

# *No cat could be that hungry! This/that as Intensifiers in American English*<sup>i</sup>

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## **Abstract**

The degree meaning of *this/that* can be traced back to the 14th century, when they acquired their adverbial status as a result of a grammaticalization process that transformed them from deictic demonstratives to degree adverbs with the meaning of ‘to this/that extent, so much, so’. In spite of their origin in Late Middle English, they have had different ups and downs in the history of English. These intensifiers are practically non-attested from the 16th to the 18th centuries, experiencing a timid revival again from the beginning of the 19th century. The actual diffusion of the construction, however, takes place at the beginning of the following century, the intensifier *this* always lagging behind its counterpart *that*, not only in terms of occurrence but also in terms of collocational use.

The present paper investigates the use and distribution of the intensifying function of *this/that* in American English with the following objectives: (a) to trace their origin and grammaticalization as degree words in English; (b) to evaluate their quantitative dimension from a historical perspective; and (c) to assess their distribution from a variationist point of view across speech and writing and text types; and d) to cast light on the lexico-semantic structure of the right-hand collocates in terms of their mode of construal. The source of evidence for this study comes from the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA) and the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA).

## **Keywords:**

American English, degree, grammaticalization, intensifiers, mode of construal, *that*, *this*

## **1. Introduction**

Intensifiers are lexico-grammatical elements expressing the degree or exact value of the

item that they modify (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 585). 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 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*). The intensifiers *this* and *that* belong to the category of boosters denoting the extent or degree of the item that they modify with the meaning of ‘so, to this/that extent, so much, so’ (OED s.v. *this/that* adv.), 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.

(1) It was unusual to find him out this early on a Sunday morning, attending to a routine suspicious death (COCA, Fiction, BloodTiesNovel, 2015).

(2) There's no advantage to locking in all that early (COCA, Spoken, NPR\_TalkNat, 2011).

Even though the phenomenon is witnessed in practically all the varieties of English worldwide, there are grounds to consider it with a varying degree of diffusion. A quick search for the construction *this/that* followed by an adjective/adverb in the *Corpus of Global Web-based English* (GloWbE) reveals that the degree meaning of *this/that* is found to diffuse more prominently in American English, with all the other inner circle varieties lagging well behind it (i.e. Canadian English, British English and Australian English). Among the outer circle varieties, the phenomenon is also subject to some geographical preferences. In African Englishes, the construction is more widespread in Nigerian English while Singapore English stands out among Asian Englishes.

On historical grounds, the degree meaning of *this/that* is conceived to develop from their demonstrative function. Demonstratives are determiners of literal and figurative distance providing additional information about the proximity of the referential item to the speaker and the addressee, as illustrated in example (3) (Biber et al. 1999: 70). These determiners render two intrinsic semantic features, i.e. deixis and comparative potential, which are input for the development of their degree meaning in English. Degree modifiers, in broad terms, “can be defined as elements which modify another element with respect to degree” and it is precisely the potential for grading of *this/that* what eventually derives in their function as degree modifiers, as shown in examples (4-5) in combination with the adjective *easy* (Paradis 1997: 19).

(3) Put the dirty clothes next to this/that box

(4) I know it's not all going to be this easy. When I see somebody walking around inside, I take the next step (FantasySciFi, FIC, 2007).

(5) You can't get rid of the world that easy. Unless your world's just one person (Play:YellowEyes, PLAY, 2000).

The degree meaning of *this/that* has suffered different ups and downs in the history of English. After their origin in Late Middle English, they are practically non-attested in the available corpora from the 16th to the 18th centuries. The early 19th century witnesses the rebirth of the construction, becoming more frequently attested in combination with adjectives and adverbs. These ups and downs are surely explained in the light of their intensifying function. Intensifiers are generally subject to a markedly emotional function depending on the speaker's need of expressivity and, for that reason, it is a category which constantly undergoes a process of innovation and semantic change in such a way that a new intensifier appears when another begins to lose its pragmatic

function (Hopper and Traugott 2003: 122; Lorenz 2002: 143–144; Calle-Martín 2014: 401). Strictly speaking, the intensifier *so* is the only competitor of *this/that* in the category of boosters, often sharing the same semantic connotations. The 19th-century revival of *this/that* plausibly coincides with the progressive decline of *so* in the sense that the former are already observed to be displacing the strong deictic use of *so* in some dialects of English, in examples such as *John is this tall* with the speaker's gestures as to the particular dimension involved (Castroviejo-Miró 2011: 86).

These intensifiers, however, have been traditionally ignored in many historical and Present-Day English grammars, in favour of other high-frequency intensifiers such as *quite*, *rather*, *so* or *very*, among others (Méndez-Naya and Pahta 2010: 191-213). Burchfield is one of those few linguists calling the attention to the construction in his revised edition of *Fowler's Modern English Grammar*, where he affirms 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 (Fowler 1926: 772).<sup>ii</sup> This downgrading effect is confirmed by the *OED* decision to judge it as dialectal in the year 1912 and, in view of their informality, *so* is generally recommended as the most appropriate choice in these contexts (Swan 1980: 566; Quirk et al. 1985: 1466). Despite the historical bias towards these intensifiers, 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 more formal registers with the adoption of an increasing variety of collocates.

