Exploring metalinguistic intensification. The case of Extreme Degree Modifiers *

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1.   Introduction

Intensifying expressions have received considerable attention in semantics and pragmatics. Recent work, in particular, has unveiled a striking degree of internal complexity within this category, suggesting that intensifiers can be grouped in different subclasses on the basis of their fine-grained semantic and pragmatic properties (Kennedy and McNally 2005, McNabb 2012, Beltrama and Bochnak 2015 among others). In the present paper I focus on *extreme degree modifiers* (henceforth, EDM) – e.g., *flat-out, downright, simply, just* – a class of expressions that have been claimed to specialize in the intensification of adjectives denoting properties to extreme degrees (Morzycki 2012).[1] After showing that EDMs' distribution extends well beyond such adjectives, I propose to analyze these expressions as *metalinguistic intensifiers*, that is, as devices whereby the speaker signals that a certain linguistic expression is the strongest among a set of salient alternatives. Under this analysis, EDMs are pragmatically restricted to contexts in which such weaker alternatives are lexically or pragmatically accessible.

2.   Extreme degree modifiers

Morzycki (2012) observes that modifiers like *flat-out, downright, simply, just* present a particular distributional restriction. While they all contribute an effect of intensification, they are not licensed with just any gradable adjective; instead, they sound felicitous exclusively with *extreme adjectives*, that is with adjectives that denote properties to very high degrees in their positive form (see also Cruse 1986, Paradis 2001, Rett 2008). Due to their sensitivity to adjectival extremeness, Morzycki suggests that these modifiers form a natural

[1] Morzycki discusses a broader range of such modifiers, including *full-on*, *balls-out*, *absolutely* and others. I will not consider these in the present paper, although the proposal outlined here can be easily extended to them as well.

subclass within the broader landscape of degree morphemes, rechristening them *extreme degree modifiers* (henceforth, EDMs). (1) below provides two examples.

(1)   a.   Your shoes are *flat-out/just/simply/downright* huge.   ✓Extreme
       b. ??Your shoes are *flat-out/just/simply/downright* big.   ?? Non-extreme
       c.   Hawaiian pizza is *flat-out/just/simply/downright* fantastic.   ✓Extreme
       d. ??Hawaiian pizza is *flat-out/just/simply/downright* good.   ?? Non-extreme

More precisely, EDMs appear to be in complementary distribution with canonical degree morphemes such as *very* and comparatives, which are felicitous with regular gradable predicates but tend to resist combination wirh extreme adjectives (in (2)).

(2)   Comparatives
       a. ??Godzilla is *more* gigantic than Mothra.   ?? Extreme
       b.   Godzilla is *bigger* than Mothra.   ✓Non-extreme
       c. ??Hawaiian pizza is *more* fantastic than Italian pizza.   ?? Extreme
       d.   Hawaiian pizza is *better* than Italian pizza   ✓Non-extreme

(3)   *Very*
       a. ??Godzilla is *very* gigantic.   ?? Extreme
       b.   Godzilla is *very* big.   ✓Non-extreme
       c. ??Hawaiian pizza is *more* fantastic than Italian pizza.   ?? Extreme
       d.   Hawaiian pizza is *better* than Italian pizza   ✓Non-extreme

Morzycki links the different distributional patterns of regular degree modifiers and EDMs to the different lexical properties of canonical gradable adjectives and extreme adjectives. On the one hand, both types of predicates denoting relation between individuals and degrees, represented below as $<e,dt>$.[2] On the other hand, they differ on the domain restrictions that operate on such degrees. Extreme adjectives require that the degree to which the individual instantiates the property is so high that it is beyond the contextually salient portion of the scale C, which contains the degrees that the listener would have reasonably considered in the context. This condition is represented by the requirement that the individual at stake must instantiate the relevant property to a degree that exceeds Max(C), that is, the maximal degree on the salient portion of the scale C. By contrast, ordinary gradable adjectives involve degrees within C, that is, degrees that the interlocutors would reasonably consider in the conversation. This distinction is reflected in the following lexical entries for *big* and *gigantic*.

