

The Social Meaning of Semantic Properties

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1. Introduction: linguistic constraints on social meaning

Studies within the third wave approach have unveiled the fluid nature of social meanings, showing how speakers can creatively recruit and recombine linguistic resources to make social moves and construct identities. Less explored, though, is the question as to whether there is a motivated connection between social meanings and the grammatical properties of linguistic forms. We believe that tackling this issue would not only help us attain a better understanding of how social indexicality emerges and circulates; it would also illuminate the relationship between socially and grammatically-conditioned variation, shedding light on how a third wave approach can be combined with other perspectives to develop a comprehensive approach to the study of linguistic variation. A growing body of literature has recently taken a step towards addressing this question by asking whether, and how, the semantic meaning of a variant can contribute to determining its socio-indexical value (Acton and Potts 2014; Glass 2015; Jeong and Potts 2016; Acton 2017, this volume). The current paper aims to provide a contribution in this direction by taking into examination the linguistic category of intensifiers, a type of expression that is deeply embedded in both sociolinguistic and semantic variation. Focusing on *totally* in US English and *-issimo* in Italian, we show that these expressions are perceived as more prominent indexes of speaker qualities in contexts in which they combine with non-scalar predicates, and thus require extra work on the part of the interlocutors for being interpreted. These results contribute to our understanding of how social meaning is linguistically grounded, while providing additional support for the generalization that social meanings tend to arise from marked forms across domains of variation (Bender 2000, Campbell-Kibler 2007, Podesva 2011, Acton and Potts 2014).

2. Intensifiers: between sociolinguistic and semantic variation

The category of intensifiers – e.g., *very*, *really*, *so* – has been shown to participate in different levels of language variation.

2.1 Intensifiers and sociolinguistic variation

Extensive work in variationist sociolinguistics has shown that intensifiers are not homogeneously distributed in socio-demographic space, and tend to change rapidly in any speech community (Bolinger 1972; Macaulay 2006; Rickford 2007; Tagliamonte 2008; Tagliamonte and D’Arcy 2009; Brown and Tagliamonte 2012; Kwon 2012 among others). Specifically, it has been claimed that intensifiers’ use correlates with speaker age (Labov

2001; Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2009; Ito and Tagliamonte 2003); gender (Tagliamonte 2005, 2008) and social class (Macaulay 2002); and specific textual genres (Biber 1988; Lim and Hong 2012; Brown and Tagliamonte 2012). Intensifiers have also been claimed to index a rich constellation of social meanings, even though no study, to our knowledge, has specifically explored their social indexicality. Intensification, for instance, has been associated with the construction of a 'high-involvement' style' (Andersen 2000; Brown and Tagliamonte 2012); hyperbole and exaggeration (Paradis 2000); a desire to sound captivating and creative (Bolinger 1972; Waksler 2009); a high degree of solidarity among members of the same group (Anderson 2006); and a stance of rebelliousness and emancipation from institutional norms (Macaulay 2002; Kwon 2012). By the same token, intensifiers can evoke higher level persona-based features. Among others, Zwicky (2011) refers to certain uses of *so* as "Generation X *so*", suggesting an association with young¹ white women in the U.S., "no doubt because of its prominence in the movies *Heathers* (1988) and *Clueless* (1994)" (Zwicky 2011: 4). In sum, sociolinguistic research has highlighted intensifiers as a rich object of investigation for the study of language variation, both with respect to the demographic correlates of the speakers and their social meaning. The factors predicting the variability of these expressions, however, are not limited to the social context. As we now turn to discuss, intensifiers do indeed come in a variety of different variants with respect to their grammatical properties and, more specifically, their semantic meaning.

2.2 Intensifiers and semantic variation

We take semantic meaning to be the content conventionally associated with words, as well as the rules whereby the content of such words can be assembled to produce interpretable sentences. With respect to communication, this type of content crucially underlies language users' ability to describe reality, as well as to judge whether such descriptions are true or false in a particular context. For example, in the sentence below, *very* in (1) tells us that Paul is not just tall, but that he greatly exceeds the minimum height that we consider is necessary to count as a tall person.

(1) Paul is *very* tall.

From this perspective, intensifiers can be classified as "linguistic devices that boost the meaning of a property upwards from an assumed norm" (Quirk et al. 1985). This semantic contribution comes with a basic condition of use: intensifiers require the availability of a scalar, non-discrete dimension (Eckardt 2009), whose intensity they can modulate accordingly. We shall call this requirement the scalarity requirement.

(2) SCALARITY REQUIREMENT: An intensifier modifying S carries the pre-supposition that S is a gradable property.

¹ The adjective "young" is to be understood relative to the time this work was being developed.

Notably, we observe a striking degree of variability in the mechanism through which the requirement is satisfied. In particular, instances of intensification can be classified in two groups. In the most canonical cases, the target scale is directly provided by the semantic meaning of the modified predicate. Let us consider *so* and *totally* in US English and the suffix *-issimo* in Italian. In (3), for instance, both *full* and *tall* are adjectives that inherently encode a scale which can be directly targeted by the two modifiers. Because gradability is supplied in the lexical material surrounding the intensifier, we dub this semantic variant *lexical* intensification.

- (3) a. Bob is so tall!
b. The bus is totally full.
c. Gianni e` alt-issimo.
Gianni is alt-ISSIMO.
'Gianni is extremely tall'.

In other cases, however, no scale is made available by the surrounding expressions. Let us consider (4): the state of dating a person or being employed are intuitively all-or-nothing ones, which hardly lend themselves to be graded²; mahi mahi fish is a biological category, whose membership is defined on a discrete, rather than continuous basis. In all these cases, however, the intensifiers are not only perfectly interpretable; they also retain the boosting function that distinguishes them among other types of modifying expressions in natural language. Given the absence of an explicit scale in the surrounding lexical material, we label this variant of intensification *non-lexical* intensification.