To my knowledge, the topic has not been hitherto researched in the History of English, perhaps as a result of its erroneous accusation of informality, as happens with

other intensifiers such as *all* (Buchstaller and Traugott 2006: 346; Rickford et al. 2007: 3-31). The present study then investigates the use and distribution of the intensifying function of *this/that* in American English with the following objectives: (a) to trace the origin and grammaticalization of *this/that* as degree words in English; (b) to evaluate the quantitative dimension of the construction from a historical perspective since the 19th century; c) to assess their distribution from a variationist perspective across speech and writing and text types; and (d) to cast light on the lexico-semantic structure of the right-hand collocates in terms of their mode of construal.<sup>iii</sup>

## **2. Methodology**

The present research relies on the freely accessible tagged versions of the *Corpus of Historical American English (COHA)* and the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*, both originally developed by Mark Davies at Brigham Young University.

The former is considered to be the largest structured corpus of historical English, containing more than 400 million words of written American English for the period 1810-2009 classified into 20 different decades. The corpus is balanced across genres and sub-genres with equally distributed material from the following domains, i.e. fiction, non-fiction, magazines and newspapers. In view of its chronology and dimension, the corpus then stands out as the appropriate input for the study of textual variation over time, thus providing accurate information about on-going changes in English.<sup>iv</sup>

*COCA*, on the other hand, contains more than 520 million words of text of contemporary American English from 1990 to 2009, and therefore it stands out as the largest freely available corpus of Present-Day English. The corpus material is organized

into speech, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers and academic texts, each genre amounting to 20% of the overall corpus. More importantly, however, is the fact that “the genre balance stays almost exactly the same from year to year”, sub-genres also included, a feature turning the corpus into the most reliable input for investigating current on-going changes in American English (Davies 2010: 453).<sup>v</sup>

Mark Davies’ tagged versions of COHA and COCA have been designed using the CLAWS 7 POS-tagger.<sup>vi</sup> In this particular case, the instances were automatically retrieved searching for the adverbial uses of *this* and *that* followed by either an adjective or an adverb. The process, however, was not straightforward as the results had to be manually disambiguated in order to leave out the instances beyond the scope of this research. The present study thus disregards those instances where a noun phrase is involved, as shown in example (6), together with all the others where *this* and *that* do not strictly appear as intensifiers, plausibly as a result of an erroneous tagging of the corpus, i.e. as a premodifier of numerals, as a pure demonstrative, as a conjunction introducing an object clause, or in constructions such as *that is/that is to say*.

(6) *It's unusual that a man as young as you would have that much wisdom* (COHA, Fiction, Summerhouse, 2002).

This disambiguation process substantially trimmed down the corpus instances so as to display a total of 9,059 instances in COHA, of which 7,706 appear with the intensifier *that* and 1,353 with the intensifier *this*. COCA, in turn, provides us with 32,529 instances in intensifying positions, of which 28,488 appear with the intensifier *that* and 4,041 with the intensifier *this*.

### **3. The grammaticalization of *this/that* as intensifiers in the history of English**

Demonstratives are deictics and, as such, they are linguistic elements “whose

interpretation makes crucial reference to some aspect of the speech situation” (Diessel 1999a: 35; 1999b: 2-3). In the light of this definition, deictic expressions have been traditionally classified into three semantic categories (Bühler 1934: 102), i.e. person deictics (denoting the speech participants *I* and *you*), place deictics (demonstratives *this* and *that*) and time deictics (adverbs such as *now* and *then*). Under the label of place deictics, the demonstratives *this* and *that* generally denote objects, persons and locations present in the situation of utterance, *this* applying to objects relatively close to the speaker (proximal) and *that* referring to objects relatively distant from the speaker (distal), as shown in *this city is boring* vs. *that city is boring*, their difference depending on the relative position of the speaker towards the city (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1505; also Lyons 1977: 676-677).

These demonstratives experienced a process of grammaticalization that transformed them from deictic demonstratives to degree adverbs. The adverbial use of demonstratives is generally interpreted in terms of ‘here’ and ‘there’ adverbs, considering that *this/that* have developed into *here/there* as a result of its implicit locative case marker, thus becoming manner deictics or degree deictics. In Ambulas, a language spoken in Australia, demonstrative adverbs stem from the demonstratives *kén* and *wan* with a locational adverb or adposition, and the resulting forms *kega* and *waga* come to denote the meanings ‘like this’ and ‘like that’, respectively (Diessel 1999a: 17; also Wilson 1980: 32). In this same vein, it is precisely this deictic locative function of *this/that* what may have ultimately contributed to the adoption of the degree meaning in English, plausibly experiencing the following pathway:

- *this* DEM + PROXLOC ‘this far place, as far as this’ > *this* ADV ‘this far’
- *that* DEM + DISTLOC ‘that far place, as far as that’ > *that* ADV ‘that far’

This development of *this/that* is very similar to the development of *all* in the sense that it goes from a determiner (more properly a quantifier or predeterminer) to a degree modifier, the latter historically derived from the quantifier use as a result of a reanalysis that occurred in the Proto-Germanic period (Buchstaller and Traugott 2006: 350). A similar reanalysis is observed in other intensifiers developing from grammatical items to grammatical items of another type, as in the case of *rather* (Rissanen 2008: 355), *so* (Castroviejo-Miró 2011: 76-94) and *such* (Russell 1954: 236-238), among others. This development is possible because of their deictic, contrastive and comparative potential. Their use as degree modifiers requires semantic valence with the collocating item and, in the particular case of *this/that*, their semantics makes them suitable for modification of degree in view of two important features. One is deixis which develops into (inter)subjective attitudinal deixis, whilst the other is their comparative potential, which is necessary for scalar readings and scalar modifiers. All new readings rely on an implication of comparison which, when *this* and *that* combine with scalar meanings, degree is inferred. For *this* and *that* to be interpreted in a given context as a degree modifier, there has to be a potential for grading in the combining meaning and this is triggered by the invoked comparison (Paradis, personal communication).<sup>vii</sup>

