

# Intensification, Gradability and Social Perception: The Case of *totally*



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**Abstract** The notion of *social meaning* has been widely investigated in sociolinguistic research (Eckert, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 12(4):453–76, 2008); yet, it is rarely considered in experimental semantics, mainly due to the assumption that this type of meaning is relatively independent from the semantic properties of its carrier. Following a recent strand of inquiry (Acton and Potts, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 18(1):3–31, 2014; Glass, *Selected papers from NWAV 43*, 2015; Jeong and Potts, *Proceedings of SALT*, 26, 1–22, 2016), this paper contributes to filling this gap by exploring the role of semantic and pragmatic factors in determining the salience of the social meaning of the intensifier *totally*. Relying on a social perception task, it is shown that listeners perceive the social meaning of this expression—measured in terms of Solidarity and Status attributes—as particularly prominent in situations in which the morpheme combines with a commitment scale provided by the pragmatics, as opposed to when it combines with a scale lexically supplied by the subsequent predicate. This evidence suggests that listeners keep track of semantic information when making social evaluations about speech, pointing to social perception as a novel methodology for research in experimental semantics.

**Keywords** Intensification · Social meaning · Adjectives · Social perception Variation · Markedness

## 1 Introduction: What is Social Meaning?

Scholars in semantics and pragmatics have focused on *meaning* as the conventional content associated with linguistic forms, enriched with inferences drawn from the linguistic and non-linguistic context. In other domains of linguistics, however, the notion of meaning has been investigated under a completely different light. In particular, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists pursue the investigation of *social meaning* (Eckert 1989), that is, the cloud of socio-psychological qualities that expressions convey about language users, which typically range from demographic traits

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(e.g., gender, age) to more local, idiosyncratic categories (e.g., “Jocks”, “Burnouts”, “Yuppies” and similar. See Agha 2005; Podesva 2007 for further discussion). A typical example of social meaning is represented by the use of raised diphthongs in the island of Martha’s Vineyard, investigated in a seminal study by Labov (1963). As tourism from the mainland came to undermine fishing as the main source of income in the local economy, fishermen from the Vineyard began to centralize the pronunciation of diphthongs /ay/ and /aw/ to a much greater extent than any other occupational group on the island, thus turning a generic geographical marker of the island’s dialect into a resource to convey more specific ideological meanings such as “locality”, “loyalty”, and resistance against the looming socio-economic transformations.

Despite the common label, semantic and social content have typically been seen as pertaining to independent domains. Even though they can be both seen as *bits* of content that attach to linguistic forms, a number of empirical observations justify this divide. First, the two types of meaning do not attach to the same units: sounds, for example are devoid of semantic meaning, and yet often carry a rich cloud of social meanings (e.g., Martha’s Vineyard or the association of full releases of /t/ with attributes like “articulate”, “prissy”, “educated”. See Campbell-Kibler (2007) for further discussion). 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 (Silverstein 2003), emerging as more contingent and perspective dependent. Third, while semantic meaning is relatively fixed within a speech community and impermeable to the influence of extra-linguistic factors, social meaning is deeply affected by the broader social, cultural and ideological context, as the discussion above made clear.

At the same time the fact that social meaning has a more fluid nature and is heavily affected by non-linguistic factors does not mean that it lacks systematicity, or that it is blind to the language internal properties of its carriers. Quite the contrary, studies focusing on different phenomena and methodologies have pointed to a principled interaction between the perception of social meaning and language structure and processing. In particular, 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 speech perception (e.g., Niedzielski 1999; Campbell-Kibler 2010; D’Onofrio 2015); and that the social meanings conveyed by phonological variables—e.g., the association between monophthongized diphthongs and the Southern states of the US—survive negation and other environments in which at-issue meanings are normally suppressed, making a case for grouping social meaning together with other types of non-at-issue meaning traditionally investigated in semantics and pragmatics (Smith et al. 2010). In this paper, I aim to expand on these investigations to explore whether the perception of social meaning is constrained, or at least affected, by fine-grained semantic and pragmatic properties of linguistic expressions. Specifically, I focus on the following question: can the compositional mechanism whereby an expression is interpreted affect the expression’s suitability to serve as a vehicle of social meaning?

## 2 *Totally*: A Promising Case Study

Intensifiers, and more broadly modifiers that target scalar dimensions, emerge as a promising test case for this question. On the one hand, they tend to be used more frequently by speakers with specific socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., young and female: Ito and Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte 2008 among others), emerging as a powerful linguistic resource to convey social meanings. Crucially, sociolinguists have been extremely careful to point out that the social meaning of a linguistic form neither boils down to, nor is it directly caused by such correlations between frequency of use and such demographic traits (Ochs 1992; Eckert 2008, 2012 among others). Quite the contrary, the relationship between them is a dialectic one: social meanings of a form feed off of the form's variability across the demographic space; but patterns of use in turn, are constantly reinforced and retransformed by the social meanings that speakers assign to the form.<sup>1</sup> The takeaway is that, while the nexus between patterns of use identity categories and social meanings is a complex one, the life of social meanings is crucially tied to the presence of socially-conditioned linguistic variation, making intensification a good testing ground for the investigation of this type of content.

On the other hand, intensifiers present considerable variation on the semantic front as well, as they appear to be able to contribute their meaning through different compositional mechanisms, including: direct binding of the degree argument supplied by a gradable predicate (Heim 2000; Kennedy and McNally 2005 among others); manipulation of scales grounded in the contextual parameters of interpretation of the expression (Anderson 2013; Beltrama and Bochnak 2015; McNabb 2012); modification of gradable epistemic/emotive attitudes held by the speaker towards the propositional content (Giannakidou and Yoon 2011; Morzycki 2011; Bochnak and Csapak 2014). The empirical richness of these expressions on both the compositional semantic and the sociolinguistic front opens up the possibility of investigating whether a principled relationship links these two dimensions. The present paper explores this issue by focusing on the intensifier *totally*.

