitable site for the emergence of "extra" meanings. The underlying contrast with an unmarked alternative provides a linguistic mechanism that, on the basis of basic pragmatic considerations, draws the listener's

attention to the intensifier and highlights its additional contributions, including those that penetrate to the social dimension (see Section 5 for further discussion).

#### 4.4.2 Implicit contexts and markedness

In this section, I propose that a similar asymmetry is nested within different uses of attitudinal *totally*, with implicit contexts emerging as marked with respect to explicit ones. I argue below that the difference in markedness between explicit and implicit contexts lies in the degree to which the use of the intensifier is called for in the context, and in the different levels of complexity of the process whereby the presence of *totally* can be justified. To see how this works, let us consider again the step-by-step breakdown of the interpretation of *totally* introduced early in the chapter.

- (155)
1. The speaker asserts “totally *p*” → The speaker expresses commitment to adding *p* to the CG
  2. Adding *p* to the CG is already part of the sincerity conditions of an assertion.
  3. The presence of *totally* needs to be justified by a particular feature of the assertion; else the intensifier will be infelicitous.
  4. **Explicit licensing:** The justification of *totally* is provided by explicit cues:
    - (a) Either the previous move suggests that the interlocutor is reluctant to add *p* to the CG
    - (b) Or a subjective modals/predicate weakens the assertion, creating collective uncertainty about the status of *p* in the CG
  5. **Implicit licensing:** There are no explicit cues justifying the use of *totally*.
    - (a) The proposition must be highly shareworthy

In explicit contexts, the reason calling for the use of *totally* is immediately disclosed by an overt cue in the surrounding linguistic material. No extra effort on the part of the listener is required to make sense of the presence of the intensifier, since the justification is already straightforwardly

provided. Implicit contexts, however, are different. In this case, *totally* modifies an assertion that presents no overt sign that calls for the need of stressing commitment. As a result, the need for using the intensifier is less expected, hence more salient to the listener, pushing the interlocutor to embark on a more complex reasoning to appreciate the rationale behind the use of the intensifier. Specifically, the use of *totally* presupposes that both interlocutors converge on evaluating the proposition as outlandish or funny, and thus in need of an extra “push” that can stave off the potential resistance to adding *p* to the Common Ground. As we have seen, this process adds a further layer of complexity: it bears on a high degree of attuning between the interlocutors, entailing an extra step of reasoning that is instead missing in explicit contexts. The emerging picture is one in which *totally* in implicit contexts presents a marked status: due to the absence of cues that call for intensification, the presence of *totally* is inherently more surprising, and hence more apt to catch the listener’s attention, than in explicit context, leading the interlocutors to embark on a coordination work that extends beyond the surrounding linguistic material. Crucially, this asymmetry closely resembles the one described for demonstratives, as discussed by Acton (2014) and Acton and Potts (2014). While demonstratives are always more marked than run-of-the mill determiners, just like attitudinal *totally* is always marked with respect to lexical *totally*, demonstratives are *especially* marked in contexts in which their presence cannot be motivated by the need to secure reference, that is to say, by the most obvious reason why a speaker would normally want to make use of this expression. An extreme case is the use of *that* with proper names, already discussed above.

(156) *That* Henry Kissinger sure knows his way around Hollywood!

In this case, securing reference cannot be the reason licensing the use of *that*: the use of a proper name alone is sufficient to pick out a unique individual that satisfies the descriptor. Just like the use of *totally* in implicit contexts cannot be justified by the urgency of addressing the interlocutor’s doubts, it is precisely the need to find a justification other than the usual one that makes demonstratives in this context especially marked. To achieve this goal, the hearer needs to accommodate the perspective-alignment presupposition, shifting the locus of perspective alignment from

the physical to the affective space, and thus boosting the social potential of these expressions.

## 4.5 Comparison with similar expressions

### 4.5.1 Similar expressions, different social meaning

At this point of the discussion, it becomes possible to see how the pragmatic effects of *totally*, and their tight connection to its basic conventional meaning as a Common Ground managing operator, set this expression apart from apparently similar ones, which nevertheless lack the same constellation of semantic and pragmatic properties. I discuss two types of operators, each of which features a different distribution from the one of *totally*, and as such does not appear to be able to have the same array of pragmatic correlations that impact the speaker-hearer relationship in the way in which the intensifier does.

#### Epistemic markers and Verum Focus

As discussed in section 4.3.2, *totally* can be used in *implicit contexts*. In these cases, I have argued that the intensifier presupposes a joint evaluation of the anchor proposition as worthy of disbelief, fostering a relation of proximity between the interlocutors. The ability to occur in these environments, which I have shown to be derived from *totally*'s nature as a Common Ground managing operator in the analysis in Chapter 2, distinguishes the intensifier from run-of-the-mill markers of epistemic confidence such as *definitely*, which are often used as paraphrases of attitudinal *totally* due to their superficially similar effect. More precisely, by expressing the speaker's private certainty towards the truth of the proposition, *definitely* does not target a shared space in the conversation. As such, *definitely* lacks the inherently relational character of *totally*, emerging as a less consequential expression for the interactional alignment of the participants and, as such, a less ripe carrier of social meaning. The crucial semantic difference between these two operators is shown by two facts. First, as already mentioned above, *definitely* cannot be used to solve doubts in situations in which expressing private confidence would be bizarre, such as expressing confidence

about one's own proper name. *Totally*, by contrast, is perfectly acceptable in an exchange of this kind.

(157) **Josh:** Hi, are you Emily?

**Emily:** # I'm DEFINITELY Emily

**Emily** ✓ I'm TOTALLY Emily

Second, *definitely* lacks the ability to introduce the shared evaluation about *p* that licenses *totally* in implicit contexts, emerging as strongly deviant in these environments. Only with an explicit question can *definitely* be licensed in this environment.

(158) # Man in "I have drugs" *definitely* had drugs.

(159) A: Did the man in "I have drugs" shirt have drugs?

B: ✓ Yes, he *definitely* had drugs.

The ability to be licensed in implicit contexts is also what distinguishes *totally* from other Common Ground operators like Verum Focus. As discussed in Chapter 2, the analysis of this devices is still under debate. Under certain accounts, in particular, they have indeed been argued to target a shared space in the conversation (Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miró 2011, Han and Romero 2004). As such, they could in principle have similar pragmatic implications to the ones of *totally* and, thus, similar potential to index social meaning. Note, however, that not even their contribution completely overlaps with the one of the intensifier. In particular, Verum operators' availability is always linked to the presence of an explicit cue, suggesting that these devices, even under an analysis in which they are treated as Common Ground operators, do not have *totally*'s ability to be licensed via a shared evaluation of the proposition.

(160) ?# Man in "I have drugs" shirt did have drugs.

(161) A: Did the man in "I have drugs" shirt have drugs?

B: Yes, he did have drugs.

In conclusion, both the felicity of confidence markers and Verum Focus operators are contingent on the presence of explicit cues in the surrounding linguistic context. Contrary to *totally*, thus, both these devices lack the ability to be licensed through a shared evaluation of the interlocutors towards the content of the proposition. The emerging picture is one in which, by virtue of a subtle, yet important difference in its semantic properties, *totally* appears to be a much more impactful type of expression to inform the relationship between the interlocutors than either of these operators, thus presenting more conducive conditions for the emergence of social meanings.

### **Actually**

While neither *definitely* nor Verum Operators are licensed in implicit contexts, it is possible to observe that, in this specific environment, other expressions can make a contribution superficially similar to the one of *totally*. An example is *actually*:

(162) Man in "I have drugs" shirt *actually* had drugs.

Contrary to *totally*, *actually* does not appear to index a particularly prominent constellation of social meanings. At the same time, similar to *totally*, *actually* does suggest an evaluative construal of *p* as outlandish and worthy of disbelief. As such, at least at first sight, this adverb could share with *totally* the potential to foster interactional proximity between the interlocutors and become a ripe linguistic environment for the emergence of social meanings, raising a potential puzzle for what I have argued thus far. Yet, upon closer inspection, it can be noted that the semantic contribution of *actually* is quite distinct from the one of the intensifier. More specifically, *actually* has been argued (Williamson 2009) to be a 'rigidifying' operator, that is, an expression whose function is to set the world of evaluation of a proposition to the world of utterance, or, more generally, to the context of utterance. In a parallel way to what we have seen for *totally*, the contribution of *actually* with sentences in the past indicative would be normally redundant (in (163a)): in such cases the parameter of evaluation is by default set to the current world. For *actually* to be felicitous, then, we need a compelling pragmatic reason, such as the need to contradict what the interlocutor said in a previous move (in (163b)).

(163) a. # Luke *actually* got married at 24.

b. **John:** Luke got married at 25.

**Mark:** ✓No, *actually*, he got married at 24.

By the same token, propositions that run against the background assumptions of the interlocutors can also license the use of *actually*, as shown above. Here, the modifier can be deployed by the speaker to signal to the interlocutor that there is a discrepancy between the fact that *p* is true and the fact that *p* is reasonably expected *not* to be true. Yet, while the final effect is a shared construal of the proposition as outlandish similar to the one observed for *totally*, the evaluative charge of *actually* does not come about through an invitation to the hearer to accept the proposition as part of the Common Ground, but through a completely different type of semantic meaning, which, by not being directly linked to the co-construction of the Common Ground, does not have the same intersubjective charge that *totally* has. I argue that this difference is indeed crucial to explaining why *actually*, despite a superficially similar pragmatic effect to the one of *totally* in certain contexts, does not emerge as a rich social meaning carrier: it simply lacks the same ability to serve as a tool to foster inclusiveness and proximity at the interactional level, thus failing to impact the speaker-hearer relationship in a similar fashion to how *totally* does. This is confirmed, in particular, by the fact that *actually* cannot be used to achieve the similar proximity-inducing effects of *totally* in responsive contexts. For instance, it cannot mark agreement in responses to assertions containing subjective predicates, neither as a fragment answer, nor in a full proposition. Quite the contrary, the use of *actually* in responses is maximally felicitous in the presence of some discrepancy between the speaker and the hearer's position, thus requiring a conflicting relationship between the two interlocutors. This highlights the fact that the different sociolinguistic potential that we observe for *totally* and *actually* corresponds to important semantic and pragmatic differences between these two modifiers.

(164) a. **John:** The House of Cards finale was great.

**Mark:** #*Actually!*/# Yes, it was *actually* great (unless M. didn't expect it).

**Mark:** ✓*Totally!*/✓ Yes, it was *totally* great

b. **John:** The House of Cards finale was great.

**Mark:** ✓No, I think it was *actually* terrible.

#### 4.5.2 Demonstratives, intensifiers and tag questions: a natural socio-semantic class?

Conversely, it is possible to observe that other expressions, despite having a conventional meaning that is at first sight completely different from *totally*'s, carry parallel pragmatic effects for the relationship between the interlocutors, likewise emerging as suitable loci for the emergence of social meaning. While very few cases of interaction between social and semantic meaning have been analyzed in detail, the instances discussed thus far share a strikingly consistent correspondence between interactional effects and the indexed social meaning. This indicates that expressions whose semantic meaning correlates with similar interactional effects might indeed form a “natural class” in terms of their social indexicality, providing further evidence that the principles underlying the mapping discussed above does not merely apply to the single case of *totally*. I would like to mention two cases in particular, both of which have already been discussed at length at the beginning of this chapter.

One is the example of demonstratives analyzed by Acton and Potts (2014). As can be recalled, demonstratives foster perspective-sharing between the speaker and the hearer by virtue of their presuppositional content, and in particular through the presumption that, to interpret this expression successfully, the hearer must be able to access the speaker's spatial/affective perspective with respect to the referent of the embedded noun phrase. The interactional proximity thus fostered by these expressions lies at the basis of the social effects that they index. Although the authors do not test the perception of specific identity categories in association with the use of demonstratives, it is possible to note a striking similarity between the solidarity indexed by the use of *this* and *that* and the positive qualities associated with *totally*, and in particular the high degree of friendliness and outgoingness that listeners ascribe to the users of the intensifiers.

The other example is represented by the use of tag questions, also mentioned in the earlier part of the chapter. As discussed in section 3, a variety of studies have described the rich interactional

implications of these expressions, linking them to their suitability to become salient identity markers within a given community. Moore and Podesva (2009) have explored the role of tag questions as “turn facilitators” to highlight the discourse participants’ joint engagement with co-constructing the conversational exchange and reaching agreement, showing that this pragmatic function is constitutive of the stylistic features that differentiate a specific group of language users in a school. Denis et al. (2016) have analyzed the use of the *eh?* and *right?* tags in Canadian English, arguing that these linguistic devices serve as a tool for confirming that the listener would have produced the same speech act that the speaker just performed. Crucially, the ensuing effect of bringing the interlocutors “on the same page” with respect to the discourse moves of the conversation correlates with a specific set of broader social meaning features associated with the users of tags, including “youth”, “inclusiveness”, “informality” “female”, even though the authors do not discuss such traits in detail.

The emerging picture is one in which a range of different expressions, through their particular semantic meaning, contribute to bringing about a relation of proximity and alignment between the interlocutors. This effect is obtained through different routes, ranging from the presupposition of shared perspective of demonstratives, to the discursive alignment on the type of chosen speech act for Canadian tags, to the Common Ground managing properties of *totally*. Yet, despite these differences, for all these cases it is possible to observe a connection between how the semantic content contributes to “create a we” between the interlocutors and the richness of these expressions as carriers of relatively similar identity-based social meanings. While the exploration of the socio-semantics interface is still in an incipient stage, the cases analyzed so far confirm that the connection between these dimensions is not only non-random, but also applies across different linguistic varieties and speech communities.

## 4.6 Taking stock: the semantic/pragmatic grounding of *totally*'s social meaning

In this section I come back to the original question that informed this chapter. How can the semantic/pragmatic properties of *totally* explain the observation that attitudinal *totally* is a salient marker of speaker qualities, and in particular of high solidarity and low status attributes? I discuss this issue by focusing on two subquestions:

- How do these properties speak to *totally*'s suitability to serve as *a* social meaning carrier?
- How do these properties speak to *those* particular social qualities, as opposed to others?

### 4.6.1 Why *a* social meaning?

The discussion until this point has unveiled two distinctive features of attitudinal *totally*, each of which resonates with the general principles that have been invoked to govern the relationship between social meaning and linguistic forms: *totally*'s nature as an operator that foregrounds speaker-hearer proximity and inclusiveness on a variety of dimensions; and *totally*'s status as a linguistically marked expression. On a general level, I argue that these properties illustrate why attitudinal *totally* is a better candidate to become a carrier of social meaning than lexical *totally*; on a more specific level, they also explain why *totally* in implicit contexts is an even more productive site for conveying speaker qualities.

#### **Attitudinal vs lexical *totally***

By virtue of featuring the two properties discussed above, attitudinal *totally* fits the profile that we would normally expect for a suitable social meaning carrier. First, it comes with a complex pattern of indirect indexicality, whereby it impacts the stance-taking activity of the interlocutors on multiple levels. If, as seen in section 2, the attachment of identity-based qualities to linguistic forms is mediated through the interactional implications that such forms have when deployed in communication, it follows that expressions that are highly performative from this point of view are

more likely candidates to become social meaning indices than expressions that have bland or null interactional implications. It is now possible to see more clearly in what sense lexical *totally*, as well as the other intensifiers tested in Experiment 1, is a relatively poor carrier of social meaning. By locally composing with the predicate that it modifies, it serves a chiefly descriptive function, indexing no particular stance on how the participants are aligning themselves with respect to one another, or with respect to the content of the exchange.

Second, attitudinal *totally* is a suitable candidate to convey social meaning in virtue of its status as a marked variant. By pragmatically evoking a set of simpler, semantically equivalent alternative utterances that could have been used in its substitution, this use of the intensifier is naturally equipped to strike the listener's attention as a noticeable linguistic choice. As such, on a par with what has been observed for other socially meaningful expressions, it is associated with a language-internal mechanism that makes it apt to be assigned "extra" meanings besides its regular semantic/pragmatic ones, including those pertaining to the social dimension. On the other hand, as a consequence of its semantics, lexical *totally* does not sufficiently stand out in terms of markedness. It operates within the propositional content of the utterance, failing to invoke the contrast with a simpler alternative. As such, this version of *totally* does not have the inherent salience that marked expressions carry, failing to draw the listener's attention in the way in which its attitudinal counterpart does.

We have seen that the correlation between markedness and the depth of the proximity effects is also found within attitudinal *totally*, with implicit contexts emerging as the more marked variant, as well as the one that more strongly fosters proximity between the interlocutors. In light of the previous discussion, it now becomes possible to understand why, as emerged from Experiment 2, attitudinal *totally* in implicit contexts appears to be an even richer site for social meaning than its counterpart in explicit contexts. On the one hand, the added evaluative component of implicit contexts enhances the degree of speaker-hearer proximity fostered and presupposed by the use of the intensifier. On the other hand, the additional linguistic complexity required to interpret *totally* in implicit contexts makes this use inherently more salient to the listener, providing a mechanism

whereby the social meaning of *totally* can stand out.

#### 4.6.2 Why *that* social meaning?

I have shown that attitudinal *totally*, especially when occurring in implicit contexts, features the linguistic properties that are normally found in highly socially meaningful expressions, thus emerging as a rich marker of social identity. Yet, we are still left with a question. While we have an understanding of why *totally* becomes associated with *some* social meaning, are we also in the position of explaining why it is associated with *that* particular social meaning just by looking at its semantic and pragmatic profile? In other words, why does it emerge as an index of high solidarity and low status, as opposed to other evaluations? Is there anything in the semantic and pragmatic content, for instance, that can illuminate why *totally* indexes friendliness and immaturity, and not the opposite? Providing a complete answer solely on the basis of the linguistic properties appears to be an ambitious task. On the one hand, it is well known that the outcome of any enregisterment process is heavily driven by extra-linguistic ideological and historical factors. As Agha (2007) suggests, the social recognition of linguistic features as indexes of speaker qualities is the result of a continuous process of circulation, renegotiation and reanalysis, which cannot be pre-determined by the sheer linguistic features of these forms. On the other hand, a crucial element to cast light on the indexicality of *totally*, and in particular on its association with younger speakers, lies in *totally*'s status as a recent innovation, which therefore tends to be associated with the social characteristics of the speakers that first introduced it in the grammar and are now consistently using it. Yet, the question remains as to whether the pragmatic features discussed above, besides rendering certain expressions a more or less suitable site for the emergence of social meaning, can also have any effects on the particular type of indexical content that becomes associated with them. In the remainder of this section, I argue that the interpersonal convergence invited at the semantic/pragmatic level serves as a basis for fostering in-groupness among the interlocutors, thus resulting in the association of the users of *totally* with social qualities that highlight inclusiveness and proximity. This explains the systematic association between *totally* and Solidarity-based attributes. As far as the association

with other attributes is concerned (Status, Age, Gender), I suggest that these qualities are essentially driven by *totally*'s status as a linguistic innovation, rather than by its semantic/pragmatic features per se.

### **Solidarity attributes: a direct connection**

As discussed in Chapter 3, Solidarity attributes Friendly, Cool, Outgoing and Excitable are those that appear to be tracking variations in pragmatic convergence more deeply, as they turn out to be significantly affected by both the distinction between attitudinal and lexical *totally* and the distinction between implicit and explicit contexts in which attitudinal *totally* is used. In light of the close co-variation between the depth of the interactional effects and the perception of the Solidarity attributes, it thus seems reasonable to hypothesize a direct connection between the type of pragmatic work that the intensifier indexes when deployed in communication and the likeability of *totally*'s users emerging from the high value in Solidarity. Under this view, the commitment to involving the interlocutor in the construction of the Common Ground and the invitation to share a common evaluative and affective stance towards the proposition not only bring the interlocutors closer to one another in the context of the interaction; they also percolate up to the more durable categories of social identity, contributing to indexing users of *totally* as kind of persons that are likewise committed to fostering inclusion and proximity at the social level. The resulting association with qualities like friendliness and outgoingness is thus grounded in the pragmatic activity of “creating a we” that *totally* presupposes and fosters by virtue of its semantic and pragmatic features.

Positing a direct connection between pragmatic convergence and the indexing of solidarity qualities likewise helps us understand the fact that users of attitudinal *totally* in implicit contexts are perceived as significantly higher along these attributes than users of *totally* in explicit contexts. The additional effects of shared evaluativity and shareworthiness labeling, distinctive of *totally* in implicit contexts, can be predicted to deeply intersect with *totally*'s suitability to index social identity. If, following Eckert (2008), social meaning “does not refer so much to identity groups as it does to the stances and characteristics that constitute them”, then a word that explicitly labels

the shareworthiness of a fact in light of the participants' interests emerges as a powerful linguistic resource to foreground the stances and attitudes that make the interlocutors part of a particular social group as opposed to another. As such, the use of *totally* acquires a crucial ideological significance, which extends well beyond the boundaries of the interaction and involves the more durable components of the social identity of the interlocutors. It serves as a tool that the participants can use to acknowledge, negotiate and redefine their broader interests, tastes and inclinations, explicitly tagging what matters to them and *why* it matters.