- (4) a. Bob so dated that kind of guy before!
b. True story: This one time? I totally got fired on April Fools Day.
c. Abbiamo appena preso questa lampugh-issima.
We.have just caught this mahi.mahi.fish-ISSIMO.
'We just caught this quintessential mahi mahi fish.'

The source of scalarity in these examples seems to vary from case to case. So in (4-a) and *totally* in (4-b) appear to be intensifying some sort of scalar attitude of the speaker towards the proposition, which we could roughly paraphrase in terms of "certainty" or "surprise" (Irwin 2014; Beltrama 2018); *-issimo* in (4-c), instead, conveys that the exemplar of fish at stake embodies the quintessential properties of the category to a high degree, though it does not specify what these properties might be. The fish could be particularly big, colorful, tasty, but what dimension is relevant ultimately depends on the context (Beltrama and Bochnak 2015). The distinction between lexical and non-lexical intensification raises a number of questions for linguistic analysis. From the perspective of semantics, a growing body of literature has

² It is, of course, possible to conceive of a situation in which two people are "kind of dating"; or in which someone is on the way of being fired, but is still somehow employed. In both such cases, though, gradience is associated with these predicates via world knowledge, rather than being encoded as part of their grammaticalized meaning. In the remainder of the paper, we suggest that intensifiers precisely have the power of associating gradability to non-gradable linguistic objects. We thank Lauren Hall-Lew for commenting on this issue.

aimed to unveil and model the compositional rules whereby intensifiers can combine with non-lexical scales, focusing on the empirical and theoretical differences between lexical and non-lexical intensification, as well as the deeper conceptual connection between them (McNabb 2012b; Beltrama and Bochnak 2015; Bochnak and Csipak 2014; Beltrama 2018). From the perspective of sociolinguistics, the non-homogeneous semantic landscape of intensification raises the issue as to whether, and how, semantic variability is linked to socially-conditioned variability.

2.3 Connecting two realms of variation

Thus far, semantic and sociolinguistic variation have been seen as independent domains in the study of intensification. While the semantic literature has engaged with intensification as an abstract, language-internal phenomenon, the variationist literature by-and-large focused on lexical variants, to the exclusion of non-lexical ones. The decision to restrict the focus to gradable adjectives – a well circumscribed, easily codeable domain – is motivated by the need to find not just the intensifiers themselves, but also the contexts where an intensifier “could have occurred but did not occur” (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003: 263), in compliance with Labov (1972)’s principle of accountability. While justified by the goal of providing a rigorous treatment of the variable’s distribution, this methodological decision comes at the expense of an adequate empirical representation of the phenomenon. From a meaning-based perspective, for example, restricting the focus to gradable adjectives fails to do justice to the semantic complexity of intensification, and in particular the distinction between lexical and non-lexical uses of intensifiers; from a sound-based perspective, furthermore, coding intensifiers as merely present-or-absent precludes the possibility of taking into account the different possible phonetic realizations of intensifiers (and intensification in general³). As a consequence, the approach adopted by the literature reviewed above crucially misses out on the opportunity of exploring how the sociolinguistic properties interact with other empirical properties of these expressions – be them semantic features or other parameters of variation.

Focusing on *totally* and *-issimo*, we aim to take a step towards filling this gap by asking the following: how does the type of targeted scale – i.e., lexical vs non-lexical – affect an intensifier’s likelihood to carry social meanings? We believe that investigating this question could be advantageous not only to refine our theory of social meaning, but for the study and understanding of language variation more broadly. Not only does the non-homogeneous semantic behavior of these intensifiers constitute an ideal testbed to further understand how social indexicality is constrained by the linguistic features of their carriers; it also provides a window into the relationship between grammatically- and socially-conditioned variation, affording the opportunity to complement the focus of the extant sociolinguistic literature on intensification.

3. From semantic to social meaning: hypothesis

3.1 From markedness to social meaning salience

³ We are grateful to Lauren Hall-Lew for pointing this out.

Recent work within the third wave approach has suggested that not all linguistic forms are equally likely to be invested with social meanings. Specifically, the likelihood of an expression to become a social index is not just determined by language users' agency and creativity, but is also shaped by its structural properties. In particular, various studies pointed to the following generalization: given a variable, the variant with the richest social meaning tends to be the one that is linguistically marked. Throughout this paper, we adopt a standard view across different linguistic subfields of linguistics in treating marked variants as the a variable's less frequent, natural, simple or predictable instantiations; or, following a definition provided in a sociolinguistic investigation, "those forms which depart more strongly or unexpectedly from a listener's customary experience" (Campbell-Kibler 2007: p.27). This generalization has been discussed especially in relationship to markedness asymmetries grounded in frequency: Bender (2000) shows that zero copula are perceived as more strongly associated with African American ethnic identity in environments in which the variant is least frequent (i.e., before NPs); similarly, Podesva (2011) shows that rising intonation in declarative sentences, by virtue of being highly infrequent in comparison to rise-fall contours, emerges as a better linguistic resource for doctors to construct a "caring persona" to put patients at ease⁴; conversely, Jeong and Potts (2016) show that questions asked with falling intonation, the least frequent tune for this speech act, convey an especially rich package of social information; finally, Callier (2013) argues that creak in mid-phrasal position, where it is less frequent, is perceived more negatively than in phrase-final position. In addition the correlation between the salience of social meaning and markedness can also be grounded in expectations generated by our grammatical knowledge. For example, Acton and Potts (2014) show that demonstratives like *this* and *that* are less expected, and hence more marked, in contexts in which they are unnecessary for referential purposes. Precisely in such contexts these expressions emerge as a viable stylistic resource to foster a sense of affective and epistemic proximity with the listener.