(4)   a. $\llbracket \text{BIG}_C \rrbracket_{<e,dt>} = \lambda x\, \lambda d.\, d \in C \wedge \text{Big}(x)(d)$
       b. $\llbracket \text{GIGANTIC}_C \rrbracket_{<e,dt>} = \lambda x\, \lambda d.\, d > \text{Max}(C) \wedge \text{Big}(x)(d)$

Against this background, EDMs and ordinary degree modifiers similarly manipulate the relationship between the degree to which the modified adjective holds and a standard for

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[2]See Cresswell (1976), von Stechow (1984), Heim (2000), Kennedy and McNally (2005) for further discussion on the formal underpinnings of gradable predicates. For an alternative formalization of gradable predicates as encoding measure functions, see Kennedy (2007).

computing its truth conditions, which I will henceforth represent as θ. What determines the complementary distribution of the two modifiers is that they are differentially sensitive to the contextual restriction on the scale denoted by the adjective they combine with. In particular, EDMs encode a *domain widening* operator that broadens the set of salient degrees to the expanded domain C^+, making degrees located in the non-salient, extreme portion of the scale available for modification. More specifically, EDMs' contribution encodes two components. First, they presuppose that the standard of the modified adjective θ is in C^+- C, that is, the portion of the scale that belongs to the widened portion of the scale but not to the original one. Second, they require that the adjective interpreted in the extended domain hold to a degree greater than the standard.[3] By contrast, *very* just requires that the degree to which the property holds be located in the upper portion of the contextually salient portion of the scale and that it exceeds the relevant standard. The entries below reflect this distinction, with the different contextual restructions underlined for the convenience of the reader.

(5)   a. $[\![\text{EDM}]\!]=\lambda\text{Adj}_{<e,dt>}\lambda\text{x}: \theta(\textbf{Adj})\in\textbf{C}^+\textbf{--C}.\exists\text{d}[\text{Adj}_{C+}(\text{x})(\text{d})\wedge\text{d}>\theta(\text{Adj}_{C+}]$

      b. $[\![\text{VERY}]\!]=\lambda\text{Adj}_{<e,dt>}\lambda\text{x}: \exists\text{d}[\textbf{small}(\textbf{Max(C) -- d})\wedge\text{Adj}(\text{x})(\text{d})\wedge\text{d}>\theta(\text{Adj})]$

In light of their different semantics, the complementary distribution of EDMs and *very* follows straightforwardly. By denoting degrees that exceed contextual salience, extreme adjectives immediately satisfy the presupposition that the standard of the adjective be located outside the set of salient degrees. Regular adjectives like *big*, instead, fail to satisfy this presupposition, and are therefore predicted to be generally infelicitous with EDM. As Morzycki notes, the only exception to this generalization comes in contexts where the adjective strongly violates the listener's expectations. For instance, even though *calm* does not denote extreme degrees, the fact that it was not expected to hold in the first place entails that the standard of the adjective is not contextually salient, pragmatically satisfying the presupposition placed by *flat-out*. Changing the context to one in which expectations are not violated, however, significantly worsens the status of the modifier.

(6)   a.   Clyde didn't panic during the earthquake – he was *flat-out* calm.

      b.   ??In his transcendental meditation class, Clyde was *flat-out* calm.

On the other hand, *very* lacks the domain widening mechanism and thus cannot access degrees ouside the salient portion, resulting in infelicity when occurring with extreme adjectives.

3.   Additional data

I now turn to discuss a set of further empirical properties that distinguish EDMs from regular degree modifiers, none of which directly follows from an analysis that treats these expressions as standard manipulators.

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[3]This denotation reproduces Morzycki's proposed analysis of *downright*. While he does suggest that each EDM provides a (slightly) different contribution, I will disregard these distinctions in the paper, treating this denotation as a template for all EDMs.