### **Status and Age: an indirect connection**

Contrary to Solidarity attributes, the prominence of Age and Status attributes does not increase proportionally with the degree of pragmatic convergence indexed by *totally*, but is instead more heavily affected by the distinction between attitudinal and lexical uses. I suggest that their connection to the intensifier is less grounded in the pragmatic effects per se than it is in the circulating ideological characterization of its users. For example, if types of language users whose affective disposition highlights proximity and interpersonal closeness are also ideologically associated with other salient qualities of attributes, then these traits will also be recruited as part of the social meaning of *totally*, despite not being directly grounded in its semantic/pragmatic properties. I suggest that this is precisely the case for the social dimensions pertaining to Age and Status. This would explain why these attributes are more heavily affected by the attitudinal vs lexical distinction than they are by the distinction between implicit and explicit contexts. Specifically, by virtue of being a recent innovation and presenting substantial empirical difference from lexical *totally*, attitudinal *totally* comes to be easily recognized as a salient marker of the specific categories of people who use it, thus conveying attributes and traits that are stereotypically associated with such people. Once the listener recognizes *totally* as attitudinal, in other words, they will thus associate it with these attributes, regardless of whether the intensifier comes in an explicit or implicit context. In this perspective, the status of *totally* as an expression.

## 4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I showed that attitudinal *totally* features two ingredients that have been argued to determine an expression's suitability to become a carrier of social meaning: (i) a semantic content that affects the interactional relationship between the interlocutors; (ii) a linguistic mechanism that makes it stand out in comparison to an alternative, quasi-equivalent expression that could have occurred in its place. By grounding each of these two factors in the semantic/pragmatic properties of the intensifier, I have outlined a principled connection between *totally*'s semantic and social meaning, framing it in the broader principles that govern the relationship between social indexicality and linguistic forms across different types of variation.

# Chapter 5

## *-issimo*: a second case study

### 5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, I have unveiled the empirical association between *totally*'s semantic and social meaning, discussing the linguistic forces driving the link between these two dimensions. In the current chapter, I test whether the same principles discussed for *totally* allows us to make successful predictions for other instances of intensification. As a second case study, I have opted to focus on the Italian suffix *-issimo*, a morpheme that is similar enough to *totally* to justify a direct comparison, and yet different enough to serve as a genuine testing ground to extend the empirical basis of the study. Similar to *totally*, the suffix features a broad distribution, as it can combine with gradable and non-gradable predicates alike. Contrary to *totally*, however, *-issimo* always modifies properties *within* the propositional content, rather than attitudes of the speaker *towards* the propositional content, providing a semantic contribution that substantially differs from the one proposed for *totally*. The chapter is divided as follows. In section 5.2, I provide an overview of the distribution of *-issimo*, focusing on three types of environments in which it is found: gradable predicates; imprecision-prone predicates; and nouns. In section 5.3, I outline a proposal to capture the semantics of the suffix across the different environments in which it is found. In section 5.4, I rely on the analysis of Chapter 4 to make a prediction concerning the social meaning of *-issimo*, hypothesizing that, when combining with a noun, the suffix should index a richer social meaning

than when combining with gradable adjectives. In section 5.5 I report on a perception experiment that provides support to the hypothesis. In section 5, I frame the results obtained for *-issimo* within the broader picture of intensifiers, focusing on the comparison with *totally*. Section 6 concludes.

## 5.2 The distribution of *-issimo*

In Italian, the suffix *-issimo* can be added to a variety of expressions to achieve an intensification effect, including both gradable and non gradable predicates. In this section, I provide an overview of the distribution of the suffix, contrasting it with the less flexible degree adverb *molto* ( $\approx$  English *very*).

### 5.2.1 Gradable predicates

As is the case for all intensifiers, gradable predicates represent a highly productive environment for *-issimo*. In cases like (165), the result of applying the modifier results in a reading that can be characterized as ‘boosting’, whereby the subject must hold the relevant property to a high degree.

- (165) *La casa è bell-issima.*  
 The house is beautiful-ISSIMO  
 ‘The house is extremely beautiful.’

When it composes with gradable predicates, note that *-issimo* is licensed regardless of whether the adjective has a *relative* standard or an *absolute* standard (Kennedy and McNally 2005), as shown in (166).

- (166) a. *La torre è alt-issima*  
 The tower is tall-ISSIMO  
 ‘The tower is very/extremely tall’ RELATIVE STANDARD
- b. *Il serbatoio è pien-issimo*  
 The tank is full-ISSIMO  
 ‘The tank is completely/perfectly full’ MAXIMUM STANDARD
- c. *Il panno è sporch-issimo*  
 The towel is dirty-ISSIMO

‘The towel is very/extremely dirty’

MINIMUM STANDARD

This promiscuous distribution contrasts with the behavior of most degree modifiers, which have been claimed to be only acceptable with gradable predicates of only one of these two types (in (167), see Rotstein and Winter 2004; Kennedy and McNally 2005 for further discussion).

- (167) a. The bottle is {*very*/?*completely*} tall.  
b. The bottle is {*completely*/?*very*} closed.

The Italian modifier *molto*, for instance, also has a distribution that is sensitive to the type of standard encoded by the adjective: it combines freely with relative-standard predicates, but is somewhat degraded with maximum-standard predicates, as shown in (168).<sup>1</sup>

- (168) a. *La casa è molto bella.*  
the house is MOLTO beautiful  
‘The house is very beautiful.’  
b. ??*Lo straccio è molto asciutto.*  
the towel is MOLTO dry

Besides being productive with gradable predicates of different sorts, *-issimo* can also modify non-gradable predicates. I now turn to discuss these cases, focusing on two categories: imprecision-prone predicates and nouns.

## 5.2.2 Imprecision-prone predicates

One class of expressions that can be productively modified by *-issimo* is represented by *imprecision-prone* predicates. These predicates, contrary to the adjectives discussed above, have clearcut meanings, which present little room for gradience. What distinguishes them, however, is that they are often interpreted *imprecisely*: they are normally taken to be true even in the presence of some deviance from their truth conditions. The result of applying the suffix, in these contexts, is to reduce such a margin of imprecision, forcing a stricter interpretation of the predicate, and thus bringing

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1. *Molto*, instead, is fine with minimum standard predicates. While this does not immediately follow from Kennedy and McNally’s theory of degree modifiers, the patterns of combination with minimum-standard adjectives are somewhat controversial. See the previous footnote on *very*, for instance.

about a strengthening effect that is commonly known as *slack regulation* (Lasersohn 1999, see Chapter 2 for further discussion). I illustrate three examples in which *-issimo* contributes a similar effect. Note that in all these cases the presence of *molto* is not acceptable, providing further evidence that this modifier, contrary to *-issimo*, can only be licensed in the presence of a gradable predicate.

The first example is *subito*, ‘immediately’. Intuitively, although *subito*’s truth conditions require that the relevant event takes place within a time minimally following the utterance, a variable time lag between the two times is normally tolerated. For instance, a government that is formed within a week from the time of the utterance can be still reasonably count as *subito*. The presence of *-issimo*, however, forces as close as possible an interpretation to the literal truth conditions, dramatically reducing the time difference that can be tolerated. An expression that does a similar job in English in this context is *right now*.

- (169) a. *Serve un governo {subit-issimo/\*molto subito}.*  
 is.needed a government immediately {-ISSIMO/very \*immediately}  
 ‘We need a government right now.’
- b. ?? *Serve un governo molto subito.*  
 is.needed a government MOLTO immediately

The second example can be seen with ordinals like *primo* and *ultimo* (respectively: ‘first’ and ‘last’) *-issimo* likewise forces a stricter, more literal interpretation of the element it applies to (170). For example, if someone is the *primissimo* to do something, it means that he is *really* the first one, and not more loosely among the first ones, or the first to the exclusion of a few ignorable exceptions. English counterparts of this usage are *very first* and *very last*.<sup>2</sup>

- (170) a. *Per la {prim-issima / \*molto prima} volta, ho vinto una scommessa.*  
 For the first-ISSIMO / MOLTO first time, I.have won a bet.  
 ‘For the very first time I won a bet’
- b. *Voglio chiederti l’ {ultim-issima / \*molto ultima} cosa.*  
 I.want to.ask.you the last-ISSIMO / MOLTO last thing

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2. It is interesting to observe that, while *very* is normally restricted to gradable predicates in English, it can have a slack regulation effect with ordinals, although it is not productive with quantifiers like *any* and adverbs like *immediately*.

‘I want to ask you the very last thing, then you are off the hook’

Finally, *-issimo* can modify universal quantifiers like *nessuno* ‘any’ and *tutti* ‘all’ in (171). On a par with the predicates above, such expressions do not qualify as gradable. Yet, they also lend themselves to being interpreted imprecisely: for example, one can normally use *any* in (171) if some ignorable winning probability exists, whether because it is remarkably low (e.g., .01%), or because it entails a scenario that we are not considering in the pragmatic context (e.g., cheating). Here, *-issimo* eliminates room for these exceptions, providing a contribution comparable to the one afforded by expressions like *at all* with *any* and *absolutely* with *all* (cf. Krifka 1995; Lasnik 1999). Note that, once more, degree modifiers like *molto* are not licensed with these expressions.

(171) *Non c’è* {*nessun-issima/\*molto nessuna*} *possibilità di vincere.*  
Not there.is {any-**issima**/MOLTO any} chance of winning  
‘There is no chance at all to win the game.’

(172) {*Tutt-issimi/\*molto tutti*} *gli studenti sono venuti alla festa.*  
{All-**issimi**/MOLTO all} students have come to.the party.  
All the students came to the party.

In sum, these examples show that *-issimo* is able to operate in the presence of certain non gradable predicates, bringing about a strengthening effect that is qualitatively different from boosting the degree to which a property applies. I now turn to discuss the use of the suffix with nominal constructions, another environment that does not provide a scale.

### 5.2.3 Nouns

*-issimo* is also found with nouns. Given the subtleties of the effect of *-issimo* in this environment and the relevance that nominal uses will turn out to have for the emergence of social meaning, I divide the discussion in three parts. First, I introduce the debate on the encoding of scales in the nominal domain (Section 5.2.3); second, I outline the distribution of *-issimo* with nouns (Section 5.2.3); third, I discuss the connection between the effects of *-issimo* and different models of typicality effects discussed in the psychology literature (Section 5.2.3).

## Nouns, scales and vagueness

The representation of gradability and scalarity in the nominal domain has long been debated. In particular, a crucial observation for the upcoming discussion is that not all nouns feature a discrete distinction between individuals that instantiate that property and individuals that do not. Specifically, Kamp and Partee (1995) suggest a distinction between *sharp* nouns (e.g., *bird*), which present a clearcut boundary between members and non-members, and *vague* nouns (e.g., *chair*), which feature gradient boundaries and give rise to borderline cases that might or might not be considered to be part of the extension.<sup>3</sup> A distinction similar in spirit, yet more radical in terms of its linguistic implications, has been suggested in recent work in formal semantics (Morzycki 2009, 2011b; de Vries 2015), which proposed that certain nouns (e.g., *idiot*, *sports fan*) lexicalize scales as part of their denotation, and should thus be analyzed as *bona fide* gradable expressions. This claim has however been disputed by different authors (see in particular Sassoon 2013; Constantinescu 2011), who instead suggested that gradability and scales are associated with nouns only at the cognitive level, but not at the linguistic one. While casting light on whether, and how, gradience is linguistically represented in nominal constructions represents a much needed step towards a better understanding of gradability across categories, I will not have much to say about it here. For the purpose of the present work, indeed, the crucial observation is that the licensing of *-issimo* appears to cut across the distinction between vague and sharp nouns, as well as the one between (putatively) gradable and non gradable ones. Across these environments, the intensifier obtains the effect of singling out an individual that quintessentially instantiates the category associated with the noun, with possible paraphrases ranging from *a quintessential N*, which I use below, to modifiers like *ultimate* or “N of N” constructions.<sup>4</sup> Yet, while *-issimo* promiscuously applies across different

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3. This distinction exclusively applies to category membership, and is essentially orthogonal to the observation that members of the same category can feature different degrees of typicality (Rosch 1975. For further discussion see Osherson and Smith 1981; Kamp and Partee 1995 and the end of this section.)

4. While nominal occurrences of the suffix had already been noticed in the previous literature, they have not received very much attention compared to the adjectival ones, partly because these uses are very recent (Gaeta 2003), partly because they are less productive and feature fluctuating acceptability across speakers. This could very well be due to the fact that the nominal use of *-issimo* represents a form of change in progress from an older stage of Italian where it only modified adjectives and adverbs (Beltrama 2014) and, as such, has not completed its grammaticalization

types of nouns, it is nonetheless important to observe that its effects significantly differ depending on whether the modified noun is associated with vague or sharp category boundaries.

### The distribution

Let us first consider (173) below.

- (173) *Michael Jordan è un campion-issimo.*  
Michael Jordan is a champion-ISSIMO  
'Michael Jordan is a quintessential champion.'

A noun like *campione* qualifies as vague, as shown by the presence of borderline cases. For example, it is perfectly plausible to think of someone who *might* or *might not* be considered to be a champion: perhaps a player who is good enough (or has won enough) to be in the conversation for being considered a champion, but is not good enough to undisputably make the cut. A crucial observation is that the presence of *-issimo* with such nouns has significant repercussions for category membership. First, by singling out an individual that represents a quintessential instantiation of the category, the suffix excludes borderline cases, suggesting that Michael Jordan unquestionably falls within the extension of the category. Second, the individual picked out by the noun modified by *-issimo* is taken to instantiate the property to a greater extent than an individual that is just a regular member of the category. This is shown by the fact that the use of *-issimo* to intensify a noun N entails that the individual at stake has more N-ness than an individual that merely qualifies as N.

- (174) a. *Michael Jordan è un campion-issimo. Derrick Rose è solo un campione.*  
Michael Jordan is a champion-ISSIMO. Derrick Rose is only a champion.  
'Michael Jordan is a quintessential champion. Derrick Rose is just a champion'
- b. *→Michael Jordan è più un campione di Derrick Rose.*  
Michael Jordan is more a champion than Derrick Rose.  
'Michael Jordan is more of a champion than Derrick Rose.'

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trajectory yet. In addition, we also observe some variability in judgments from native speakers, as we have witnessed when we presented this data to various audiences. Some speakers prefer other strategies for nominal intensification, e.g. the prefix *super* or the suffix *-one*. I thank Giorgio Magri for pointing out this.

Crucially, however, the suffix is also found with *sharp* nouns, which do not give rise to borderline cases. Two relevant examples are *partita* in (175a) and *lampuga* in (175b) below.

- (175) a. *Lakers-Celtics è una partita-issima.*  
 Lakers-Celtics is a game-ISSIMO  
 ‘Lakers-Celtics is a quintessential instance of a game’
- b. *Lampugh-issima in Alto Adriatico.*  
 Lampugh--ISSIMO in northern Adriatic Sea  
 ‘Quintessential exemplar of dorado-fish caught in northern Adriatic Sea’

In both cases, the effect of *-issimo* is very similar to the one observed for nouns like *campione*. The suffix likewise suggests that the referent of the noun embodies a perfect, exceptionally good instantiation of the category; one that makes the individual stand out as a more representative category member than individuals that instantiate the same property.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the effect of *-issimo* presents an important empirical difference with respect to cases like *campione*. In this case, *-issimo* does not seem to affect the degree of category membership.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the

5. Similar examples of nominal intensification include *filmissimo* (‘movie-issimo’), *tramontissimo* (‘sunset-issimo’), *professorissimo* (‘professor-issimo’). These examples have been collected by browsing Facebook on March 5, 2016.

6. Note that, at least for these four nouns, the distinction between vague and sharp nouns seems to pattern along the lines of the distinction between (putatively) gradable and non-gradable ones. One test concerns the effect of modification with size adjectives like *big* (Morzycki 2009). For some nouns – e.g. *idiot* – *big* boosts the degree of a property that is inherent to the meaning of the noun; for other nouns – e.g., *game* – *big* can only license a size reading.

- (1) a. He’s a **big** champion = a champion to a high degree  
 b. \*It’s a **big** game = a game to a high degree

Another diagnostic concerns combinability with *such a* (Constantinescu 2011). The same nouns for which *big* yielded an intensifying reading can be intensified by this modifier. For other nouns, the modifier can only give rise to a deictic kind use, but not to an intensifying one.

- (2) a. He’s a **such an** champion! = a champion to a high degree  
 b. \*It’s **such a** game! ≠ a game to a high degree  
 c. I’d love to play in such a game as you’re playing in right now. deictic

A third environment in which the difference between these two classes of nouns emerges is represented by Wh-exclamatives and modifiers like *quite a* (Constantinescu 2011; Birner and Kaplan 2002). For gradable nouns, these constructions, similarly to *big*, convey information on the degree to which the property of the noun applies to the referent. For nouns like *game* these constructions also suggest that the referent of the noun itself possesses a quality to a very high degree. Yet, this quality is *external* to the referent. It does not contribute to determining the extent to which the referent instantiates the noun, but simply adds a further, contextually implicit specification about the referent that must be inferred on the part of the listener.

quintessential nature of the individual is, as it were, severed from the extent to which the individual is a member of the category: a *lampughissima*, thus, is not “more of a dorado-fish” than a regular *lampuga*; and neither is *partitissima* “more of a game” than a regular game. Rather, both a *lampuga* and a *partita* are members of the category to the same extent of their unmodified counterpart, with the individual picked out by intensified form emerging as a better instantiation according to criteria other than those determining membership.

- (176) a. *Il pesce A è una lampuga. Il pesce B è una lampugh-issima.*  
 The Fish A is a dorado.fish. The Fish B is a dorado.fish-ISSIMO.  
 ‘Fish A is a dorado fish. Fish A is a quintessential dorado fish.’
- b. *→Il pesce A è più una lampuga del pesce B.*  
 The Fish A is more a dorado.fish than the Fish B.  
 ‘Fish A is more of a dorado fish than Fish B.’

Note, however, that in special contexts that introduce borderline cases for these nouns as well, *-issimo* returns to show an effect on category membership, paralleling the contribution described for nouns like *champion*. To see this, let us imagine a world in which dorado fish can breed with other species, giving rise to hybrid individuals that, while sharing important features with the category of *lampuga*, are not unquestionable members of it. Under this particular circumstance, the use of *-issimo* conveys that the individual undeniably falls within the extension of the predicate, in contrast to others that might or might not make the cut. As a result, if we contrast Fish A, a 3/4 hybrid of dorado fish, with Fish B, a pure exemplar of dorado fish, the use of *-issimo* does give rise to the inference that a *lampughissima* is “more of a dorado fish” than a regular *lampuga*, which we did not get under the normal reading of *lampuga* as a sharp noun.

- (177) a. *Il pesce A è una lampuga. Il pesce B è una lampugh-issima.*  
 The Fish A is a dorado.fish. The Fish B is a dorado.fish-ISSIMO.  
 ‘Fish A is a dorado fish. Fish A is a clear case of dorado fish.’

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- (3) a. He’s a **quite a** champion!/What a **champion** he is! = a champion to a high degree  
 b. It’s **quite a** game!/What a **game** this is! = a very fun, long, awaited,... game

While these data substantiate the intuition that a natural connection exists between vague and gradable nouns on the one hand, and sharp and non-gradable ones on the other, I will not have much to say about it here. What really matters is that *-issimo* is able to combine with both types of nouns.

- b. → *Il pesce A è più una lampuga del pesce B.*  
The Fish A is more a dorado.fish than the Fish B.  
'Fish A is more of a dorado fish than Fish B.'