The grammaticalization of these demonstratives into degree words is corroborated in view of the following morpho-syntactic, phonological and semantic features. On morpho-syntactic grounds, these demonstratives experience a process of *deategorialization* characterized by their inability to inflect, as their adverbial status does not allow for the use of the plural forms (i.e. *these* and *those*); and *condensation*, characterized by their restriction to specific slots in a grammatical construction, as they exclusively appear in intensifying positions in combination with adverbs/adjectives

(Lehman 1995: 137-143; Hopper 1991: 22). On phonological grounds, in turn, these demonstratives undergo a process of *phonological reduction* and *coalescence*, as they come to lose some of their phonological substance (Bybee, Pagliuca and Perkins 1994: 4-9; Diessel 1999a: 117; Croft 2000: 163-164). Finally, the grammaticalized item becomes semantically less concrete and significant as a result of a process of *semantic bleaching*, adopting a more subjective meaning (Heine and Reh 1984: 15; Hopper and Traugott 2003: 96-97).

This semantic bleaching, however, is not a straightforward process, giving way to two different types of adverbs, one is strong/deictic and the other weak/anaphoric, both occurring in the same syntactic environments. The strong forms, on the one hand, preserve the potential deictic use of demonstratives to such an extent that they serve to refer to entities in the here and now, and not “to intangibles such as meanings or mental representations” (West 2014: 4; Quirk 1985: 865). In this fashion, *this/that* are especially conceived to indicate the precise quantity expressed by the adjective/adverb, thus becoming mechanisms for a more definite expression of quantity than other boosters in English, conveying a referential meaning which eventually depends on some shared knowledge by the speaker and the hearer. While boosters such as *very* and *so* do not need the listener’s background knowledge in statements like *Martha is very intelligent/so intelligent*, the use of *this/that* in *Martha is this/that intelligent* serves to “locate Martha’s intelligence on the scale by equating it with some contextually-determined degree of intelligence” (Baker 1989: 314).

The weak forms, on the other hand, are more semantically bleached to such an extent that they become deictically non-contrastive and therefore semantically interchangeable. Setting aside any contextual caveat, the intensifiers *this* and *that* denote

exactly the same high degree of the intensity in statements such as *I don't like this much on my plate* and *I don't like that much on my plate*, regardless of the proximity of the speaker towards the referential item. In the light of these semantic values, the strong forms are the result of a partial process of grammaticalization, or relatively grammaticalized, similar to other intensifiers like *kind of*, *a little*, *a bit*, *enough*, etc. (Bolinger 1972: 25). The weak forms, in turn, are located one step beyond in the grammaticalization path as a result of the adoption of a fully subjective meaning deprived of any referential meaning with the status of other intensifiers.<sup>viii</sup>

From a historical viewpoint, the adverbial function of *this/that* is dated in Late Middle English. The origin of their intensifying function is plausibly associated with expressions of quantity like *as far as that*, *as much as that*, *as long as that*, where the demonstrative/pronoun still kept its deictic connotations, as shown in examples (7-9), eventually developing into proper degree words like *that far*, *that much* and *that long*, respectively.

(7) And for þi for as moche as that my resoun or my proces ne go nat away wipoute an ende (Chaucer's translation of Boethius's *De consolacione philosophiæ*, p. 89).

(8) And whan he saw himselfe in Mountawban / he sware that he shoulde never make peace wyth Reynawde / as longe as that he were prysoner (Caxton, *The Foure Sonnes of Aymon*, p. 11).

(9) Right worshipfull Brother, I recomaund me to you. And in as muche as that my Cosen Willyam cumeth home to you hymself (*The Stonor Letters and Papers*, Thomas Mull to Thomas Stonor, xlvi, 63).

Even though catalogued as a mid-15th-century innovation in the *OED* (s.v. *that*, adv. b.B.III.b), earlier instances of the intensifier *that* have been attested in the second half of the 14th century, where it appears in combination with adverbs, as shown in example

(10). The intensifier *this*, on the other hand, developed one hundred years later than its counterpart *that*. 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 it also appears together with the adverb *long*, spreading later to other adjectives and adverbs, as shown in examples (11-12):<sup>ix</sup>

(10) 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).

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

(12) Do yowr dylygens To clense þe Soull wyche ys bis fowll (*The Macro Plays*, Folg V.a.354, c. 1475).

Since then, however, these intensifiers are found to have an erratic distribution in the history of English, from their almost obliteration in the early modern period when they practically disappear from any corpus data to their rebirth again at the beginning of the 19th century, preferably in combination with adverbs, as shown in examples (13-15). The process, however, was not straightforward. The Late Modern English use of the construction may be considered just a constrained revival, having to wait until the first quarter of the 20th century to witness the actual outburst of *this/that* as intensifiers. On linguistic grounds, on the other hand, the spread of the construction is observed to follow the same path as the late Middle English precursors in the sense that it is initially constrained to a particular set of adverbs (i.e. *far*, *much*, *little* and *long*) with the progressive adoption of a wider variety of adverbs and adjectives towards the middle of that same century.

(13) Fancy me at that game! Is that why my lady--but I can't be suspected that far?

You make me break out at my pores (Meredith, *The Amazing Marriage*, chapter 29).

(14) For him she felt much compassion;-- for Lucy very little--and it cost her some pains to procure that little;--for the rest of the party none at all (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, chapter 30).

(15) Having said that much, he beckoned the visitor with a mysterious aspect to follow him to the parlour-door, where he announced him in the voice of a gentleman-usher (Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, chapter 27).