### 2.1 *Totally and Social Meaning: A Preliminary Look*

Let us begin by considering the following example accompanying the picture of a cap whose bill has been designed to resemble Donald Duck's beak.<sup>2</sup>

(1) I *totally* had this hat as a child ... The bill *totally* quacks when you squeeze it.

Even a cursory look is sufficient to observe that the use of *totally* in this particular context comes with a somewhat rich social meaning. First, it conveys a flavor of marked informality and reduced social distance, suggesting that the interlocutors are

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<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this issue to my attention.

<sup>2</sup><https://instagram.com/p/zEZEQQqYPY/>.

close to one another, share a set of norms or values and easily agree on the content of the conversation. Besides these effects, the intensifier additionally conveys a set of social attributes about the social identity of its typical users, which track macro-social categories—e.g., young age—as well as more specific personae and social types. This emerges in the following excerpt from the website Urban Dictionary,<sup>3</sup> a popular repository of social stereotypes that can be used to have a preliminary grasp on the social significance of specific linguistic expressions in the sociocultural context of North America. While these commentaries are not sufficient to have an exhaustive map of the social content conveyed by a linguistic variable—they merely reflect those attributes that are stereotypical enough to undergo explicit circulation in a community—they already point to a rather rich constellation of social attributes, highlighting *totally* as a highly salient social meaning carrier.

1. It's a word used by ditzzy young girls that means definitely or for sure.
2. Valley Girl Speak that means "Of course!"
3. A word used by girly girls, poppers, and rich spoiled little brats.
4. A word used for emphasis. Makes you sound kinda cheerleaderish when you use it.

## 2.2 *Totally: Semantic/pragmatic Meaning*

On the semantic and pragmatic front, *totally* likewise presents a rich empirical picture. On a general level, the intensifier combines with a bounded scale and requires that the scalar maximum on such a scale be reached.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely in the way in which this scale is supplied that variation enters the picture. In standard cases, the scale is provided by the following predicate as in (2): both *full* and *agree* come with a bounded ordering hardwired in their lexical meaning, providing *totally* with an argument to operate on. I refer to these cases as *lexical totally*.

- |     |                                       |         |
|-----|---------------------------------------|---------|
| (2) | a. The bus is <i>totally</i> full.    | Lexical |
|     | b. She <i>totally</i> agrees with me. | Lexical |

In other cases (in (3)), though, *totally* combines with predicates that do *not* supply a scale operating on the *commitment* that the speaker has towards the proposition (McCready and Kaufmann 2013; Irwin 2014). I refer to these cases as *speaker-oriented totally*.

<sup>3</sup><http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=totally>.

<sup>4</sup>Authors have put forward different proposal to model this meaning—see Kennedy and McNally (2005) for a degree-based approach and Toledo and Sassoon (2011), Sassoon and Zevakhina (2012) for a non-degree-based one among others. The formalization of the contribution of the modifier in this use is orthogonal to the aims of the current paper, and I will therefore remain agnostic as to whether a degree-based or a non-degree based approach is to be preferred.

- (3) a. You should *totally* click on that link! It's awesome.<sup>5</sup> Speaker-oriented  
 b. A dude *totally* walked off a train, threw his shit down & camped out.<sup>6</sup>  
 Speaker-oriented

Despite sharing reference to maximality, the speaker-oriented usage of *totally* is empirically distinct from the lexical one. First, because it does not combine with a lexical scale it cannot be replaced by modifiers like *partially* and *almost* (in (4a)). Second, it contributes its meaning at the non at-issue level, as shown by the fact that it resists being embedded under questions or negators and it cannot be challenged independently from the rest of the propositional content.<sup>7</sup>

- (4) a. \* You should *partially/almost* click on that link! It's awesome.  
 b. \*You shouldn't *totally* click on that link.  
 c. \*Should he *totally* click on that link?  
 d. She should *totally* click on that link!  
 B: # **No!** She should click on that link, but you're not committed to saying that!

As far as the exact nature of the contribution of *totally* is concerned, I have proposed in my previous work an analysis of the intensifier as a Common Ground managing operator, whereby the speaker expresses the belief that there should be no option other than adding the anchor proposition to the Common Ground. More precisely, adopting the conversational model of Farkas and Bruce (2010) I have argued that *totally* signals that, in view of the speaker's conversational goals, all worlds in possible Common Grounds projected by the assertion (i.e., its Projected Set) should be worlds in which the proposition is true. On this view, speaker-oriented *totally* operates as a universal quantifier over sets of worlds. As such, while it does not target a scale in the traditional sense it still targets a gradient domain of sort, all the while retaining a common semantic core with the maximizing function of the lexical version Beltrama (2018).

An important corollary of this proposal is that, while the intensifier is generally paraphrased with epistemically flavored adverbs like *definitely* or *certainly*.<sup>8</sup> *Totally* is crucially different from these operators, which are instead grounded in private individual certainty of the speaker towards the truth of the proposition. While subtle this difference is empirically substantiated by the lack of interchangeability between *totally* and these adverbs in certain contexts. Let us consider, for example contexts in which the intensifier is used out of the blue such as (3b), reproduced below as (5a).

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

<sup>6</sup><http://bartiodiohalloffame.com/dude-totally-walked-off-a-train-threw-his-shit-down-camped-out-embaracado-station/>.