### **Pinning down quintessential qualities: ideal types, not prototypes**

Once we have ascertained that the suffix is productive across different types of nominal hosts, it is important to offer a more precise characterization of the quintessence effect contributed by *-issimo*. The idea that certain individuals might be more representative of a category than others has long been discussed in linguistics and psychology. In particular, Rosch (1975)'s pioneering research provided experimental evidence that members within the extension of a semantic category are cognitively ordered according to their degree of similarity to a *prototype*, that is, to a member that is maximally similar to other members of the category and maximally different from members of other categories. Since then, the notion of prototype has been widely discussed and implemented in various theories of meaning and cognition (Lakoff 1987; Sassoon 2005 among many others. See Taylor 2008 for an overview). Yet, while the effect of *-issimo* bears an intuitive connection to the idea of typicality orderings, a *lampughissima* is not quintessential in the sense in which a classic prototype is. More specifically, it does not single out an average, unmarked and highly frequent instantiation of dorado fish; rather, it picks out an individual that maximally instantiates the properties associated with being an ideal exemplar of dorado fish. From this perspective, the effect of *-issimo* resonates with theories of categorization arguing that, for certain types of nouns, goodness of example is indeed calculated not on the basis of average values, but on the basis of an *ideal* dimension: the more a category member has of whatever such a dimension of the category consists of, the more typical the member is of that category (Barsalou 1985; Lynch et al. 2000 among others).<sup>7</sup>

While ideal models were originally conceived of to account for the structure of goal-oriented categories, recent studies have demonstrated that these representations are also at work in natural

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7. For example, as Voorspoels et al. (2011) put it, "porridge is considered a typical member of the goal derived category 'things you eat when on a diet' not because it is similar to the average diet product, but because it is low in calories, that is, it is close to the ideal value on that dimension, zero calories."

categories, including those used to describe animals and plants (Lynch et al. 2000). In particular, research in cognitive psychology has pointed out several important properties that distinguish such ideal types. First, they are generally extremely difficult to describe in a precise fashion, even if speakers seem to have clear intuitions about them; second, despite their ineffability, they systematically crop up in typicality judgment tasks, in which speakers are asked to provide quantitative judgments about how good an example of a category a certain individual is; third, and perhaps most importantly, while members of a community generally agree on typicality judgments based on central tendency, a much wider amount of variation is found when it comes to pinpointing ideal members, with different social groups varying greatly in their intuitions about what the quintessential qualities of a category are. For example, Lynch et al. (2000) provide evidence that professional landscapers, biologists and people who have no professional ties with trees and vegetation all have different, often conflicting representations of the ideal qualities associated with the category of “tree”. This suggests a picture in which sharing the same stance on what constitutes an ideal member of a category is by no means a pragmatic given for speakers of the same language, but actually hinges on a more subtle convergence around a complex array of non-linguistic factors, including background world knowledge, expertise, shared experience and others.

The intuition that the suffix *indeed* is related to an ideal-based, rather than an average-based notion of quintessential members is substantiated by observing the behavior of *-issimo* with categories that are well known for encoding classic prototypes – e.g., *bird* – As we observe in (179), this prediction is not supported. Modifying *uccello* ‘bird’ with *-issimo* is somewhat degraded on the intended reading where we are trying to assert that the sparrow is a prototypical case of a bird.

(178) **Context:** Looking at a sparrow.

*#Quello è un uccell-issimo.*

That is a bird-ISSIMO

Intended: ‘That is a quintessential bird.’

The example above would instead be significantly improved if the bird at stake, rather than an average exemplar, were an imaginary, atypical, highly exceptional exemplar seen on the pages of

a fantasy book.

(179) **Context:** Looking at a majestic, huge, half-eagle/half-pelican bird on a fantasy book.

✓ *Quello è un uccell-issimo.*

That is a bird-ISSIMO

Intended: ‘That is a quintessential bird.’

This contrast indicates that the goodness of example effect of *-issimo* is more about exceptional than prototypical members of a category, suggesting that the individual picked out by the suffix fully instantiates the ideal qualities that define “birdness”, whatever these are.

#### 5.2.4 Super: a contrast case

Before proceeding with presenting an analysis for *-issimo*, it is worth considering the distribution and effects of a modifier that presents a very similar distributional profile: the prefix *super-*. Besides allowing a better grasp on the contribution of *-issimo*, this modifier will serve as a crucial contrast to investigate the social meaning of the suffix.<sup>8</sup> Particularly striking, in particular, is *super-*'s ability to combine with gradable adjectives and both vague and sharp nouns. With the former, it brings about a “degree boosting” effect similar to the one of *-issimo*. With the latter, it conveys that the individual at stake represents an outstanding or noteworthy instantiation of the category.

- (180) a. *La torre è super-alta*  
The tower is SUPER-tall  
‘The tower is very/extremely tall’ RELATIVE STANDARD
- b. *Il serbatoio è super-pieno*  
The tank is SUPER-full  
‘The tank is completely/perfectly full’ MAXIMUM STANDARD
- c. *MJ è un super- campione.*  
MJ is a SUPER- champion.  
‘MJ is an outstanding champion’ VAGUE NOUNS

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8. While this modifier is also found in English and in many other languages, my claims in this chapter are limited to its use in Italian. While, at a cursory glance, many of the properties are indeed similar across languages, I have not yet done a cross-linguistic investigation, so it remains to be seen whether the properties are identical from one language to the next.

- d. *Super-lampuga in Alto Adriatico.*  
 SUPER-lampuga in northern Adriatic Sea

‘Outstanding dorado-fish caught in northern Adriatic Sea.

SHARP NOUNS

At first sight, the effects of the suffix and the prefix, just like their distribution, appear to be largely, if not completely overlapping. Yet, upon closer investigation it is possible to observe that *-issimo* and *super* are crucially *not* interchangeable. First, *super* is highly infelicitous with imprecision-prone predicates, with which *-issimo* has been instead been shown to be completely acceptable. The examples below illustrate this contrast for *primo* ‘first’, *nessuno* ‘any’. From this perspective, it therefore behaves similarly to what I have observed for *molto* earlier in the section.

- (181) a. *Non c'è {\*super-nessuna/nessun-issima} possibilità di vincere.*  
 Not there.is {SUPERany/any-issima} chance of winning  
 ‘There is no chance at all to win the game.’
- b. *Per la {\*super-prima/prim-issima} volta, ho vinto una scommessa.*  
 For the {SUPER-first/first-ISSIMO} time, I.have won a bet.  
 ‘For the very first time I won a bet’

Second *super* and *-issimo* display subtle, yet significant differences when they combine with nouns. Intuitively, while their contributions are very similar, *-issimo* appears to convey that the individual displays the quintessential properties of the category; *super*, instead, just requires that the individual is somewhat outstanding, although its noteworthiness could also have to do with properties that are just contingently associated with it in the context, and are not quintessential to the category. This impressionistic difference can be seen more clearly by creating a specific context in which being quintessential and being outstanding are clearly distinct. For instance, let us imagine a person walking off a California pier with a gigantic four-scoop cone of vanilla ice-cream. While such an entity would clearly qualify as outstanding due to its size, it would hardly make the cut as a quintessential *gelato*, which, among its unsaid requirements, presumably include the one of being made in Italy. Unsurprisingly, while *super* can be used in this context, the use of *-issimo* would come across as somewhat strange.

- (182) **Context:** Walking off a California pier with a 4-scoop vanilla ice-cream.

- a. ✓ *Quello è un **super**-gelato.*  
That is a SUPER-gelato.  
'That's an outstanding ice-cream'.
- b. #*Quello è un gelat-**issimo**.*  
That is a gelat-ISSIMO.  
'That's a quintessential ice-cream'.

By contrast, imagine a context in which a person walks out of a renowned gelato place in the center of Rome that has been producing homemade *gelato* for decades enjoying a perfectly proportionated, carefully composed cone of incredibly tasty ice-cream. This instance of *gelato* would be significantly closer to a quintessential member of the category. It would also qualify as outstanding, given its exceptional taste. Unsurprisingly, both *-issimo* and *super* would be felicitous in such a context.

(183) **Context:** Walking out a historic gelato place in Roma.

- a. ✓ *Quello è un **super**-gelato.*  
That is a SUPER-gelato.  
'That's an outstanding ice-cream'.
- b. ✓ *Quello è un gelat-**issimo**.*  
That is a gelat-ISSIMO.  
'That's a quintessential ice-cream'.

Crucially, the distinction between quintessential and just noteworthy individuals can also be probed linguistically. A prediction, in particular, is that the use of *-issimo* should not be compatible with a continuation that overtly denies the quintessential status of the entity. A similar continuation should instead be possible for *super-*, since an individual can be noteworthy without being necessarily quintessential. This prediction is borne out.

- (184) a. #*Questo è un gelat-**issimo**, anche se non è un gelato per eccellenza.*  
This is a ice.cream-ISSIMO, even if not is an ice.cream par excellence.  
'This is a quintessential ice-cream, even if it's not an ice-cream par excellence.'
- b. ✓ *Questo è un **super**-gelato, anche se non è un gelato per eccellenza.*  
This is a SUPER-ice.cream, even if not is an ice.cream par excellence.  
'This is a quintessential ice-cream, even if it's not an ice-cream par excellence.'

The emerging picture is one in which the effect of *super* with nouns appears to be somewhat less specific than the one of *-issimo*, pointing to a genuine difference between the two intensifiers. Note, however, that it is also possible to find contexts in which, conversely, *-issimo* is acceptable, while *super-* is excluded. This can be seen in situations in which we have a salient contrast between a borderline and a clear case of a category, and in which the interlocutors are explicitly discussing whether each of them falls within the extension. On the one hand, it is possible to use *-issimo* to convey that the clear case, even if not noteworthy, unquestionably falls within the extension of the category; in the same context, though, *super-* is *not* felicitous, unless the clear case also has some independent noteworthy feature. To see a concrete example, let us return to the world in which dorado fish can be either pure or hybrid, where Fish A is one such hybrid and Fish B is instead a pure exemplar of *lampuga*. Here, the use of *-issimo* is always felicitous to remark that fish B unquestionably falls within the extension of the predicate; the use of *super*, instead, is to a certain extent blind to category membership, and always requires a component of noteworthiness to be present.

(185) **Fish A:** Hybrid, **Fish B:** Pure, unremarkable

- (186) a. *#Il pesce B è una super-lampuga.*  
 The Fish B is a SUPER-dorado.fish.  
 ‘Fish is an outstanding dorado-fish’.
- b. *✓Il pesce B è una lampugh-issima.*  
 The Fish B is a dorado.fish-ISSIMO.  
 ‘Fish is a pure dorado-fish’.

For *super-* to be felicitous, we would instead need Fish B to be somewhat outstanding in its own right, regardless of its status as a clear case of the property.

(187) **Fish A:** Hybrid, **Fish B:** Pure, remarkable (e.g., huge)

- (188) a. *✓Il pesce B è una super-lampuga.*  
 The Fish B is a SUPER-dorado.fish.  
 ‘Fish is an outstanding dorado-fish’.

- b. ✓ *Il pesce B è una lampugh-issima.*  
 The Fish B is a dorado.fish-ISSIMO.  
 ‘Fish is a pure dorado-fish’.

The emerging picture is one in which the effect and distribution of *-issimo* and *super-* are not completely overlapping, especially in the nominal domain. On the one hand, in neutral contexts *-issimo* appears to provide a more specific contribution, requiring that the relevant individual embodies the essential qualities of a category; *super-*, on the other hand, merely requires that the individual is somewhat outstanding with respect to a salient property, either quintessential or non-quintessential. Second, in discourses in which category membership is explicitly under discussion and borderline cases are present, *-issimo* can be used to remark that an individual falls within the extension of the property, even if the individual has no outstanding feature. The licensing of *super-*, by contrast, is always tied to the presence of noteworthiness.

### 5.2.5 Interim summary

In this section I provided an overview of the distribution of *-issimo*, showing that it can be found with gradable and a variety of non-gradable expressions, including nouns and imprecision-prone predicates. Across all these uses, the common contribution of the suffix can be informally described as strengthening or intensification of the meaning of the host, which nevertheless surfaces in a variety of ways: degree-boosting effects with gradable predicates; precisification effects with imprecision-prone ones; and ideal-type selection for nouns. Table 5.1 summarizes the hosts and the specific effects.

Table 5.1: *-issimo*: distribution and effects

Host	Example	Effect
Gradable predicate	Tall	Degree-boosting
Imprecision-prone predicate	First	Slack regulation
Vague noun	Champion	Quintessential member - Effect on category membership
Sharp noun	Dorado fish	Quintessential member - No effect on category membership

### 5.3 The semantics of *-issimo*

I now proceed to illustrate an analysis that captures these effects in a unified fashion, while yielding a prediction about the social meaning potential associated with using *-issimo* for each type of host. The section is organized as follows. In section 5.3.1 I resort to several diagnostics to show that *-issimo* always operates at the same level in all the environments in which it is found, thus presenting a major empirical difference from the behavior of *totally*. In section 5.3.2 I address and reject a degree-based analysis of *-issimo*, a route that seems promising at first glance. In section 5.3.3 I outline my proposal, modeling the meaning of *-issimo* as an operator over contexts of interpretation.

#### 5.3.1 *-issimo* as an at-issue operator

As can be recalled from the discussion in Chapter 2, a variety of diagnostics have shown that *totally* operates at different compositional levels depending on the type of scale that it targets. While the modifier is part of the at-issue content with bounded gradable predicates, it operates on a different tier when working as a Common Ground operator, as shown by the lack of interaction with negators and approximators and the sensitivity to speech act types. The first step towards providing an analysis of *-issimo* is thus to assess whether the suffix likewise operates at different levels in the different types of hosts discussed in section 5.2. The results from three diagnostics – negators, questions, and denials – shows that this is not the case. The suffix always emerges as part of the at-issue content, regardless of the context in which it occurs.

Let us start with negation: *-issimo* can always be felicitously licensed in this environment, regardless of where it occurs. Its effect is to merely suppress the intensification effect, leaving everything else unchanged.

(189) a. ✓ *La torre non è alt-issima*

The tower is not tall-ISSIMO

‘The tower is not very/extremely tall’

GRADABLE ADJ

- b. ✓ *Non serve un governo subit-issimo.*  
 Not is.needed a government immediately{-ISSIMO/very \*immediately}  
 ‘We do not need a government right now.’ IMPRECISE PRED
- c. ✓ *Michael Jordan non è un campion-issimo.*  
 Michael Jordan is not a champion-ISSIMO  
 ‘Michael Jordan is not a quintessential champion.’ VAGUE NOUN
- d. ✓ *Non ho preso una lampugh-issima.*  
 Not have.I caught a lampugh--ISSIMO.  
 ‘I have not caught a quintessential exemplar of dorado-fish.’ SHARP NOUN

Unsurprisingly, *-issimo* can be targeted by denials in isolation from the rest of the proposition. For example, a hearer can reply to any of the utterances above by using “No!”, followed by a continuation in which they make clear that they specifically intended to challenge the intensifying effect of the suffix.

- (190) a. A: La torre è **alt-issima**  
 ‘The tower is very/extremely tall’  
 ✓ B: **No!** Non è così alta.  
 ‘No! It’ not so tall!’
- b. A: Serve un governo **subit-issimo**.  
 ‘We need a government right now.’  
 B: ✓ **No!** Non serve **subit-issimo**.  
 No! Not right now.
- c. Michael Jordan è un **campion-issimo**.  
 ‘Michael Jordan is a quintessential champion.’  
 ✓ **No!** Non è un **campion-issimo!**  
 ‘No! He’s not a quintessential champion.’
- d. Ho preso una **lampugh-issima**.  
 ‘I have caught a quintessential exemplar of dorado-fish.’  
**No!** Non è una **lampugh-issima**.

‘No! it’s not a quintessential exemplar of dorado-fish.’

Finally, *-issimo* can be smoothly embedded in questions regardless of the nature of the host.

- (191) a. ✓ *La torre è alt-issima?*  
The tower is tall-ISSIMO?  
‘Is the tower very/extremely tall?’ GRADABLE ADJ
- b. ✓ *Serve un governo subit-issimo?*  
is.needed a government immediately-ISSIMO.  
‘Do we need a government right now?’ IMPRECISE PRED
- c. ✓ *Michael Jordan è un campion-issimo?*  
Michael Jordan is a champion-ISSIMO?  
‘Is Michael Jordan a quintessential champion?’ VAGUE NOUN
- d. ✓ *Avete preso una lampugh-issima?*  
Have.you caught a lampugh--ISSIMO?  
‘Have you caught a quintessential exemplar of dorado-fish?’ SHARP NOUN

All these properties contrast with what has been shown for attitudinal *totally*, which cannot embed under negation, cannot be challenged with denials and is limited to assertions.

- (192) a. She should *totally* click on that link!  
B: # **No!** She should partially click on that link!  
B: # **No!** She should click on that link, but you’re not committed to saying that!
- b. \*You shouldn’t *totally* click on that link.
- c. # Should I *totally* click on that link?

Taken together, these diagnostics suggest that the grammatical encoding of *-issimo* does not change across the different kinds of hosts with which the suffix is found. More specifically, the suffix always appears to constantly display two compositional properties. First, it always operates within the at-issue content, providing a contribution that is part of what the utterance asserts or proffers for evaluation. Second, it systematically has local scope, constraining the interpretation of its host but not affecting parts of the sentence that are associated with higher projections. As hinted

above, this represents a crucial difference with respect to *totally*, which features substantially different patterns depending on the type of scale that it targets.

### 5.3.2 Rejecting a degree-based analysis

Before introducing my proposal, I consider and refute an enticing analytical route to model the contribution of *-issimo*. Given that the suffix productively modifies gradable predicates and contributes an interpretation of intensification paraphrasable as degree boosting, a plausible solution could be to propose an analysis of the intensifier in terms of a degree modifier. Under this view, the modifier would bind the degree argument of a gradable predicate, requiring that an individual hold the relevant property to a degree that largely exceeds the standard  $\theta$ . Such an analysis could be formalized as in (193).<sup>9</sup>

(193) A degree-based analysis for *-issimo* (to be rejected):

$$\llbracket \text{-ISSIMO} \rrbracket = \lambda G_{\langle d, et \rangle} \lambda x. \exists d [G(x)(d) \wedge d \gg \theta_G]$$

In this analysis, *-issimo* is treated on a par with other degree modifiers: it applies to gradable predicates and return a predicate that is true of an individual  $x$  if the degree to which  $x$  holds the relevant property is much higher than a standard degree (represented as  $\gg s$ ). Although they have not been explicitly formalized, analyses along the lines of (193) have in fact been pursued for *-issimo* by Wierzbicka (1991), Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994), and Rainer (1983). For instance, according to Wierzbicka (1991), the semantic contribution of *-issimo* can be paraphrased in the following way: given an individual  $x$  and an adjective *Adj*, *-issimo* requires that “ $x$  is very/extremely *Adj* and nothing could be more *Adj*” Wierzbicka (1991): 275). In a similar fashion, Rainer (1983) and Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994) argue that *-issimo* selects for an extreme degree of a gradable property. According to these accounts, both *-issimo* and *molto* are assigned a roughly equivalent semantic analysis, although they differ with respect to how ‘extreme’ their effect is. While intuitively sound, such proposals face an obvious challenge: if *-issimo* is a

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9. In (193) I assume a semantic type for gradable predicates that includes a degree argument,  $\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$ . See Chapter 1 for further discussion.

degree modifier, it does not follow naturally that it can also combine with predicates that do not lexicalize a scale, as shown in section 5.2. I review and reject three possible solutions to the issue.

A first solution would be to argue that gradability is supplied by a covert element in the syntax, that is not lexically realized but can be nevertheless compositionally accessed by the suffix. In particular, Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994) and Merlini Barbaresi (2004) argue that occurrences of the suffix with non gradable predicates are only possible whenever “they are associated with an intensifiable quality, be that of contextual or metaphorical nature” (Merlini Barbaresi, 2004, pp 448-9), claiming that the licenser of *-issimo* with nominal predicates is a covert, unpronounced gradable adjective that is nevertheless encoded in the syntax. This solution, however, runs into two major problems. First, since these authors say nothing about the possible values of the covert adjective, it largely over-generates the interpretations that *-issimo* might receive in these environments. While in principle any covert gradable adjective could combine with a noun, we do not find interpretations of *laumpughissima* that correspond to ‘an extremely smelly fish’, or ‘an extremely pale fish’, where the covert adjectives would be ‘smelly’ or ‘pale’. Rather, the suffix provide a much more specific contribution, in that it singles out a member of the category that boasts the essential qualities distinguishing the best exemplars in the group. Second, positing an implicit adjective does not provide a satisfactory solution for other instances in which the suffix appears with non gradable predicates. For instance, it is hard to see how this stipulation could help us understand the effect of *-issimo* with imprecision-prone predicates such as *primo* ‘first’ or *nessuno* ‘any’. As discussed above, in such contexts the intensifier does not seem to intensify the degree a property; rather, it invites a stricter interpretation of the predicate, which appears to be unattainable by positing a covert predicate in the syntax.