#### 4. Quantitative analysis

This section explores the quantitative dimension of the intensifying function of *this/that* in American English, shedding light on a) the origin and development of the construction from the early 19th century; and b) its distribution across text types.

##### 4.1. The phenomenon across time

This section deals with the historical development of the intensifiers *this/that* in the data provided by COHA. Table 1 below reproduces the total number of instances in the corpus, distributed in terms of whether they appear in combination with adjectives or adverbs. As shown, these intensifiers are more bound to occur with adverbial collocates. In the particular case of the intensifier *that*, it amounts to 37.07% and 62.92% with adjectives and adverbs, respectively. Its counterpart *this*, on the other hand, presents a wider diffusion with adverbial collocates with 12.41% and 87.58% of adjectives and adverbs, respectively.

That				This			
Adverbs		Adjectives		Adverbs		Adjectives	
Raw	%	Raw	%	Raw	%	Raw	%
4849	62.92	2857	37.07	1185	87.58	168	12.41

Table 1. Distribution of the intensifiers *this/that* in the COHA

Figure 1 reproduces the distribution of these intensifiers according to the 10-year period division of COHA, where the figures have been normalized to a corpus sample of one million tokens for comparison. The intensifier *that*, on the one hand, is more frequent in combination with adverbs than with adjectives throughout the whole period, even though there is a significant increase in the use of adjectives from the second half of the 20th century, thus approximating the occurrence of adverbs. More importantly, however, the data allow us to establish two different trends of development, the year 1920 as an approximate dividing line. With adverbs, the period 1810-1920 witnesses a slow diffusion of the intensifier *that* (with less than 10 occurrences per million words across the decades). The period 1920-2000, in turn, shows a drastic increase of this intensifier with 22.38 and 24.97 occurrences in 1970s and 1980s, respectively. A similar tendency is observed in combination with adjectives inasmuch as its use becomes negligible throughout the whole 19th century, and it is also from 1920s when the construction begins to proliferate with adjectives, plausibly triggered by its increasing use with adverbs, thus reaching 8.4 in 1950 and 21.13 occurrences in the year 2000.

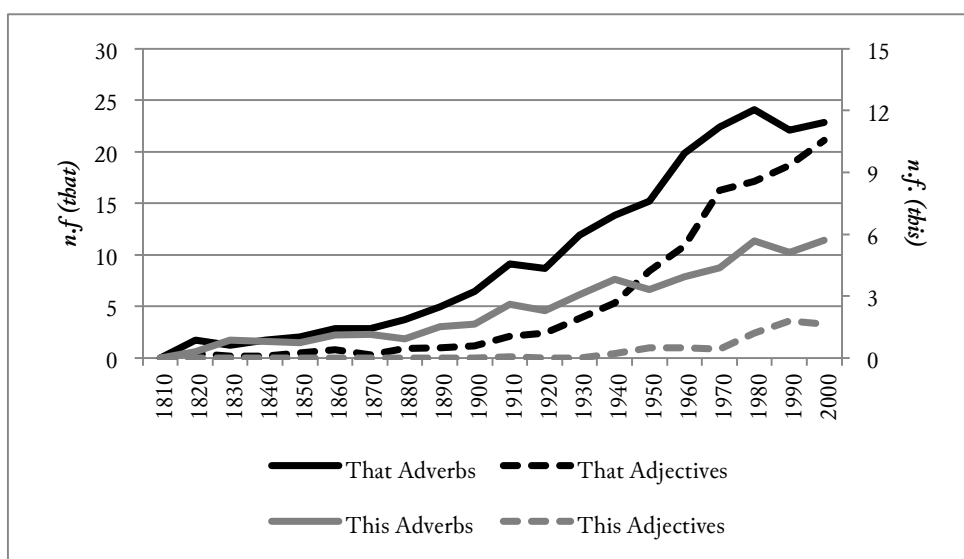


Fig. 1. Chronological distribution of the intensifiers *this* and *that* in COHA (n.f.)

The intensifier *this*, on the other hand, presents a similar state of affairs. Figure 1 also confirms an outstanding tendency to appear in combination with adverbs, especially from the second half of the 20th century. In addition to this intrinsic preference for adverbs, the development of this intensifier can be safely compared with its counterpart *that* inasmuch as it is observed to have an impulse from the 1920s, its use being doubled within a 50-year period, with 4.38 and 5.68 occurrences in 1970s and 1980s, respectively. With adjectives, however, this intensifier is found to have a slower process of diffusion since it timidly appears in the 1940s and it was not until the 1970s when the construction begins to proliferate in these environments, plausibly triggered by the wider use of *this/that* with adverbial collocates.

Even though these results tentatively lead us to ascertain the revival and rise of the construction, the use of the total number of occurrences may sometimes provide us with a distorted picture of the phenomenon, especially when there are particular combinations (i.e. *this/that much*, *this/that long* or *this/that far*) with a significant number of occurrences in the corpus. For this reason, Figure 2 reproduces the chronological development of *that* with adjectives and adverbs considering the number of types as well as the hapax legomena across the different decades.<sup>x</sup>

As far as types are concerned, on the one hand, the phenomenon is observed to behave differently in combination with adjectives and adverbs. While the adverbial use of *that* + adverbs remains stable throughout the whole period with just a slight increase from the 1950s, the construction with adjectives is observed to be in an on-going process of diffusion collocating with a higher number of adjectives across the decades. Notwithstanding this tendency, the results confirm that the phenomenon diffuses more

substantially from the second half of the 20th century, with 83 and 174 types in the 1950s and 2000s, respectively.

