Flat-out metalinguistic. Extreme degree modification as speaker’s preference evaluation

Intensifiers like *flat-out, downright, simply, just* have been claimed to form the natural class of extreme degree modifiers (henceforth, EDM) by virtue of their sensitivity to adjectival extremeness (M 2011). We analyze EDMs as metalinguistic intensifiers, recasting them as manipulators of degrees of speaker’s preference. The analysis expands the inventory of metalinguistic degree modifiers besides the well-known cases (M 2010, G&S 2009, G&Y 2011, B&C 2014), uncovering a new variety of this class of expressions.

**EDMs as extreme degree modifiers** - Morzycki observes that EDMs are only compatible with extreme adjectives (henceforth, EAs), which denote degrees which are so high to exceed contextual salience (in 1a)). Conversely, regular degree modifiers (e.g. *very* in (1b)) are odd with EAs.

(1) a. flat-out/just/simply/downright {?? good-big-pretty / √ excellent-huge-gorgeous}
   b. very {√ good-big-pretty / ?? excellent-huge-gorgeous}

In his account, both EDMs and *very* compositionally manipulate the degree argument of a gradable adjective. Their complementary distribution is explained by the fact that EDMs encode a domain widening operator which broadens the set of salient degrees to include the extreme ones, resulting in infelicity/redundancy with non extreme adjectives. Conversely, because *very* lacks the domain widening mechanism, it fails to access extreme degrees.

**More Data** - We first discuss additional data which do not directly follow from Morzycki’s analysis.

**No Truth-Conditional Effect** - If EDMs compositionally manipulate the standard of EAs, they should impose more stringent truth conditions than EAs in the positive form (tested in (2a), and should be challengeable (in (2b)). Yet, this prediction is not borne out: *very* sounds considerably more natural than EDMs.

(2) a. # Chicago is huge, but NYC is [EDM] huge. vs √ Chicago is big, but NYC is {very} big.
   √ A: Pasta is {very} good. B: No. It’s good, but not {very} good.

**Saturation Degree Arguments** - EDMs are productive with constructions where the degree argument is already bound, and shouldn’t be available to further degree morphology (K 2007).

(3) a. This instrument is not just more efficient but {√ flat-out/*very} better (COCA).
   b. Economic growth since 1992 has been {√ downright/*very} stranger than anything before (COCA)

**Not Only Extremeness** - A corpus search on COCA1 showed that EDMs, while widely attest with EAs, are also highly productive with non-extreme predicates. The hits refer to the three most common adjectives with which the modifier is attested. *Just and simply* were excluded because of the ambiguity with an adverbial and a focus particle (≈only) sense.

(4) **Downright:** Dangerous (n=62), Hostile(27), Silly(26). **Flat-out:** Wrong (n=66), Good(7), Gorgeous(5). Interestingly, Morzycki claims that EDMs can be sensitive to discourse, as they can also modify contextually extreme adjectives (e.g. *dangerous*). These acquire an extremeness flavor when the property is not expected to hold in the previous discourse or whenever someone is objecting to something that was mentioned earlier. Yet, *wrong, pretty or nice* hardly encode any extremeness. Moreover, discourse can license EDMs not just through expectations or objections, but also by just mentioning an alternative to the adjective (in (5)), in a context that is not skewed towards negative or positive expectations.

(5) You have not only been fair to Michelle Obama; you’ve been downright nice to her. (COCA)

**Judgment** - Roughly, EDMs share a common independent meaning paraphrasable as “with no need to add anything else”, suggesting that the positive form alone is judged to be a perfectly adequate expression.

**Speaker-Orientedness** - EDMs share with speaker-oriented modifiers the incompatibility with negation and in If clauses (I 2014). Note that a gradable adjective with a degree modifier would instead be fine here. That EDMs are perspective-dependent is confirmed by the fact that the judgment described above, while normally anchored to the speaker, can be shifted to the matrix attitude holder under attitude predicates.