An alternative solution would be to posit two lexical entries for *-issimo*, in a similar fashion to what I have suggested for *totally*, treating the uses with different hosts as related, yet distinct variants. This solution is advocated by Rainer (1983), who distinguishes between the “intensifying” use of the modifier, which occurs with gradable predicates and boosts the standard degree; and the “confirmative” use, which occurs with imprecision-based predicates and “confirms”, as it were,

that the predicate really applies in the context. To complete the typology, a new “ideal type selecting” use could be then stipulated for the effect of *issimo* with noun, accounting for the distribution. While this proposal would be able to maintain a degree-based analysis for the occurrences with gradable predicates, it would nonetheless come with a hefty price in terms of explanatory power, leaving us with a non-unified proposal and three distinct lexical entries. This would be especially problematic in light of the empirical observation that, contrary to *totally*, *-issimo* operates on the same compositional level across all the linguistic environments in which it is found, thus providing strong evidence in favor of a unified account.

Finally, a third solution to maintain a degree-based analysis would be to argue that the occurrences of *-issimo* with non-gradable predicates can be derived via a type-shifting mechanism, which coerces the host into a fully gradable predicate, therefore solving the mismatch and allowing for smooth composition. Similar accounts have indeed been suggested for many situations within scalar semantics (e.g. Sawada and Grano 2011 for measure phrases in Japanese; Bogal-Allbritten 2012 for English *slightly*). However, this solution would likewise encounter a problem: since the intensifier combines with a wide array of non-gradable predicates, it would be extremely difficult to find a unique coercion mechanism that could apply to all these situations. For example, the same coercion mechanism that turns a quantifier into a gradable predicate would be most likely have to be substantially different from the one that has the same effect on a noun like *lampuga*, thus introducing considerable complications in the analysis.

In sum, a degree-based analysis for *-issimo* is undesirable in light of the trouble that it would encounter in accounting for the wide distribution of the suffix across different hosts. In light of this discussion, I opt to take a different route, outlining an analysis of *-issimo* as a modifier of the contextual parameters that affect the interpretation of the host.

### 5.3.3 Analysis

In a nutshell, the basic idea underlying the proposal is the following: *-issimo* operates over the parameters that resolve the underdeterminacy of the interpretation of the host, universally quan-

tifying over their possible values. Under this view, degree-boosting, precisification effects and quintessence effects all arise as a consequence of the interaction between such an operation and the specific kind of context sensitivity of the host.

### **The core contribution: quantifying over counterstances**

Once we have ascertained that a degree-based analysis is not the best analytical route to model the contribution of *-issimo*, we can return to its distribution, asking whether the different types of host can be seen as forming a natural class from a semantics/pragmatic perspective, and hence as a natural target for the suffix. Leaving nouns aside for the moment, I argue that, as has been largely observed in the previous literature, what makes gradable and imprecision-prone predicates similar is the following property: both types of expressions are associated with extensions that are contingent on what particular metalinguistic stipulations the interlocutors make in the context of the utterance. In other words, what qualifies as *tall*, *immediate* or even *first* in a particular scenario crucially depends on how the participants decide to fix the indeterminacy that is associated with these expressions. As I make clear below, it is precisely this contingency that *-issimo* tracks and eventually eliminates, requiring that the relevant individual be within the extension of the modified property, or the domain of the quantifier, under any possible way of resolving its meaning in a given context. On this view, the suffix is agnostic as to whether such context sensitivity arises semantically or pragmatically. As long as the interpretation of the host is potentially subject to this type of variability, I predict *-issimo* to be licensed. In light of this common feature of the hosts, the task of providing a unified analysis of the suffix becomes considerably more straightforward than it would have been under a degree-based analysis. I now proceed to discuss how I implement this idea in the analysis.

### **Preliminaries: introducing counterstances**

Before modeling the contribution of *-issimo*, it is crucial to provide a unified representation of the context sensitivity of the predicates the suffix combines with. At first glance, this task is not

trivial. While the interpretation of gradable adjectives and imprecision-based predicates intuitively varies across different contexts of evaluation, these predicates present major differences in terms of their lexical semantics. As a result, the instability of their extensions arises via substantially different processes. In the case of a gradable adjective like *tall*, for instance, context sensitivity is grounded in the truth conditions of the predicate, and specifically in the variability of the cutoff point that we use to distinguish between tall and non-tall members; In the case of an imprecision-prone predicate, by contrast, the truth conditions are fixed across contexts, with the variability of the extension being tied to the different levels of pragmatic tolerance that the interlocutors apply in the context.

To capture the commonality shared across these two types of expressions, I start from the assumption that the assignment of truth values to sentences is not only relative to possible worlds, but also to a series of parameters – e.g., standards of gradable adjectives and standards of precision – whose setting crucially depends on the meta-linguistic stipulations shared by the interlocutors in the conversation (Kennedy and Willer 2016). Crucially, while the same set of facts about the world are compatible with multiple ways of fixing these parameters, the extension of certain predicates, and therefore the truth value of the sentences that contain them, is ultimately affected by the specific values that such parameters are assigned in the here-and-now of the interaction. The emerging picture is one in which knowing the state of affairs of the world is not sufficient to verify whether certain predicates apply or not; fleshing out the parameters is also required to compute the extension of certain predicates and, as a result, the truth value of the sentences containing them. To see this, let us consider the following scenario, with the extension of a predicate like *tall* specified for three possible parameters.

(194) **Facts:** John is 5’9”; Mark is 6’0”; Luke is 6’6”.

**Predicate:**  $\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket$

- a. Context 1: Threshold set at 5’5”  $\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket = \{\text{John, Mark, Luke}\}$
- b. Context 2: Threshold set at 5’10”  $\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket = \{\text{Mark, Luke}\}$
- c. Context 3: Threshold set at 6’1”  $\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket = \{\text{Luke}\}$

As a result, a sentence like “Mark is tall” can be true or false of the *same* facts about the world depending on where the interlocutors decide to set the threshold in the particular communicative context. The same mechanism, *mutatis mutandis*, can be applied to imprecision-prone predicates: The same event can count *immediate* or not depending on how large of a time lag we are willing to tolerate between the time at which the event happens and the particular reference time that we are adopting in the discourse. What changes is just the specific nature of the parameter, which is no longer a threshold along a scale lexicalized by a gradable predicate, but a purely pragmatic dimension.

Building on Kennedy and Willer (2016), I propose that the specific values at which such parameters are set are discursively encoded in the Common Ground of the conversation. More specifically, the Common Ground does not just track what facts are taken to be true by the participants, but also what decisions the interlocutors have made concerning the way to resolve the interpretation of underdeterminate predicates. Under this view, I follow the authors in referring to the possible ways of setting these parameters as *counterstances* of the same Common Ground, that is, as information states that differ only in decisions about how to resolve semantic underdetermination by the facts of the discourse situation. More precisely, the counterstances for a Common Ground are derived through a function  $\kappa$ , which takes as a common ground  $s$  as argument and returns a partitioned set including  $s$  as well its counterstances. To characterize the relation between each counterstance I introduce the relation  $R$  to  $s$ , where  $R$  holds between  $s$  and  $s'$  if  $s'$  is just like  $s$ , except possibly for the values they assign to the relevant contextual parameter that bears on the interlocutors' stipulations.

(195) **Counterstance:** For a Common Ground  $s$

$$\kappa(s) = \{s, s', s'', s''', \dots\} \text{ s.t. } s' \mathbf{R} s.$$

Each such counterstance is thus a common ground (e.g., a set of worlds) that represents what  $s$  would have been like given different choices about those aspects of meaning (e.g., thresholds, standards of precision) that are contingent on linguistic practices, rather than on facts about the world.

### **-issimo: quantifying over possible counterstances**

Against this background, it is now possible to provide a formalization for the contribution of *-issimo*: given a property and an individual, the suffix universally quantifies over possible counterstances that can be possibly applied to the interpretation of the property, requiring that for all such counterstances the individual is part of the extension of the predicate. It is precisely this core of universal quantification that yields the strengthening effect associated with the suffix, which crucially eliminates the contingency of the interpretation that would instead be present in the unmodified form. Whether strengthening surfaces in terms of degree boosting, slack regulation or another effect is determined by the nature of the host, and specifically in the specific type of parameter that determines the contingency of its interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

#### (196) **Core contribution**

$$\llbracket \text{-ISSIMO} \rrbracket^s = \lambda P_{\langle e,t \rangle} . \lambda x . \forall s' \in \kappa(s) : x \in P^{s'}$$

If this is the core meaning of *-issimo*, it is possible to see that the suffix introduces a crucial presupposition: there must be at least one salient counterstance in which *x* is not part of the extension of *P*, that is, in which the interpretation of *P* with respect to *x* would be different. If this were not the case, the contribution of the suffix will be completely trivial. I label this requirement the *counterstance-contingency* condition (henceforth, CCC), proposing that it represents the general admissibility condition for *-issimo*.

#### (197) **Counterstance contingency condition:**

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10. It is important to note that the idea that operators can universally quantify over contexts to yield an intensification effect is reminiscent of different proposals that have been put forward to deal with similar phenomena. Barker in particular uses quantification over candidate worlds within a dynamic framework to account for the English modifier *definitely*, arguing that *John is definitely tall* is true in a world  $c \in C$  (a member of the context set  $C$ ) if John counts as tall in  $c$  and there is no other  $c' \in C$  in which John's height is the same but he does not count as tall  $c'$ . However, the proposed analysis is meant to be even more general than Barker's, who only considers *definitely* in combination with gradable adjectives in English, and does not consider cases in which the modifier targets other predicates (e.g. *It's definitely raining*, *He is definitely a doctor/a champion/Italian*). Similarly, McNabb (2012b) proposes that the Hebrew modifier *mamaš* 'really' applies to a property and states that the property holds of an individual in all relevant contexts of evaluation, proposing an account that, *de facto*, closely resembles the one proposed to capture *-issimo*. Introducing the relation *R* to specify in greater detail the connection between assignment functions, though, provides the opportunity of offering a more detailed account of how the different content of evaluations on which *-issimo* operates relate to one another.

$$\exists s' \in \kappa(s): x \notin P^{s'}$$

I argue below that such a requirement is overtly satisfied when *-issimo* combines with predicates that are inherently context-sensitive, but can also be accommodated by the interlocutors in situations (e.g., sharp nouns) where the meaning of the host is not depending on any parameter. Before proceeding any further, let me just observe the remarkable similarity between the CCC and the non-homogeneity condition formulated for *totally* in Chapter 2.

(198) **Projected Set Non Homogeneity Condition:**

$$\neg \forall w: w \in PCG \in PS(\text{Assert}(p)), p(w) = 1$$

While the two modifiers combine with different objects – propositions versus properties – and work at different levels –non-at-issue and at-issue – they both operate in situations that allow for the possibility of “rejecting” the meaning of the relevant linguistic form, introducing a certain degree of uncertainty around how the interlocutors will deal with such an expression in the conversation. Just like subjective assertions are accepted in the Common Ground only if every participant agrees on the assessment at stake, an individual is included in the extension of a counterstance-contingent predicate only if the relevant parameters are fixed in a certain way. In other words, the common thread tying together these two admissibility conditions is that each of them allows for the (felicitous) possibility that the interpretation of the relevant meaning, all things being equal, could have just been different. As such, in both cases the meaning of the expression modified by *totally* and *-issimo* turns out to be *weak*, as it is vulnerable to contextual circumstances that are independent either from the facts about the world or from the control of the individual speaker. *Mutatis mutandis*, it is precisely this vulnerability, either framed in terms of contingency or non-homogeneity, that provides the intuitive “gradience” on which intensifiers can operate in the absence of a lexical scale, justifying their use as a tool to strengthen the meaning of the target expressions. I now proceed to applying the analysis of *-issimo* to the different classes of elements that the suffix can modify.

## Degree-intensification effect

I start to apply the analysis from the occurrences of *-issimo* with relative standard gradable predicates such as *alto* ‘tall’ in (199).

- (199) *Marco è alt-issimo*  
 Marco is tall-ISSIMO  
 ‘The tower is very/extremely tall.’

As widely discussed thus far, the interpretation of relative gradable adjectives depends on a contextually determined standard of comparison, which establishes the degree that must be exceeded by the gradable predicate to count as true. This contextually-determined value depends on the individuals with whom it is being implicitly compared to (i.e., the *comparison class*, see Klein (1980b) and Kennedy (2007) among others). On the degree-based analysis of Kennedy and McNally (2005) and Kennedy (2007), the standard value  $\theta^{11}$  which is contributed by the null positive morpheme POS, and in (200). In (200b),  $\theta$  is the standard relative to a context  $c$  containing a comparison class.

- (200) a.  $\llbracket \text{POS} \rrbracket = \lambda G_{\langle d, et \rangle} \lambda x. \exists d [(G(d)(x) \wedge d > \theta_G]$   
 b.  $\llbracket \text{POS ALTO} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \exists d [\text{Tall}(d)(x) \wedge d > \theta_{Tall}]^{12}$

Against this background, *-issimo* applies to the  $\langle e, t \rangle$  predicate in (200b), universally quantifying over possible counterstances that assign a value to the standard variable.

- (201)  $\llbracket \text{-ISSIMO(POS ALTO)} \rrbracket^s(x) = 1$  iff  $\forall s' \in \kappa(s): \text{Tall}(x)^{s'} = 1$

For example, if *altissimo* is true of Marco, then Marco must qualify as tall not only according to the parameter sets in the Common Ground  $s$ , but under all other counterstances  $s'$  accessible from  $s$  that may introduce higher standards. It can therefore be inferred that Marco must be well above the cut-off for counting as tall in the actual context  $s$ , since he must count as tall under even

11. In the authors’ model, the notation  $s$  is used to refer to the standard. I will use  $\theta$  here, since I already used  $s$  to refer to a counterstance.

12. I assume that *tall* and *alto* are semantically equivalent. I therefore capture them with the metalanguage predicate ‘Tall’.

counterstances  $s'$  setting possibly higher standards. Hence, the degree boosting effect achieved by *-issimo*.<sup>13</sup>

### Slack regulation effect and other types of context-sensitivity

Another common effect achieved by the suffix is one of “precisification”, as exemplified by the cases in (202).

- (202) a. *Serve un governo subit-issimo.*  
is.needed a government immediately-ISSIMO.  
'We need a government right now.'
- b. *Maria è l'ultim-issima ragazza avuta da Gianni prima che morisse.*  
Maria is the.last-ISSIMO girlfriend had by Gianni before he died.  
'Maria is the very last girlfriend that Gianni had before he died.'

As discussed in section 5.2, such predicates do not display context-sensitive variability in their truth conditions. Yet, they are often subject to imprecise interpretation. For instance, an action that does not happen *right now* but happens within a reasonably small time lag can still qualify as happening *subito*; by the same token, something can be close enough to being the latest individual on a temporal scale to be considered as such, even if there were few lower ranked individuals that, strictly speaking, would make the proposition false. The level of deviance tolerated from the strict truth conditions, however, is context-dependent.

What makes these predicates similar to adjectives like *tall* is that the parameter determining the amount of imprecision in each context is similarly contingent on arbitrary choices of the interlocutors. Just as different counterstances specify different values for the standard of gradable

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13. It is important to note that the universal quantification effect brought about by *-issimo* is restricted by R, which determines what possible counterstances  $s'$  are accessible from  $s$ . This prevents *-issimo* from operating over unwanted counterstances, such as those setting standards that could not be realistically expected to hold for  $x$ . For instance, if the original comparison class for Marco is represented by adult males, a comparison class made of professional basketball players would be presumably too remote from the values in  $s$  to count as a possible context of evaluation, making it possible to use *-issimo* even if the individual would not presumably count as tall in such a scenario. By the same token, if Marco is 10 years old, uttering (199) would not entail that he should also count as tall for a class of adult males, which is pragmatically too remote from the original context. In this sense, R affects the contribution of *-issimo* much like a pragmatic restrictor weakens the effect of universal quantifiers (see von Stechow (1994) among others) by limiting the domain of quantification to a set of contextually salient individuals.

predicates, they can likewise specify different levels of precision for interpreting a predicate like *immediate*. By universally quantifying over all the possible counterstances, *-issimo* ensures that the property holds true for every value of precision on which the interlocutors might settle in the conversation.

Let us first consider the case of (202a). I suggest that the level of precision specifies the amplitude of the time lag tolerated for the interpretation of *subito*: certain events can count as “immediate” in some contexts but not in others, depending on how much tolerance the interlocutors opt to apply as they engage in the exchange. The presence of *-issimo* affects the interpretation by requiring that the predicate must hold true under any (accessible) counterstance, thus including those assigning a stricter level of precision.<sup>14</sup>

$$(203) \quad \llbracket (-\text{ISSIMO}(\text{SUBITO}))(\text{GOVERN IS FORMED}) \rrbracket^s = 1 \text{ iff } \forall s' \in \kappa(s): \text{Immediate}(\text{Gov is formed})^{s'} = 1$$

In the case of *ultimissima* in (202b), *-issimo* requires that Maria must count as Gianni’s last girlfriend under every value of precision relative to which the predicate is interpreted. This means that she counts as last even under the maximum standard of precision, which does not allow for any deviation from the truth conditions. Hence, the intuition that the suffix is “reinforcing” the truth conditions, excluding the tolerant interpretations and forcing a strict one.

Note that, besides accounting in a unified way for the cases discussed above, modeling both the degree boosting and slack regulation effects of the morpheme in terms of counterstance manipulation has two additional analytical advantages. First, it allows us to account in a straightforward manner for the availability of the suffix in situations that feature a third flavor of context-sensitivity. These examples are illustrated by the behavior of universal quantifiers, another environment in which the intensifier is productively found.<sup>15</sup>

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14. A complication associated with this case is that, at the compositional level, *subito* applies to events, rather than individuals, much like most adverbials. This technical difference, however, is orthogonal to the account of the suffix proposed here.

15. There is a possible compositional difficulty since it not clear that either numerals or n-words have a semantic type  $\langle e, t \rangle$ , which is required for the first argument of the modifiers. What is needed to get the semantics to work in this case is a type-shifting rule that could convert these expressions into expressions of type  $\langle e, t \rangle$ , which can then be used as the first argument of the modifiers.

- (204) *Non c'è nessun-issima possibilità di vincere.*  
Not there.is any-**issima** chance of winning.  
'There is no chance at all to win the game.'

*-Issimo*, here, can target two conceptually different types of context sensitivity. On the one hand, *any* can give rise to bona fide imprecision effects. For instance, if the probability of winning the game is very low – say .5% – this small amount can be tolerated in certain contexts as a tolerable deviation from the truth conditions, making the use of *any* acceptable. In this case, the use of the suffix would directly target the level of precision, assuring that a 0% likelihood must hold for (204) to be considered true. On the other hand, the quantifier might be subject to a type of context variability that, while being intuitively similar to imprecision, is more properly grounded in the pragmatic restrictions that are applied to its domain, as widely observed in the literature (von Stechow 1994; Chierchia 2006). For example, the domain represented by “winning chances” is normally taken to be limited to situations in which the teams follow the rules and do not cheat; or to situations in which abnormal events, such as multiple sudden injuries to the opponent team, are excluded. As such, quantifiers are subject to yet another type of context sensitivity that eventually affects the final interpretation of the sentence, and which cannot be reduced to either degree boosting or slack regulation proper.<sup>16</sup> Coming back to *-issimo*, a prediction follows from the previous account. Counterexamples, in the same way in which they can specify standards of comparison and standards of precision, should also be able to keep track of domain restrictors as another source of contingency for the interpretation of the predicate. As such, by operating over alternatives to *s*, *-issimo* should be able to eliminate such restrictions, forcing an interpretation of the quantifier according to a wider domain of quantification, and hence stronger (see Kadmon and Landman (1993), Krifka (1995)). This prediction is indeed borne out. As the following two exchanges show, the suffix can indifferently target either imprecision-based or domain-based types of context sensitivity.

- (205) a. A: *Non c'è nessun-issima possibilità di vincere.*  
A: 'There is no chance at all to win the game.'

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16. Lasnik (1999) suggested that domain restrictions could still be seen as a special type of pragmatic halo.

B: Nemmeno .1%?

B: ‘Not even .1%?’

A: No. NessunISSIMA possibilità.

A: ‘No. Any-**issimo** chance.’

IMPRECISION

b. A: Non c’è nessun-**issima** possibilità di vincere.

A: ‘There is no chance at all to win the game.’

B: Nemmeno se corrompi l’arbitro?

B: ‘Not even if you bribe the ref?’

A: No. Nessun-**issima** possibilità.

A: No. Any-**issimo** chance.