3.1   Interaction with at-issue operators

To begin with, if EDMs compositionally manipulate the standard of extreme adjectives, they should interact with other operators in the at-issue content, just like *very* and other degree modifiers do. However, this prediction is not borne out, as shown by a variety of diagnostics. First, EDMs, unlike *very*, are degraded under negation. Note that extreme adjectives by themselves can instead appear in the scope of negation.

(7)   a.   #Chicago is not *flat-out* huge/gigantic.
       b.   Chicago is not huge/gigantic.
       c.   Chicago is not *very* big.

Second, EDMs, contrary to *very*, cannot be targeted by denial independently from the rest of the proposition.

(8)   a.   A: The movie was *downright* fantastic.
              B:# No! It was fantastic, but not *downright* fantastic.
       b.   A: The movie was *very* good.
              B: No. It was good, but not *very* good.[4].

Third, EDMs' status significantly worsens when embedded under conditionals' antecedents. Again, *very* and extreme adjectives are instead felicitous in this environment.

(9)   a.   ??If the movie is {*simply/just*} fantastic, we will watch the whole thing.
       b.   If the movie is *very* good, we will watch the whole thing.
       c.   If the movie is fantastic, we will watch the whole thing.

In sum, these diagnostics suggest that EDMs contribute their meaning on a different compositional level than ordinary degree modifiers. Specifically, they appear to behave like other types of expressions that have been argued to operate at the non-at-issue level, including 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).

3.2   Non degree expressions

A further prediction of an account of EDMs as degree modifiers is that they should be ruled out when no degree slot is available, that is, with non-gradable predicates or whenever the degree argument is already saturated by degree morphology. This prediction, however, is not empirically supported, as shown by the following two examples taken from the COCA Corpus (Davies 010). In (10-a) an EDM felicitously combines with a comparative and in (10-b) with a non-gradable quantifier.

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[4]Pitch stress on *very* is required for a felicitous use of the denial. Note that, even with this prosody, EDMs are significantly worse than *very*

(10)   a.   This instrument is not just more efficient but {✓*flat-out*/*very} better.[5]
        b.   Anthony and Gail Uglesich are worn out by years of rising at 4:30 and work-
              ing {*flat-out*/*very} all day.[6]

3.3   Non-extreme adjectives and explicit alternatives

A further property of EDMs is that, while felicitous with extreme adjectives, they are highly
productive with predicates that do not appear to lexicalize extremeness in any obvious way.
Below are reported the three most common adjectives occurring with the following three
EDMs on COCA, with non-extreme adjectives underlined.[7]

(11)   a.   **Downright**: Dangerous (n=62), Hostile(27), Silly(26).
        b.   **Flat-out**:Wrong (n=66), Good(7), Gorgeous(5).
        c.   **Simply**:Wrong(n=154), Right(91), Good(48).

As can be recalled, Morzycki argues that EDMs can indeed be found with non-extreme
adjectives, but only in counterexpectational contexts, in which the property had not been
previously considered. Yet, unexpectedess does not seem to be a necessary condition either
for the use of EDMs with non-extreme adjectives. The examples below, in particular, intu-
itively suggest that the licensing of *flat-out* and *downright* with non-extreme adjectives like
wrong and *nice* seems to be tied to the mention of an explicit alternative in the previous
linguistic context (underlined).

(12)   a.   A form of replay should resume in a game with questionable, or *flat-out
              wrong*, officiating decisions.[8]
        b.   You have not only been fair to Michelle Obama; you've been *downright nice*
              to her.[9]

Note that explicit alternatives appear to be able to license EDMs also with non-adjectival
categories, as shown by the following examples.