<sup>7</sup>From this perspective it shows compositional properties similar to other expressions that specify the attitude of the speaker such as expressives (Potts 2005b), certain evidentials (Faller 2002; Murray 2014; Rett and Murray 2013); and other speaker-oriented adverbs, (see Ernst 2009).

<sup>8</sup>The OED added a dedicated entry in 2005: "In weakened use as an intensifier: (modifying an adjective) very, extremely; (modifying a verb) definitely, absolutely."

- (5) a. A dude *totally* walked off a train, threw his shit down & camped out.  
 b. # A dude *certainly/definitely* walked off a train, threw his shit down & camped out.

The content of the sentence is inherently bizarre as it describes a fact that strongly deviates from our background assumptions about the world—e.g. people do not normally camp on train platforms. By pushing for the addition of the proposition to the Common Ground, the presence of *totally* serves as a strategy for the speaker to preemptively address the potential skepticism of the listener, who would have good reasons to question the update on the ground of its low plausibility. On the other hand, without a previous discourse move that openly raises an issue as to whether the proposition is actually true pure epistemic operators like *certainly* and *definitely* sound remarkably less natural than *totally*.

Finally, note that, while it is normally straightforward to distinguish between the speaker-oriented and the lexical version of the intensifier, the boundary between the two uses is less clearcut in particular contexts. This is observed, for instance in occurrences of the intensifier with *extreme* adjectives (Morzycki 2012)—e.g., *awesome amazing*. These adjectives, while gradable do not lexicalize a bounded scale. As such, the presence of *totally* in their proximity is predicted to instantiate the speaker-oriented version of the intensifier. Yet, we observe that, when *totally* modifies these adjectives, it is considerably less deviant than standard cases of speaker-oriented *totally* when we run the diagnostics discussed above.<sup>9</sup> While I will remain agnostic throughout the paper as to what semantic/pragmatic factors are behind this empirical observation, the somewhat murkier status of speaker-oriented *totally* with extreme adjectives will be important to one of the hypotheses that will be laid out with respect to the mapping between the intensifier's semantic and social meaning.<sup>10</sup>

- (6) a. Bob is totally awesome  
 b. ? Bob is {*not totally/almost totally/completely/entirely*} awesome.  
 c. ? Bob is *almost totally* awesome.  
 d. ? Is Bob *totally* awesome?  
 e. ? Bob is *completely/entirely* awesome.

### 3 From Semantic to Social Meaning: Hypotheses

In light of the discussion above the flexibility of *totally* in terms of the type of targeted scale provides a window into the relationship between mechanisms of semantic

<sup>9</sup>The symbol ? indicates a minor degree of deviance.

<sup>10</sup>A possible departure point for an explanation could be rooted in the fact that extreme adjectives themselves pattern somewhat in between relative and absolute ones, as extensively discussed by Morzycki (2012). By referring to properties with an inherently high degree for example they could make it easier for the listener to coerce their open scale into a bounded one as suggested by Paradis (2000).

composition and social meaning, raising the following question: does *totally*'s suitability to convey social information about language users change depending on whether the intensifier targets a lexical or a speaker-oriented scale? Before making a hypothesis about the relationship between these two components, it is first necessary to consider what proposals have been made in the literature to capture the relationship between social meaning and linguistic features on a broader level. I first review the extant literature in this area, focusing on the role of markedness as a bridge between linguistic expressions and the salience of social meaning and then proceed to formulate two hypotheses on the behavior of *totally*.

### 3.1 *Linguistic Constraints on Social Meaning: The Role of Markedness*

#### 3.1.1 Frequentistic Markedness

Since Wolfram (1969) various studies pointed out a positive correlation between markedness and the *salience* of social meaning, observing that, by virtue of their heightened noticeability, marked variants are better designed for conveying social meaning than their unmarked counterparts. Concerning the exact characterization of the notion of noticeability, 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.<sup>11</sup> In a foundational study, Bender (2000) shows that “copula deletion” in African American English is perceived as more strongly associated with African American ethnic identity in environments in which this particular variant is least frequent—eg. before an NP. 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. The contrast is exemplified in (in 7), where  $\emptyset$  represents the absence of an overt auxiliary.

- (7) a. She  $\emptyset$  a nurse.  
b. I don't think John  $\emptyset$  gonna make it.

Similar arguments have been provided for the social meanings carried by phonological variables. Podesva (2011) for example shows that rising contours in declarative sentences, by virtue of being considerably less frequent than falling ones, emerge as a suitable resource for doctors to convey a variety of social meanings, including concern and attentiveness towards the patient; conversely, Jeong and Potts (2016) show that questions asked with falling intonation, the least frequent tune for this

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<sup>11</sup>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”.



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 tends to be restricted to non-stereotypical situations, in which the communicated content extends beyond the bare literal meaning of the expression. 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.<sup>12</sup>

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

In such contexts, the proper noun already identifies a unique referent. As such, the presence of the demonstrative is especially redundant, thus acquiring especially high potential to become socially meaningful through the contrast with the semantically equivalent demonstrative-free alternative that could have been used instead. The authors observe that it is in these contexts that demonstratives are more frequently used by politicians (and, in particular, Sarah Palin) 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.