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

In a similar vein, Acton (2017, this volume) argues that in English the determiner *the* establishes affective distance between the speaker and the referent when used to modify plural noun phrases (e.g., the Americans). Conducive to highlight this effect is the fact that, in this particular construction, the determiner is also semantically redundant, and hence marked. Because the same content could have been conveyed with a simpler bare plural (e.g., "Americans"), the presence of the determiner calls the listener's attention to the fact that a more complex construction than the default is being used, emphasizing the determiner's ability to bundle object-level individuals as a collective, and thus convey distance.

The emerging picture is one in which linguistic markedness – both in its frequency-based and grammatically-based notion – provides a non-social common denominator shared by many linguistic forms invested with social content, suggesting that

⁴ In addition, Podesva suggests that the markedness of rising contour is grounded not just in its frequentistic distribution, but also in phonetic detail, where high values of acoustic frequency independently contribute to make this intonational pattern stand out.

the circulation of social meaning can be driven by forces endemic to the linguistic system. Before proceeding to see how this generalization can help us make specific predictions about the social meaning of intensifiers, two caveats are in order. First, we are aware that the labels normally used to characterize marked forms in sociolinguistic studies and linguistic theory more generally— e.g., infrequent, complex, noticeable, unpredictable, unexpected – are often descriptive, rather than explanatory; and that they are notoriously controversial and widely debated in the field⁵. However, we also believe that, insofar as a systematic correlation between these properties and social meaning salience is empirically attested, such terms remain relevant to better characterize how social meanings are distributed across natural language expressions. Second, the generalization discussed above does not mean that any instantiation of markedness *necessarily* gives rise to social meanings. In particular, it is possible to find linguistic forms that would qualify as marked according to at least one of the criteria discussed above, and that yet do not seem to be particularly rich social meaning carriers. Consider the contrast between truth-conditionally equivalent expressions such as “they stopped the car” and “they caused the car to stop”. As discussed in Horn (1984), these two alternative ways of recounting an event can be framed in terms of a markedness asymmetry grounded in a Manner implicature, where the latter formulation, by means of being more complex and prolix, is typically regarded as marked vis-a-vis the former. But while the marked status of the second alternative does have important consequences on its semantic interpretation – marked forms of this kind tend to convey a more specific, less stereotypical meaning than their unmarked counterparts⁶ – they do not always convey a richer constellation of social meanings⁷. Yet, we do not believe that these counterexamples invalidate the empirical and theoretical import of the association between markedness and social indexicality. First, as discussed above, pragmatic incarnations of markedness of this sort can also be linked to richer social meanings, as shown for, among others, demonstratives and determiners (Acton and Potts 2014, Acton 2017, this volume). Second, even if some linguistically marked forms fail to show an association with particularly rich social meanings, the generalization still holds that, among forms that are enregistered as social meaning indexes, marked variants tend to be considerably more common than unmarked ones. In conclusion, even though the association between markedness and social meaning salience might not have universal scope over all linguistic forms, this observation remains important for sociolinguistic theory, to the extent that it serves as a viable category to better understand the emergence and circulation of social meanings across different linguistic forms. At this point, we can move on to the investigation of intensifiers, with a focus on the following question: can the semantic variation that characterizes these expressions allow us to make predictions concerning the social salience of their different variants?

3.2 Markedness and intensification

⁵ See Haspelmath (2006) and Hume (2010) for a critical overview.

⁶ For further details, see Horn (1984) on the principle of the division of pragmatic labor.

⁷ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

As discussed above, the two semantic variants of intensifiers differ in terms of the dimension that they target: lexical intensifiers operate over a scale that is directly provided via the semantic meaning of the subsequent predicate; non-lexical intensifiers, by contrast, operate over a scale that needs to be retrieved from the broader communicative context. We suggest that non-lexical occurrences of intensifiers, by virtue of having to retrieve the scalar dimension from a source located outside the given lexical material, require a more complex chain of steps on the part of the listener to be interpreted. Following the generalization that forms associated with especially complex or effortful interpretation processes tend to be marked (Givon 1991), we consider non-lexical uses of intensifiers as marked, and hence more likely to be invested with social meaning⁸.

Let us consider how this complexity asymmetry emerges for each of our case studies, starting from *totally*.

- | | | |
|-----|---|-------------|
| (6) | a. The bus is totally full. | Lexical |
| | b. Man in “I have drugs” shirt totally had drugs. | Non-lexical |

As seen above, the presupposition scalarity in (6-a) is straightforwardly satisfied by the meaning of *full*; by contrast, no scale is supplied by the event of possessing drugs, leading us to interpret *totally* in (6-b) as operating over an attitude on the part of the speaker. We suggest that observing a semantic mismatch between the intensifier and the semantic meaning of the subsequent expression makes the non-lexical variant of *totally* more suitable to violate our expectations than the lexical one. As we normally interpret the semantic meaning of sentences by assembling the semantic meaning of their parts, recruiting the attitude scale targeted by *totally* leads us to deviate from this process, taking an extra step that is not normally required in interpreting an utterance. Furthermore, the interpretation of non-lexical intensifiers poses a non-trivial underspecification problem: besides introducing a scalar dimension in the interpretation, both the speaker and the hearer must converge on exactly what scalar dimension is being intensified, inferring it on the basis of world knowledge, contextual information or other elements. Again, the case of *totally* in (6-b) illustrates this further element of complexity⁹. Let us consider the following examples.

⁸ As Givon (1991: 337) puts it, “[t]he marked category tends to be cognitively more complex – in terms of attention, mental effort or processing time – than the unmarked one.” Again, this does not mean that all constructions with high complexity should feature the same type of markedness. For example, as an anonymous reviewer points out, a sentence with many negations will be certainly complex, and yet should not be regarded as marked in the same way in which an intensifier is. Yet, to the extent that *totally* and *-issimo* can be seen as patterning with similar examples of markedness discussed in the previous literature, we believe that they can also be considered as marked forms.