DOMAIN RESTRICTION

A corollary of this observation is that, when one of the two sources of context-sensitivity is blocked, the other one should still be able to be targeted by *-issimo*. This clearly emerges in the following example, where the domain is made explicit, but the suffix can nevertheless operate over the pragmatic halo of the quantifier.<sup>17</sup>

- (206) *Tutt-issimi i dieci studenti sono venuti alla festa.*  
All-ISSIMI the ten students have come to the party.  
Absolutely all the ten students came to the party.

A second advantage of the proposed account concerns the treatment of maximum standard predicates like *full*, which productively combine with *-issimo*.

- (207) *Il serbatoio è pien-issimo*  
The tank is full-ISSIMO  
‘The tank is completely/perfectly full’

While there is consensus that these adjectives are context-sensitive in a nontrivial way, authors disagree on the exact characterization of this type of variability. On the one hand, it has been argued that these expressions, contrary to relative adjectives like *tall*, do not have context-dependent

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17. The example is taken from Bylinina and Sudo (2015), who pointed this fact out in a commentary on Beltrama and Bochnak (2015), which reported on a similar version of the analysis presented here. I thank the authors for pointing out this property of the use of *-issimo* with quantifiers, as well as for the useful and insightful comments provided on the article.

truth conditions (Kennedy and McNally 2005; Kennedy 2007; Aparicio et al. 2016), and should be therefore treated like regular imprecision-prone predicates. For instance, the denotation of *full* already requires that the standard be set at the maximum point of the scale across contexts. What changes across scenarios is just the amount of tolerated deviation from such a maximum that can be applied to the interpretation. On the other hand, proposals have been put forward treating *tall* and *full* on a par, either suggesting that the interpretation of both adjectives requires comparison classes, although of different kinds (Toledo and Sassoon 2011; Sassoon 2012; McNabb 2012b); or that for both types of adjectives context-variability can be modeled in terms of pragmatic reasoning about the threshold required to interpret the truth conditions (Lassiter and Goodman 2013, 2015). An analysis of *-issimo* as an operator over counterstances allows us to account for its combinability with maximum standard adjectives independently from the formalization of the meaning of such predicates, providing the opportunity to capture the effect of the suffix in a manner that is compatible with the different proposals available in the literature. While the contribution of the suffix is uniform, what changes according to the particular theories of absolute adjectives is the specific nature of the semantics/pragmatic parameter that varies across contexts. Specifically, for accounts of *full* as an imprecision-prone predicate, counterstances assign different values of precision; for accounts of *full* as a predicate sensitive to comparison classes, counterstances assign different thresholds on the lexicalized scale.

#### 5.3.4 Nouns

I now turn to nominal constructions, the third environment in which *-issimo* is found. I account for the effects of the suffix with these predicates through the same mechanism that I have resorted to for gradable and imprecision-prone predicates. The difference with respect to the cases discussed above is that, while predicates like *tall* and *immediately* automatically satisfy the Counterstance Contingency Condition, only a subclass of nouns do so: Kamp and Partee (1995)'s *vague nouns* (e.g., *champion*). By contrast, *sharp nouns* (e.g., *dorado fish*), appear to be instead associated with extensions that are, at least at first sight, constant across contexts, thus violating the accessibility

condition for the suffix. In such cases, I argue that the use of *-issimo* pushes the interlocutors to accommodate a new meaning of the property in which the individual in the predicate's extension has to satisfy not only the normal criteria for category membership, but also a set of additional, context dependent properties (e.g., being a quintessential instantiation).

As discussed in section 5.2, with certain nouns the suffix seems to pick out a quintessential case of the sort of thing named by the noun. An example of this sort is provided by *champion*, reproduced below. In this case, we are dealing with a category whose membership tends to be gradient, rather than clearcut. As such, it is perfectly plausible to think of *bona fide* borderline cases. For example, there might be players, e.g., Derrick Rose, that are good enough to be in the conversation for being considered a champion, but not good enough to undisputably make the cut. The room for such intermediate cases allows us to say sentences like (212) without sounding contradictory.

- (208) *Derrick Rose è e non è un campione.*  
Derrick Rose is and not is a champion.  
'Derrick Rose is a champion and is not a champion'

*-issimo* in (209) selects for a referent that clearly and undoubtedly instantiates the property, excluding borderline cases.

- (209) *Michael Jordan è un champion-issimo.*  
Michael Jordan is a champion-ISSIMO  
'Michael Jordan is a quintessential champion.'

I account for this effect by suggesting that vague nouns are also interpreted according to a contextual parameter, which also depends on how the interlocutors opted to treat the indeterminacy of the predicate. Notably, in this case the precise value of the parameter is itself variable, given the fact that there is not one single way to fix the extension of such nouns. In other words, while standards of comparison and standards of precision are the sole context-dependent values that matter in determining whether something falls within the extension of *tall* and *immediately* respectively, membership for categories like *champion* can be decided along a plurality of criteria. The counterstance will specify what value along the relevant criterion the individual must possess to be

considered a member of the category. Let us imagine, for example, that the relevant criterion to qualify as a champion is represented by the number of individual awards received by the player. In this case, different counterstances will specify different values for the number of awards required to be part of the category in a given context: while it could be possible to stipulate that winning one award can be considered enough, in more stringent contexts two, three or even four awards might be required. The same applies if we consider instead the amount of individual talent as the crucial dimension to define a champion. Here, different counterstances will specify different amounts of talent that are required to make the cut. For whatever the relevant context-sensitive criterion is, *-issimo* requires that an individual  $x$  count as a champion under every possible way of fleshing out the meaning of the predicate.

$$(210) \quad \llbracket \text{-ISSIMO}(\text{CAMPIONE}(\text{MJ})) \rrbracket = 1 \text{ iff } \forall s' \in \kappa(s): \text{Champion}(\text{MJ})^{s'} = 1$$

For example, if the relevant criterion is represented by the amount of talent, the intensifier specifies that Michael Jordan qualifies as a champion for any possible value of talent that we may adopt as a threshold to distinguish between champions and non champions, thus yielding a strengthening effect, together with the inference that the referent is unquestionably part of the extension of the noun. In sum, the mechanism through which this effect is achieved is the same as the one that I outlined for gradable and imprecision-based predicates. In all cases, the predicate comes with an extension that can vary depending on the way in which a contextual parameter is fixed, allowing *-issimo* to eliminate such a range of variability.

Let us turn now to nouns like *lampuga*, which can also be modified by *-issimo*, and with which the suffix appears to single out a quintessential member of the category.

$$(211) \quad \text{Lampugh-*issima* in Alto Adriatico.}$$

Lampugh--ISSIMO in northern Adriatic Sea  
 ‘Quintessential exemplar of dorado-fish caught in northern Adriatic Sea’

The licensing of the suffix in this context poses an apparent problem. Category membership for a noun of this kind is not vague. Rather, it is fixed through a set of objective and clearcut biological

criteria, which typically give rise to no borderline cases. Unsurprisingly, simultaneously asserting and denying the predicate gives rise to a contradiction, contrary to what we have seen for *champion*.

- (212) #*Questo pesce è e non è una lampuga.*  
This fish is and not is a dorado.fish.  
'This fish is and isn't a dorado fish'

Moreover, the interpretation of the noun does not seem to be subject to imprecision; nor is the noun subject to pragmatic restrictors in the way in which quantifiers are. As a result, the extension of the predicate cannot be seen as context-sensitive according to any of the parameters that we discussed above, giving rise to a compositional mismatch between *-issimo* and the argument: because the extension of the property is identical under any counterstance, the effect of *-issimo* trivially says that the individual is part of the category, emerging as completely uninformative with respect to the unintensified form. I argue that in such cases the interpretation of the suffix requires a kind of exceptional accommodation. The interlocutors must share a view that, at least in some contexts, a fish that has all the biological characteristics of a dorado fish might still not count as one. In other words, the interpretability of *-issimo* is contingent on the interlocutors' ability to re-negotiate the meaning of the predicate from a fixed to a context-contingent property. In the new meaning, having the required biological features of a *lampuga* is no longer sufficient to make the cut; to be part of the extension, individuals will also need to satisfy some additional criteria that, contrary to the biological characteristics, are contingent on the context, as well as on the interlocutors' own stances.

Crucially, the conceptual structure of these nouns provides an immediate route to perform such an accommodation. As discussed at large in section 5.2.3, research in both linguistics and psychology (see Section 5.2.3) has convincingly shown that two entities might both unquestionably qualify as instantiations of the property, and yet significantly diverge in the degree to which they embody the quintessential quality(ies) of such a property. On this view, the different degrees to which individuals can be *representative* of a category provide an immediate criterion to perform the accommodation: It is perfectly possible to conceive of borderline cases that could make the cut

in certain contexts but not in others, depending on whether the threshold for what counts as a good example is set. Considered from this perspective, the notion of “goodness of example” emerges as a viable criterion to imbue the meaning of *lampuga* with contextual contingency. It is gradient, and it can genuinely vary from individual to individual, this allowing for the possibility that, under this new meaning, what counts as an instance of *lampuga* under one counterstance might not do so under another one.

(213) *Lampuga*: accommodating contingency

a. **Original meaning:** A fish with the biological characteristics of a *lampuga*

#CCC: For  $x \in \llbracket \text{LAMPUGA} \rrbracket^s: \nexists s' \in \kappa(s): x \notin \llbracket \text{LAMPUGA} \rrbracket$

b. **Accommodated meaning:** A fish with the biological characteristics of a *lampuga* and a good example of *lampuga*

✓CCC For  $x \in \llbracket \text{LAMPUGA} \rrbracket^s: \exists s' \in \kappa(s): x \in \llbracket \text{LAMPUGA} \rrbracket$

Under the accommodated meaning, the right elements are in place for *-issimo* to operate. For an individual to qualify as a *lampughissima*, it has to be the case that the entity qualifies as such under any possible criterion to determine its extension, that is to say, according to any possible threshold that we resort to partitioning the extension of the category between good and not good examples of the property.

(214)  $\llbracket \text{-ISSIMO(LAMPUGA)(x)} \rrbracket = 1$  iff  $\forall s' \in \kappa(s): \text{Dorado.Fish}(x)^{s'} = 1$

Crucially, while accommodation creates room for the context-sensitivity that *-issimo* can target, it is ultimately the interlocutors’ task to coordinate over what the relevant criteria are to distinguish between representative and less representative instances of the property. In other words, because the lexical representation of *lampuga* encodes no information about what it takes to be good example of the category, the speakers will have to access this information from their cognitive representation of the category, which, as has been discussed in the previous sections, might vary greatly from individual to individual. As such, the final interpretation of a sharp noun modified by *-issimo*

ends up requiring considerably much effort, in terms of semantic interpolation and pragmatic coordination, than the one required by the combination of the suffix with genuinely context-sensitive hosts. I will argue below that it is precisely this added semantics/pragmatic complexity that makes the nominal uses much better sites for the emergence of social meaning.

Finally, the proposed account correctly predicts that, in scenarios that re-introduce context sensitivity in association with the original property, *-issimo* can normally quantify over the contextual parameter, with no need to force a shift of the type described here. This emerges, for example, with respect to the hybrid case context outlined in section 2. In situations in which the category of *lampuga* features borderline cases, the extension of the noun can vary depending on the contextual parameter that we adopt to interpret the property, similar to the case of *champion* discussed above. Unsurprisingly, in such cases *-issimo* can be normally used to convey that the individual at stake counts as a member of the category under any criterion used to determine the extension. The same applies to cases of explicit conversational exchanges revolving around whether the property applies or not. Here, as discussed above, the boundaries of the category remain very much sharp. Yet, context sensitivity becomes part of the picture as a consequence of the fact that the same property appears to be resolved in different ways by different speakers. Once again, this makes the counterstance contingency crucial to the interpretation of P, allowing *-issimo* to non-trivially quantify over its possible values. Before moving on to outlining a hypothesis about the socio-semantic mapping, let me just briefly return to *super*, which was discussed in section 5.2.4 as a distributionally similar, yet crucially distinct type of intensifier from *-issimo*.

### **5.3.5 Super: a (special) degree modifier**

I have argued in section 5.2.4 that *super-*, despite having a similar distribution and similar intensifying effects to those of *-issimo*, presents important differences in comparison to the suffix. I discussed three of them in particular. (i) *Super*, contrary to *-issimo*, is limited to degree boosting effects. It cannot target pragmatic halos or domain restrictions. (ii) When occurring with nouns, *super* can operate over a wide range of dimensions associated with the noun, including those that

might be linked to the property only by a contingent relation (e.g., size). *-issimo* is instead limited to the quintessential qualities of the category. (iii) When occurring with nouns, *super* always requires that the individual possess a property to a high degree; in such contexts, instead, *-issimo* can be used to single out a clear case of the predicate, regardless of whether it features a property to a high degree or not. In this section, I sketch out an analysis to capture the contribution of the prefix. The upshot of the proposal is that, contrary to the suffix, *super-* can combine with adjectives and nouns in an equally smooth fashion, with no need to introduce the extra coercion step discussed above.

More specifically, I propose to analyze *super* as a genuine degree operator, adopting the proposal that was instead rejected for *-issimo* in section 5.3.2. The core idea is the following: *super* combines with a gradable property  $G$  and requires that the degree to which a property is instantiated (largely) exceeds a given threshold. Note that a contribution of this type, at least at a coarse-grained level, is essentially similar to the one outlined for degree modifiers, including Italian *molto* and English *very* (see Section 5.2).

(215) *Super*: preliminary denotation

$$\llbracket \text{SUPER} \rrbracket = \lambda G_{\langle d, et \rangle} \lambda x. \exists d [G(x)(d) \wedge d \gg \theta_G]$$

A denotation along these lines would be able to capture the effect of *super-* with gradable predicates, as well as the lack of combinability with imprecision-based ones, which do not lexicalize a scale, and thus cannot supply a degree argument for *super-* to operate on. Yet, it would also run into a serious issue. Because nouns, contrary to gradable predicates, do not lexicalize scales either<sup>18</sup>, they should not be able to supply an open degree argument to the prefix, leading to a compositional mismatch. Yet, while this issue requires modifying the entry proposed in (215), it does not force us to abandon altogether the idea that *super-* is operating over degrees and thresholds in the way in which we did for *-issimo*. In particular, the observations that *super*, contrary to *-issimo*, obtains a systematic degree-boosting effect across categories and is not able to bring about other flavors

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18. Recall that this claim does not hinge on the idea that certain nouns can be analyzed as lexically gradable. As has been discussed extensively, *super-* can indeed combine with putatively gradable and non gradable nouns alike, and is thus orthogonal to this distinction.

of intensification provide compelling evidence to preserving the core of the entry in (215). I argue that what makes *super-* equally amenable to combining with adjectives and nouns is that the prefix, contrary to run-of-the-mill degree modifiers, independently introduces its own measure function in the composition, and thus does not require that the host be gradable in itself. More specifically, *super-* encodes an operator that can retrieve and supply to the composition gradable properties that, while not encoded in the argument of *super-*, are inherently or contextually associated with it. As a result of this particular property, the distribution of *super-* is correctly predicted not to be limited to gradable predicates. While these provide a sufficient condition for the prefix to apply, other properties that make gradable dimensions contextually available can be likewise intensified with no need of special interpolation at the compositional level.

To formalize this idea, I propose that *super-* encodes in its lexical meaning a DIMENSION FUNCTION<sub>C</sub> (henceforth, DM<sub>C</sub>) that retrieves the set of gradable dimensions *D* associated with the property in context *C*. I purposefully leave the requirements on what counts as “associated” rather lax, in light of the observation that *super-* can target a wide array of dimensions, ranging from quintessential to more peripheral ones. I formalize below *D* as a measure function of type  $\langle e, d \rangle$ , which takes an individual and returns the degree to which *D* applies to the individual. For a predicate like *tall*, applying DM trivially yields a scale of tallness, which already constitutes the backbone of the predicate’s denotation. For a predicate like *lampuga*, instead, DM returns a larger set of gradable dimensions, which include (but are obviously not limited to) the size, the strength of the fish once hooked on the line, its taste.

(216) a.  $DM_C = \lambda P_{\langle e,t \rangle} . \{D_{\langle e,d \rangle} : D \text{ is contextually associated with } P\}$

b. Dimension function on gradable adjectives:

$$DM(tall) = \{\lambda d. Tall(x)\}$$

c. Dimension function on nouns:

$$DM(dorado\ fish) = \{\lambda d. Big(x); \lambda d. Strong(x); \lambda d. Tasty(x); \dots\}$$

Assembling the pieces, we get a modified lexical entry for *super-* that preserves the core of the one proposed in (215): the prefix combines with a property *P* and an individual *x*, and requires that

there exist at least one dimension D contextually associated to P for which the value of x largely exceeds a contextual standard.

(217) *Super*: revised denotation

$$\llbracket \text{SUPER} \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle e,t \rangle} \lambda x. \exists D: D_{\langle e,d \rangle} \in \text{DM}(P)_c: P(x) \wedge D(x) \gg \theta_D$$

We can now see how this applies to derive the intended reading of *super* with *alto* and *lampuga*. Let us begin with a gradable adjective. As said above, these predicates lexically encode a scale as part of their denotation. This dimension is trivially retrieved by DM and supplied to *super*. The resulting interpretation is one in which *super* requires that *alto* applies to Marco – that is, that Marco is tall – and that the degree to which Marco is *tall* largely exceeds a contextual standard, thus yielding the intensification effect.<sup>19</sup>

- (218) a.  $\llbracket (\text{SUPER}(\text{ALTO}))(\text{MAR}) \rrbracket = \exists D: D_{\langle e,d \rangle} \in \text{DM}(\text{Alto})_c: \text{Tall}(\text{Mar}) \wedge D(\text{Mar}) \gg \theta_D$   
 b.  $\text{DM}(\text{Alto}) = \{ \lambda x. \text{Tall}(x) \}$   
 c.  $\llbracket (\text{SUPER}(\text{ALTO}))(\text{MAR}) \rrbracket = \text{Tall}(\text{Mar}) \wedge \text{Tall}(\text{Mar}) \gg \theta_{\text{Tall}}$

For a noun like *lampuga*, the mechanism is exactly the same. What changes is that, since the denotation does not lexicalize a scale, there will be a set of multiple dimensions on which *super* can operate. Assuming we are in a context in which size is the relevant dimension, the end result of applying the prefix is that the individual x qualifies as a dorado fish, and that it presents a degree of bigness that largely exceeds the standard.

- (219) a.  $\llbracket (\text{SUPER}(\text{LAMPUGA}))(x) \rrbracket = \exists D: D_{\langle e,d \rangle} \in \text{DM}(\text{Lampuga})_c: \text{Dorado.Fish}(x) \wedge D(x) \gg \theta_D$   
 b.  $\text{DM}(\text{LAMPUGA})_c = \{ \lambda x. \mathbf{Big}(x); \lambda x. \text{Strong}(x); \lambda x. \text{Tasty}(x); \dots \}$   
 c.  $\llbracket (\text{SUPER}(\text{LAMPUGA}))(x) \rrbracket = \text{Dorado.fish}(x) \wedge \mathbf{Big}(x) \gg \theta_{\text{Big}}$

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19. Under this view, *super* does not directly bind the degree argument of *tall* in a way in which a traditional degree modifier like *very* would do. Rather *super-* enters the composition after *tall* has composed with the positive morpheme POS, on a par with what I have also claimed for *-issimo*. Degree modification happens once DM retrieves a dimension from the adjective.

Returning to *-issimo*, the denotation for *super* presents the following substantial differences with respect to the one proposed for the suffix. First, it always operates over degrees and thresholds, even though these need not be lexically supplied by the modified argument. This constitutes a major difference with respect to *-issimo*, which targets a more general contextual parameter that could be instantiated not just by scales, but also by standards of precision and pragmatic restrictions. Second, *super* operates over dimensions that can (although need not) be only loosely or contextually associated with its host. *-issimo*, by contrast, modifies an interpretation parameter associated with the host. As such, it is primarily expressing an evaluation about whether the modified property applies or not, showing a closer connection to the meaning of its host. While this difference is difficult to detect with gradable adjectives, it clearly emerges in the empirically distinct behavior of the two modifiers with respect to nominal intensification. First, whenever category membership is not fixed across contexts and borderline cases are salient, *-issimo* can be licensed as a way to express that an individual unquestionably falls within the extension of the property, regardless of whether it features a property to a high degree; *super-*, by contrast, can be used only for individuals whose value along a property exceeds a standard, and cannot single out entities that are simply clear cases of the category. In addition, the more inherent connection between *-issimo* and the modified property emerges with respect to the effect with sharp nouns like *lampuga*. Even in cases like this, where the effect of the suffix is not about membership alone, *-issimo* can only access the quintessential properties of the category; *super-*, by contrast, can be about any property, even those that are clearly extraneous to what defines the representative members of a property. A third difference between *-issimo* and *super* is that, while the prefix contributes its meaning with the exact same mechanisms across nouns and adjectives, the suffix can only combine with certain nouns through an extra step that coerces the original property into the property of being a good example of it. As I will discuss later on, this asymmetry is going to be crucial to understanding why the social meaning of *-issimo* dramatically changes from adjectives to nouns, while the one of *super-* does not.

