'It is not exactly *that bad*': On the use of the intensifiers *this* and *that* in English[1]

Javier Calle Martín

University of Málaga

Abstract

The intensifying function of the adverbs *this* and *that* can be traced back to the 19th century, when they just appeared in combination with gradable scalar adjectives like *big – small, good – bad, easy – difficult*, etc. The 20th century has witnessed the rapid diffusion of these intensifiers, but not only in terms of occurrence (both in speech and writing) but also in terms of scope, accepting the other types of gradable adjectives, both limit and extreme adjectives (i.e. *dead*) together with non-gradable adjectives (Paradis 2001: 50-53; 2008: 1317-318).

The present study investigates the use and distribution of these degree modifiers in present-day English with the following objectives: (a) to trace the development of these intensifiers from its appearance in the 19th century; (b) to analyse the frequency of the construction from a variationist perspective; (c) to cast light on the lexical semantic structure of the right-hand collocates in terms of their mode of construal and their attitudinal features; and (d) to describe their developmental path. Different corpora have been used as source of evidence for this study, such as the *British National Corpus* (BNC-BYU), the *Diachronic Corpus of Present Day Spoken English* (DCPSE) and the *Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language* (COLT).

1. Introduction

Intensifiers are lexico-grammatical elements expressing the degree or exact value of the item that they modify (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 585). Depending upon their intensity, Quirk et al. (1985: 445–446) divide them into amplifiers (those scaling upwards from an assumed norm) and downtoners (those scaling downwards from an assumed norm). The former are classified into maximizers and boosters, depending on whether the item expresses the absolute intensity (*absolutely true, completely depressed*) or simply a high degree of intensity (*very sad, awfully sorry*).

According to Quirk's terminology, the intensifiers *this* and *that* belong to the category of boosters inasmuch as they are generally used to denote the extent or degree of the item that they modify, adjectives and adverbs in particular, with the meaning of 'so, to this/that extent', as shown in examples (1) and (2). The expressions *this early* and *that early* here imply a high degree of intensity of the adjective, their difference exclusively depending upon the interpretation of the speaker/hearer about the figurative proximity of the utterance. While in example (1) the use of *this early* implies some immediateness from the speaker's perspective, *that early* is felt to imply a more distal position, not requiring such a prompt action by the speaker.

> (1) [...] says it's as well not to rush things, not this early in my career (*BNC*, 109, FNU, W_fict_prose).

(2) I don't know when it can be delivered, so we can't do it that early (pause) you can't say yeah (pause) but er we'll let you know (*BNC*, 3214, KB7, S_conv).

On historical grounds, the earliest instances of these intensifiers can be traced back to the latter part of the Middle English period, when they acquired their adverbial status as a result of a grammaticalization process triggered by their deictic use as demonstratives. As far as I am concerned, however, the relevant literature has not been able to date its origin with some level of accuracy. While The *Middle English Dictionary* does not record this adverbial function of *this* and *that* in the period, the *Oxford English Dictionary* proposes the middle of the 15th century as the moment of their inception. a 14th-century origin is proposed here in the light of some early instances as far back as Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

The erroneous dating of the phenomenon has been also accompanied by the systematic neglection of the construction in many historical and present-day English grammars, where the intensifying uses of *this* and *that* have been traditionally ignored in favour of other high-frequency intensifiers such as *quite, rather* and *very,* among others. Burchfield is one of those few linguists calling the attention to the construction in his revised edition of *Fowler's Modern English Grammar* affirming that these intensifiers "have been slipping into and out of standard use since similar uses were first recorded in the 15c" and since then the construction has gained general acceptance even though it has been traditionally open to criticism or downgrading (1926: 772). This downgrading effect is corroborated by the *OED* decision to judge it as dialectal in the year 1912, considering it as a typical feature of Scotland, and since then many English grammars have recommended their avoidance in the light of their informality, the intensifier *so* offered as the most appropriate choice in these contexts (Swan 1980: 566; Quirk et al. 1985: 1466; Castroviejo-Miró 2011: 76-94). Despite this historical bias , they have successfully managed to find their own room as degree words in present-day English, experiencing an on-going process of diffusion not only in speech but also in the more formal types of writing with the adoption of an increasing variety of collocates.

