

Really Good or Real Good? A Corpus-Based Approach to the Grammaticalization and Delexicalization of Real

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Abstract

This study deals with the intensifying/emphasizing use of *real*, as in *real good*, the *real* question, which highlights the qualities indicated by the following adjective or nominal description. More specifically, it investigates the evolution toward Intensifier/Emphasizer by tracing *real*'s micro-diachronic progress along the two structures 'real + adjective' and 'real + noun'. The observations of prominent collocations show an ongoing grammatical change of *real*, e.g. *real* predominantly modifying a nominal *good* in 1820s but mainly functioning Intensifier in the same string *real good* after 1930s. Still, this transition seems limited to a certain set of collocates. *Real* in collocation with nouns such as *estate*, *world*, *life* never functions as Emphasizer.

Keywords: Intensifier, Emphasizer, bridging use, grammaticalization, Collocation

1. Introduction: definitions and frameworks

Adverbs such as *real* (of *real nice*), *dead* (of *dead easy*) and *pretty* (of *pretty good*) convey speakers' evaluation of the intensity by scaling upward the adjective qualities of 'niceness', 'easiness' and 'goodness'. Quirk et al. (1972, p. 429, 445, 583, 589) coin the term Intensifier to cover prenominal adjectives, adjective-modifying adverbs and adverbials which scale upwards or downwards the qualities denoted by the part of a clause. Within the Quirkian framework, Intensifier is distinguished from Emphasizer based on the gradability of the item it co-occurs with, though the effect of Emphasizers is sometimes similar to Intensifiers (cf. Quirk et al. (1972, p. 583)). This happens when an Emphasizer modifies a gradable constituent. Compare:

- (1) She **really** may have damaged the friendship.
- (2) She may **really** have damaged the friendship.
- (3) She may have **really** damaged the friendship.

In (1) and (2) *really* is an Emphasizer, while *really* in (3) not only stresses the breaking relationship but also invokes a scale of damage toward a higher end. Sinclair et al. (1990) draw a clearer functional boundary between emphasizing adverbs and submodifiers: emphasizing adverbs (e.g. *absolutely*) derive from

emphasizing adjectives (e.g. *absolute* of *an absolute success*) and usually come in front of verbs, while submodifiers come in front of other adverbs or adjectives.

In this paper only, ‘Intensifier/intensifying’ is restricted to adverbs that scale upwards the adjective/adverb qualities which are inherently gradable such as *real* of *real nice* and *real seriously*. Emphasizer/emphasizing refers to the heightening effect on the noun phrases and verb phrases, for example, *real* of *a real hero*. Another concept that needs clarification is ‘Classifier/classifying’ which applies to adjectives qualifying something either-or-not in a class. One good example is *real* of *real world* which classifies *world* into an ‘existing in fact’ category in contrast to the ‘imaginary’ or ‘non-existing’ category. Section 2 will provide a thorough test for Emphasizers, Intensifiers and Classifier. It should be noted that both Intensifier and Emphasizer reflect a high degree of grammaticalization and delexicalisation. In this paper, these two processes concern the issue how lexical items come to serve grammatical functions while being at an ongoing loss of referential meanings.

There have been revealing corpus-based studies (e.g. Blanco-Suárez, 2014; Lorenz, 2002) that suggest pathways of grammaticalization for zero-derivation¹ Intensifiers. Nevalainen and Rissanen (2002, p. 368) have drawn on historical dictionaries and reported that the polysemy of *pretty* (viz. ‘handsome’ versus ‘fair-sized, considerable’) in the Middle English is an important contributor to its intensifying use of today.