(13)   a.   A lot of it has been misinterpreted or *downright* lied about.[10]   VERB
        b.   Cosmo girl levels a gaze suggesting at least pique if not *downright* hostility.[11]

                                                                                        NOUN

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[5]From COCA: Black holes in the middle. By Steve Nad, Astronomy
[6]From COCA: A Lunchtime Institution Set to Overstuff Its Last Po' Boy. By R.W. APPLE Jr., New York
Times
[7]*Just* was excluded because of the ambiguity with an adverbial and a focus particle (≈only) sense.
[8]From COCA: Return of Instant Replay Is a Tough Call, Washington Post
[9]From COCA: Dumbest Things of the Week: Inappropriate Yearbook Photo; Ad Knocking Romney for
Speaking French; Navy SEAL, Jesse Ventura in War of Words, Fox OReilly
[10]From COCA: Marion Jones runs and jumps at immortality Track star exudes confidence in quest. Tom
Weir, USA Today
[11]From COCA: The Cosmopolitan Ideology and the Management of Desire. McMahon, Kathryn. Journal
of Sex Research

3.4 Paraphrases

Finally, EDMs bring about a contribution that is impressionistically different from the one provided by other intensifiers. Rather than boosting the degree to which the property holds, they seem to highlight the literal meaning of the modified predicate, suggesting that no further qualification need be added to adequately describe the current state of the world. Accordingly, they can be paraphrased with an expression like "with no need to add anything else", which recommends the hearer to take the modified predicate's meaning at face value; the same paraphrase is instead not effective for canonical degree modifiers like *very* and *extremely*, whose effect is better described with an expression like "to a high degree". Again, this intuitive difference does not directly follow under an analysis that treats EDMs and *very* alike as standard manipulators alike.

3.5 Interim summary

The observations presented in this section highlight a number of empirical properties that do not directly follow from an account of EDMs as compositional degree modifiers. These include the status of EDMs as non-at-issue operators, their combinability with non-gradable and saturated gradable predicates alike, their cross-categorial distribution and the type of paraphrase that best captures their contribution. In the following section, I account for these properties by outlining an proposal of EDMs as non-truth conditional *metalinguistic* operators. While still accounting for the systematic felicitousness of EDMs with extreme adjectives, the proposed analysis allows us to explain the licensing of EDMs with other types of predicate, as well as for the empirical properties discussed in this section.

4. The proposal

Informally, I propose to recast EDMs as a particular kind of non truth-conditional metalinguistic comment on the part of the speaker, signaling that the modified expression is the strongest among a set of contextually salient alternatives. More precisely, I argue that EDMs can be analyzed as *metalinguistic* scalar particles, which operate at the expressive level and target an ordered sets of expressions that could have been used to describe the same state of affairs. In section 4.1 I outline an informal characterization of the proposal. In section 4.2 I provide the formal analysis. Finally, in section 4.3 I discuss the different licensing sources of EDMs.

4.1 EDMs as metalinguistic operators

It is well know that not all natural language expressions contribute to enriching the propositional content of an utterance; some of them, in particular, specialize in expressing the relationship between the speaker and the *use* of a particular form. Metalinguistic negation, extensively discussed in Horn (1989)'s seminal work, represents a textbook example of this function. In the example below, the use of *not* does not target the truth-conditional content

of *some*, but rather suggests that the use of this particular quantifier is not fully appropriate to desribe the current state of affairs.

(14)   You didn't eat *some* of the cookies, you ate them *all*!

By the same token, it has been argued that degree morphemes sch as comparatives (Mc-Cawley 1998, Giannakidou and Stavrou 2009, Giannakidou and Yoon 2011, Morzycki 2011) and hedges (Bochnak and Csipak 2014) can also operate at the metalinguistic level, modulating, roughly speaking, a gradable attitude of the speaker towards the appropriate-ness of the expression (see section 5 for further detail on the nature of such an attitude).