⁹ It is important to point out that this kind of pragmatic indeterminacy, to a certain extent, is shared by a lot of linguistic expressions, most of which do not necessarily qualify as complex. For example, as an anonymous reviewer points out, adjectives like *smart* or *beautiful*, and gradable predicates in general, require that the interlocutors coordinate on what dimensions contribute to determining beauty or intelligence, and what the threshold for having the property is in a given context (Kennedy and McNally 2005, Sassoon 2012 among others). Yet, we believe that non-lexical variants of intensifiers do introduce an especially high amount of such indeterminacy. A crucial question raised by these cases, in this perspective, revolves around how much indeterminacy is needed to stand out as a marked form, independently of the association with social meaning. We see this as a very important issue to better understand the connection between complexity and markedness in future work.

- (7) a. Mary is *totally* coming to the party.
 b. A: I don't remember if Josh was born in January.
 B: Yeah, he was *totally* born in January.
 c. This one time I *totally* got fired on April's Fool Day.

In the examples above, each occurrence of *totally* invokes a different scalar dimension. In (7-a) the intensifier seems to be targeting the epistemic certainty of the speaker (\approx *definitely*); in (7-b) it modulates the speaker's commitment to their assertion, similarly to what *absolutely* does; finally, for (7-c) the relevant scale seems to be one concerning the speaker's surprise at the fact described by the utterance, which would be best characterized by an expression such as *WTF!* or *Wow!*. The different nature of the scales targeted by *totally* is confirmed by the non-interchangeability of the possible paraphrases. For example, while replacing *totally* with *definitely* in (8-b) preserves the meaning of (8-a), this is not the case if we replace the intensifier with a surprise marker, as in (8-c); conversely, while replacing *totally* with a surprise marker preserves the meaning of (9), as in (9-b), the substitution cannot work for (9-c).

- (8) a. Mary is *totally* coming to the party.
 b. \approx Mary is *definitely* coming to the party.
 c. \neq *Wow!* Mary is coming to the party!
- (9) a. This one time I *totally* got fired on April's Fool Day.
 b. \approx *Wow!* This one time I got fired on April's Fool Day
 c. \neq I *definitely* got fired on April Fool's Day.

The same dual level of scalarity can be observed for *-issimo* in Italian. Let us consider a contrast between a lexical and a non-lexical use again.

- (10) a. Gianni e` altissimo.
 Gianni is alt-ISSIMO.
 'Gianni is extremely tall'. Lexical
- b. Abbiamo appena preso questa lampugh-issima.
 We.have just caught this mahi.mahi.fish-ISSIMO.
 'We just caught this quintessential mahi mahi fish.' Non-lexical

Similarly to what we observed for *totally*, using the suffix with nouns like *lampuga* entails a compositional mismatch between the scalarity required by the intensifier and the categorical nature of the semantic meaning of the host. It is this incongruence, which is not found with hosts like *tall*, that makes non-lexical uses of *-issimo* marked: in this particular linguistic environment the suffix is not expected in light of the rules of the grammar, and hence is more likely to come off as particularly salient, catching the listener's attention. In particular, the interpretation of the non-lexical variant requires retrieving scalarity by the broader context – here, by associating the referent of *lampuga* with the gradable quintessential properties of a mahi mahi fish. Furthermore, the presence of the intensifier forces the listener to determine

what such quintessential properties are. The listener will have to figure them out, making a decision based on their world knowledge about the subject matter, as well as the context in which the intensifier is used – e.g., the size of the fish, its colorfulness, its tastiness etc. As such, the use of *-issimo* in combination with nouns requires a context-based inference that closely resembles the one that was observed for pinpointing the target scale of non-lexical *totally*.

The emerging picture is one in which, from the perspective of semantic meaning, the interpretation of non-lexical intensifiers involves a complex chain of extra steps, highlighting this variant of intensification as marked with respect to its lexical counterpart. We argue that this distinction at the semantic level leads us to a clear prediction about what we should expect in terms of social meaning salience. If marked linguistic forms, by virtue of being particularly surprising or unexpected to the listener, tend to emerge as especially suitable carriers of social meanings, we expect that both *totally* and *-issimo*, in their non-lexical variants, should be perceived as more prominent indexes of social meaning than their lexical counterparts.

Returning to the broader theoretical issue motivating this study, confirming this hypothesis would help us understand how social meaning is, to a certain extent, constrained by the grammar, allowing us to re-incorporate the notion of linguistic system into a theory of social indexicality. A crucial contribution of the third-wave approach, in particular, was to highlight speakers' "local indexical work" vis-a-vis "the power of the internal workings of the linguistic system" (Eckert 2012: 453-54); shifting the focus on social meaning, in other words, highlighted language users' agency and creativity in using linguistic variation as a semiotic resource, suggesting that the sociolinguistic life of linguistic variables could not be reduced to their place in the broader linguistic structure. This, however, does not entail that the socio-indexical and language-internal properties of linguistic forms ought to be as only accidentally related. In this perspective, focusing on markedness – and especially on a type of markedness that is grammar-based, rather than frequency-based – would yield crucial insights into how the structural properties of language – e.g., the scale targeted by intensifiers – affect how speakers' recruit linguistic variation to perform indexical work, providing an important theoretical contribution to a third-wave approach to sociolinguistic variation. We now proceed to test this hypothesis via two social perception studies. One study investigates the social meaning of *totally* in US English; the other study investigates the social meaning of *-issimo* in Italian. Since our hypothesis on the relationship between scale types, markedness and indexicality is not geared towards English specifically, we expect it to work across different languages, once the proper conditions are met. Focusing on these two case studies will thus grant us a broader empirical basis to test our predictions.

4. Experiment 1: *totally*

In Experiment 1, we test our hypothesis for *totally*. A social perception emerges as a viable methodological avenue for two reasons. First, it makes it possible to construct a series of controlled conditions in which we manipulate the type of scale targeted by *totally*, while leaving the rest of the proposition unchanged. Second, it allows us to compare the social perception of these two conditions to the social perception of the sentence without the intensifier, providing us with the "zero occurrence" case that can be used as a baseline to assess the social meaning of the intensifier in each variant.