The evidence of semantic relevance raises a more general question: what meanings are likely to be transferred into an intensifying context and gradually to be weakened. Lorenz (2002, p. 146) suggests a delexicalization pathway of ‘modal-to-scalar’ along which epistemic modal adverbs (e.g. *really* of *He admitted what really happened*) feature an active resource of scalar adverbs or ‘adverbs of degree’ (e.g. *very* of *very good*) which convey no meaning beyond degree. The possibility of a modal resource may be related to the strong logical connection between epistemic modality and intensification, that is, invoking the degree to which an adjectival quality holds truth. This idea is echoed by another framework ‘modal-to-intensifier shift’ proposed by Partington (1993) who has also stressed the small step from vouching for truth to being hyperbolic about it, when she explains how truth-averring modals (such as *very*, *utterly* and *absolutely*) become successful and permanent Intensifiers (or degree modifiers) in the OED Online database. Overall, Lorenz (2002) and Partington (1993) have both drawn on abundant data either by counting the extractions from formal versus informal context or by analysing the range of collocates². However, both frameworks miss a detailed semantic and grammatical analysis of the collocational strings, in other words, the underlying relationship between the adverb Intensifier and the co-occurring adjective phrases, adverb phrases and part of clause, though Lorenz (2002) briefly mentions the force of negative and interrogative contexts in driving delexicalization.

- (4) Then what you are basically saying is that these are not **really** worth the paper they're written on. [COCA 2017 SPOK Fox]
- (5) ...Mr. President, are you **really** serious about taking on ISIS? [COCA 2015 SPOK CNN]

In (4) and (5), adverb *really* allows dual readings of a truth-affirming modal and meanwhile a contrastive emphasis on the 'appropriateness' of the adjectival quality 'worthiness' and 'seriousness'. From a diachronic perspective, the semantically bleaching reading indicates a delexicalization process.

There have been studies dedicated to determine the semantic or structural pattern where adjectives develop the intensifying meanings (e.g. Athanasiadou, 2007: 563; Adamson, 2000: 45; Blanco-Suárez 2014: 120). Despite its synchronic nature, Athanasiadou's (2007) study points out that adjectives in collocation with adjective-like nouns (e.g. *a complete fool*) demonstrate a changing role of uses 'interbetween' descriptive adjective³ and Intensifier.

- (6) This case study is not intended to be a **complete** catalogue of ethical issues or cases... [COCA 2017 ACAD AI Magazine]
- (7) It will be a **complete** failure, in which case, you'll be proven right. [COCA 2017 SPOK Fox]

Example (6) shows a property of measurable 'wholeness' assigned to *catalogue*, while in (7), a non-measurable or more subjective quantification scale of 'completeness' is invoked to describe an inherently scalar notion *fool*. This observation reflects a diachronic picture of semantic changes: a process of subjectification⁴ following property > quantification > intensification > emphasis. Adamson (2000) also embraces subjectification in his framework where intensification is reflected in a leftward movement in prenominal adjective strings. The relevance of position sheds new light on Dixon's (1982) synchronic model of ordering-meaning relations⁵ which clarify the unmarked preferences of Modern English and indicate diachronic validity. Accordingly, when *pretty* progressively shifting toward the leftmost position, its original sense 'lovely' extends along human propensity > physical property > evaluation. The leftmost position allows the reading of *pretty* of dual functions as descriptive adjective and Intensifier (e.g. *pretty big box*).

The categorical shift from descriptive adjective to Emphasizer is covert and should be inferred from structural, semantic and pragmatic observations. Emphasizers such as *pure* have raised interest of Vandewinkel and Davidse (2008, p. 255) who focus on two syntactic environments, *pure* + adjective(s) + noun and *pure* + noun, and conclude that the rise of Emphasizer is reinforced by both structures via shared collocational sets (e.g. emotion nouns).