As far as I have been able to investigate, however, the phenomenon has not been hitherto undertaken both quantitative and qualitatively in English, perhaps as a result of its erroneous accusation of informality. A corpus-based analysis of these intensifiers is then a need in order to evaluate the quantitative dimension of the construction, both synchronic and diachronic, together with its actual usage among the present-day speakers of English. The task is a challenge that calls for measures beyond mere corpus reliance. On methodological grounds, on the one hand, one of the major drawbacks faced by the analyst is the absence of enough distributional data over time, insofar as it is an extremely low-frequency item in historical corpora, particularly if compared with the occurrence of other boosters. On chronological grounds, on the other hand, there is a need to cover a

In addition to the *BNC*, the origin of these intensifiers has been surveyed in *The Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse* (CMEPV) together with the quotation database of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the latter particularly to check the chronology of the earliest instances with an intensifier function in English. *The Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse* has been compiled from editions of Middle English texts used in the *Middle English Dictionary*. Even though some of these editions cannot be deemed a reliable source for orthographic variation, it is nonetheless an appropriate input for morpho-syntactic analysis.

3. Origin

According to Huddleston and Pullum, "the primary use of the demonstratives is in NPs referring to objects present in the situation of utterance, with *this* applying to objects relatively close to the speaker (proximal) and *that* to objects relatively distant from the speaker (distal)", thus serving to focus the hearer's attention on items, persons, or locations in the speech situation (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1505; also Lyons 10977: 676-677). These demonstratives were historically reanalysed from deictic demonstratives to grammatical items serving a specific syntactic function, experiencing a process of grammaticalization that transformed them into degree adverbs.

After the process of grammaticalization, these degree adverbs adopted a potential deictic use referring to entities in the here and now, and not "to intangibles such as meanings or mental representations" (West 2014: 4; Quirk 1985: 865). Thus, they were conceived to indicate the precise quantity expressed by the adjective/adverb, thus becoming mechanisms for a more definite expression of quantity than other intensifiers in the history of English, such as *very, ful, right, swithe* or *wel*. For instance, in statements like *Martha is this/that intelligent*, these intensifiers serve to "locate Martha's intelligence on the scale by equating it with some contextually-determined degree of intelligence" (Baker 1989: 314).

According to Diessel, the grammaticalization of demonstratives is observed to undertake the following kinds of changes, not necessarily sequential:

(i) *functional changes*: a) they are no longer used to focus the hearer's attention on entities in the outside world; and b) they are usually deictically non-contrastive;

(ii) *syntactic changes*: a) their occurrence is often restricted to a particular syntactic context; and b) they are often obligatory to form a certain grammatical construction;

(iii) *morphological changes*: a) they are often restricted to the proximal form; and b) they may have lost their ability to inflect;

(iv) *phonological changes*: a) they may have also undergone a process of phonological reduction.

Diessel,   tates that not all these changes actually apply in the grammaticalization   .ven though the functional changes apply to practically

all the grammaticalization processes in which demonstratives are involved, the others are optional depending of the nature of the change (Diessel 1999: 19-20). In the particular case at hand, these intensifiers experience a) a functional change according to which they do not necessarily refer to a material entity from the speaker's perspective and b) a syntactic change expressing intensification as modifiers of adjectives and adverbs. For this reason, Bolinger refers to them as relatively grammaticised, similar to other intensifiers like *kind of, a little, a bit, enough*, etc. as a result of this partial process of grammaticalization (1972: 25). The process, however, was not straightforward insofar as the construction was at first associated with particular adverbs of quantity (*far, long*, and *much* being the most recurrent items), diffusing later among gradable, scalar, unbounded adjectives.