### 3.2 *Totally and markedness asymmetries*

The emerging picture is one in which linguistic markedness—both in its frequentistic and pragmatic notion—provides a non-social criterion that can set apart suitable and less suitable linguistic carriers of social content, illuminating how the circulation of social meaning can be parasitic on forces that are endemic to the linguistic system, and not just grounded in the socio-cultural ideological landscape. It now becomes possible to consider the specific case of *totally* with a focus on the following question: can the semantic variation that characterizes the intensifier allow us to make prediction concerning the social salience of the different uses of *totally*? As discussed above the two basic variants of the morpheme differ in terms of the dimension that they target: lexical *totally* quantifies over the degrees supplied by the lexical meaning of a bounded predicate; speaker-oriented *totally* quantifies over a scale of pragmatic commitment that is grounded in the speaker's attitude towards the content of the assertion. I argue that this distinction at the semantic level does indeed correspond to a markedness asymmetry between the two uses of *totally* thus leading us to make a clear prediction about what we should expect in terms of social meaning salience.

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<sup>12</sup>The example only holds for languages like English, where proper names do not require a determiner. The same social effects are not predicted to hold, instead, for languages that grammatically require the presence of a determiner in this context, such as Greek, even though, to my knowledge the prediction has not been tested scientifically thus far.

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:

- (10) John's personality is different from Katie's personality.
- (11) 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 (10) is satisfied whenever the two personalities are at least slightly different from one another, (11) is only satisfied in a scenario in which the two personalities have no overlapping whatsoever. While in a less obvious fashion, the same applies to situations in which lexical *totally* occurs next to maximum standard adjectives such as *full*.

- (12) The glass is *full*.
- (13) The glass is *totally* full.

While different proposals have been put forward to model the meaning of the intensifier in this environment, what is common across them is that *totally* affects at the very least the *extension* of the modified predicate thus affecting the propositional content of the utterance in a non-trivial fashion. Under certain accounts (Sassoon and Zevakhina 2012; Toledo and Sassoon 2011), *totally* has been analyzed as an operator that *widens* the comparison class of the predicate. As such, it shifts upwards the standard that we use to determine whether the adjective holds true or not, strengthening the interpretation and affecting its truth conditions. 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*'s 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 even if it does not technically change its truth-conditions.

The same does not apply to speaker-oriented *totally*. First, this version of the intensifier does not affect the propositional content, as shown by the fact that it operates on an independent compositional tier (see Sect. 2.2). Second, the contribution of speaker-oriented *totally* is already part of the sincerity conditions of every 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.<sup>13</sup> Under this view, speaker-oriented *totally* appears to express a pragmatic move that already underlies the speech act that it modifies. As such, the very same

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<sup>13</sup>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).

message could have been conveyed by an utterance without *totally* resulting in the minimal pair below:

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

The contrast between (14a) and (14b) exemplifies a case of markedness based on the division of pragmatic labor, where (14a) is an utterance that, *ceteris paribus* could have been made in a simpler way. As such, the use of *totally* with speaker-oriented scales emerges as an inherently salient: the morpheme adds to the complexity of the utterance while not making any additional contribution to what would have been conveyed without its presence. The seemingly redundant of *totally* in this context thus creates the conditions for the emergence of “extra” meanings. It imbues the presence of the intensifier with special social and pragmatic significance highlighting the social content that it contributes.

### 3.3 *Totally Scale Type and Social Meaning Salience: Hypotheses*

In light of this discussion, speaker-oriented *totally* emerges as a more suitable linguistic resource to convey the social identity of its users than lexical *totally* leading us to predict a correlation between the salience of the intensifier's social meaning and the availability of a lexical scale in the linguistic context. More specifically, I hypothesize that the intensifier should be more likely to be interpreted as a social marker when it occurs in contexts that make no bounded scale lexically available thus making a speaker-oriented interpretation the only possible one. Conversely, the social meaning should be less salient when *totally* combines with a bounded gradable predicate and thus can receive a lexical interpretation.

- (15) **Hypothesis 1:** *Totally* is more likely to be interpreted as a carrier of social meanings when it targets a speaker-oriented rather than a lexical scale.

If this hypothesis is confirmed, the question emerges as to whether the salience of social meaning reflects the gradience of the distinction between the two semantic variants of *totally* discussed in the end of Sect. 2.2. If this is the case I hypothesize that, with extreme adjectives, the social meaning of *totally* should have intermediate salience between the lexical and the speaker-oriented use given the fact that, while a bounded lexical scale is not available it can be easily coerced.

- (16) **Hypothesis 2:** The social meaning of *totally* should be most salient for clear cases of speaker-oriented *totally*; least salient for clear cases of lexical *totally*; and intermediate with *extreme adjectives*.

I test these hypotheses via a social perception experiment.

## 4 The Experiment

### 4.1 Methods

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). This method has two important advantages for our purposes. First, it provides the opportunity of manipulating the type of scale targeted by *totally* in different sentences while leaving the rest of the proposition unchanged, allowing 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, it 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 test questions about the linguistic factors that constrain the perception of social meaning, just like the one addressed in this paper.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4.1.1 Building Test Scales

As the first step, I conducted a preliminary study to construct the evaluation scales to be used to measure social meaning in the actual experiment. 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. First, each subject saw in written a sentence containing an instance of lexical *totally* and one of speaker-oriented *totally*. The order in which the two instances was randomized, so that each subject saw either an instance of lexical or speaker-oriented *totally* first.

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<sup>14</sup>An obvious disadvantage of this methodology, by contrast, 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 which 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 in isolation obviously comes with a price in terms of empirical simplification.

For each sentence each subject was asked to provide four adjectives to describe its imagined speaker by filling out blank spaces on a computer screen. Based on the most recurring adjectives in the responses, a total of eight social attributes describing the listener were selected as particularly salient in connection with the use of the intensifier: four of them are predicted to be positively affected, while four of them are instead predicted to be negatively affected by the presence of *totally*. I label these sets of dimensions Solidarity and Status attributes respectively, using them as the dimensions of social evaluation to tap into the social meaning of *totally*.