(15)   a.   Your problems are *more* financial than legal.   Comparative
          b.   They won the match . . . *ish*.   Hedge

I argue that EDMs likewise convey a commentary of the speaker on the status of a par-ticular lexical choice in the context. However, contrary to comparatives and hedges, they do not modify a gradable attitude of the speaker; rather, they flag the superior strength of the chosen form with respect to all the alternatives that could have been used in its place to describe a certain state of affairs. On this view, a sentence like "Mary is downright gor-geous" can be paraphrased in the following way: 'Mary is gorgeous and the speaker signals that "gorgeous" is the strongest expression available to describe Mary'. As it can be seen, such an evaluation adds nothing to the truth-conditions of the sentence. That *gorgeous* is more informative than *good* or *nice* is just a property of the grammar of English that all speakers are presumably familiar with, and does not in any way contribute to refining the representation of the world outlined by the utterance. In this sense, the contribution of an EDM can be seen as metalinguistic. Yet, that fact that these morphemes are descriptively vacuous does not make them pragmatically redundant. In fact, in the right conditions, these expressions can serve as a strategy for the speaker to draw the listener's attention to the modified expression, explicitly remarking the fact that all weaker alternatives would be un-derinformative in the context. On this view, EDMs' intensifying contribution arises not via standard boosting, but as a side effect of the fact that the modified expression outranks all the possible alternatives.

4.2   Formalizing the contribution

Before outlining a template denotation for EDMs, I propose that the metalinguistic com-ment contributed by these expressions operate on a separate tier from the rest of the sen-tence. Following Potts (2003)'s framework, I thus analyze EDMs as *expressive* modifiers, with non-at-issue type ε.[12] Treating EDMs as non-at-issue forms allows us to better acount for their lack of interaction with truth-conditional operators and their null contribution to

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[12]See Potts (2003, 2005) for a compositional model of expressive meaning. For the purpose of the current paper, treating EDMs as expressive operators is exclusively meant to capture their lack of interaction with at-issue meaning. It does not implicate in any way, though, that EDMs express a heightened emotive status on the part of the speaker, contrary to the specific expressions (e.g., *fucking*, *damn*) that were first claimed to form the natural class of expressives.

the propositional content discussed in Section 2, a set of properties that are unexpected for standard manipulators. This move is also intuitively correct. If EDMs are remarks on the strength of a linguistic expression, then it makes sense that they compose on a separate compositional tier, which has nothing to do with the content asserted by the proposition.
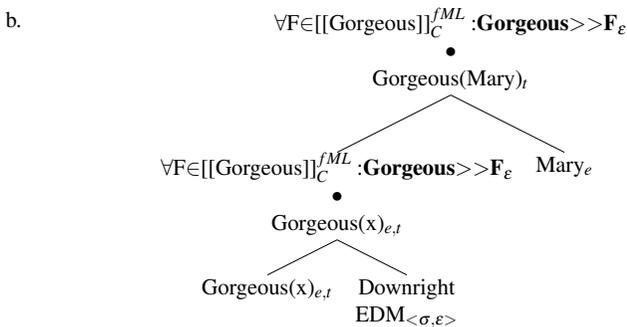
I suggest that the denotation of an EDM consists of two parts: a presupposition that metalinguistic alternatives are available in the first place; and the actual comment that the modified expression outranks in strength all the salient alternatives that could have been used in the context. The first part can be seen as a general admissibility condition of EDMs. Providing a metalinguistic commentary on the strength of an expression only makes a sensible contribution if there is another expression that can used as a term of comparison, and that could have been reasonably used to express a similar meaning. The second part represents the actual metalinguistic comment contributed by the EDM, whereby the speaker signal that any other alternative expression would be weaker than the one that is being used. More specifically, I propose that the metalinguistic comment contributed by EDM is composed of three ingredients. First, a linguistic expression X of flexible type $< \sigma >$; second, a *metalinguistic* focus operator $[[\,]]_C^{fML}$, which provides a set of contextually salient alternative expressions F1,F2,Fn that have identical semantic type to X, and that could have used by the speaker instead of X in context C; third, a strength relationship $>>$ among the alternatives, either lexically or pragmatically determined.

Assembling the pieces, we obtain the following denotation: an EDM combines with an expression X of type σ and, provided that alternatives to X are available, returns the expressive comment of type ε that X outranks all such alternatives.