### 5.3.6 Interim summary

In this section, I have proposed a denotation of *-issimo* in terms of an operator over contextual parameters, and compared it to the contribution of *super-*, an intensifier that features similar distribution and effects to those of *-issimo*, but encodes a substantially different type of operator. I now turn to the predictions that the semantic properties of *-issimo* allow us to make concerning its suitability to emerge as a carrier of social meaning.

## 5.4 *Issimo* and the socio-semantic mapping: predictions

The discussion thus far has discussed the semantic contribution of *-issimo*, highlighting the ability of the intensifier to operate across a wide array of linguistic environments. It is now possible to take a step back and consider how, in light of the analysis provided in Chapter 4, the semantic and pragmatic properties of the suffix should relate to its social meaning. In this section, I make the following prediction concerning *-issimo*: when occurring with (sharp) nouns, the suffix should emerge as a rich carrier of social meaning; when modifying a genuinely counterstance-contingent predicate, and especially gradable adjectives, the suffix should instead be considerably less likely to be re-analyzed as an index of personal and social characteristics of the speaker. This prediction is based on the same principles that I resorted to in the discussion on *totally*: (i) the pragmatic implications of the semantic meaning for the social relationship between the interlocutors; (ii) the status of the intensifier as a linguistically marked expression, which, by virtue of violating frequentistic or pragmatic expectations, can catch the listener's attention and highlight the social effects of the expression. Against this background, I now proceed to illustrate how the same factors operate to determine the social meaning potential of *-issimo*. My argument is the following. Concerning the speaker-hearer alignment, the use of *-issimo* with nouns requires that both interlocutors converge in re-negotiating a new meaning of the predicate as context sensitive. The need to coordinate on this issue presupposes and recreates an effect of convergence that is instead not present in adjectival uses, where all the parameters of interpretation are supplied by the semantics of the argument.

Concerning markedness, nominal uses of *-issimo* present a mismatch between the semantics of the suffix, which requires that the modified property have a context-variable nature, and the fixed status of the modified property, whose extension is instead determined by clearcut boundaries and is not subject to imprecision. As such, their interpretation requires and fosters a significant amount of pragmatic convergence among language users, while catching the listener's attention thanks to the morpho-syntactic markedness of the suffix with this type of host. Before testing this prediction with a perception experiment, I outline in greater detail the motivation of such an hypothesis on the basis of the semantic meaning of the suffix.

#### **5.4.1 Nominal *-issimo*: establishing a “we”**

As can be recalled from the preceding sections, I argued that speaker-oriented *totally* serves as a pragmatic tool to build inclusiveness by virtue of its status as a Common Ground operator. By conveying the speaker's attitude about a shared space in the conversation, the modifier contributes to increase the mutual knowledge of the interlocutors and, in specific contexts, additionally presupposes evaluative convergence about the proposition. As such, it fosters a stance of epistemic and evaluative proximity between the speaker and the hearer. In the remainder of this section, I argue that the interpretation of nominal uses of the suffix presupposes a shared, nontrivial evaluation of what constitutes the quality that distinguishes the quintessential members of the semantic category from the regular, unmarked ones. As such, the use of the intensifier in combination with nouns requires that the interlocutors are attuned enough to be able to successfully carry out this process, fostering an effect of intersubjective convergence and alignment that closely resembles the one that was observed for speaker-oriented *totally*. The same evaluation is instead not required by the interpretation of *-issimo* with gradable and imprecision-based predicates, where the predicate's extension comes with an inherent space of context-variability that is compositionally targeted by the suffix and is independent from the speakers' particular evaluations. To see this, let us consider the following contrast again.

- (220) a. *Marco è alt-issimo*  
 Marco is tall-ISSIMO  
 ‘The tower is very/extremely tall.’
- b. *Lampugh-issima in Alto Adriatico.*  
 Lampugh--ISSIMO in northern Adriatic Sea  
 ‘Quintessential exemplar of dorado-fish caught in northern Adriatic Sea’}

As discussed in section 5.3, the extension of a predicate like *alto* ‘tall’ inherently introduces a contextual parameter, represented by the threshold used to partition the extension between individuals who count as tall and individuals who don’t. This type of context sensitivity is a lexical property of all relative gradable adjectives and vague predicates. As a result, if a sentence like (220a) is used in an interaction, understanding the contribution of *-issimo* trivially requires that both interlocutors know the meaning of the predicate and accordingly adjust its interpretation to reflect the fact that Marco counts as tall in any possible context of interpretation. Nothing more than basic grammatical knowledge of the language bears on computing the meaning. By contrast, the social implications of using *-issimo* with a predicate whose extension does *not* depend on a context-sensitive parameter of interpretation are much deeper. To see why this is the case, let us break down the steps to interpret an utterance like (220b). As discussed at length, a noun like *lampuga* is normally understood to be neither vague nor imprecision-prone. As such, contrary to what we observed for *tall*, there is no parameter of variability immediately available that *-issimo* can quantify over. Computing the contribution of the suffix in this context thus requires an exceptional accommodation of the meaning as context-sensitive. In particular, both interlocutors need to be able to accommodate that a noun like *lampuga* does not just pick out the fish that instantiate the relevant biological properties of the species, but just those that, besides embodying such characteristics, are also quintessential exemplars of the category. It is precisely at the level of this shift that the alignment between the interlocutors becomes crucial to licensing the interpretation of *-issimo*. Since nothing in the lexical meaning of the noun provides a cue as to what criteria determine the ideal type of a *lampuga*, the use of *-issimo* requires that the interlocutors themselves already share a similar view of what such essential qualities are, or, at least, are in the position of fleshing them

out upon encountering the expression. Crucially, this requirement is interactionally and interpersonally restrictive, as it bears on a stock of shared world knowledge that goes well beyond knowing the lexical entry of the predicate. It cannot be expected to be satisfied by just *any* language user. Regarding (220b), for instance, the speaker must assume that the hearer shares their same view on the quintessential qualities associated with being a dorado fish, and can thus appreciate the sense in which the fish portrayed in the picture qualifies as good example of the category. As such, this state of convergence can only be expected to hold for language users that have enough familiarity with the subject matter: people who are interested in fishing, for example, and, possibly, in fishing that particular species. In this respect, it is not by chance that the reported example was found on a Facebook group dedicated to fishing, and thus presumably browsed only by speakers with enough shared background to make sense of the utterance.

A similar dynamics of inclusiveness also emerges for the interpretation of *-issimo* with more generic categories than the one discussed above. Let us consider the following example.<sup>20</sup>

- (221) *Visto che si avvicina il periodo natalizio, vi consiglio un libr-issimo.*  
Seen that is nearing the period of Christmas, you recommend one book-ISSIMO.  
'Since it's almost Christmas, let me recommend you a quintessential example of book.

Contrary to what is the case for dorado fish, presumably every speaker of Italian is familiar with the semantic category of *book*. A much less reasonable assumption, though, would be to expect that all speakers agree on what qualities distinguish a quintessential representative of the category. Just like a vast amount variation has been unveiled regarding people's individual representations of goodness of example for basic categories like *tree* (Lynch et al. 2000; see Section 5.2.3 for further discussion), it is equally likely that different humans, based on their experience, tastes and interests, have different goodness of example rankings of the individuals that are part of the extension, to the point that a *librissimo* could end up picking out different entities across speakers. Against this high potential for inter-individual variation, the presupposition that the interlocutors align on the relevant set of qualities characterizing the category's ideal type illustrates the non-

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20. <http://photo.buttha.eu/page/6/>

trivial social inclusiveness associated with the semantic contribution of *-issimo*. In other words, by carrying the presumption that the speaker and the hearer share a common view of what makes a quintessential book, the successful interpretation of the suffix requires a convergence that crucially bears on the interlocutors' tastes, interests and practices – that is, their social world – going well beyond a common linguistic knowledge of the lexical meaning of the items that form the sentence.

The emerging picture is one in which, when used in combination with nouns, the semantic contribution of *-issimo* comes with significant implications for the speaker-hearer relationship, indexing a relationship of proximity with the hearer in a way in which one using the suffix with adjectives doesn't. More precisely, aligning on a common representation of the category's ideal type contributes to making the interlocutors parts of a relation of social inclusiveness, establishing "a we" that is as grounded in social factors and world knowledge as it is in shared knowledge of the grammar. The final effect is thus remarkably similar to the one of attitudinal *totally*, although it is arrived at via substantially different semantic routes.

#### **5.4.2 Nominal *-issimo* and compositional markedness**

I have previously argued that, in determining an expression's suitability to emerge as a salient social index, markedness works in synergy with the interactional effects driven by the semantic meaning of the form, highlighting them by making the use of the expression particularly surprising or unexpected to the listener. Concerning speaker-oriented *totally*, I have suggested that markedness arises as a consequence of Horn (1984)'s *division of pragmatic labor*. The intensifier provides a contribution that is already encoded as part of the felicity conditions of an assertion. As such, its presence systematically evokes the contrast with a simpler, intensifier-free alternative that could convey the same propositional content, thus making the intensifier an inherently marked form. Yet, just like it was the case for the interactional effects, the same story cannot be told for *-issimo*. By modifying a property at the level of the descriptive content, I have provided evidence that the suffix always changes the content of the proposition in a non trivial fashion, even when it targets a parameter that is not lexically supplied by the target predicate. As such, an argument for markedness based

on the division of pragmatic labor cannot hold.

In the remainder of this section, I suggest that the use of the suffix with nouns entails a compositional mismatch between the context-sensitivity required by the intensifier and the sharp nature of the meaning of the host. It is this incongruence, which is instead not found with hosts like gradable predicates, that makes nominal uses of *-issimo* marked from at least two perspectives. First, the mismatch between the modifier and the modified property leads to the violation of the listener's expectations, making the suffix particularly likely to catch the addressee's attention. Second, the interpretation of the suffix is associated with a more complex process than is the case for other predicates, requiring a nontrivial amount of pragmatic work to be interpreted. To see why this is the case, let us consider again the contrast between *tall* and *dorado fish* discussed in the previous section. With a vague predicate like *tall*, the semantic composition is rather seamless. The adjective comes with context-sensitive parameter, that is bound by the suffix to yield the intensification effect. With a noun like *lampuga*, instead, the composition needs a further step to go through: the sharp boundaries and the lack of imprecision effects associated with the noun gives rise to a mismatch with the semantics of the suffix, which instead requires that the modified property have a context-variable nature. While the accommodation of a counterstance-contingent meaning can fix the problem and, under specific pragmatic conditions, yield a coherent interpretation, the initial violation of the compositional requirements makes *-issimo* with nouns stand out as a highly noticeable use with respect to the regular adjectival ones. Not only does it require a substantial amount of extra work on the part of the hearer, as discussed above; it also represents an environment in which the suffix is not expected in light of the rules of the grammar, and hence is more likely to come off as particularly salient, catching the listener's attention. The heightened noticeability of *-issimo* in this particular environment, in turn, contributes to creating the suitable conditions for the emergence of social meaning, in a similar way to what has been observed for speaker-oriented *totally*, as well as many other cases of socially meaningful variation (see Chapter 4 for discussion).

### 5.4.3 Predictions

In this section, I have argued that the nominal usage of *-issimo* stands out with respect to its adjectival counterpart in two respects: it fosters a stance of heightened alignment between the speakers by presupposing that they share a joint representation of the essential qualities that define a semantic category; it forces a complex accommodation process, thus emerging as a marked, more noticeable expression to the listener. The combination of these two factors, in a similar fashion to what we have seen for *totally*, suggests that this particular use of *-issimo* should be an especially suitable environment for the emergence of broader identity-based social meanings. I now proceed to test this hypothesis with a perception experiment, focusing on two main questions. First, is nominal *-issimo* interpreted as a richer index of social qualities than adjectival *-issimo*? Second, given the striking similarity to the pragmatic correlates and the markedness effects of speaker-oriented *totally*, are the social characteristics associated with *-issimo* qualitatively similar to those found for *-totally*? I proceed to investigate these questions in a perception experiment similar to Experiment 1 on *totally* in Chapter 3.

## 5.5 The experiment

To test the questions above, I compare the social perception of *-issimo* in two different environments that maximally differ in terms of interactional implications and markedness: relative gradable adjectives and natural kind nouns. To strengthen the significance of the results, I additionally test the suffix's social meaning against the perception of the intensifier *super*, a word that, as discussed above, can likewise appear in these two environments but does not present substantial differences across them in terms of markedness or compositional properties.

### 5.5.1 Methods

#### Building test scales

As with the studies on *totally*, the first step was to first have a better grasp on the set of salient qualities associated with the use of *-issimo*, so as to collect the necessary materials for building the test scales to use in the experiment. Contrary to what is the case for *totally*, there is a certain dearth of metapragmatic commentaries on the use of *-issimo*, other than the common intuition that, like other intensifiers, it contributes to a sense of heightened emotivity and excitement on the part of the speaker. To collect more substantive evidence, I carried out a pilot study similar to the one described for *totally* in Chapter 3. The study was designed with the software Qualtrics and subsequently circulated via social networks and word of mouth advertising.<sup>21</sup> 50 subjects, who self-declared to be native speakers of Italian and were between 18 and 40 years old, volunteered to participate in the study.

The questionnaire was structured in a similar fashion to the one used for *totally*. In the first part of the study, each subject would see a written sentence containing either an instance of *-issimo* with a noun and with an adjective. Following the sentence, the subject was asked to respond to the following questions. Responses were left open-ended, with unlimited space.

1. Do you think this person is female or male?
2. How old do you think this person is?
3. What kind of person is this person? What do you think they are like?
4. Provide 4 adjectives to describe this person.

In the second part, subjects who saw a nominal use of *-issimo* in the first sentence were presented with an adjectival use, and vice versa. Subsequently, the following questions were asked.

1. How are person A and person B different?

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21. The need to have native speakers of Italian precluded the use of Mechanical Turk for this study.

2. Person A sounds like ... Person B sounds like: ...
3. What kind of people say “totally tall”? What kind of people, instead, say “totally bald”?

Based on the most recurring adjectives in the responses, a total of six evaluation dimensions were selected as particularly salient in connection to the use of the intensifier. Three of these dimensions emerged as positively associated with the use of *-issimo*. I group them under the label of Solidarity attributes, following what was done for *totally*. Three dimensions, instead, were negatively associated with the use of *-issimo*. I call them Status attributes.

- **Solidarity:** Outgoing, Friendly, Excitable
- **Status:** Intelligent, Mature, Poised

Before discussing the design and results of the experiment, it is worth noting that the salient social qualities associated with users of *-issimo* appear to be remarkably similar to those associated with *totally*. In addition, the range of proposed adjectives and the spontaneous extra comments added by some participants at the end of the survey provided initial evidence to the idea that the social indexicality of *-issimo* seems to be considerably stronger with the nominal uses. One participant, for example, pointed out that they would use *-issimo* with nouns only with people they are “extremely close with”; another one observed that they could only imagine people using the suffix in this environment with members of “their own social group”. This suggests that, at least at first sight, the effect of *-issimo* with nouns is remarkably similar to the one of speaker-oriented *totally*, both in terms of the social meaning and the sensitivity to particular semantics/pragmatic environment in which the morpheme is found.

### 5.5.2 Stimuli

Two factors were crossed in a 2x3 design. The first factor manipulated the environment in which the intensifier is found and has two levels: gradable adjectives and nouns. The second factor manipulated the intensifier used in the construction and came with levels: *-issimo*; *super*; and the

bare form, which was used as the baseline condition to isolate the effect on social meaning of the intensifier. The use of *super* is used as a contrast case, in the same way in which *completely* and *really* were used in the experiment on *totally*. As can be recalled from the discussion in the previous section, the two modifiers share the ability to combine with nouns and adjectives alike, even though they contribute their intensification effect through two rather different semantic operators. In particular, while the use of *-issimo* with nouns involves a coercion process that is not required in adjectival uses, *super* combines with both types of host via the same mechanisms, with no difference across the two environments. As I discuss below, this makes *super* a suitable contrast case for the investigation of *-issimo*, yielding the following prediction: whatever semantics-driven difference in social meaning is observed between *-issimo* in nominal and adjectival uses, the same difference should not be observed for *super*.

A full set of stimuli is offered below. 12 items, each with a different set of adjectives, were crossed in a Latin Square Design. The table below provides a full paradigm for an item across all conditions.

(222) a. **-issimo, noun**

*Dopo pranzo Luca ha mangiato un gelati-issimo.*  
 After lunch Luca has eaten a ice.cream-ISSIMO.

b. **Super, noun**

*Dopo pranzo Luca ha mangiato un super gelato.*  
 After lunch Luca has eaten a SUPER ice.cream.

c. **Bare, noun**

*Dopo pranzo Luca ha mangiato un gelato.*  
 After lunch Luca has eaten a ice.cream.

d. **-issimo, adjective**

*Dopo pranzo Luca ha mangiato un gelato gustos-issimo.*  
 After lunch Luca has eaten a ice.cream tasty-ISSIMO.

e. **Super, adjective**

*Dopo pranzo Luca ha mangiato un gelato super-gustoso.*  
 After lunch Luca has eaten an ice.cream SUPER-tasty.

f. **Bare, adjective**

*Dopo pranzo Luca ha mangiato un gelato gustoso.*  
After lunch Luca has eaten a ice.cream tasty.

### Procedure and statistical analysis

Every subject saw a total of 12 written sentences, one sentence for each condition. Each sentence was followed by a series of questions aimed at assessing solidarity-based and non-solidarity-based traits of social meaning discussed above. They were presented in the form of a 1-6 Likert scale, where 1 indicated the minimum value and 6 the maximum value. A full list of the questions, together with the possible answers, is reported below. The original version in Italian, reproduced above, has been omitted here.

(223) **Sentence:** After lunch Luca has eaten a ice.cream-ISSIMO

1. What age do you think the speaker is? Tick all the options that apply.  
Kid / Teenager / Adult / Elderly
2. What do you think the speaker's gender is?  
Male / Could be Either / Female
3. How **intelligent** does the speaker sound? 1 ..... 6
4. How **mature** does the speaker sound? 1 ..... 6
5. How **poised** does the speaker sound? 1 ..... 6
6. How **friendly** does the speaker sound? 1 ..... 6
7. How **outgoing** does the speaker sound? 1 ..... 6
8. How **excitable** does the speaker sound? 1 ..... 6

The study was created with Qualtrics and carried out online. 32 self-declared native speakers of Italian, age 18-35, offered voluntary participation to the experiment. For statistical analysis, mixed effects models were run for each attribute with the R statistical package *lmer4* (Bates et al. 2014). The fixed effect predictors included Host and Intensifier and their interactions, and the random effects included at least random intercepts for subjects and items. When a higher-level main effect

or interaction was significant, I followed up with posthoc paired-comparisons between the relevant conditions, with particular attention towards the following. First, I am interested in testing, within each type of host, the independent effect of *-issimo* and *super-* on the social perception of the sentence. To do so, I first plan to compare, within each kind of host, the perception of each modifier with the social perception of the bare form.

- {-issimo/Super-} vs bare {Adjective/Noun}

When any of these comparisons yielded a significant effects for both modifiers, I carried out the following comparisons. The contrasts were assessed on the values resulting from subtracting the score of the bare form from the scores of each intensifier, so as to control for any other impact on social perception due to factors other than the intensifier (e.g., the adjectives or the nouns selected in the stimuli).

- *Within intensifier*: Adjectives vs Nouns
- *Across intensifier*: *-issimo* vs *super*

In light of the discussion above, I make the following predictions concerning the effects of the intensifiers on social meaning:

1. *-issimo* with nouns should be a significantly more salient index of social meaning than *-issimo* with adjectives
2. No significant difference should be observed in social meaning between *super* with adjectives and *super* with nouns

All pairwise comparisons were carried out with a Tukey HSD Test by using the *Multcomp* package in R.<sup>22</sup>

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22. The function `glht(Model, linfct=mcp(factor="Tukey"))` was used to generate p values.

### 5.5.3 Results

For each category of tested attributes, I first report the summary of the main effect and interactions in a dedicated table and then the results for the comparisons discussed above.