The origin of the intensifying function of *this*, on the one hand, has been traced back to the second half of the 15th century. According to the *OED* (s.v. *this*, adv. b.II.2.b), the earliest example of this intensifier is dated as far back as the year c. 1460 in the *Macro Plays*, where the intensifier *this* is witnessed as a modifier of the adverb *long*, as

in example (6)

(6) I be-gyn awake, I that þis longe hath slumberyde in syne (Wisdom 982 in Macro Plays 67, c 1460).

It is not, however, until the second part of the 19th century when the construction begins to accept a wider variety of collocates, the list including not only prototypical adjectives and adverbs of quantity such as *early, old, thick* but also those not exclusively associated with the expression of a particular dimension, like *good, typical, well,* etc. as shown in examples (7) – (10).

(7) This much she spoke in proud tones (1863 hope 1898 - rupert of hentzau.txt).

(8) I haven't felt this well in years (1976 Woman's Day (U.S.) Nov. 154/2).

(9) Keep in mind, however, that no existing property is this typical (1972 Real Estate Rev. Winter 8/2).

(10) Yet the picture is usually not even this good. Most teachers talk much more than half the time in their classes, and the time that is left is not all used for children talking (1971 Where Dec. 376/3).

The intensifier *that*, on the other hand, witnesses a similar process of diffusion. Even though the *OED* considers it to be a 15th-century innovation with the earliest example dated in 1450 (OED s.v. *that*, adv. b.B.III.b), it has been attested to be already in use in second half of the 14th century in Chaucer's *The Parson's Tale*, as shown in example (11). Next, the construction is also witnessed in other late Middle English compositions such as *The Romance of Guy of Warwick* and *The Life of St. Alexius* from the 15th century, as in examples (12) and (13).

(11) Mercy of crist; that oother is / That they thynken that they ne myghte / That longe persevere in goodnesse./ The / Firste wanhope comth of that he demeth (Chaucer, *The Parson's Tale*, Part III).

(12) But for my brother, my trowth to hold, / And for to delyuer hym owte of peryle, / That longe hath bene in excile / Also power as he may bee. / When I hym saw I had pyte (*The Romance of Guy of Warwick*, Caius MS 107, p. 1).

(13) That poreman þat yee toke to me, / That long has bene in your hall, / he is an holy man with all. *The Legend or Life of St. Alexius, MS. Cotton, Titus, A xxvi, lf* 145.].

As in the case of the intensifier *this*, *that* was originally bound to collocate with particular adverbs of quantity (*much* and *long* in particular) spreading later to other adjectives and adverbs like *bad, bold, difficult, far, high, little, long, much, silly*, etc., as illustrated in examples (14) – (15).

(14) I've seen considerable people who are that silly about cats (1853 caine 1897 - the christian.txt).

(15) [...] co-worker with the Spirit, told her that difficult as the duty might appear, she (1829 booth 1879 - papers on practical religion.txt).

4. Quantitative Analysis

This section explores the quantitative dimension of the phenomenon shedding light on the distribution of these intensifiers 4y across register (speech and writing) and across text types, distinguishing spoken text types (i.e. conversations, meetings, interviews, broadcasts, etc.) and written text types (i.e. fiction, magazine, newspaper, academic, non-academic and miscellaneous). Next, the occurrence of these two intensifiers is also explored in teenagers' talk in order to determine whether the construction is more bound to occur among the younger speakers of English and, if so, their sociolinguistic background (i.e. sex and age).

4.2. The intensifiers this *and* that *in the BNC*

Table 2 below reproduces the occurrence of both intensifiers in the *BNC* in absolute figures, together with the normalized frequencies to tokens per 1,000,000 words for the sake of comparison. These data confirm that the intensifier *that* is substantially more frequent than *this*, as they amount to 2.39 and 0.27 occurrences per million words in the corpus. This fact is plausibly explained in the light of the proximity effect of these two intensifiers, i.e. *this* and *that* . ...vcu to denote the notion of proximity and distance, ~~ .nd the latter is therefore more bound to appear it does not require an immediate proximity to the speaker/hearer.