The distribution of hapaxes, on the other hand, comes to confirm this same state of affairs. Traditionally, computer analyses of linguistic variation have been restricted to comparisons of the use of frequent and countable linguistic features, and the study of the less frequent items have often escaped the analyst's attention. Corpus-based counts of hapax legomena provide an indirect way of estimating the rate at which a morpho-syntactic construction diffuses across time, providing fresh data in relation to the increasing adoption of new collocates in a particular construction (Oakes 2009: 159; Baayen 2009: 905). The list of adverbial hapaxes is reduced as a result of the intrinsic preference for particular adverbs of quantity in these contexts (i.e. *that much*, *that long* and *that far*), but it is a fact that the intensifying use of *that* begins to proliferate with a number of adverb types from the second half of the 20th century, the list including manner adverbs like *badly*, *carefully*, *clearly*, *differently*, and others. The number of adjectival hapaxes, in turn, also confirm a wider adoption of new collocates across time, especially from the second half of the 20th century when the construction triples the number of hapaxes with 58 and 150 hapaxes in the 1950s and 2000s, respectively.

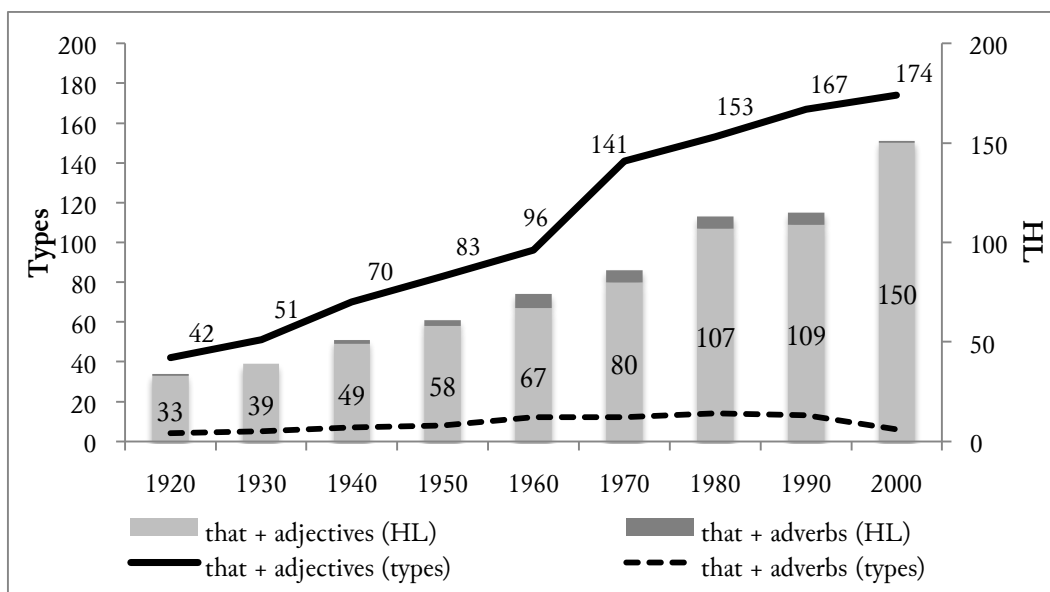


Fig. 2. Chronological distribution of the intensifier *that* in COHA (types and HL)

In the same vein, Figure 3 reproduces the chronological distribution of the intensifier *this* in terms of types and hapaxes across the different decades. The analysis of types, on the one hand, allows us to conclude that the rise of the construction does not strictly coincide with that of its counterpart *that*. Setting aside its use with adverbs with a stable distribution across time, the intensifier *this* is observed to increase substantially with adjectives from the 1970s, rising from 10 to 33 occurrences in just three decades. This rise takes place approximately two decades after the intensifier *that*, and this gap is tentatively explained as a result of the pull effect of the intensifier *that*, which is found to have a more advanced process of diffusion, not only in terms of occurrence but also in terms of its collocational use.

The analysis of the hapax legomena, in turn, suggests that the development of the intensifier *this* lags behind *that* in these contexts. The list of adverbial hapaxes is reduced in combination with this intensifier, almost exclusively restricted to adverbs of quantity. More important, however, are the adjectival hapaxes insofar as their number also increases more significantly in the same decade, with just 10 hapaxes in the 1970s

and reaching 25 in the 2000s, this increase also coinciding with the spread of the construction.

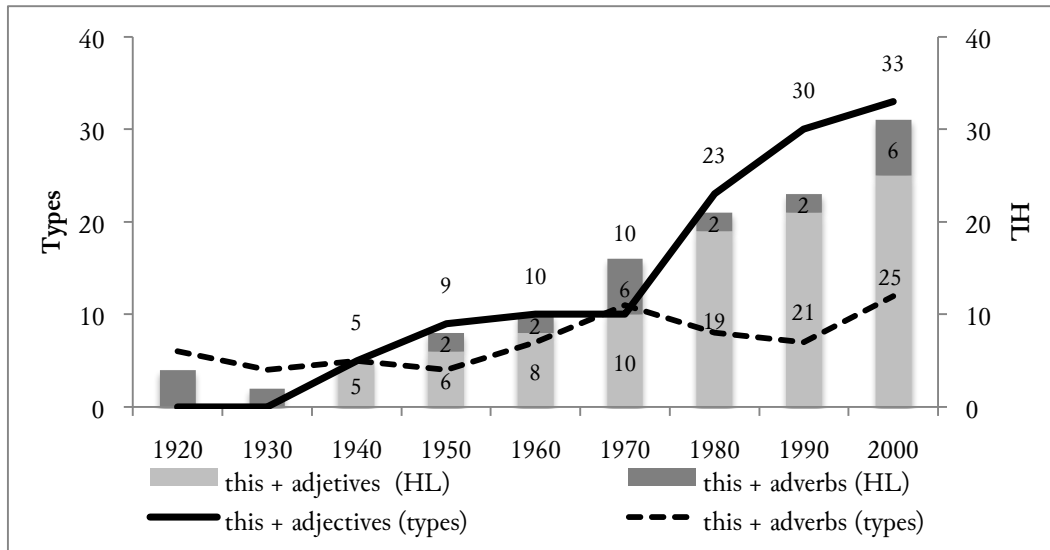


Fig. 3. Chronological distribution of the intensifier *this* in COHA (types and HL)