#### Age

As in the study of *totally*, age was first converted from a categorical to a numerical variable. Every life stage provided in the multiple choice response was assigned a numerical score with increasing value, where Kid=1, Teenager=2, Adult=3 and Elderly=4. This ensures that the higher the Age score, the higher the perceived age of the speaker.<sup>23</sup> The table below reports the summary of the mixed effects model. Main effects of Intensifier and Host were found, as well as an interaction between them.

Table 5.2: Expt. 3: Mixed effect model summary for Age perception

Age score	F-value	p-value
Intensifier	60.41	<.001
Host	17.61	<.001
Host:Int	12.41	<.001

The scores are plotted in Figure 5.1 below.

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23. In case multiple life stages were chosen, the average was calculated. For instance, if a subject selected “Kid” and “Teenager”, the resulting score would be  $(2+1)/2=1.5$ , which returns an intermediate value between the two categories.

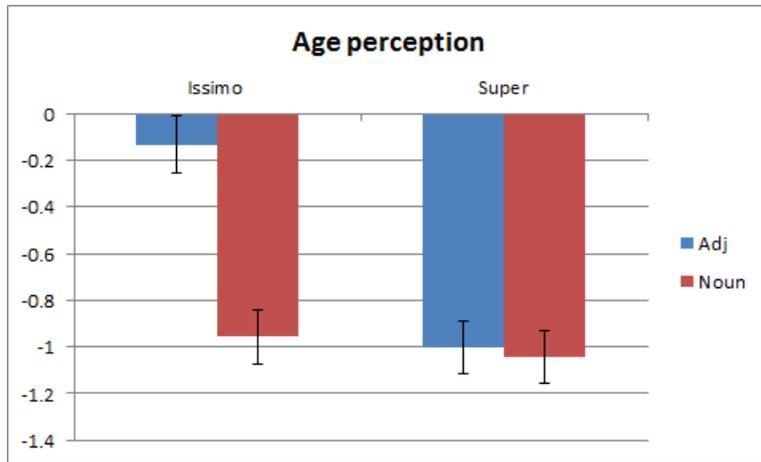


Figure 5.1: Age perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of each intensifier and the positive, non intensified form. The X-Axis groups the different intensifiers.

### Intensifiers vs bare forms

Table 5.3 reports the differences between the age perception of the sentence with the intensifier and the perception of the sentence with the bare form for the corresponding adjective type. Results for *totally* are in bold face, with significant contrasts indicated with \*.<sup>24</sup> Concerning *-issimo*, we observe that the suffix made the perception of age significantly decrease with nouns but not with adjectives. *Super*, by contrast, caused a significant lowering of the perceived age across hosts.

Table 5.3: Perception for Age: differentials

Attribute	Adjective			Noun		
	Base	Issimo	Super	Base	Issimo	Super
Age	2.57	-.13	*** -1.04	2.54	***-.96	*** -1.00

### Within intensifier: Adjectives vs Nouns

*-issimo* with nouns recorded a much stronger effect than *-issimo* with adjectives ( $p < .001$ ). No difference is found for *super* ( $p > .5$ ).

24. \*= $p < .05$ , \*\*= $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*= $p < .001$

Across intensifier: -issimo vs super-

Within adjectives, *super* recorded a much stronger lowering effect than *-issimo*. Within nouns, no difference is observed between the two intensifiers ( $p > .5$ ).

### Gender

As with Age, Gender was converted into a numerical dependent variable, with “Male” =1, “Could be either” = 2 and “Female” = 3. Hence, the higher the resulting score, the higher the likelihood that the person was perceived to be female. Table 5.4 below reports the summary of the mixed effects model. No main effects or interactions are found. The scores are plotted in Figure 5.2.

Table 5.4: Mixed effect model summary for Gender perception

Age score	F-value	p-value
Intensifier	1.47	-
Host	1.29	-
Host:Int	0.57	-

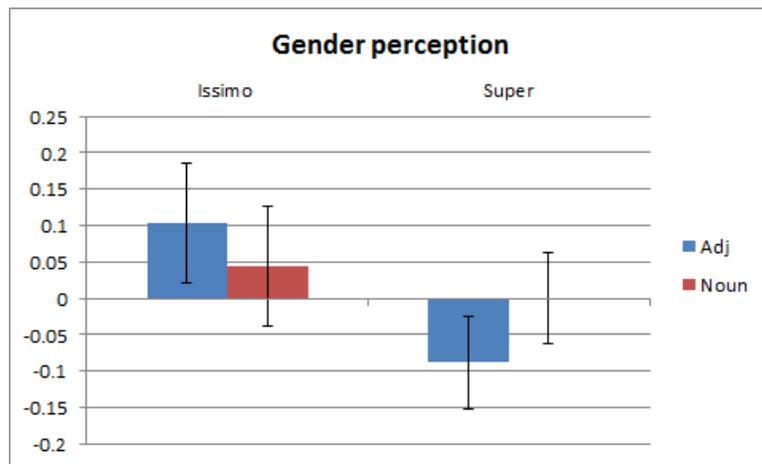


Figure 5.2: Gender perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of each intensifier and the positive, non intensified form. The X-Axis groups the different intensifiers.

## **Solidarity**

Table 5.5 reports the summary of the mixed effects model for all Solidarity attributes, showing main effects of Intensifier and Host, as well as a significant interaction between them.

Table 5.5: Mixed effect model summary for Solidarity attributes

Factor	Excitable		Outgoing		Friendly		Average	
	F-value	p-value	F-value	p-value	F-value	p-value	F-value	p-value
Intensifier	63.66	<.001	48.38	<.001	6.26	<.01	60.14	<.001
Host	7.03	<.01	22.05	<.001	1.33	-	13.44	<.001
Host:Int	8.33	<.001	5.69	<.01	3.21	<.05	8.99	<.001

The scores are plotted in Figure 5.3 below.

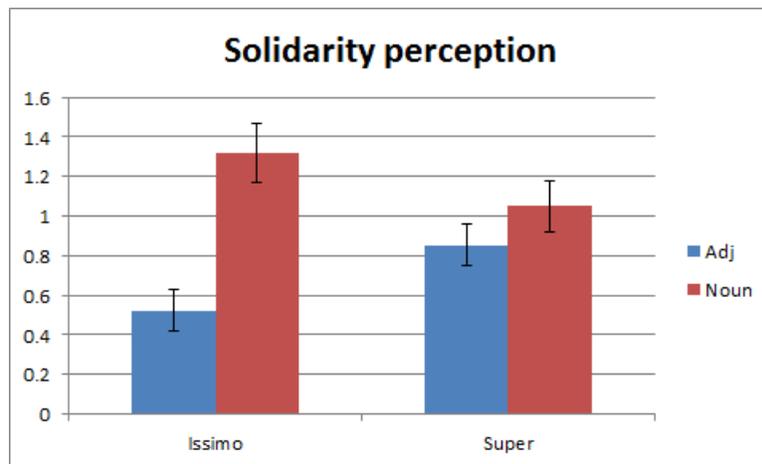


Figure 5.3: Average of Solidarity attributes perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of each intensifier and the positive, non intensified form. The X-Axis groups the different intensifiers based on their host.

### Intensifiers vs bare forms

Table 5.6 reports the contrasts between each intensifier and the corresponding bare form for each Solidarity attribute, with significant contrasts indicated with \*. Both *-issimo* and *super-* significantly raised the perception of all Solidarity attributes across both kinds of hosts. The only exception is Friendly, for which *-issimo* with adjectives did not change the perceived social meaning (even though it showed a consistent trend with the other scores)

Table 5.6: Perception for Solidarity: differentials

Attribute	Adjective			Noun		
	Base	Issimo	Super	Base	Issimo	Super
Out	3.26	+**.63	***+1.00	3.11	*** +1.44	*** +1.19
Excit	3.20	+**.76	***+1.11	2.98	*** +1.86	*** +1.55
Friendly	2.83	+.17	**+.44	2.82	***+.64	*+.39
Avg	3.05	**+.52	***+.85	3.02	*** +1.32	*** +1.05

Within intensifier: Adjectives vs Nouns

The perception of *-issimo* with nouns was significantly higher than with adjectives (all  $ps < .001$ ); no difference was found between between adjectives and nouns for *super* (all  $ps > .05$ ).

Across intensifier: *-issimo* vs *super-*

Within adjective, *-issimo* is perceived as lower than *super* for all attributes (all  $ps < .01$ ); within noun, no significant difference is found between *-issimo* and *super-*, although *-issimo* features a trend to record higher scores than *super* for all attributes that nears statistical significance (all  $ps < .08$ ).

**Status**

Table 5.7 reports the summary of the mixed effects model for all Status attributes. The analysis revealed a main effect of Intensifier and Host, as well as a significant interaction between them.

Table 5.7: Mixed effect model summary for Status attributes

Factor	Mature		Smart		Articulate		Average	
	F-value	p-value	F-value	p-value	F-value	p-value	F-value	p-value
Intensifier	37.73	<.001	17.98	<.001	40.77	<.001	43.12	<.001
Host	50.23	<.001	34.26	<.001	32.30	<.001	53.40	<.001
Host:Int	17.86	<.001	8.62	<.001	9.89	<.001	15.65	<.001

The scores are plotted in Figure 5.4 below.

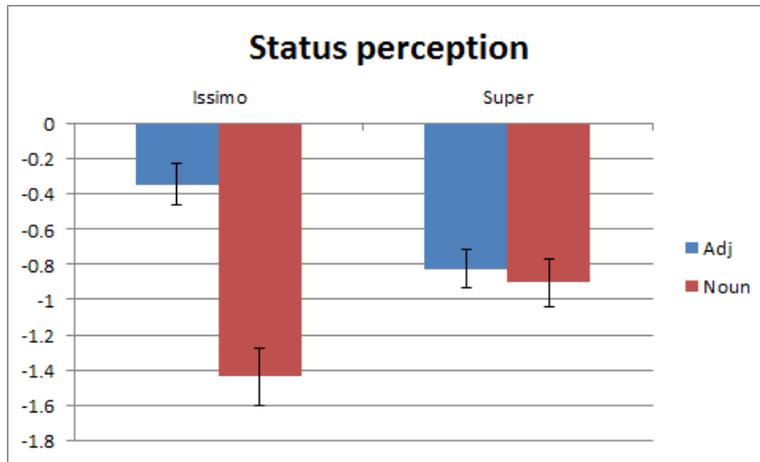


Figure 5.4: Average of Status perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction between the score of each intensifier and the positive, non intensified form. The X-Axis groups the different intensifiers based on their host.

### Intensifiers vs bare forms

Table 5.8 reports the contrasts between each intensifier and the corresponding bare form for Status attributes, with significant contrasts indicated with \*. As Table 5.8 shows, the effect of *-issimo* is not uniform across hosts and attributes. For Mature and Smart, the suffix caused a significant lowering of the perception with nouns, but did not have a significant effect with adjectives (although both attributes show a lowering trend). Concerning Poised, the analysis revealed an impact for the suffix across both hosts. By contrast, *super-* significantly lowered the perception across both kinds of hosts for both attributes.

Table 5.8: Perception for Solidarity: differentials

Attribute	Adjective			Noun		
	Base	Issimo	Super	Base	Issimo	Super
Mat	4.16	-.35	***-1.07	3.75	***-1.54	***-0.85
Sma	3.73	-.10	**-.50	3.60	***-1.14	***-0.88
Poised	4.20	**-.57	***-.89	3.97	***-1.61	***-.97
Avg	4.03	-.34	***-.82	3.77	***-1.44	***-.90

### Within intensifier: Adjectives vs Nouns

For all attributes, *-issimo* had a much stronger effect with nouns than with adjectives ( $p < .001$ ). Concerning *super*, no difference was found between nouns and adjectives.

#### Across intensifier: *-issimo* vs *super-*

Concerning the contrast between *-issimo* and *super*, *super* recorded a significantly lower value than *-issimo* with adjectives across all attributes (all  $ps < .01$ ); the pattern is reversed with nouns, with which *-issimo* is perceived as significantly lower than *super-* (all  $ps < .01$ ).

#### **5.5.4 Discussion**

Building on the same principles discussed for the case study of *totally*, I tested the hypothesis that the use of *-issimo* with nouns should be a particularly ripe site for the emergence of social meaning. I verified this prediction by focusing on two comparisons: (i) the contrast between the perception of *-issimo* with nouns and with adjectives, where the suffix should be less prone to carry social meaning; (ii) the contrast between the social meaning fluctuation of *-issimo* and *super-* across nouns and adjectives, where the prefix, contrary to *-issimo*, is predicted not to feature social meaning differences between the two types of argument. As I now turn to discuss, both predictions are borne out. Notably, the findings also reveal an unexpected pattern with respect to the social indexicality of *super-* that, while tangential for the analysis of *-issimo*, raises some intriguing questions concerning the relation between semantic and social meaning. I now turn to discuss these issues separately, starting from the two crucial contrasts outlined above.

#### **Nominal *-issimo*: an expected carrier of social meaning**

Concerning the first hypothesis, *issimo* showed a systematic difference in social meaning between nominal and adjectival uses. When occurring with nouns, the suffix always brings about a substantial effect on the social perception in the predicted direction. By contrast, the effect of *-issimo* on gradable adjectives is not present for all attributes; and even when it is present, it is remarkably

weaker than the one of *-issimo* with nouns. This result confirms the prediction that the suffix in nominal environments should be a more suitable site for the emergence of social meaning. While gradable adjectives immediately provide the right conditions for the suffix to contribute its intensifying effect, nouns require an accommodation process, which requires the interlocutors to align on a shared evaluation of the quintessential properties. This makes nominal uses of *-issimo* highly marked, as well as more conducive to a stance of convergence than the adjectival ones.

Second, the same discrepancy between nominal and adjectival uses does *not* emerge for *super*. The prefix turns out to have a stable effect on social meaning with both hosts, which does not systematically differ between nouns and adjectives. This result is also predicted from the semantic analysis. While the compositional mechanism underlying the contribution of *-issimo* with nouns significantly differ from the one underlying the contribution with adjectives, I have argued that the same does not hold for *super*, whose compositional properties are uniform across the two types of hosts. The emerging picture from the contrast between the modifiers is that differences in the semantic composition are correlated with differences in the social indexicality, once again pointing to the core semantic meaning of linguistic expressions as an important factor to cast light on their potential to become carriers of social meanings.

### ***Super-*: an unexpected carrier of social meaning?**

While the results confirm the prediction that no difference in social meaning should emerge between adjectival and nominal uses of *super*, it is independently striking that *super-* tends to have a rather strong impact on the social meanings of the sentence across both kinds of hosts, making speakers sound consistently and remarkably younger, higher in Solidarity and lower in Status. This observation, in light of the semantics of the prefix, is not entirely expected. Contrary to the nominal uses of *-issimo*, the use of *super* with either adjectives or nouns does not seem particularly outstanding from a semantic standpoint, neither in terms of its pragmatic indexical effects nor in terms of its morpho-syntactic markedness. The question therefore arises as to why *super* nevertheless emerges as an overall ripe site for the emergence of social meaning, despite not meet-

ing the semantic and pragmatic profile that we would normally expect for social meaning carriers like *-issimo* and *totally*. I suggest two possible explanations that could cast light on this observation. First, it must be noted that *super* is a rather infrequent strategy of intensification across the board. In particular, its frequency with adjectives is remarkably lower than the one of *-issimo* in the same environments, as indicated by a search on the La Repubblica Corpus of Italian (*-issimo* with Adjectives = 296,000, *super* with adjectives = 1,106). The relative rarity of the use of *super*, rather than its semantic and pragmatic profile, could be the factor making the prefix a suitable form to take on social meanings, making it come across as an overall unexpected, and then inherently noticeable, linguistic choice on the part of the speaker with respect to other intensifiers. Under this view, *super*'s social salience would be essentially grounded in its frequentistic distribution, suggesting that, perhaps unsurprisingly, the emergence of social meaning in intensifiers is also subject to the same “non-semantic” constraints that have been widely discussed for zero copula, sounds and other linguistic forms. A second possibility could be that the social meaning of *super-* is affected by semantic/pragmatic factors other than those that have been discussed for *totally* and *-issimo*, and which apply independently of the linguistic environment in which the intensifier is found. For example, it could be the case that the boosting effect of *super-* is especially strong in comparison to other intensifying expressions in Italian, triggering an iconic association between extreme values on a scale and high degrees of exaggeration and emotivity that would significantly contribute to the emergence of social meaning. By the same token, the exceptionally high boosting effect would make the use of the morpheme a marked expression with respect to weaker modifiers that could have been used in the same place, thus making it more noticeable to the listener's attention. Under this view, *super*'s suitability to become an index of social qualities would be related to its semantics through an alternative route to the one outlined for the two main case studies of this dissertation, pointing to a further modality of interaction between social and semantic meaning that opens up intriguing scenarios for further investigative endeavors (see Section 6.3).

## 5.6 The broader picture

In this section, I situate the results of *-issimo* in the broader picture that has emerged in the course of the thesis, focusing on the relationship between semantic and social meaning in intensification. First, I discuss the similarities and differences between the suffix and the properties of *totally*. Second, I suggest a parallel between the semantic and pragmatic process at play with nominal uses of *-issimo* and another domain in which the use of intensifiers requires coercion: adnominal uses of English intensifiers to create *ad hoc* typicality scales.

### 5.6.1 *-issimo* vs *totally*

On a general level, these findings reveal that the social indexicality of *-issimo* is remarkably similar to the one of *totally*. Not only does the social meaning of the Italian suffix correlate with the semantic/pragmatic properties of the carrier in a parallel way to what we have observed for the English adverb; the specific sets of social attributes conveyed by the intensifiers are also largely overlapping, as they both turn out to be associated with language users that are younger, score higher in terms of solidarity attributes and lower in terms of status ones. The emerging picture is one in which the same semantics/pragmatic constraints on social meaning operate for multiple expressions and across multiple languages, suggesting that the behavior of *totally*, rather than being an idiosyncrasy of this specific lexical item, reflects more general properties of intensifiers. This observation is particularly important in light of the fact that, as discussed at length, the semantics of *totally* and *-issimo* are *not* identical, supporting the idea that it is the general combination of pragmatic convergence and markedness, rather than the specific operators encoded by these two intensifiers, that make these forms suitable carriers of social meaning.

At the same time, it is important to notice that the two intensifiers also feature some important differences in terms of their social meanings. I focus on two observations in particular. To begin with, although both the social meaning of *-issimo* and *totally* are sensitive to semantic environment, the social contribution of the suffix appears to be stronger than the one of *totally* in the most unmarked environment. In other words, while *totally* only displays a very weak trend to affect the

social meaning of the sentence in its lexical variant, *-issimo* with gradable adjectives does have a more robust effect on the social perception. Observing this difference it itself is not particularly surprising. Claiming that the social meaning of intensifiers is affected by their semantic properties, in fact, does not entail that all intensifiers should have the exact same social indexicality. Yet, it remains an open question whether this empirical difference, just like the observed similarities, is also grounded in the semantic properties of the two morphemes. A possible explanation of the stronger social impact of *-issimo* in the unmarked condition could be related to the fact that the suffix, besides quantifying over contexts of interpretation, has also been claimed to contribute an *expressive* contribution, whereby it conveys that the speaker is in a heightened emotive state while uttering the proposition (see Beltrama and Bochnak 2015 for further discussion). While this component of the meaning of *-issimo* has not been discussed here – it should be at work for adjectival and nominal uses alike, and thus would not allow us to make any prediction concerning the difference between these environments – its presence as part of *-issimo*'s conventional meaning and simultaneous absence in *totally*'s one might be responsible for the fact that the suffix affects the social perception even in the most unmarked environment, especially with respect to those personal characteristics that are more closely connected to high levels of emotivity. Another possibility would be that part of *issimo*'s social meaning, even with gradable adjectives, is related to a remnant of the superlative function that the suffix used to have in Latin, which more easily cues the association with extreme values. Note that this possibility would resonate with the idea that extremeness on a scale could be another, independent source of mapping between semantic and social content, as already suggested for *super-* above.

### **5.6.2 Very San Francisco, so New York: a parallel case?**

I have argued that a crucial factor making nominal uses of *-issimo* salient indexes of social meaning is the requirement of a common evaluation of what counts as a quintessential member of a certain category. As discussed in section 5.4, because quintessential qualities are not specified anywhere in the lexical material, the use of the suffix presupposes that speakers and hearers share a joint

evaluation of what these qualities are, or are at least in the position of coming up with one in the here and now of the interaction. Note, however, that this particular pragmatic arrangement is not unique to *-issimo*. On the one hand, it bears resemblance to the dynamics emerging in connection with certain non-lexical uses of *totally* (see Chapter 4). On the other hand, as I now turn to discuss, it is also found in other users of intensifiers that have not been explicitly addressed here. Let us consider, in particular, the following examples of intensifiers that modify proper nouns, where the target arguments can be names of cities, of person or even time intervals.