	this		*that*	
	Raw	*n.f.*	Raw	*n.f.*
Speech	45	4.51	862	86.51
Writing	218	2.52	1,448	16.77
Total	263	0.27	**2,310**	2.39

Table 2. The intensifiers this *and* that *across speech and writing*

Next, these intensifiers are also ᵗ ᵗo diffuse more widely in speech rather than in writing, even though with a differei rate. In the particular case of *this*, it amounts to 4.51 and 2.52 occurrences in the spoken ld written material, respectively. The occurrence of

the intensifier *that*, on the contrary, is negligible in the written material with just 16.77 occurrences in opposition to 86.51 occurrences in the corpus. These intensifiers, therefore, can be tentatively confirmed as a typical resource of spoken English, while the written register shows a more intrinsic preference for the more formal intensifier *so* in these contexts.

4.2. The intensifiers this and that across text types

This section explores the distribution of the phenomenon in the light of the textual typology provided by the *BNC*. The material of the spoken component of the *BNC* is classified into conversations, meetings, interviews, broadcast, lectures, sermons, etc. offering the possibility to ascertain where a particular linguistic construction diffuses more widely in the corpus. Figure 1 below reproduces the distribution of the intensifiers *this* and *that* in the spoken domain of the *BNC*, where it can be tentatively concluded that these two intensifiers find more room in the same typology of texts, conversations in particular with 56,91 and 2,31 occurrences of *that* and *this*, respectively. Next, the phenomenon is observed to appear with relative frequency in meetings, interviews, broadcasts and classroom material, while it is practically negligible in the other text types. In view of these data, the phenomenon, therefore, is confirmed to diffuse more widely in less formal contexts, such as spontaneous conversations and unscripted speeches.
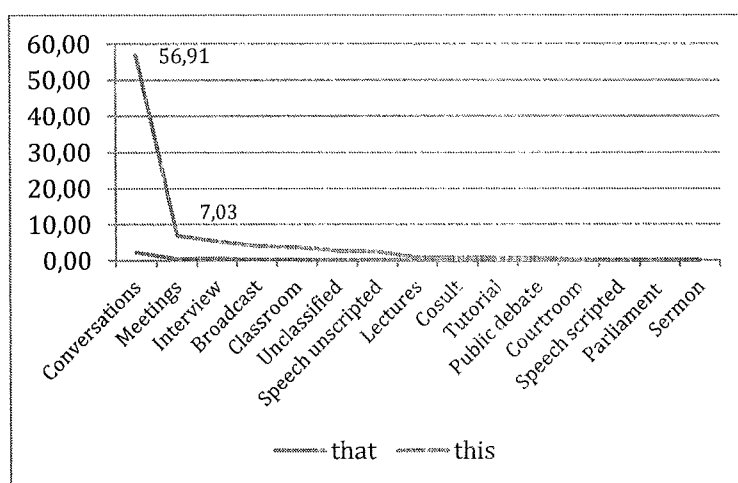

Figure 1. The intensifiers this and that across spoken text types

The written component of the *BNC*, on the other hand, is classified into the following type of material: fiction, magazine, academic and non-academic material, newspaper and miscellaneous texts. Figure 2 reproduces the distribution of the phenomenon across these text types, where it can be gathered that these intensifiers are more bound to those texts characterized by a less formal type of writing, fiction in particular amounting to 8,08 and 1,12 occurrences of *that* and *zero* in particular. In this same fashion, the phenomenon is observed to diffus 'n miscellaneous texts, magazines and non-academic material, while academic compositi are at the end of this continuum with a negligible occurrenc ⌐these intensifiers.
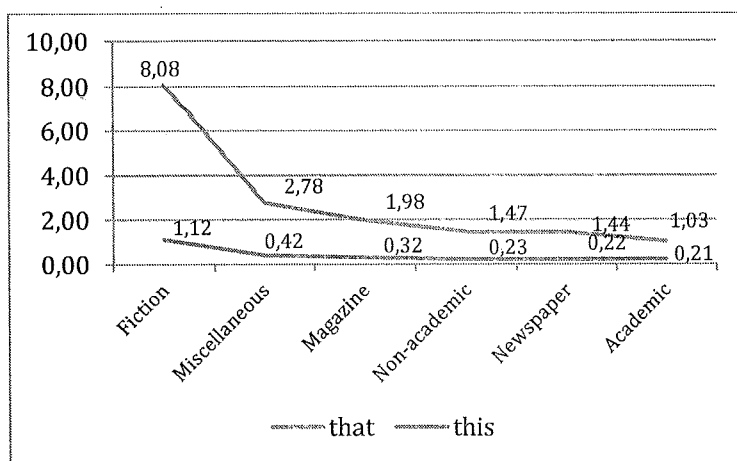
Figure 2. The intensifiers this and that across written text types