- **Solidarity:** Friendliness, Coolness, Outgoingness, Excitability
- **Status:** Articulateness, Maturity, Intelligence Seriousness<sup>15</sup>

For clarification purposes, it is important to observe that adopting the Solidarity and Status categories is primarily motivated by the convenience of having a conventional term that uniquely identifies each class of social evaluation scales, while at the same time connecting with the labels commonly used in the literature on social perception studies and language attitudes (Lambert et al. 1960; Campbell-Kibler 2010 among others). Thus, while most of the scales can indeed be seen as loosely related to either social proximity (i.e. solidarity) or social distance (i.e., status), I do not intend to make a specific commitment to claiming that each of the attributes related to these notions in a strict sense.

#### 4.1.2 Stimuli

Two factors were crossed in a  $3 \times 4$  design. The first factor manipulates the semantic variant of *totally* along the lexical vs speaker-oriented 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 (*maximum standard*) *absolute adjectives* (Kennedy and McNally 2005), which lexicalize a bounded scale as part of their lexical meaning (e.g., “bald”). To cue the speaker-oriented reading, instead, open-scale *relative adjectives* (e.g., “tall”), which offer a commitment scale as the only possible target for the intensifier. In addition, *extreme adjectives* (e.g., “awesome”) were used as an intermediate case between the two other categories. I predict that *totally* affects the social perception of the speaker of the sentence in the following way (Table 1). In the other factor, the type of modifier accompanying the adjective came in four different conditions: the target intensifier, *totally*; two control intensifiers, *really* and *completely* and the positive non-intensified form. On the one hand, *completely* contrary to *totally* is exclusively able to target lexical scales. As such, it cannot modify speaker-oriented scales, resulting in ungrammaticality when used with an

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<sup>15</sup>Note that, for building the scales predicted to be negatively affected by the intensifier, I took into consideration both adjectives referring to a high degree of their antonym and adjectives negating the quality itself. For example the decision to adopt “Intelligent” as a dimension negatively impacted by *totally* was motivated by subjects entering both “unintelligent” and “dumb” as descriptors of the speaker in the pilot.

**Table 1** Critical conditions and predictions

Adjective type	Bounded scale availability	Markedness of totally	Social meaning salience
Absolute	✓	Low	Low
Extreme	≈	Medium	Medium
Relative	No	High	High

open-scale 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 any type of scalar predicate (McNabb 2012; Constantinescu 2011). Since all the adjectives used in the experiment are indeed scalar, 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 positive form 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.<sup>16</sup> Table 2 provides a full paradigm for an item across all conditions.

### 4.1.3 Procedure and Statistical Analysis

Every subject saw a total of 12 written sentences, one sentence for each condition.<sup>17</sup> 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.

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

- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| 1. How <b>articulate</b> does the speaker sound?  | 1 .....6 |
| 2. How <b>mature</b> does the speaker sound?      | 1 .....6 |
| 3. How <b>intelligent</b> does the speaker sound? | 1 .....6 |
| 4. How <b>serious</b> does the speaker sound?     | 1 .....6 |

<sup>16</sup>See Appendix for full set of experimental items.

<sup>17</sup>Due to the high number questions following each item, no fillers were used so as to avoid overwhelming subjects throughout the study and help them stay focused at all times.

**Table 2** A full item

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

- 5. How **friendly** does the speaker sound? 1 .....6
- 6. How **outgoing** does the speaker sound? 1 .....6
- 7. How **cool** 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. 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 ran for each attribute with the R statistical package *lmer4* (Bates and Walker 2015). 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 planned paired-comparisons between the relevant conditions. In light of the experimental questions, I am especially interested in comparing each intensifier with the base 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.

**Table 3** 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	<0.001	1.4	–	0.6	–	3.5	<0.05
Adjective	11.0	<0.0001	7.3	<0.0001	1.4	–	6.1	<0.001
Adj:Int	3.4	<0.05	2.3	<0.05	2.5	<0.05	2.3	<0.05

(18) Planned comparisons:

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

## 4.2 Results

For both Solidarity and Status attributes I report the summary of the main effect and interactions in a dedicated table (Tables 3 and 5).<sup>18</sup> I then report the results of the planned comparisons in a separate table for Solidarity and Status attributes.

### 4.2.1 Solidarity

Table 3 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 relative 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.

I now focus on the specific contrasts between intensified forms and the base forms, which allow us to gauge the effect of *totally completely* and *really* in the different linguistic environments in which they were tested. Table 4 reports the differences between the perception of the sentence with the intensifier and the perception of the sentence with the base form for the corresponding adjective type. Results for *totally* are in bold face. Other significant contrasts between intensifier and base form are indicated with \*, with threshold for significance set at  $p < .05$ .

For all attributes, *totally* with relative adjectives was perceived as significantly higher than the corresponding base forms. No significant contrasts are found for *totally* with extreme adjectives or absolute adjectives. With the latter, however, *totally*

<sup>18</sup>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))`.