The higher frequency of *that* over *this* in these environments is plausibly associated with their occurrence as demonstratives/pronouns, a topic which has been the object of scholarly attention in the literature from different perspectives. Demonstratives are the earliest terms produced by children, *that* being the first deictic term to emerge “to refer to near or far objects without differentiating among possible points of orientation” (West 2014: 5). The language of adults is not an exception insofar as *that* can also be used non-contrastively to denote any object irrespective of its proximity even after the development of the deictic differentiation (Clark 2009: 94). In the light of this piece of evidence, *that* has become “the unmarked member of the demonstrative paradigm in that it has a wider incidence of use and is produced earlier on in ontogeny when compared to *this*”, the latter therefore more bound to occur in more restricted contexts (West 2014: 29). This same tendency is witnessed even after the grammaticalization of *this/that* as degree words inasmuch as *that* has eventually subsumed the unmarked

condition within its paradigm and, as happens in child language, it has eventually derived in a) a quicker chronological development; and b) more importantly, a wider occurrence together with a higher number of collocates.

#### 4.2. *The phenomenon across text-types*

This section explores the quantitative dimension of the phenomenon shedding light on the distribution of these intensifiers according to the textual classification of COCA, distinguishing spoken and written texts, the latter including fiction, magazine, newspaper and academic texts. Table 2 reproduces the occurrence of both intensifiers in absolute figures, together with the normalized frequencies to tokens per 1,000,000 words for comparison.

	<i>this</i>				<i>that</i>			
	Adjectives		Adverbs		Adjectives		Adverbs	
	Raw	<i>n.f.</i>	Raw	<i>n.f.</i>	Raw	<i>n.f.</i>	Raw	<i>n.f.</i>
Spoken	689	6.29	841	7.68	4,473	40.88	6,207	56.74
Fiction	356	3.39	641	6.11	3,197	30.47	3,420	32.6
Magazine	292	2.65	356	3.23	1,684	15.29	3,864	35.09
Newspaper	287	2.7	344	3.24	1,588	14.98	2,198	20.74
Academic	89	0.86	146	1.41	760	7.34	1,097	10.6
Total	1,713		2,328		11,702		16,786	

Table 2. *The intensifiers this and that across text types in COCA*

These data allow us to establish a relatively consistent ranking as to the use of these intensifiers. First, as expected, spoken English is located at the top of this continuum where the phenomenon is found to have the widest distribution with 6.29 and 40.88 occurrences of *this* and *that* with adjectival collocates and 7.68 and 56.74 occurrences

with adverbial collocates, respectively. Second, the construction is observed to appear with relative frequency in fiction where the intensifier *that*, for instance, amounts to 30.47 and 32.6 occurrences with adjectival and adverbial collocates, respectively. Next, fiction is followed by magazine and newspaper material where these adverbs share approximately the same distribution with the only exception of the intensifier *that* which is significantly higher in magazines than in the newspaper samples in combination with adverbs. Finally, academic texts are located at the bottom of the continuum, with just 0.86 and 1.41 occurrences of the intensifier *this* and 7.34 and 10.6 of its counterpart *that*.

The phenomenon is therefore confirmed to be a typical resource of spoken English, plausibly as a result of the intrinsic deictic feature of this intensifier, triggered with a referent known by both speakers beforehand. In sharp contrast with the written medium which is, in strictly functional terms, not interactive and carefully planned, the spoken language is deemed interactive and unplanned (Biber 1988: 11-12; Biber and Conrad 2009: 42-43). This immediateness produces a stronger dependence on grammatical words, spatial deictics in particular, which directly contributes to the proliferation of these intensifiers in the spoken domain. Written texts present a different attitude towards the construction in the sense that the phenomenon finds more room in those texts characterized by a less formal type of writing, fiction in particular, while academic compositions are at the end of this continuum with a negligible use of these intensifiers.

## **5. Qualitative analysis**

### ***5.1. Paradis' model of degree modifiers***

In view of the progressive acceptance of adjectival heads across time, the collocates have been examined according to Paradis' model of degree modifiers and adjectives, a framework which has been hitherto successfully applied to the study of the history of the intensifiers *right* and *wonder* in early English (Méndez-Naya 2007: 198–204; Calle-Martín 2014: 399-419). 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 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 is classified into *scalar modifiers* (*very, terribly, fairly*) and *totality modifiers* (*completely, absolutely, almost*). Scalar modifiers are divided 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 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.<sup>xi</sup>

## **5.2. The intensifiers *this/that* according to Paradis' model**

This section analyses the adjectival collocates in the light of Paradis' model of degree modifiers based on the data provided by COHA to ascertain whether these intensifiers reshape their mode of construal since their revival at the beginning of the 19th century. As degree words, both *this* and *that* are boosters with the meaning of 'to this/that extent or degree, so much, so', and therefore they are initially configured as scalar modifiers combining with bounded adjectives, in particular those 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. *small, big, great*), taste (i.e. *sour*), personality (i.e. *bad, nice, proud, wise, bold*), etc.

