
The semantic and pragmatic evolution of “very”

David Beaver & Ashwini Deo

University of Texas, Austin

dib@utexas.edu, ashwini.deo@austin.utexas.edu

The disparate uses of *very* seen in Modern English evolved over two centuries from its source as a marker of truth, but were already established by the 1500s (Breban and Davidse, 2016). *very* moved from marking a binary (i.e. truth) to being a scalar operator, and it moved from being narrowly truth-functional to becoming a highly expressive, mirative marker in a range of post-determiner uses. We explore the semantic and pragmatic principles underlying this transition, arguing that the development of scalarity and mirativity are intimately connected. We investigate uses in which *very* comments on the remarkability of there being an individual that satisfies the properties introduced in the linguistic context (e.g. *the very person I wanted to see*); uses where it gives rise to raised standards for interpreting vague spatial predicates (e.g. *the very center*); its scalar additive-like uses (e.g. *the very leaves on the trees turn against humanity*); and its use to convey that the predication involves something central/fundamental/essential (e.g. *the very brain architecture of children is affected...*). *very* also has a well known use as degree modifier (Kennedy and McNally 2005).

We hypothesize a path whereby *very* evolved from being a predicate of truth (from Latin *verus* ‘true’) to being a conventionalized device for conveying (from the speaker’s perspective) the extraordinariness of a proposition relative to its alternatives. Suppose that a marker is mirative in the sense of marking the surprisingness of its host clause. Given the inherent scalar structure associated with any gradable adjective G, such a marker will be appropriate when an entity is being described as exceeding a high threshold wrt the scalar attribute expressed via G. Mirative marking of this kind is expected to be found with end-of-scale nominals too. With *very*, it is associated with expressions seen as both central/constitutive to a larger entity (*foundations, notion*) and expressions that might be construed as the smallest building blocks of a larger entity (*leaves, stones*) in order to convey the extraordinariness of the property that holds of them. In both cases, the end-of-scale nominal gives rise to a further set of scalar inferences, following a template “if this property is even true of X, then surely it is characteristic of other items on the scale.” Thus *very* marks the extraordinariness of some mention-some answer to a QUD, which stands in also for other answers to the QUD.

References: • References: Breban, Tine and Davidse, Kristin, 2016. The history of *very*: the directionality of functional shift and (inter) subjectification. *English Language & Linguistics*, 20(2):221–249. Kennedy, Christopher & McNally, Louise 2005. Scale structure, degree modification, and the semantics of gradable predicates. *Language*, 81(2):345–381.