**Table 4** Perception for Solidarity attributes: differentials

Attribute	Relative			Extreme			Absolute		
	Base	Tot	Dif	Base	Tot	Dif	Base	Tot	Dif
Exc	3.51	*+ <b>0.61</b>	+0.25	3.80	+0.34	+0.42	3.19	+0.54	-0.05
Out	3.65	*+ <b>0.74</b>	+0.26	4.34	-0.09	+0.14	3.80	+0.05	-0.39
Fri	3.68	*+ <b>0.65</b>	+0.37	4.20	-0.26	-0.03	3.94	+0.00	-0.44
Cool	3.02	*+ <b>0.85</b>	+0.06	3.45	-0.03	+0.26	2.97	+0.17	-0.18
Avg	3.47	*+ <b>0.72</b>	+0.23	3.95	-0.01	+0.20	3.47	+0.19	-0.26

Attribute	Relative			Extreme			Absolute		
	Base	Tot	Dif	Base	Tot	Dif	Base	Tot	Dif
Exc	3.51	*+ <b>0.61</b>	+0.25	3.80	+0.34	+0.42	3.19	+0.54	-0.08
Out	3.65	*+ <b>0.74</b>	+0.26	4.34	-0.09	+0.14	3.80	+0.05	+0.05
Fri	3.68	*+ <b>0.65</b>	+0.34	4.20	-0.26	-0.23	3.94	+0.00	+0.17
Cool	3.02	*+ <b>0.85</b>	-0.02	3.45	-0.03	-0.40	2.97	+0.17	+0.00
Avg	3.47	*+ <b>0.72</b>	+0.14	3.95	-0.01	-0.30	3.47	+0.19	+0.04

**Table 5** 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	<0.001	10.0	<0.0001	8.8	<0.01	10.9	<0.001
Adjective	1.6	–	3.7	<0.05	4.3	<0.05	3.4	<0.05
Adj:Int	3.1	<0.01	1.8	–	2.0	–	1.3	–

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 absolute adjectives tend to lower the perception of solidarity.

#### 4.2.2 Status

Table 5 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 absolute adjectives being rated higher than extreme and relative ones. Finally, an interaction between Intensifier and Adjective is found for Articulate.

As was done for Solidarity attributes, I now focus on the specific contrasts between intensified forms and the base forms. Table 6 reports the differences between the perception of the sentence with the intensifier and the perception of the sentence with the base form for the corresponding adjective type. Results for *totally* are in bold face. Significant contrasts between intensifier and base form are indicated with \*.

For all attributes, *totally* with relative adjectives and with extreme adjectives is perceived as significantly lower than the corresponding base forms. No significant contrasts are found for *totally* with absolute 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 relative adjectives displays a marked trend to decrease the perception with relative adjectives, with effects that near significance (all  $ps < 0.1$ ). At the same time we note that *completely* with absolute 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*.

**Table 6** Perception scores for status attributes: differentials

Att	Relative			Extreme			Absolute			
	Base	Tot	Dif	Base	Tot	Dif	Base	Tot	Dif	
Art	3.68	*-0.87	+0.23	3.91	*-0.86	-0.14	3.47	+0.03	+0.55	-0.02
Mat	3.68	*-0.93	+0.11	4.05	*-1.20	-0.50	3.77	-0.42	+0.31	-0.03
Int	3.60	*-0.84	+0.34	4.00	*-1.03	-0.37	3.77	-0.19	+0.17	+0.08
Ser	4.22	*-1.01	-0.14	4.25	*-1.15	-0.12	4.22	-0.31	+0.00	+0.00
Avg	3.80	*-0.90	+0.13	4.05	*-1.08	-0.28	3.81	-0.23	+0.26	+0.01

## 4.3 Discussion

### 4.3.1 *Totally*

The current study aims to investigate how the social perception of *totally* is affected by variations in the semantic properties of the intensifier across different linguistic contexts. Two hypotheses were tested. First, I predicted that instances in which *totally* targets a speaker-oriented scale should be more likely to be interpreted as carriers of social meaning than cases of lexical *totally*. The prediction is confirmed for all the attributes used in the experiment: when *totally* occurs next to an unbounded adjective in an environment in which only a speaker-oriented reading is licensed, listeners perceive the intensifier as a salient marker of social identity along eight different dimensions. By contrast, when *totally* occurs next to an absolute adjective and a lexical reading is possible the intensifier does not significantly impact the social evaluation of the sentence.

The second hypothesis tested whether the salience of the social meaning would reflect the continuum in the distinction between lexical and speaker-oriented uses, predicting that the social meaning should have intermediate intensity with extreme adjectives. This prediction, however, is not borne out, as we observe that for none of the tested dimensions a continuum along these lines emerges. 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 positive unintensified form. Concerning Status, the effect of *totally* is instead comparable to—in fact, even stronger than—the one observed for relative adjectives. A possible explanation of this result could be that Extreme adjectives, by virtue of referring to properties that are already instantiated to a very high degree tend to come with a considerable emotive charge. As such, they turn out to feature a remarkably high value on their own along Solidarity attributes—as Table 5 shows, the average Solidarity difference between the bare forms of these adjectives and the bare form of relative and absolute adjectives is 0.48, a much wider gap than the one observed for Status attributes—thus masking the independent contribution of *totally*.<sup>19</sup>

The emerging picture is one in which, by and large the (lack of) availability of a lexical scale correlates with the social salience of *totally* in a given context, suggesting a connection between the semantic and the social components of the meaning conveyed by the intensifier. At the same time the data from the experiment do not present conclusive evidence as to whether the social meaning of *totally* is a gradient phenomenon. In other words, is it the case that only the speaker-oriented use has a distinctive independent social meaning, while the lexical use lacks it altogether? Or is it the case that *totally* has the same underlying social meaning across both variants,

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<sup>19</sup>At the same time it must be noted that the Solidarity mean ratings of the positive form of extreme adjectives is still near the middle of the scale rather than being skewed towards the top. As such, it would be hasty to explain the lack of Solidarity effects on *totally* in terms of a ceiling effect of the bare forms. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for directing my attention to this observation.