5. Qualitative Analysis

5.1. Typology of collocates

This section analyses the typology of collocates with which these intensifiers are bound to occur in order to determine whether there is an intrinsic preference for adjectives or adverbs in these contexts. Table 3 reproduces the distribution of these intensifiers in terms of types and tokens where the following conclusions can be tentatively gathered. When it comes to tokens, adverbs are the choice over adjectives as they are found with a rate of 79.7% and 56.8% with the intensifiers *this* and *that*, respectively. This preference is clearly the result of the recurrent use of the adverbs *far* and *much*, the latter amounting to 954 and 38 occurrences with *this* and *that*, a fact substantially increasing the number of adverbs in these environments. When it comes to types, on the other hand, adjectives overwhelmingly prevail with a rate of 77.1% and 87.2% with *this* and *that* in our data.

	this				*that*			
	tokens		types		tokens		types	
	Raw	%	Raw	%	Raw	%	Raw	%
Adjectives	53	20.2	27	77.1	996	43.1	259	87.2
Adverbs	209	79.7	6	17.1	1314	56.8	32	10.7
Total	262		35		2310		297	

Table 3. Distribution of adjectives and adverbs with the intensifiers this *and* that

The adverbial collocates are mostly adver of manner, representing 66.6% of the instances in our data, with examples like *badly*, *...early*, *seriously*, *strongly* and *well*, among many others. These are followed by adverbs of degree and time, both with a percentage of 13.3% as in *few*, *many*, *much*, *soon*, *often*, etc. Adverbs of place are not frequent in these contexts with the only occurrence of the adverb *far*, which is the most frequent adverb after its counterpart *much*.

5.2. Collocates with adjectives

This section considers collocates in its original Firthian sense, defined as 'lexically and/or pragmatically constrained recurrent co-occurrences of at least two lexical items which are in a direct syntactic relation with each other' (Bartsch 2004: 11). According to this

definition, the lexical items which are thus collocated are said to be collocates of each other (Crystal 1980: 70). Given the adjectival and the adverbial status of the collocates, the umbrella term right-hand collocate will be here used for convenience.

The present section is based on the assumption that amplifiers (both maximizers and boosters), being the prototypical items to intensify gradable adjectives and adverbs, have to be to a certain extent harmonic with what they modify. For the purpose, this section has been divided into two sub-sections which discuss the semantic attributes of the right-hand collocates, concentrating on their mode of construal (bounded or unbounded) and their attitudinal features (positive, negative or neutral). The examination of the collocational behaviour of these intensifiers is taken to be of diagnostic relevance in the development of their intensifying function in English.

5.2.1. Paradis' model of degree modifiers

In view of the overwhelming preference for adjectival heads, the collocates have been examined according to Paradis' model of degree modifiers and adjectives, a framework which has been hitherto successfully applied by Méndez-Naya to the study of the history of *right* in early English (2007: 198–204). In itself, the model has been described in some of Paradis' publications over the past decade (2001: 50–53; also Paradis 2000a: 147–160; 2003: 197–220), but it has been synthesized with a more recent theoretical development of a general model of lexical meaning (Paradis 2008: 318). According to Paradis, "degree is a configuration that is available in mappings between lexical items and their meaning" and, in the particular case of modifiers of degree, they cannot be dealt with in isolation insofar as they need to be profiled against gradable meaning structures (such as things, events and states) in order to make sense (Paradis 2008: 317–318). Paradis proposes a framework in the assumption that degree modifiers and adjectives are predictable if in the same domain of gradability.