4.1 Methods

4.1.1 Building test scales

To construct the evaluation scales to be used as dependent variables in the study, we conducted a pilot study aimed at collecting open-ended social judgments and commentaries on the use of *totally* with different types of adjectives. The study was designed with the software Qualtrics and subsequently circulated on Amazon Mechanical Turk. 60 subjects, self-declared native speakers of US English and between 18 and 35 years old, were recruited and paid \$ 0.50 for participating¹⁰. Each subject saw in written form one sentence containing either an instance of lexical or non-lexical *totally*, and was then prompted to provide four adjectives to describe the speaker.

- | | | | |
|------|----|--|-------------|
| (11) | a. | Speaker: John is <i>totally</i> bald. | Lexical |
| | b. | Speaker: John is <i>totally</i> coming to the party. | Non-lexical |

Based on these results, the most frequently mentioned evaluation dimensions were selected as representative of the socio-indexical meaning of the intensifier. Four of these dimensions were described as being positive correlated to the use of *totally*; four dimensions, by contrast, were described as being negatively correlated¹¹.

- **Positively correlated:** Friendliness, Coolness, Outgoingness, Excitability
- **Negatively correlated:** Articulateness, Maturity, Intelligence, Seriousness

4.1.2 Stimuli

Two factors were crossed in a 2x4 design. The first factor manipulates the semantic variant of *totally* along the lexical vs non-lexical axis of variation by presenting the intensifier in combination with two distinct classes of adjectives. To cue lexical *totally*, the intensifier was used next to bounded adjectives, which lexicalize a bounded scale as part of their lexical meaning (e.g., “bald”, “full”, “straight”). To cue the attitudinal, non-lexical reading, instead, we used unbounded adjectives, which fail to lexicalize a bounded scale and thus present a mismatch, offering an attitudinal scale as the only possible target for the intensifier.

¹⁰ The average time for completing the task was approximately 2 minutes.

¹¹ It is important to observe that these are all personality factors, making this investigation of “socio-indexical meaning” different from many other studies of the same. We had no particular reasons to focus on these types of attributes, as opposed to broader identity factors. The selected attributes were simply those that were mentioned more frequently in the pilot study. As for the reason why this was the case, we speculate that intensifiers might evoke particular social types that people don’t have good names for; or that, alternatively, they are so common across different identity categories that people do to associate their use with any such group, preferring instead to mention personality features.

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

Adjective Type	Example	Variant
Bounded	Bald, Full, Straight	Lexical
Unbounded	Tall, Big, Large	Non-lexical

The second factor manipulates the modifier accompanying the adjective and comes in four conditions: the target intensifier, *totally*; two control intensifiers, *really* and *completely*, and the bare, unintensified form. On the one hand, *completely*, contrary to *totally*, has not grammaticalized a use in which it can target attitudinal scale, and is therefore exclusively able to target lexical scales (on the more constrained distribution of *completely* in comparison to *totally*, see Irwin 2014; Beltrama 2018). As such, it should give rise to an ungrammatical combination. 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 bounded and unbounded scales alike (McNabb 2012a; Constantinescu 2011). As such, the intensifier should always operate at the lexical level, showing no semantic difference across the adjective types. We predict that, if an effect of the semantic variant of *totally* is observed on the social meaning, the same effect should not be observed on the two control intensifiers.

Finally, the bare form of the adjective serves as a baseline condition to assess the contribution of each intensifier to the social meaning. Having this contrast is necessary to filter out any effect on social meaning that is contributed by other elements in the sentence, such as the adjectives themselves. 12 items, each with a different set of adjectives, were crossed in a Latin Square Design. (12) below provides a full paradigm for an item across all conditions.

(12) I just met the new boss. He's $\{totally/completely/really/\emptyset\}$ $\{bald/tall\}$

4.1.3 Procedure and statistical analysis

Every subject saw a total of 12 written sentences. Following each sentence, subjects were prompted to evaluate the speaker along the eight dimensions above, presented in the form of a 1-6 Likert scale (1 = minimum value, 6 = maximum value). The study was created with Qualtrics and carried out online. 36 self-declared native speakers of US English, age 18-35, were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk and compensated \$2 for their participation¹². For statistical analysis, mixed-effects models were run 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 random intercepts for

¹² The study took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

subjects and items. When a higher-level main effect or interaction was significant, we followed up with posthoc comparisons. All comparisons were carried out with a Tukey HSD Test by using the Multcomp package in R.¹³

4.2 Results

Positively correlated attributes

As we predicted, the nature of the adjective following *totally* crucially impacts the social perception of the intensifier. Specifically, for all positively correlated attributes except for Excitable, the combination of *totally* and unbounded adjectives was rated significantly higher than the bare adjective with no intensifier. No significant contrasts are found for *totally* with bounded adjectives. With the latter, however, *totally* displays a trend to raise the perception. Concerning the other intensifiers, no significant contrast is observed; however, it is worth observing that the combination of *completely* with bounded adjectives tends to be associated with lower ratings than the bare occurrences of the bounded adjectives. Table 2 reports the differences between the perception of the sentence with the intensifier and the perception of the sentence with the bare form for the corresponding adjective type.

Results for *totally* are in bold face. Significant contrasts between intensified and bare form are indicated with *.¹⁴

Table 2: Differential ratings for positively correlated attributes for *totally*

	Unbounded				Bounded			
	Bare	Totally	Completely	Really	Bare	Totally	Completely	Really
Excitable	3.51	+.61	+.25	+.01	3.19	+.54	-.05	-0.08
Outgoing	3.65	**+.74	+.26	+.26	3.80	+.05	-.39	+.05
Friendly	3.68	*+.65	+.37	+.34	3.94	+.00	-.44	+.17

¹³ The function glht was used to generate p values.

¹⁴ *=p<.05; **=p<.01; ***=p<.001.