- (224) a. This bar is {*so/very/completely*} San Francisco.  
b. It was a {*very/completely*} Barack Obama thing to say.  
c. It's a {*very/completely*} 1990 shirt.

None of the arguments of the intensifiers above are gradable. Moreover, although all these nouns do come with a package of associated scalar dimensions (for San Francisco: population size, extension, years of existence), none of these can be targeted by the intensifier. In other words, “this place is so San Francisco” cannot be interpreted as “this place is as big as San Francisco” or “this place is as old as San Francisco”. Instead, the relevant scale appears to be the result of an aggregation of properties associated with the referent via a relation of *typicality*. For example, the evaluation of “a very San Francisco bar” most likely revolves around properties such as “liberal”, “gay-friendly”, “culturally lively”, and other stereotypical attributes that are entirely external to the meaning of the noun per se and emerge as the result of the world knowledge and attitudes that the interlocutors share.<sup>25</sup> This pragmatic requirement carries a crucial implication from a sociolinguistic perspective: in a similar fashion to what I have observed for nominal uses of *-issimo*, the use of an intensifier in this particular linguistic environment forces the interlocutors to mutually construct a consistent notion of “San Francisco-ness”, fleshing out the scale of typicality with at-

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25. When it comes to modeling this semantic mechanism, Bylina (2011) suggests that the modifiers target a scale constructed out of the distance in resemblance between the referent of the proper noun and the individual that is under discussion in the sentence. Such resemblance is precisely measured on the basis of the salient stereotypical properties. In other words, an individual which is “very San Francisco” features a high degree of resemblance to the entity denoted by San Francisco along a set of stereotypical properties which can be measured on both individuals.

tributes that bear on a social relationship of proximity and inclusiveness between the speaker and the hearer, thus contributing the same effect of “establishing a we” that was already described for *-issimo*. From the perspective of social indexicality, the prediction of this observation would be that uses of intensifiers as in (224) should be a particularly ripe site for conveying identity-based qualities and categories about language users. While I leave the investigation of this hypothesis to further research, informal judgments collected on English speakers appear to confirm this intuition, suggesting that, at the very least, uses of *very* with arguments like San Francisco tend to come across as younger and markedly informal as opposed to more canonical uses with gradable predicates like *tall*. If this is confirmed to be true, it would provide further evidence that the social meaning attributes observed for *totally* and *-issimo* are, at least in part, driven by general semantic and pragmatic principles, rather than historical accidents about the evolution of these two particular words in their respective cultural context.

## 5.7 Summary

In this chapter I presented a study of the suffix *-issimo* in Italian. After providing a semantic analysis of this modifier as a quantifier over contexts of interpretation, I predicted that nominal uses of *-issimo*, by virtue of their specific pragmatic implications and heightened markedness should be particularly suitable sites for the emergence of social meaning. The hypothesis was confirmed by the results of a perception experiment, outlining a picture in which the same core semantic and pragmatic principles, though manifesting themselves in different ways, affect the social meaning of the intensifiers in a parallel fashion. In the final chapter of the dissertation, I move on to summarize the main implications of these studies from the perspective of both semantic and social meaning, as well as the interaction between the two.

## Chapter 6

# Taking stock: from intensification to social qualities

In the beginning of the dissertation, I highlighted intensifiers – and specifically intensifiers operating in the absence of gradable predicates – as a window into the interaction between different components of meaning. I focused on two questions in particular. First, what can the study of these expressions reveal about the processes whereby semantic content and pragmatic information conspire to yield the interpretation of linguistic expressions? Second, what do the semantic and pragmatic properties of intensifiers reveal about the linguistic factors that determine the suitability of a linguistic expression to carry social meaning? Having provided an analysis of *totally* in American English and *-issimo* in Italian as case studies, I now revisit the findings of the thesis in light of these issues in section 6.1 and 6.2. In section 6.3 I then proceed to outline several directions of further research that could further expand on such results, leading us to a more comprehensive understanding of how the different components of meaning interact with one another.

### 6.1 Intensification between semantic and pragmatic meaning

On a semantic level, I began from the observation that both intensifiers appear to be able to operate both in the presence and in the absence of gradable predicates. On the one hand, I have proposed

to treating *totally* as polysemous between a lexical use, in which it combines with bounded scales lexicalized by absolute gradable adjectives; and an *attitudinal* use, in which it universally quantifies over possible continuations of the conversation, conveying the speaker's meta-conversational belief that the anchor proposition should be added to the Common Ground. On the other hand, I proposed a unified analysis of *-issimo* in which the suffix combines with a context sensitive predicates and universally quantifies over possible parameters of interpretation of its host, requiring that the individual at stake be within the extension of the property in any possible context of evaluation. The different effects obtained by *-issimo* – degree boosting; slack regulation; quintessence – stem from the particular type of context sensitivity that the host introduces by virtue of its semantic properties.

The emerging picture is one in which gradience in natural language is not only supplied through words that lexicalize a scale as part of their meaning (i.e., gradable predicates), but also manifests itself in connection to a much broader range of semantic and pragmatic phenomena. More specifically, the proposed analyses have shown a number of ways in which the meaning of lexical items and propositions can be subject to *indeterminacy* with respect to the course of action that the interlocutors will take in the continuation of the conversation, in a way that transcends the individual speakers' control. To name some of the discussed cases, the acceptance of subjective assertions in the Common Ground is contingent on every participants' agreement on the assessment at stake; the acceptance of outlandish assertions is contingent on the hearer being willing to overwrite their background assumptions about the world; and the interpretation of imprecision-prone predicates is contingent on the amount of pragmatic tolerance that the participants are willing to apply in the context, which will eventually play a crucial role in determining whether an individual is part of a predicate's extension or not. It is precisely this indeterminacy that makes the meaning of these expressions *weak*, introducing at the pragmatic level the gradience that intensifiers can target and manage. Intensifiers like *totally* and *-issimo*, thus, are not mere manipulators of degree arguments; rather, they broadly emerge as tools that speakers can use to strengthen the message associated with their utterance, staving off the potential sources of weakening that they might encounter. At

the same time, it is remarkable to note that these two modifiers, despite the common ability to operate in the absence of lexical gradability, contribute their meaning via mechanisms encoded at different compositional levels – i.e., at-issue vs non at-issue – and which differentially interact with elements in the linguistic and the discourse context – e.g., subjectivity, discourse structure. The proposed accounts thus point to non-lexical intensification as a linguistically varied phenomenon, where superficially similar expressions specialize in targeting a particular type of indeterminacy, and thus obtain a set of distinct, though similar, effects.

## **6.2 The association with social meaning**

Concerning these intensifiers' social meaning, three perception studies showed that both *totally* and *-issimo* are especially ripe indexes of speaker social qualities. The two modifiers feature a very similar social indexicality, as they are both associated with younger speakers, high levels of Solidarity attributes (e.g., Friendliness, Outgoingness, Excitability) and low levels of Status (e.g., Intelligence, Articulateness, Seriousness). No effect of Gender, however, emerges for either modifier, despite a tendency towards the association with female speakers. I would like to focus on three main implications of these findings.

### **6.2.1 The social indexicality of intensification**

First, while sociolinguistic research has extensively discussed how such content is conveyed through the use of phonemic and morphosyntactic variables, this thesis explores the indexicality of a novel type of variable, exploring a class of expressions that, while widely investigated in variationist sociolinguistics, have surprisingly received little attention with respect to their social indexicality. Overall, the results from the studies suggest that *totally* and *-issimo* are associated with a multi-layered constellation of social attributes, which range from demographic attributes – e.g., age – to more specific speaker qualities. On the one hand, most of these attributes are by-and-large consistent with the findings of variationist studies about the patterns of use of these expressions across demographic space. For instance, the perception of the intensifiers as markers of lower age reflects

the fact that they are generally more frequent among younger speakers (see Chapter 3); by the same token, the high degree of excitability with which they are associated is consistent with the finding that they tend to be used in contexts that emphasize the role of appealing to the hearer's emotions, such as narratives (Brown and Tagliamonte 2012). On the other hand, the indexicality of *totally* and *-issimo* cannot be entirely predicted just on the basis of the categories of speakers that normally use intensifiers. For instance, while most studies claimed that these expressions are more frequently used by females than by males, no such association emerges in the perception data, where the association with female speakers is either nonexistent, or extremely tenuous. Taken together, these results confirm the status of social meaning as a cloud of content that is systematically recognized as part of what linguistic expressions “say” when used in interaction, and which does not merely boil down to *who* uses these expressions more often.

### **6.2.2 The empirical association with semantic meaning**

Second, these results reveal a systematic correlation between the social meaning of *totally* and *-issimo* and the semantic and pragmatic properties of these morphemes. More specifically, the social meaning of these intensifiers appears to be systematically more salient in contexts in which they operate in the absence of a gradable predicate, confirming a generalization that had been mentioned in the previous literature (Zwicky 2011) but never put to the test. At the very least, this observation unveils an empirical association between different domains of meaning, suggesting that differences on the level of semantic and pragmatic content correlate with differences in terms of social perception. On a narrow level, this finding suggests that the choice of exclusively focusing on cases in which intensifiers target gradable predicates, while justified by the methodological demands of the variationist approach (see Chapter 3), comes at the expense of an adequate characterization of the empirical behavior of these expressions, whose sociolinguistic properties cannot indeed be severed from their semantic and pragmatic features. On a broader level, these results provide evidence that the suitability of an expression to operate as a carrier of social meaning is not merely determined by the socio-ideological context, but is also constrained by the structural,

language-internal properties of the form. This result dovetails with the findings from other areas of sociolinguistic investigation, which similarly showed that even minimal variations in the fine-grained phonetic and morpho-syntactic properties of the form under investigation are associated with significant differences in their social indexicality (Squires 2013; Staum Casasanto 2008; Bender 2000; Niedzielski 1999; Campbell-Kibler 2010; D’Onofrio 2015 among others). The emerging picture is one in which listeners rely on knowledge about the type of scale targeted by the intensifier to evaluate the social characteristics of their interlocutor, highlighting semantic and pragmatic properties as another linguistic parameter that can guide social perception.

### **6.2.3 Explaining the connection**

Third, I have argued that for both intensifiers the different layers of meaning, rather than being just correlated, are linked via a principled connection. In particular, I proposed that the semantics/pragmatic features of *totally* and *-issimo* contribute to inform the emergence of their social meaning in two separate, though related, ways. First, I have suggested that interpreting the semantic meaning of these intensifiers requires the interlocutors to engage in a set of pragmatic practices that contribute to the construction of a sense of proximity and inclusiveness between the participants, which involves the linguistic as well as the social dimension. For example, the use of attitudinal *totally* with factual assertions presupposes that both the speaker and the hearer share an evaluation of the proposition as worthy of disbelief and highly relevant to their conversational goals; by the same token, the interpretation of *-issimo* in nominal environments requires that the interlocutors share the same view of what individuals embody the quintessential properties of a category and what don’t; and finally, as discussed by Acton (2014) and Acton and Potts (2014), the presuppositions encoded by demonstratives in certain contexts contribute to constructing a stance of affective convergence between the interlocutors, fostering a sense of solidarity and alignment. In all these cases, when speakers use these expressions they do not just call on the interlocutors’ abstract knowledge of the language, but also on their attitudes, affective stances and background knowledge. The emerging picture is one in which the linguistic *practices* required to interpret

the content of certain expressions act as a liaison between the semantic meaning of such forms and what humans do with them in the here-and-now of the interaction, thus making these expressions particularly amenable to crystallizing as indexes of social qualities and characteristics. It is precisely this impact on the interlocutors' relationship that is shared across the two intensifiers discussed in the dissertation, as well as the other socially meaningful expressions that have been discussed in the previous literature (demonstratives; modals; question tags).

Second, I have argued that both attitudinal *totally* and nominal uses of *-issimo* are semantically marked expressions, either because they add to the utterance complexity without modifying its propositional content (for attitudinal *totally*), or because they involve a mismatch between the compositional requirements of the intensifier and the semantic properties of the host (for nominal *-issimo*). I have suggested that their status as marked variants conspires to make the use of these forms stand out as especially noteworthy, drawing the listener's attention to their interactional effects and thus further contributing to highlighting their social significance. From this perspective, the notion of markedness provides a further bridge between the study of semantics and pragmatics and research centered on social meaning. As discussed in Chapter 4, the claim that markedness correlates with social meaning salience is common to a variety of studies that focused on phonological and morphosyntactic variables. The findings about both intensifiers thus conform to a general property of the linking between social indexicality and linguistic features, helping us situate the results presented in the dissertation in the broader debate concerning the mechanisms that affect the salience of social meaning across different types of variation.

#### **6.2.4 A more comprehensive view**

In sum, the findings of the dissertation reveal a picture in which the semantic, pragmatic and social aspects of intensifiers' meaning closely interact with one another. As discussed throughout the previous chapter, all of these dimensions have turned out to be crucial to understanding the layers of content that *totally* and *-issimo* convey. This suggests a view in which different varieties of meaning, despite their empirical differences, should not be seen as independent modules, as most

research in semantics and sociolinguistics has assumed thus far; rather, they are equally important facets of the “total linguistic fact” (Silverstein 1985) that a linguistic form conveys in a given communicative context.

## **6.3 Further directions**

Observing that the semantic properties of *totally* and *-issimo* contribute to determining these forms’ suitability to serve as social indexes represents a promising start towards a better understanding of the mapping between different layers of meaning. At the same time, these findings crucially open up a number of further questions in the area, suggesting several directions for further work. I focus on two in particular.

### **6.3.1 The role of iconicity**

While this work focused on intensifiers, there appear to be a number of other phenomena that, at first glance, present a high degree of empirical complexity in terms of both their semantic/pragmatic and social meanings, as well as an intuitive connection between the two dimensions. In this regard, an especially intriguing question concerns whether the particular semiotic processes that have been invoked to govern the relationship between signs and social meanings in the domain of phonological variation likewise apply to semantic meaning. In particular, it has been argued that the indexical relation between forms and social qualities has an *iconic* (Irvine and Gal 2000) nature, that is, it is based on a direct resemblance between the social qualities and the nature of the carrier. Examples of this sort abound in previous studies on social meaning. Eckert (2008), for instance, argues that cases of hyperarticulation such as /t/ release typically index precision and attention to detail, where articulatory carefulness in pronouncing the sound analogically translates in carefulness as a social attribute. Likewise, in the study on contours discussed in Chapter 4, Podesva (2011) argues that the use of extreme F0 values serves to construct an “emotionally animated” persona, where high pitch is iconically connected to high emotional involvement. In both cases, the profile of the indexed social meaning is analogically grounded in the acoustic or articulatory properties of the carrier,

providing an example of a motivated connection between language and speaker qualities.

In light of these observations, the question emerges as to whether analogous similarity-based mappings are relied upon by listeners to imbue semantically meaningful forms with social significance. One relevant example, for instance, comes from so called *verbal crutches*, which include discourse markers like *literally* and *like*. As the label suggests, these expressions are negatively seen in metalinguistic discourse as “devoid of meaning”, and hence worthy of being eradicated from speech.

(225) I *literally* finished my shift in an hour.

(226) She’s *like* 85 years old!

Interestingly, the perception of these forms as semantically empty is typically presumed upon as an index of the qualities of their users, triggering an iconic association between the lack of semantic content and the lack of positive qualities of language users. Just sampling a few metalinguistic commentaries provides an idea of the phenomenon, with the following being a prominent one. “[Verbal crutches] make you appear uneducated, ignorant and unable to string a couple of words together”.<sup>1</sup> As such, these expressions provide a promising test case to tap into a different modality of relationship between the social and semantic facets of meaning, where a crucial role is played by the ideological construal of these expressions as ultimately *devoid* of content. A further intriguing case is represented by *slack regulators* like *exactly* and *perfectly*, which have already been discussed at length in the previous parts of the dissertation. While different, these expressions all serve the purpose of boosting the degree of pragmatic precision adopted in the discourse, steering the conversation towards a state in which the interlocutors strictly adhere to the literal meaning of the expressions that they are using. From the perspective of social meaning, a potentially relevant question concerns whether the high degree of pragmatic precision associated with these forms leads listeners to perceive their users as embodying social qualities that likewise revolve around ideas such as “precision”, “articulateness”, “pedantry” and the like, in a similar

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1. Source: <https://www.enterprisealive.ie/connect-with-us/how-to-kill-an-interview/>

way to what has been observed for hyper-articulation of final dental stops. In sum, exploring the role of iconicity in governing these associations would provide another bridge to frame the mapping between semantic and social meaning within the broader principles that have been suggested to drive the emergence of social indexicality across different types of variation.

### **6.3.2 From social to semantic meaning: a bi-directional relationship?**

Another valuable angle to expand on the study of the relationship between semantic and social meaning revolves around the question whether this connection is bi-directional. That is, is it also the case that, just like semantic features can facilitate the emergence of social meanings, social meanings can serve as a cue to inform the semantic interpretation of linguistic forms? As discussed in Chapter 3, a variety of studies have recently illuminated the central role of sociolinguistic knowledge in different areas of language processing, including speech perception (Staum Casasanto 2008; Hay 2009; D’Onofrio 2015) and syntactic parsing (Campbell-Kibler 2010; Weatherholz et al. 2012; Squires 2013). While such investigations unveiled a principled relationship between social and cognitive aspects of linguistic behavior, we know little as to whether this connection likewise extends to the dynamics of meaning interpretation. Once again, intensifiers present an ideal testbed to address this question. A possible critical scenario for a study could be the following, where *totally* is potentially ambiguous between a lexical and an attitudinal reading.

(227) You should *totally* fill out that form.

The underdetermination of *totally*’s interpretation in this example allows for the possibility of testing whether knowledge about the social profile of the speaker can serve as a cue to resolving the ambiguity. *Ceteris paribus*, do listeners tend to interpret *totally* as attitudinal in contexts in which they know that the speaker is a typical user of this variant of the intensifier? Do they tend to interpret *totally* as lexical in contexts in which the speaker is instead *not* a plausible user of attitudinal *totally*? A possible way of testing this would be to resort to a *social priming* paradigm, which has proven highly successful in other domains of language processing (Campbell-Kibler 2010). In this set up, participants are asked to process the critical stimulus after being presented with an

image that evokes a social type that is either highly congruent or highly inconsistent with the most expected users of attitudinal *totally* (e.g., Frat Boys, Valley Girls vs distinguished professors).<sup>2</sup> Observing how listeners flesh out the meaning of intensifiers in relation to the social information that they are provided with would make it possible to tap into the impact of social meaning of semantic interpretation, thus complementing the perspective adopted in the present dissertation. Finding a significant effect, in particular, would allow us to broaden our understanding of the dynamics whereby lexically encoded and contextual information conspire in determining the message conveyed by linguistic forms, thus adding sociolinguistic information to other well known pragmatic factors that inform the interpretation of words and utterances (e.g., discourse structure, Roberts 2012; world knowledge, Frazier 1999).

## 6.4 Conclusion

In this dissertation I have investigated how the semantic and pragmatic properties of two intensifiers affect and inform the social meaning that they convey. The thesis provides three main contributions. First, it furthers our understanding of the mechanisms whereby the lexical and the pragmatic dimensions of linguistic meaning interact with one other to allow for the interpretation of intensifiers in the absence of overt scales. Second, it contributes to the enterprise of investigating social meaning, broadening the exploration of this notion beyond phonological variation and showing that the social meaning associated with an expression is also constrained by its grammatical properties, and not just by the socio-ideological context. Third, and most crucially, it unveils a picture in which the social and the logical properties of linguistic content are connected in a principled fashion. As such, they are not independent modules, but equally important components of the broad domain of meaning.

While these findings represent a promising start, much ground remains to be covered within

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2. Sociolinguistic studies successfully managed to activate these stereotypes with rather simple caricatures, such as a white boy with a skateboard or a skinny blond girl. Highly iconic objects such as shopping bags or even stuffed toys have also been used.

this area of linguistic investigation. As the previous sections of this chapter have suggested, the interaction between different aspects of linguistic meaning lends itself to being explored from a variety of empirical, theoretical and methodological angles that could not be adopted in the present work. It is my most sincere hope that the claims and results of the present dissertation might serve as a useful starting point for scholars interested in making progress in this direction.

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