For the purpose, the COHA material has been analysed in three different decades coinciding with the origin, rise and definite diffusion of the phenomenon in the 20th century. In the particular case of the intensifier *that*, the analysis has been based on the data belonging to the 1920s, 1950s and 2000s; the development of the intensifier *this*, on the contrary, relies on the evidence coming from the 1940s, 1960s and 2000s on account of its slower diffusion in the course of the 20th century.

Table 3 reproduces the semantic classification of adjectives with the intensifier *that*, distinguishing whether the adjective denotes a bounded or an unbounded mode of construal, non-gradable items also considered.

<i>that</i>						
	1920s		1950s		2000s	
	Raw	%	Raw	%	Raw	%
Unbounded	5	11.9	16	20.5	33	18.9
Bounded	36	85.7	62	79.4	139	79.8
Non-gradable	0	0	0	0	2	1.1
Total	42		78		174	

Table 3. Semantic classification of adjectives combining with *that*

As expected, this booster is more bound to collocate with bounded items, as they predominate in our data across the decades with 85.7% in the 1920s, 79.4% in the 1950s and 79.8% in the 2000s. Despite this preference for bounded collocates, the number of unbounded collocates is found to rise over time with 11.9% in the 1920s, rising to 20.5% and 18.9% in the 1950s and 2000s, respectively, the list including not only limit adjectives like *blind, loyal, categorical, free* or *integrated* but also extreme adjectives

like *grand*, *huge*, *perfect* or *spectacular*, among others. The intensifier *that*, however, is also found to collocate with non-gradable adjectives in the last sub-period where it appears in combination with adjectives such as *interchangeable* and *locked*, as shown in examples (16-17). In (13), for instance, the adjective *interchangeable* is not taken to have any gradable property insofar as it does not generally occur with comparatives and superlatives (i.e. *\*the most interchangeable*) nor with degree adverbs (i.e. *\*rather interchangeable*) and this intensifier, however, is here used to denote some gradable property of that adjective. These are non-gradable adjectives which are not generally witnessed in combination with this intensifier before that decade. Thus, the evolution of the intensifier *that* shows a twofold stage of development consisting of the progressive adoption of a) a bounded mode of construal (Paradis, personal communication; see also Paradis 2000a: 157 for a similar argument) with the adoption of limit and extreme adjectives; and b) the acceptance of non-gradable collocates in these contexts.

(16) [...] she'd get everyone's names confused. They were that interchangeable. They all sort of looked alike, too (Fiction, *Nineteen Minutes*, 2007).

(17) Seriously, there's not a whole lot you can do when you're that locked in (Magazine, *Bicycling*, 2002).

Table 4, in turn, shows the semantic classification of the adjectival collocates with the intensifier *this*. In sharp contrast with *that*, the booster *this* is found to harmonize with its bounded construal showing an overwhelming preference for scalar gradable collocates such as *generous*, *happy*, *pretty*, *sick*, *surprised*, *tough* and others. There is not room for an unbounded mode of construal, however, until the beginning of the 21st century, when this intensifier begins to accept both limit (i.e. *transparent*) and extreme adjectives (i.e. *formidable*, *horrible*), as shown in examples (18-19):

(18) I hated that my motives, even so early in our relationship, were this transparent to her. I had to deny it (Fiction, *Southern Rev*, 2007).

(19) [...] the American League will put up another two teams against New York that are this formidable any time in the near future (Magazine, *Sporting News*, 2001).

		<i>this</i>					
		1940s		1970s		2000s	
Unbounded		0	0	0	0	4	12.1
Bounded		5	100	10	100	29	87.8
Non-gradable		0	0	0	0	0	0
Total		5		0		33	

Table 4. Semantic classification of adjectives combining with *this* (raw figures and %)

In view of the semantic taxonomy of the examples, it may be tentatively concluded that the intensifiers *this* and *that* are found in different levels of diffusion as degree modifiers. In itself, as a prototypical member of the scalar modification scheme, the intensifier *that* is found to predominate with bounded collocates, but it is making room for other collocates not strictly in the same domain of gradability, non-gradable adjectives included, as a result of their higher occurrence from the second half of the 20th century. The booster *this*, in turn, is particularly committed to its bounded mode of construal, being more reluctant to accept both unbounded and non-gradable adjectives, the latter in particular, plausibly as a consequence of the limited occurrence of this intensifier if compared with *that*.

This semasiological development leads us to formulate on the onomasiological issue and consider what kind of meanings can develop into degree meanings and how this process is achieved. In contrast with other degree modifiers, demonstratives differ from many others in that they develop from pronouns (i.e. grammatical elements) to

adverbs (i.e. grammatical) requiring semantic harmony with the combining element.

## **6. Conclusions**

The present paper has examined the origin, use and distribution of the intensifying function of *this/that*, paying particular attention to the quantitative and qualitative dimension of the phenomenon in American English. For the purpose, the study has been based on the POS-tagged versions of *The Corpus of Historical American English* and *The Corpus of Contemporary American English*, which have provided us with material for a diachronic and synchronic analysis of the construction in this variety of English. The data have allowed us to reach the following conclusions.

