

From Demonstratives to Degree Words On the Origin of the Intensifying Function of *this/that* in American English

The intensifiers *this/that* can be traced back to the 14th century, when these deictic demonstratives acquired an adverbial status as a result of a grammaticalization process by means of which they became degree adverbs with the meaning of ‘to this/that extent, so much, so’ (OED s.v. *this/that* adv.). The present paper contributes to the study of the development of intensifiers through the grammaticalization of deictic demonstratives analysing the use and distribution of these intensifiers with the following objectives: (a) to trace their origin and grammaticalization as degree words in English; (b) to analyse their development over time; (c) to assess their distribution across register/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 study concludes that the deictive function of demonstratives contributed to the adoption of their degree meaning in late Middle English. The phenomenon disseminated in the early 19th-century as a typical resource of spoken English and both forms have progressed to where they can impose a scalar construal on adjectives for which scale is not the default construal. The evidence comes from the Corpus of Historical American English and the Corpus of Contemporary American English.

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