(6) a. ?? Chicago is not {flat-out/downright/simply/just} huge/gigantic. (where not > EDM)

1http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/
The analysis - We propose that EDMs express a non truth-conditional, perspective-dependent metalinguistic evaluation informally paraphrasable as: If {flat-out/downright/simply/just} P, then the speaker / attitude holder makes explicit that the use of no other alternative expression F would be preferable to the use of P in the context. We model the metalinguistic judgment in terms of: (a) An individual anchor α, which represents the source of the judgment (B&C 2014); (b) A gradable attitude predicate R, which expresses α’s degree of preference towards the use of an expression (G&S 2009); (c) A focus operator [[[ ]]][u], which provides a set of contextually salient alternatives F1, F2, Fn which could have been used instead of the expression.


The denotation is composed of two parts: (i) a presupposition that there is at least a salient alternative to P (in italics); (ii) a non truth-conditional (type u, see G 2011) evaluation whereby α expresses a higher degree of preference for P than to any alternative F (in boldface). In this view, EDMs’ distribution is not governed by a selectional restriction for degrees exceeding contextual salience, but is contingent on the satisfaction of the initial presupposition, that is, on the availability of alternatives F which can be compared to P. In particular, alternatives can be supplied in two ways: lexically, as is the case for EAs and markedly negative evaluative adjectives, or discursively (≈ Morzycki’s contextual EAs).

Licensing - Properties associated with either very strong (EAs, in (9)) or markedly face-threatening (e.g. silly, wrong, in (10)) claims naturally invoke a set of salient alternatives, which would have allowed the speaker to make a more cautious claim. In this context, explicitly stressing the metalinguistic preference for the chosen expression is pragmatically justified/not redundant, as it signals that the speaker is aware of the importance of the contribution that comes with using the expression, and fully intends to deliver it.

(8) [[Gorgeous]]c = {Gorgeous, Nice, Pretty, Beautiful . . . } (GORG + WEAKER ALTERNATIVES)

(9) [[Downright(Gorg.)]] = ∀ F ∈ [[Gorg.]]c, [d:R(d)(Gorg.)(α) > d:R(d)([Ni, Pret, Beaut. . . ])(α)]u

(10) [[Wrong]]c = {Wrong, imprecise, questionable, partially incorrect, inaccurate . . . } (WRONG + LESS FACE-THREATENING ALTERNATIVES)

(11) [[Flat-out(Wrong)]] = ∀ F ∈ [[Wrong]]c, [d:R(d)(Wrong)(α) > d:R((Imp., Quest., Inac. . . ))(α)]u

For less committal expressions (e.g. nice), the meaning of the expression by itself is not enough to evoke alternatives out of the blue, resulting in infelicitous combination with EDMs. Yet, discourse can still license the use of an EDM by explicitly evoking an alternative in the previous context (in (5)).

(12) [[Nice]]c = {Nice, Fair} (NICE + EXPLICITLY MENTIONED ALTERNATIVE)

(13) [[Downright(Nice)]] = ∀ F ∈ [[Nice]]c, [d:R(d)(Wrong)(α) > d:R(d)(Fair)(α)]u

Deriving the other properties - While the meaning of the modified predicate matters for making alternatives available, EDMs do not compositionally interact with the denotation of their argument, and are therefore not sensitive to gradability (let alone, extreme degrees). This explains why they can be found with saturated degree arguments (3a-3b). Their nature as truth-conditionally vacuous modifiers correctly predicts that EDMs do not raise the standard of the adjective, cannot be challenged and do not contribute to the asserted content (2). Finally, the speaker-oriented nature of EDMs has been modeled by relativizing the metalinguistic judgment to an anchor, accounting for perspective shifts, and for the incompatibility of EDMs with negation and antecedent of If clauses, like other kinds of non truth-conditional content (P 2007, I 2014).

The broader picture - EDMs represent a novel case of metalinguistic degree modifiers, a category which recently sparked interest in semantics (G&Y 2011, M 2010, B&C 2014). Besides broadening the (thus far, limited) domain of known metalinguistic morphemes, the paper unveils an intriguing amount of complexity within the category, showing that metalinguistic operators (i) extend beyond comparatives and hedges, and (ii) come in a non-truth conditional flavor, besides those which do affect the truth-conditions (B&C 2014).