First, the origin of the phenomenon has been surveyed so as to trace the earliest instances in the history of English and obtain some evidence about its process of grammaticalization. It is here postulated that the deictic locative function of demonstratives may have directly contributed to the adoption of their degree meaning in English. This grammaticalization process, however, is not straightforward as it gives way to the strong and weak forms of these intensifiers, the former preserving the contextually-determined deictic meaning in contrast with the weak forms of these adverbs, deprived of any referential meaning. This fact explains the diffusion of these intensifiers in Present-Day American English since the strong forms allow a more definite expression of quantity than other items within the category of boosters (*so*, *very*, etc.), as their meaning ultimately depends on some shared knowledge between the speakers.

Second, our study has also shed light on the heterogeneous distribution of the construction in the history of English. After their appearance in Late Middle English, these intensifiers are practically non-attested in any corpus data from the 16th to the

18th centuries. After a timid revival at the beginning of the 19th century, a drastic increase is witnessed from the 1920s. The intensifier *that*, however, is found to be more widely diffused than *this*. The rise of *this* takes place approximately two decades after *that*, and this gap is the result of the pull effect of *that*, one step beyond *this* in terms of occurrence and collocational use.

Third, the phenomenon has been surveyed in terms of the textual classification of *The Corpus of Contemporary American English*. The phenomenon is confirmed as a typical resource of spoken English insofar as the strong deictic form of this intensifier generally requires a referent in the here and now shared by both speakers. In the written domain, the phenomenon finds more room in the less formal types of writing, fiction being at the top of the continuum, followed by magazine and newspaper materials. Academic texts are at the bottom of the continuum with a restricted number of these intensifiers.

Fourth, this paper has also explored the type of collocates appearing in combination with these intensifiers. From a semantic standpoint, on the one hand, Paradis' model of degree modifiers and adjectives has been used for the taxonomy of the collocates (2001: 50–53). Our study has shown that the intensifiers *this/that*, as scalar modifiers, overwhelmingly combine with bounded scalar adjectives. There is a slight increase of bounded collocates from the year 1950, coinciding with the actual rise of the construction in the 20th century, adopting both limit and extreme adjectives. The diachronic analysis of these intensifiers reveals that the phenomenon initially starts with uses in certain scalar constructions pointing to a high point on a scale and the intensifier later becomes less and less restricted with respect to its partners with the acceptance of a) a bounded mode of construal; and b) non-gradable adjectives in these environments

(*that* in particular).

Paradis considers this to be commonplace in the history of other reinforcing adjectives and adverbs in English, where it undergoes a transition from a contentful to a configurational meaning (2011: 80). As happens with the intensifier *wonder* in the history of English, this is generally achieved as a twofold process: “First, degree is made prominent and the item comes to modify the gradable property expressed by the adjective/adverb; next, the reading gains speaker acceptance and the change takes place. Second, the construction is subject to zone activation by means of which it operates within senses, accepting other less restricted constructions” (Calle-Martín 2014: 415).

All in all, a call is made here for the study of these new intensifiers in English. In our opinion, they are in on-going diffusion, and the analysis with other corpora and in other varieties of English will contribute to a wider understanding of their use and the factors, linguistic and/or extra-linguistic, that account for variation on a global scale.

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### **Notes**

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<sup>i</sup> I would like to thank Professor Carita Paradis (Lund University) for her valuable comments on earlier versions of this article, which have substantially improved the final version of this article.

<sup>ii</sup> Burchfield's chronology of the phenomenon is not accurate as the earliest instances have been found in the second half of the 14th century (see section 3).

<sup>iii</sup> This variety of English has been purposely chosen in view of the wider dimension of the phenomenon among all the other inner circle varieties. In addition to this, on quantitative and qualitative terms, their prominent use in American English may also serve as a yardstick to evaluate the status of these intensifiers in other varieties of English worldwide, the outer varieties also included.

<sup>iv</sup> The total word-count of the corpus along with the total number of words across genres and decades is available in <http://corpus.byu.edu/coha/>.

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<sup>v</sup> The total word-count of the corpus together with its size in terms of genre and sub-genre is available in <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>.

<sup>vi</sup> Standing for *Constituent Likelihood Automatic Word-tagging System*, CLAWS 7 has been developed at the University Centre for Computer Corpus Research on Language (UCREL) at the University of Lancaster (Garside 1987: 30-41; Garside and Smith 1997: 102-121; Garside and Rayson 1997: 179-193; Kübler and Zinsmeister 2015: 192).

<sup>vii</sup> The meanings of words are evoked in the occasion of use, and the user is then free to construe specific meanings in *ad hoc* ways considering the dynamics of meaning in language use (Paradis 2008: 319–326; 2000b: 240–241; 2011: 77–80). The degree meaning of *this/that* is activated here by semantic triggers and, as such, they are evoked in certain contexts. When they are understood with a degree *meaning*, they combine with a scalar structure invoked by the analogy/comparison potential in a context in the same way as *very true* means *much truth*, even though *true* sometimes is bounded (Paradis, personal communication).

<sup>viii</sup> These two forms of the intensifiers *this* and *that* may be the result of *subjectification*. According to Traugott, intensifiers actually undergo this semantic-pragmatic change in the sense that they progressively “involve the speaker’s assessment and evaluation of intensity, position on a scale, ordering of alternatives, etc.” (2006: 343).

<sup>ix</sup> 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) and the electronic *Middle English Dictionary* (e-MED), the latter particularly to check the chronology of the early instances of these intensifiers in English.

<sup>x</sup> In view of the fact that the corpus samples of COHA have approximately the same dimension from the 1920s, the results are given as raw numbers.

<sup>xi</sup> See Paradis (2008: 323–326) for a more comprehensive description of her model of degree modifiers and adjectives.