which is just more salient in the speaker-oriented use and less salient in the lexical one? Possible evidence in favor of the former alternative is that we fail to observe the presence of cases with intermediate social salience as extreme adjectives could have been. On the other hand, evidence in support of the latter is that lexical *totally* features a trend that mirrors the effect observed for its speaker-oriented counterpart, even though the effect is not large enough to reach statistical significance. This suggests that, even in unmarked environments, the intensifier might still be associated with a similar social evaluation, although of much lower perceptual salience. Note however, that the trend observed on the evaluation of lexical *totally* could also be due to a different reason, which further complicates the current picture. In particular, it might be the case that certain subjects gave a speaker-oriented interpretation also to occurrences of *totally* with absolute adjectives, which are indeed in principle ambiguous between the two uses. For example a sentence like “John is *totally* bald” could be taken to either mean that John has zero hair left, or that the speaker is maximally committed to asserting the proposition that John is bald, with the two readings being possibly truth-conditionally distinct. While it is reasonable to expect that, in the absence of further information about the broader discourse context, the lexical interpretation should have been considerably more easily accessible to the subjects than the speaker-oriented one the availability of the latter leaves open the possibility that the weak social effects observed on absolute adjectives could be due to some subjects assigning *totally* the marked interpretation in this environment as well.<sup>20</sup> In sum, while the body of evidence provided by the experiment points to a connection between the semantic and social meaning of *totally* it is not sufficient to make a case either in favor or against the idea that such a social meaning is gradient in nature. I thus leave the exploration of this question to further research.

### 4.3.2 *Completely and Really*

Concerning the effect of the control 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 perception of the sentence with the positive form in a systematic way. This, at the very least, suggests that the effect observed for *totally* with relative adjectives is not due to a mismatch in scalar structure or to the perception of the construction as ungrammatical. If that were the case we should expect to observe the same effect on *completely* which however we don't. At the same time it is worth observing that *completely* closely approximates the effect of *totally* on relative adjectives, nearing statistical significance especially with respect to Status attributes. This finding raises the question as to why *completely* displays

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<sup>20</sup>As an anonymous reviewer suggests, a possible way to further explore the factor(s) driving the social perception of *totally* with absolute adjectives would be to use intonation to disambiguate between the lexical and the speaker-oriented reading, and verify how this impacts the social perception of the intensifier.

a trend that is not featured by *really*. I propose two alternative explanations, which can be explored in further research. One possibility is that the effects of scale type on *completely* are grounded in the ungrammaticality of the combination, rather than to the particular semantic properties of the expression. Saying “completely tall”, in other words, amounts to saying something that is located outside of the grammatical knowledge of the speakers, and then evokes whichever social features are associated with a “default other” who does not fully master the grammar of English.<sup>21</sup> The other possibility is that *completely* is also on the way of grammaticalizing a speaker-oriented meaning similar to the one of *totally*. As such, it begins to display the same markedness effects of *totally* even though it is not deep enough in the grammaticalization trajectory to trigger such effects as consistently as *totally*.<sup>22</sup> This hypothesis would fit in well with the observation that the shift from the lexical to the speaker-oriented domain is rather common for maximizers across languages (see Hoeksema 2011; Tribushinina and Janssen 2011 on Dutch *helmaal*).

## 5 Taking Stock

In this Sect. 1 take stock of the experimental results from a broader angle returning to the original question that informed this article: How can the social meaning of an expression be constrained by its semantic/pragmatic properties?

### 5.1 *Scalarity and Social Meaning Salience*

The experimental findings indicate that the salience of the social meaning associated with *totally* co-varies with the semantic/pragmatic properties of the intensifier. While the presence of speaker-oriented *totally* significantly impacts the social perception of a sentence the presence of lexical *totally* has a much weaker effect. To explain this result, I have argued that speaker-oriented *totally* is a suitable candidate to convey social meaning in virtue of its status as a marked variant. By pragmatically evoking a simpler, semantically equivalent alternative utterance 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

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<sup>21</sup>I thank an anonymous NWAV 44 reviewer for suggesting this explanation.

<sup>22</sup>I thank E. Allyn Smith and Tim Leffel for suggesting, separately and (almost) simultaneously, this explanation.

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 speaker-oriented counterpart does. The emerging picture is one in which, through the mediation of markedness, fine-grained semantic properties like the different types of scales targeted by an intensifier can affect the perception of social meaning. This, in turn, provides preliminary evidence that, when making social evaluations about linguistic form, listeners keep track of the semantic/pragmatic properties of these forms, suggesting that these two types of meaning, while empirically distinct, are also connected in a principled fashion. While a broader empirical basis is necessary to further test this claim, it is interesting to observe that, at first glance intensifiers with similar semantic/pragmatic flexibility to the one shown by *totally* seems to display also a comparable association with social meaning. A particularly relevant example is *so* which can modify gradable predicates (in (19b)) as well as pragmatic attitudes related to speaker commitment (in (19a, see Zwicky 2011; Irwin 2014; Potts 2005a for further discussion).

- (19) a. We are *so* going to lose game tonight.  
 b. John is *so* tall.

In this sense it is quite revealing that the attitudinal variant of *so* has indeed been informally described as a salient carrier of social meanings in comparison to its lexical counterpart, as suggested by labels such as “Generation X *so*” (Zwicky 2011) or “Drama *so*” (Irwin 2014). Such an association provides encouraging, if provisional, evidence that the socio-semantic properties of *totally* might be shared with other intensifiers, thus highlighting the domain of scalarity and gradability as a highly promising venue to continue research on this topic (see Beltrama (2016) for evidence from the Italian suffix *-issimo*).

## 5.2 *Lingering Questions*

As the systematic investigation of the interface between semantic and social meaning has just begun, a number of questions remain open to further investigation. With respect to the particular phenomenon of intensification, I would like to point out two.