(16)   a. $[\![\text{EDM}]\!]_{<\sigma,\varepsilon>} = \lambda X_\sigma.: \underline{\exists F_\sigma : F \in [X]]_C^{fML}} \wedge \forall F \in [[X]]_C^{fML} : [\mathbf{X} >> \mathbf{F}]_\varepsilon$

The full semantic representation of a sentence like (17) is offered in (17-b), where e and t are at-issue types, ε is an expressive type and the $\bullet$ operators separates the at-issue from the expressive tier.

(17)   a.   Mary is downright gorgeous.

         b.
$$\forall F \in [[\text{Gorgeous}]]_C^{fML} : \mathbf{Gorgeous} >> \mathbf{F}_\varepsilon$$
$$\bullet$$
$$\text{Gorgeous(Mary)}_t$$

$\forall F \in [[\text{Gorgeous}]]_C^{fML} : \mathbf{Gorgeous} >> \mathbf{F}_\varepsilon \qquad \text{Mary}_e$
$$\bullet$$
$$\text{Gorgeous(x)}_{e,t}$$

$\text{Gorgeous(x)}_{e,t} \qquad$ Downright $\text{EDM}_{<\sigma,\varepsilon>}$

I assume that, in cases of EDM modification, the degree head of extreme adjectives like *gorgeous* is saturated by the silent morpheme POS, which maps the denotation of the adjective to a standard (see Morzycki 2012 for further discussion of POS).

4.3   Constraints

In light of the account proposed here, a crucial requirement for the felicitous status of EDMs is the availability of (weaker) alternatives in the context. I suggest that such alternatives can be provided in two different ways, depending on the nature of the modified predicate: lexically, as is the case with extreme adjectives; and pragmatically, as is the case when alternative expressions are explicitly mentioned in the context. I now turn to discuss each of these two types of licensing.

4.3.1   Lexically provided alternatives

As can be recalled, extreme adjectives are a particularly productive site for the use od EDMs. Under the current analysis, this is not because EDMs directly track standards of comparisons that are located outside of a contextually salient range; rather, it stems from the fact that extreme adjectives lexicalize the strongest expression along a given scale, and thus inherently invoke a set of salient alternatives – i.e. non-extreme, and therefore weaker adjectives – that could have been used to express an evaluation along the same scale. For this reason, such predicates automatically satisfy the presupposition that constrains the licensing of EDMs, regardless of the structure of the discourse in which they are used.

(18) a. $[[\text{GORGEOUS}]]_C^{fML}$={Gorgeous, Nice, Pretty, Beautiful ... }
     b. $[\![\text{DOWNRIGHT GORGEOUS}]\!]=\forall F\in [[\text{Gorgeous}]]_C^f, [\textbf{Gorgeous}>>\{\textbf{Nice, Pretty, Beautiful}\}]_\varepsilon$

On this view, adjectival extremeness emerges as a sufficient, but not a necessary condition for licensing EDMs. Because extreme adjectives lexicalize the strongest expression on a scale, they systematically license modification via EDMs. However, extreme adjectives are not the only type of predicate that lexically evoke weaker alternatives. Consider *wrong*, another adjective that naturally occur with these modifiers. This adjective hardly qualifies as extreme. Intuitively, it does not denote a portion of the scale that is outside contextual salience; rather, it behaves more similarly to regular *absolute* gradable adjectives, whose standard is located at the maximum point of a bounded scale. This is suggested by the fact that *wrong* can combine with a wide range of endpoint-oriented modifiers, which are vice versa infelicitous with extreme adjectives.