Degree modifier meaning can be classified into *scalar modifiers* (*very*, *terribly*, *fairly*) and *totality modifiers* (*completely*, *absolutely*, *almost*). Depending upon the expression of totality, the latter are classified into *maximisers*, which denote the perfect match with a maximum (i.e. *completely full*) and *approximators*, which indicate that a gradable property does not reach that maximum (i.e. *almost full*). Scalar modifiers, in turn, may be classified into *boosters*, which express a reinforcing effect on the modified property (i.e. *extremely full*); *moderators*, which approximate the middle range (i.e. *fairly full*); and *diminishers*, which attenuate the properties they refer to (i.e. *a bit full*).

Adjectival meanings are organised into *gradable* and *non-gradable*, depending on whether they can be modified by intensifiers or not. Non-degree structures are not compatible with intensifiers as these are lexical items which do not generally combine with them (i.e. *financial*). Gradable adjectives are divided into two types of *oppositeness* (*complementarity* and *contrariety*) and two modes of *boundedness* (with *bounded* and *unbounded* configurations) –   This distinction eventually leads

Paradis to distinguish three categories of adjectives: a) *scalar*, conceptualized in terms of *more or less* denoting an open-ended scale (i.e. *long*); b) *limit*, construed in terms of *either-or* (i.e. *dead*); and c) *extreme*, pointing to the ultimate point on a scale (i.e. *excellent*). Paradis then comes to the conclusion that these three types of adjectives have a direct effect on the type of prospective intensifier with which they may collocate in the sense that they need to be naturally compatible and share some sort of semantic configurations.

Paradis proposes to classify gradable adjectival meanings into *bounded* and *unbounded* meaning types. The former would include scalar adjectives as the items prototypically conceived to represent a range within a scale, while the latter would then comprise both limit and extreme adjectives as the items denoting a precise value of the property involved (Paradis 2008: 317–343). Degree modifiers represent a scalar construal or a totality construal in the sense that scalar modifiers harmonize with unbounded adjectives while totality modifiers combine with bounded items.[2]

5.2.2. Analysis in light of Paradis' model of degree modifiers

Table 3 below presents the semantic classification of the collocates according to Paradis' framework, both in absolute and relative figures. As shown, the hypothesis that scalar modifiers traditionally combine with unbounded adjectives is supported in our data as the occurrence of unbounded items overwhelmingly predominates . amounting to 85.1% and 82.2% with the intensifiers *this* and *that*, respectively. As degree words, both *this* and *that* convey the meaning of 'to this/that extent or degree, so much, so' and for this reason they are more bound to collocate with adjectives denoting some variable property in terms of length (i.e. *high, long, short*), speed (i.e. *quick, slow*), weight (i.e. *heavy*), size (i.e. *wee, small, big, great*), taste (i.e. *sour*), personality (i.e. *bad, nice, proud, wise, bold*), etc.

In some cases, the intensifying function of *this* and *that* is reinforced with the use of the comparative and the superlative degrees of the adjective, as shown in the following examples. While in example (16) the intensifying use of *that* is considered to imply the meaning of 'so much tolerable', the superlative use in example (17) is taken to denote the highest degree of that particular adjective, denoting the meaning of 'in that degree of sleep, absolutely sleepy'.

> (16) [...] and so the thirty-six hour homeward journey would be that more tolerable (8114, CHV, W_pop_lore).
> (17) [...] as one who will be heard, calls aloud:' Awake thou that sleepest (4994, ACA, W_non-ac_humanities).

Table 3. Semantic distribution of adjectives combining with this *and* that *(raw figures and percentages)*

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[2] See Paradis (2008: 323–326) for a more comprehensive description of her model of degree modifiers and adjectives.