### 5.2.1 *Why That Social-Meaning?*

First, 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? Providing a complete answer solely on the basis of the linguistic properties appears to be an ambitious task. It is well known that the outcome of any enregisterment

process is heavily driven by extra-linguistic ideological and historical factors. As Agha (2005) suggests, the social recognition of linguistic features as indexes of speakers 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. Yet, the question remains as to whether such features, 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. I have suggested elsewhere that a possible route to cast light on this issue would be to consider more carefully the attitude conveyed by *totally* in its speaker-oriented use Beltrama (2018). More specifically, there could be a qualitative connection between the solidarity boosting effect of *totally* at the social level and the interpersonal convergence that is associated with the act of emphasizing commitment to adding a proposition to the Common Ground. In other words, given the intersubjective nature of the commitment targeted by *totally* the use of the morpheme could serve as a pragmatic tool to foster agreement and convergence between the interlocutors, thus resulting in the association of the users of *totally* with social qualities that highlight inclusiveness and proximity at the social level. Under this view, the commitment to involving the interlocutor in the construction of the Common Ground percolates 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. If this were true it would then be possible to posit a *constitutive* relationship between *totally* and some of the social attributes, opening up another dimension of interaction between semantic and social content (see Ochs 1992; Moore and Podesva 2009; Acton and Potts 2014; Glass 2015 for similar proposals).

## 5.2.2 The Role of Diachronic Innovations

Second, I would like to briefly elaborate on a possible objection that could be moved to the proposed conclusion of the study: What if social indexicality is not foregrounded by the semantic properties of the variable *per se* but, more simply, by the fact that speaker-oriented *totally* emerged at a later diachronic state than lexical *totally* and is therefore more easily associated with the social features of typical language innovators? Under this view, the association with different degrees of social meaning salience would just be an accident of language change relatively independent from the pragmatics. A way to respond to this observation would be the following: if recency were the only driving factor, we should expect very little difference between speaker-oriented *totally* and *totally* with extreme adjectives.<sup>23</sup> And yet, as shown

<sup>23</sup>A search on the Corpus of Historic American English (COHA, Davies 2010) shows that, while lexical *totally* has been around since the beginning of the 20th century (and, incidentally, also well before), the intensifier in the other two contexts emerged fairly recently, and almost simultaneously. While the attestation of the first occurrence with extreme adjectives predates the first attestation of speaker-oriented *totally* by 20 years, the very low number of occurrences of both contexts in the corpus suggests some caution in taking such a 20 year gap as significant.

in the experiment, the two variants do not behave in the same way. This suggests that, while the current study does not preclude the possibility that recency effects played a role in shaping the social meaning, an account entirely based on diachronic innovation would need to be supported by stronger evidence.

To provide a more definitive response it would be possible to run a follow up study that exclusively focuses on speaker-oriented *totally*. The following contrast suggests a potentially promising environment to test the hypothesis.

- (20) **John:** I can't remember if Luke got married at 25.                      Doubt about *p*  
**Mark:** Yes, he totally got married at 25.
- (21) a. A man totally got off the train, threw his shit down and camped out.  
 b. Iowa senator totally thinks you should be drug tested for child support payments.

In (20), the incongruence between the interlocutor's and the speaker's view provides an explicit justification for the act of stressing commitment to adding the proposition to the Common Ground on the part of John. By contrast, other contexts, for example (21), 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* in contexts like (21) appears to be even more marked than the use in contexts like (20): the act of stressing commitment is not openly called for by the discourse structure but stems from the outlandish/surprising content of the assertion. If markedness is the crucial factor driving the salience of the social meaning, marked cases of speaker-oriented *totally* should therefore be more socially meaningful than unmarked ones, providing a neat empirical ground to argue against the idea that the social meaning differences between lexical and speaker-oriented *totally* are entirely driven by a historical contingency. Evidence supporting this idea is discussed in Beltrama (2016).

## 6 Conclusion

While representing a preliminary step, the current study opens up a novel area of research on the study of meaning, highlighting the interface between social and semantic content as a ripe and largely uncharted, domain of investigation. This line of research, if adequately developed, carries two important implications. On the theoretical level, it can lead us to adopt a more comprehensive view of linguistic meaning, in which social meaning is seen as a *bona fide* type of content to be investigated side by side with the logical and pragmatic properties of expressions. On a methodological level, it points to social perception studies as a promising technique to explore the behavioral correlates of semantic and pragmatic features, expanding the toolbox for the experimental investigation of meaning.

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## Appendix: Experimental Materials

1. Someone found a bottle of wine on the street. It was {totally/really/very/∅} {big/gigantic/full}.
2. The drive from New York to Chicago is {totally/really/very/∅} {long/awful/flat}.
3. Compared to Atlanta, Portland is {totally/really/very/∅} {small/astonishing/quiet}.
4. I just met the new boss. He’s {totally/really/very/∅} {tall/awesome/bald}.
5. I met John’s brother. He’s {totally/really/very/∅} {young/gigantic/different from him}.
6. We jump in it and ...the water was {totally/really/very/∅} {cold/freezing/frozen}.
7. Traveling on the 4th July weekend is {totally/really/very/∅} {pricey/great/unaffordable}.
8. Dad finally found a picture of his wedding, but it’s {totally/really/very/∅} {small/ridiculous/blurry}.
9. The ice cover on the lake is {totally/really/very/∅} {thin/massive/safe} right now.
10. Take a look at this story. It’s {totally/really/very/∅} {deep/amazing/absurd}.
11. Biking from school to the train station is {totally/really/very/∅} {fast/creepy/safe}.
12. The walk home from here is {totally/really/very/∅} {short/gorgeous/straight}.

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