Cool	3.02	**+.85	+.06	-.02	2.97	+.17	-.18	+.00
Average	3.47	**+.72	+.23	+.14	3.47	+.19	-.26	+.04

Negatively correlated attributes

For all negatively correlated attributes, *totally* with unbounded adjectives is rated significantly lower than the corresponding bare forms, again unveiling a robust effect of the type of targeted scale on the perceived social meaning. No significant contrasts are found for *totally* with bounded adjectives, even though *totally* displays a trend to decrease the perception with these predicates as well. Concerning the other intensifiers, *completely* with unbounded adjectives displays a trend to decrease the rating, with effects that near significance (all $ps < .1$). No effect is observed for *really*. Table 3 reports the differences between the rating of the sentence with the intensifier and the rating of the sentence with the bare form for the corresponding adjective type. Results for *totally* are in bold face. Significant contrasts between intensified and bare form are indicated with *.

Table 3: Differential ratings for negatively correlated attributes for *totally*

	Unbounded				Bounded			
	Bare	Totally	Completely	Really	Bare	Totally	Completely	Really
Articulate	3.68	**-.87	-.54	+.23	3.47	+.03	+.55	-.02
Mature	3.68	**-.93	-.54	+.11	3.77	-.42	+.31	-.03
Intelligent	3.60	**-.84	-.37	+.34	3.77	-.19	+.17	+.08
Serious	4.22	***-1.01	-.55	-.14	4.22	-.31	+.00	+.00
Average	3.80	***-.90	-.50	+.13	3.81	-.23	+.26	-.22

4.3 Discussion

In Experiment 1, we tested the interaction between the salience of *totally*'s social meaning and the type of scale targeted by the intensifier. While for each dimension of evaluation the direction of the effect of *totally* is consistent across conditions, the effect is considerably stronger when *totally* comes in the non-lexical variant, confirming our prediction. In other words, while *totally* by itself carries an indexical package biased towards a positive association with Cool, Excitable, Friendly and Outgoing and a negative association with Serious, Mature, Articulate and Intelligent, the semantic markedness of the variant crucially affects this content, making it most salient when a lexical scale is not available and the intensifier operates at the non-lexical level. Concerning the effect of the other intensifiers, no systematic pattern emerges. As predicted, *really* has a minor impact on all the evaluation scales and presents no significant difference across the tested adjective types. Concerning *completely*, we also observe that the intensifier does not change the social meaning of the bare form in a systematic way, even though it closely approximates the effect of *totally* on unbounded adjectives, nearing statistical significance with respect to the negatively affected attributes. In sum, the findings suggest that, when an intensifier can either come in a lexical

or a non-lexical variant (e.g., *totally*), its social meaning is significantly more prominent when it targets a non-lexical scale — that is, in its marked occurrence.

5. Experiment 2: *-issimo*

Experiment 2 tests whether semantic markedness affects the social meaning associated with *-issimo*, comparing the social perception of the suffix with gradable adjectives and with nouns.

5.1 Methods

5.1.1 Building test scales

As with the study on *totally*, we ran a pilot study to build the evaluation scales to use in the experiment. The study was designed with the software Qualtrics and subsequently circulated via social networks and word of mouth advertising¹⁵. 50 subjects, who self-declared to be native speakers of Italian and were between 18 and 40 years old, volunteered to participate. The questionnaire was structured in a similar fashion to the one used for *totally*: participants were asked to provide four adjectives to describe a speaker that would use *-issimo* in a sentence. Both lexical and non-lexical variants of the suffix were presented. The six evaluation dimensions corresponding to the most frequently mentioned adjectives in the pilot were selected. Three of these dimensions emerged as positively associated and three as negatively associated with the use of *-issimo*.

- **Positively correlated:** Outgoing, Friendly, Excitable
- **Negatively correlated:** Intelligent, Mature, Poised¹⁶

5.1.2 Stimuli

Two factors were crossed in a 2x2 design. The first factor manipulated the semantic variant of the intensifier by presenting *-issimo* with two kinds of hosts: gradable adjectives, representing the lexical variant, and nouns, representing the non-lexical one. The second factor manipulated the presence vs. absence of *-issimo*. Once again, the bare form was used as the baseline condition to isolate the effect of the intensifier on social meaning. Contrary to the previous experiment, we didn't include a comparison to intensifiers like *really* or *completely*; this decision was motivated by the fact that Italian has no comparable morphemes with comparable meaning in suffix position¹⁷.

¹⁵ The need to have native speakers of Italian precluded the use of Mechanical Turk for this study.

¹⁶ The original dimensions in Italian are: Estroverso ("outgoing"), Amichevole ("friendly"), Entusiasta ("excitable"), Intelligente ("intelligent"), Maturo ("mature"), Posato ("poised").

¹⁷ Due to the absence of intensifiers in suffix position in Italian, no comparison case was included. The original study, however, did include a comparison with the prefix *-super*; the rationale behind that comparison, however, does not fall within the scope of the current paper. See Beltrama (2016): section 5.5 for details.

A full set of stimuli is offered below. 12 items, each with a different set of adjectives, were crossed in a Latin Square Design. The table below provides a full paradigm for an item across all conditions.

(13) **Conditions: Noun+issimo / Noun bare / Adj + issimo / Adj Bare**

Luca ha mangiato un {gelati-issimo/-ø / gelato gustos-issimo/-ø}.

Luca has eaten a {ice.cream-ISSIMO/-ø / ice.cream tasty-ISSIMO/-ø}.

‘After lunch Luca ate an {ice-cream-ISSIMO / ice-cream / tasty-ISSIMO ice-cream / tasty ice-cream.}’

5.1.3 Procedure and statistical analysis

Every subject saw a total of 12 written sentences, one sentence for each condition. Each sentence was followed by the evaluation of the speaker along the six dimensions specified above, in the form of a 1-6 Likert scale (1= minimum value; 6 = maximum value). The study was created with Qualtrics and carried out online. 32 self-declared native speakers of Italian, age 18-35, offered voluntary participation to the experiment. For statistical analysis, the same procedure discussed for Experiment 1 was used. The fixed effect predictors included Host and Intensifier and their interactions, and the random effects included random intercepts for subjects and items.