(19) a. ??*completely/100%* {awesome, gorgeous} vs ✓*completely/100%* wrong
     b. ??*partially* awesome, gorgeous vs ✓*partially* wrong

Despite not being extreme in Morzycki's sense, I suggest that *wrong* also lexicalizes the strongest available expression on the relevant scale. As such, its use likewise invokes a number of alternative, weaker expressions that could have been used, thus satisfying the

presupposition for the licensing of EDMs. Once again, the use of a modifier like *flat-out* is used by the speaker to signal that the chosen expression outranks all those that are available to express a similar evaluation.[13]

(20) a. $[[\text{WRONG}]]_C^{fML}$ = {Wrong, imprecise, questionable, inaccurate ... }
      b. $[\![\text{ FLAT-OUT WRONG}]\!]$ = $\forall F \in$ [[Wrong]]$_C$, [**Wrong**>>{**imprecise, questionable, inaccurate**}]$_\varepsilon$

4.3.2 Pragmatically provided alternatives

We have seen that EDMs are also licensed with expressions that do not lexicalize the strongest expression along a given scale. A relevant example is reproduced below, where *nice* is intuitively outranked by potential alternatives such as *wonderful* or *great*, and is therefore predicted to give rise to an infelicitous combination when used with these modifiers out of the blue. Yet, the discourse can still license the use of an EDM by explicitly evoking (at least) a weaker expression, and thus constructing a salient set of alternatives "on the fly" that can satisfy the presupposition for the use of EDMs. Once again, the presence of an EDM signals that the modified form outranks in strength its competitor. Note that, when alternatives are discursively supplied, the set of salient alternatives contains only two elements: the modified expression, and the one that was explicitly mentioned in the context.

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

(22) a. $[[\text{Nice}]]_C^{fML}$ = {Nice, Fair}
      b. $[\![\text{DOWNRIGHT NICE}]\!]$ = $\forall$ F $\in$ [[]]$_C$, [**Nice**>>**Fair**]$_\varepsilon$

Crucially, because the strength relationship between the alternatives is not determined by a lexicalized scale but is contingent on the particular scenario in which the utterance is produced, we predict that in a different context *fair* might outrank *nice*, and that in such a context it should be possible to use an EDM to modify the former. This prediction is borne out, as shown in the following example.

(23) **Context**: We are at a cocktail party. Being nice is the norm, but some people, despite acting nice, can have really unfair behavior.   Fair >> Nice

      ✓You have not only been nice to Michelle Obama; you've been *downright fair* to her.

Note the same is not possible when the alternatives are lexically provided, such as in the case of extreme adjectives. Because the relative strength of an extreme adjective and a

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[13]Given the face-threatening character of this adjective, it could be the case that politeness considerations make the alternatives particularly salient. In other words, even in situations that satisfy the truth-conditions for *wrong*, speakers could be under pragmatic pressure to use a milder expression. Because of this, the use of *wrong* or other negative adjectives could come across as particularly marked, thus justifying the speaker's move to metalinguistically remark the strenght of the adjective.

canonical gradable adjective is determined is by their logical meaning, it holds independently of the scenario in which the expression is used. As a consequence, it is simply not possible to come up with a context in which an EDM can modify *nice* but not gorgeous.

(24)   #Mary did not looked gorgeous; she looked *downright beautiful*.

4.4   Summary and outstanding issues

In the proposed analysis, EDMs have been modeled as metalinguistic comments whereby the speaker flags the strength of the modified expression with respect to a set of salient alternatives. On this view, the strengthening effect of these modifiers comes about indirectly, via comparison with weaker alternatives, rather than via standard boosting. Grounding the admissibility condition of EDMs in the availability of metalinguistic alternatives, rather than in the nature of the standard of comparison, allows us to account for the observation that, in the right type of context, EDMs can be found across a wide variety of syntactic categories, and with gradable and non-gradable predicates alike. In addition, analyzing EDMs as expressive modifiers as opposed to syntactic heads binding the degree slot of a gradable predicate, correctly derives their truth-conditional inertia, as well as their apparent lack of interaction with the operators in the descriptive content.