5.2 Results

Positively affected dimensions

We found main effects of Intensifier and Host, as well as a significant interaction between them (all ps <.001). Table 4 reports the contrasts between *-issimo* and the corresponding bare form for adjectives and nouns, with significant contrasts indicated with *.

Table 4: Differential ratings for positively correlated attributes for *-issimo*

Attribute	Adjective		Noun	
	Bare	<i>-issimo</i>	Bare	<i>-issimo</i>
Outgoing	3.26	**+.63	3.11	*** +1.44
Excitable	3.20	**+.76	2.98	*** +1.86
Friendly	2.83	+.17	2.82	***+.64

Average	3.05	**+.52	3.02	*** +1.32
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The presence of *-issimo* significantly raised the rating of all attributes across both kinds of hosts. The only exception is Friendly, for which *-issimo* with adjectives did not change the perceived social meaning (even though it showed a consistent trend with the other scores). However, the perception of *-issimo* with nouns was significantly higher than with adjectives (all ps <.001).

Negatively affected dimensions

The analysis revealed a main effect of Intensifier and Host, as well as a significant interaction between them (all ps <. 01). Table 5 reports the contrasts between each intensifier and the corresponding bare form, with significant contrasts indicated with *.¹⁸

Table 5: Perception for negatively affected attributes: differentials

Attribute	Adjective		Noun	
	Bare	<i>-issimo</i>	Bare	<i>-issimo</i>
Mature	4.16	-.35	3.75	***-1.54
Smart	3.73	-.10	3.60	*** -1.14
Poised	4.20	**-.57	3.97	***-1.61
Average	4.03	-.34	3.77	***-1.44

As can be noted from the table, the effect of *-issimo* is not uniform across hosts and attributes. For Mature and Smart, the suffix caused a significant lowering of the rating with nouns, but did not have a significant effect with adjectives (although both attributes show a lowering trend). Concerning Poised, the suffix had a lowering effect across both hosts. For all attributes, however, *-issimo*'s effect is significantly larger with nouns than with adjectives.

5.3 Discussion

We tested the hypothesis that the use of *-issimo* with nouns should be a particularly ripe site for the emergence of social meaning. The findings show that the suffix shows a systematic difference in social meaning between nominal and adjectival uses. When occurring with nouns, the suffix always brings about a substantial effect on the ratings in the predicted direction. By contrast, the effect of *-issimo* on gradable adjectives is not present for all attributes; even when it is present, it is remarkably weaker than the one of *-issimo* with nouns. These results substantiate the hypothesis that, for *-issimo* as well, the type of targeted scale crucially affects the indexical value of the intensifier, with the marked variant showing more prominent indexical value.

¹⁸ *=p<.05; **=p<.01; ***=p<.001.

6. General discussion

Results from two social perception experiments showed that semantically marked variants of *totally* and *-issimo* are perceived as stronger indexes of social meaning than their unmarked counterparts. This observation is consistent with the generalization that, across different domains of linguistic variation, marked variants are stronger social meaning carriers than unmarked ones. As a predictor of the intensifier's markedness, we used the type of scale that the intensifier targets, a well-known source of variability in the grammatical properties of intensifiers. These findings indicate a principled connection between the semantic and socio-indexical components of the meaning of intensifier; as such, we take them to be an important step towards understanding of how social meaning, besides being shaped by the socio-ideological context in which language users operate, is also constrained by the structural properties of linguistic variables. At the same time, the results from the experiments raise several issues that, if investigated properly, could lead to further advances in understanding the interaction between semantic meaning and social indexicality.

We would like to linger on one issue in particular: while the two studies suggest that semantic features can help us understand why certain variants of the intensifiers have a social meaning, can semantics also help us understand why the two intensifiers have *that* particular social meaning, as opposed to another? This question, in particular, is warranted by the observation that the social indexicality of *-issimo* and *totally* are remarkably similar, both in terms of the positively and negatively affected social qualities. This parallelism indicates that the sociolinguistic properties of these two expressions might be connected to their semantics in ways that are not limited to the markedness asymmetry discussed above, but are also linked to other aspects of their conventional meaning. In particular, we highlight two aspects of the semantics of intensifiers that could represent promising starting points for further research, with a caveat: since the emergence and circulation of social meanings is the result of a continuous process of circulation, renegotiation and reanalysis (Agha 2005; Silverstein 2003; Moore and Podesva 2009; Eckert 2012), an exhaustive answer to the questions above is contingent on an in-depth analysis of the sociocultural practices in which the use of intensifiers is embedded within a certain community, which goes beyond the scope of the current article.

First, it is possible that part of these social qualities could have an iconic nature (Irvine and Gal 2000), similar to what has been suggested in many third-wave investigations (Eckert 2008). In the case of intensifiers, the very operation of reaching the top, or a very high region, on a scale might trigger the association with attributes that likewise embody an element of extremeness, such as being particularly excitable or outgoing. This would crucially explain why, despite the asymmetry in prominence between marked and non-marked occurrences, both intensifiers seem to be associated with a congruent social meaning across both lexical and non-lexical variants, suggesting that intensification could retain a core social meaning across the board, which can be more or less amplified depending on the linguistic context. If this hypothesis is right, then we should predict that the social meaning kernel of intensifiers might be foregrounded by a variety of linguistic means besides their semantic properties. For example, the phonetics of intensifier realization in speech might also contribute to emphasizing the iconic association between scalar extremeness and social qualities, similarly to what has been proposed to link the use of

extreme F0 values to the construction of an “emotionally animated” persona (Podesva 2011).