At the same time, while the analysis seems to be on the right track to capture the distribution of these expressions, a number of issues remain open for further investigation. I would like to briefly mention two. First, the proposed account predicts that, in any Horn scale, the strongest expression available should always license EDMs. Yet, this is not always the case. Although universal quantifiers are sometimes attested with EDMs (see exampes like (10-b) above), *everyone* in the sentence below appears to show fluctuating acceptability with *downright* and *flat-out*. This suggests that, despite their combinability with a variety of expressions, EDMs might still exhibit a preference for particular syntactic categories as opposed to other.[14]

(25)   ?*Downright/Flat-out* everyone came to the party.

Second, while the proposed analysis relies on a focus-like mechanism for generating alternatives, it says nothing about the connection between metalinguistic focus operators and regular, non-metalinguistic ones. It is striking to observe, however, that EDMs like *just* and *simply*, in addition to their metalinguistic use, can also be deployed as canonical focus operators, suggesting that the connection between the two varieties is presumably not random. Ideally, a viable account of the meaning of these modifiers should be able to derive both the metalinguistic and regular focus constriction in a unified fashion.[15]

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[14]The single question mark here indicates fluctuation among speakers in assessing the acceptability of the sentence.

[15]I thank Kyle Rawlins for this observation.

5.   The broader picture

Looking at the broader picture, the proposed analysis contributes to enriching the typology of metalinguistic morphemes, suggesting that expressions operating on this dimension, besides performing comparison and hedging, can also bring about a strenghtening effect. In this final section, I briefly discuss the difference between the proposed analysis and the mechanisms that have been previously invoked to model other metalinguistic morphemes, suggesting that the behavior of EDMs cannot be captured by simply extending the proposals outlined for comparatives and hedges.

On the one hand, Giannakidou and Stavrou (2009) and Giannakidou and Yoon (2011) argue that metalinguistic comparatives in English, Greek and Korean involve a comparison between the degree of speaker's *preference* towards the use of a particular expression. On this view, a sentence like (26) is paraphrasable as "The speaker prefers the use of *big* to the use of *comfortable*."

(26)   The house is *more* big than comfortable.

At first sight, this notion can be extended to EDMs as well, arguing that these modifiers raise the degree of speaker's preference towards using the modified expression in the context. If this were the case, however, we would predict the distribution of EDMs would be as unconstrained as the distribution of metalinguistic comparatives: expressing one's own preference towards the use of an expressions should be in principle always possible, regardless of the expression at stake. Yet, we have seen that this prediction is not borne out, as EDMs' are constrained by both the type of predicate that they modify and the specific discourse configuration in which they are used. For instance, modifying *big* with *flat-out* does not sound as felicitous as using a metalinguistic comparative morpheme.

(27)   ??The house is *flat-out* big.

On the other hand, Morzycki (2011) and Bochnak and Csipak (2014) suggested that metalinguistic operators manipulate te *pragmatic halo* of an expression, that is, the amount of deviance from the truth conditions that can be tolerated in the context (Lasersohn 1999). On this view, EDMs could be analyzed as slack regulators, which heighten the precision required to interpret the expression and reduce the size of the halo. While intuitively plausible[16], this analysis predicts that EDMs should be licensed with all predicates that are amenable to being used imprecisely. This, however, is not fully borne out. For example, out of the blue, EDMs appear to be degraded with numerals, which are instead modifiable by slack regulators like *exactly*.

(28)   a. ??There were *downright* 27 people at the party.
             b.   There were *exactly* 27 people at the party.

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[16]The intuitive resemblance between EDMs and modifiers targeting halos is briefly discussed in Morzycki (2011)

In sum, neither of the notions previously invoked to formalize metalinguistic hedges and comparatives appears to be directly applicable to EDMs. While both preference and precision bear an intuitive connection to the effect contributed by EDMs, they do not yield the correct predictions concerning the empirical behavior of these modifiers. The emerging picture is one in which different forms of metalinguistic operators, while bringing about intuitively similar contributions, rely on different semantic and pragmatic mechanisms, calling for further research to explore a domain of modification that has received relatively little attention thus far in the formal study of meaning.

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