Second, we observe that the steps involved in the interpretation of non-lexical variants of *-issimo* and *totally*, and in particular the requirement that the interlocutors be attuned with respect to what the target scale is in a given context, appear to foster an interactional stance of proximity and convergence between the interlocutors. For example, the interlocutors must share sufficient world knowledge to figure out what the quintessential properties of a noun like *mahi mahi fish* or *book* are; likewise, they must share a congruent stance on the propositional content of an utterance to determine the attitude targeted by *totally* is about surprise, certainty, or something else. Crucially, this very interactional work involved in the interpretation of the intensifier, which is not required for the lexical variants, could yield important insights into the nature of the social qualities that tend to be associated with these expressions. Building on the idea that durable social meanings are ultimately grounded in the temporary social relationships that interlocutors inhabit in interaction (Ochs 1992; Moore and Podesva 2009; Kiesling 2016), a possible hypothesis would be that the association with qualities such as “friendly” and “outgoing” directly stems from the alignment that is presupposed by the semantic interpretation of these expressions. From this perspective, a parallelism emerges between this aspect of *totally*’s indexicality and the social effects of other expressions that similarly index a marked stance of inclusiveness, including Acton and Potts (2014)’s demonstratives and certain uses of tag questions fostering agreement (Moore and Podesva 2009) and perspective taking (Denis et al. 2016) among the interlocutors. A prediction of this hypothesis would be that a similar mapping between semantic features and social meaning should also be found for intensifiers that feature a non-lexical variant similar those of *totally* and *-issimo*. At first glance, the use of intensifiers that modify individual-denoting expressions – including proper nouns, years and referential pronouns – appears to provide preliminary support to this idea¹⁹.

- (14) a. This bar is {*so/very/completely*} San Francisco.
b. It was a {*very/completely*} Barack Obama thing to say.
c. It’s a {*very/completely*} 1990 shirt.

In all these cases, the relevant scale appears to be the result of an aggregation of properties associated with the referent via a relation of typicality. For example, the evaluation of “a very San Francisco bar” possibly revolves around properties such as “liberal”, “gay-friendly”, “culturally lively”, and other stereotypical attributes that emerge as the result of the world knowledge and attitudes that the interlocutors share²⁰. While we leave systematic

¹⁹ Note that the fact that *completely* is interpretable in this context, however, doesn’t mean that they have identical semantic properties. In particular, as discussed in Section 4, *completely* is not as felicitous as *totally* in targeting scales grounded in the speaker’s epistemic attitude towards the proposition.

- a. We’re {*totally/#completely*} coming to the party.
b. I {*totally/#completely*} got fired on April Fool’s Day.

²⁰ Of course, these associations remain highly contingent. For example, it is also possible that there are kinds of San Franciscan with a kind of real world knowledge that would assign the property “Irish” or “working class” to the city. This reinforces the idea that attaching world-knowledge based scales to

testing of this hypothesis to further investigation, informal judgments collected on English speakers appear to confirm this intuition, suggesting that, at the very least, uses of *very* with arguments like *San Francisco* tend to have a rather similar constellation of social meanings to those of *totally* and *-issimo*.

Besides advancing our understanding of the relationship between social meaning and grammatical properties, the current study could also provide a window into the study of linguistic variation more broadly. In particular, given the difficulty in circumscribing the variable space of non-lexical intensification from a canonical Labovian perspective, the investigation of their social meaning could be a proxy into the study of sociolinguistic issues that extend far beyond the themes commonly addressed in third-wave studies. For example, what might the difference in social meaning between lexical and non-lexical uses tell us about the trajectories of grammaticalization in which *totally* and *-issimo* are embedded? How do social qualities such as those associated to the intensifier speak to the demographics of language innovators at a particular time and place? An especially promising avenue to explore, in this sense, is the connection between intensifiers and younger speakers, which has been pointed out in most of the extant variationist work on this phenomenon (see Section 2.1). For example, it would be interesting to compare non-lexical intensifiers with other pragmatic variants that have been claimed to have emerged only recently, and to be predominantly used more by younger people — e.g., quotatives (Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2005, Buchstaller 2006 among others), discourse markers (Tagliamonte 2005, D'Arcy 2007 among others), extenders (Wagner et al. 2015 among others). A semantically-informed exploration of the use, distribution and development of these forms could shed novel insights on the mechanism whereby younger speakers creatively "push" the use of these forms towards novel contexts and patterns, thus providing a real-time window into how innovation informs the composition and interpretation of meaning within a given community. Another important point of connection between intensification and broader issues in sociolinguistic variation concerns the perceived association of *totally* and *-issimo* with speakers embodying low degrees of articulateness. Far from being unique to intensification, these associations have been long discussed with respect to several non-standard variables; concerning negative concord, for example, they have been linked to values such as street-savviness and alienation from educational institutions, which have been shown to be central to certain communities of practice involving younger speakers (e.g., the Burnouts, Eckert 2012). The question remains thus open as to how intensification could likewise serve as a symbolic resource to create specific styles and cultural practices, and how such styles and practices compare to those informed by other types of non-standard variables, especially among younger speakers.

A final issue revolves around the relationship between the high degree of emotive involvement conveyed by intensifiers and the contexts in which such expressions are used more often; in particular, this particular aspect of their social meaning might reflect the fact that intensifiers are particularly easy to find in settings that emphasize the role of appealing to the hearer's emotions, such as narratives (Brown and Tagliamonte 2012). The emerging picture is one in which, having a better grasp on who uses intensifiers more often, and when, would allow us to compare the case study investigated in this paper with other variables that

proper nouns has more to do with speakers' identity than with the grammar. We thank Lauren Hall-Lew for this observation.

are typically associated with youth, yielding important insights into why intensifiers have the social indexicality that they have. Our hope is that, precisely for this reason, integrating a first-, second- and third-wave approach with a semantically informed perspective might lead the way for an integrated approach to the study of linguistic variation, both with respect to intensifiers and other phenomena.

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