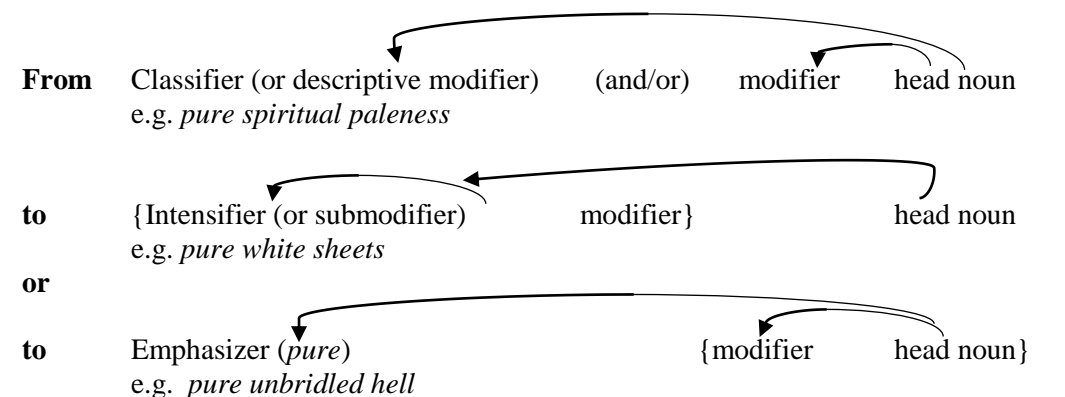


Figure1. *Reanalysis of modifier to submodifier/ emphazier* (adapted from Vandewinkel and Davidse (2008: 267)) *Elements within { } are perceived as a semantic unit in the way they share a closer relationship than elements outside the brace.

Pure in a string of coordinated adjectives (e.g. *pure rectified spirit*) may be contextually modulated⁶ by the surrounding adjective(s) and even (nouns), thus triggering a new sense ‘high-grade alcohol’ in this particular collocation. This produces a semantic indeterminacy of what *pure* actually modifies, that is, adding the ‘high-level’ attribute to *spirit* or lending force to the speaker’s utterance by taking near-synonymous *pure* and *rectified* as a weak form of emphasis. This ‘indeterminate’ or ‘bridging’ use highlights the semantic factor in facilitating the development toward a more grammatical use as an originally classifying adjective turns more semantically general and even bleached. Such ‘bridging’ use is also found in the *pure*+noun pattern.

- (8) Astounding highs and frightful lows have marked Max Cleland’s four-plus decades in public service. Today certainly qualifies as a high, but it is not a moment of **pure** joy. [COCA 2014 NEWS Atlanta]

In (8) *pure* loses its grammatical status as a descriptive modifier, as the predicative alternation test results in a difficult reading (*?the joy is pure*), and on the other hand, it heightens the relation of specification with *joy* in contrast with other values, in which case *pure* functions like to *just* or *only* and still pertains to ‘unmixedness’ of such *joy* with other feelings in (8). According to Vandewinkel and Davidse (ibid), both the prepositional syntactic environment and the emotional collocations are considered important in driving these ‘bridging’ readings, or in their language, contextual emphaziers. In a more general sense, collocational preference is the underlying mechanism of semantic change as well as categorical shift (Ghesquière, 2014, p. 94, 95). These findings are enlightening for a range of zero-derivation Emphasizers and Intensifiers.

This paper is interested in the development of *real* for two reasons. First, the grammatical class of *real* is quite established, and OED has included entries of both the submodifying use (adverb) and emphasizing use (adjective): *real* is able to submodify adjectives in the way *very* and *extremely* function, and meanwhile *real* can be used to ‘emphasize the significance of a situation’ (e.g. *a real danger of civil war*). Despite abundant examples, few studies have investigated the grammaticalization of adjective/adverb *real*. Second, in comparison with the uni-form items such as *pure*, *pretty* and *dead*, *real* is unique in terms of its close link with *really*. Speakers are found to alternate between *real* and *really* within the same clause:

- (9) I’m sure that’s—I’m not—it wasn’t **real—really** clear. [COCA 2009 SPOK CNN_Misc]

It should be noted that *real* has a varying distribution in registers, for instance, a higher frequency in casual conversation than academic writing (Biber et al., 1999, p. 545; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, p. 567; Yaguchi et al., 2010, p. 585). From a grammatical perspective, how *real* evolves toward a pure intensifying/ emphasizing function is an interesting topic: is *real* suddenly used as an intensifier (e.g. *It sounds real good*) via a shortcut of the occasional subtraction of ‘-ly’ of *really*, or does it derive from the literal sense ‘existing or happening’ via certain reoccurring collocational patterns? The latter hypothesis leads to a series of questions in this paper, (1) whether *real* in a predicative position relates to the development of intensifying function, (2) whether the multi-adjectival string (viz. *real* + adjective(s) + noun) contributes to the intensifying/ emphasizing uses, and (3) how the descriptive use of *real* shifts to an emphazier in the pattern of *real* + noun.

In order to answer these questions, this study has extracted real-life data (total 5045 tokens used) from two corpora of American English. First, there is a quick search of the most frequent collocates in COCA⁷, and this is an important step because the selected list of collocates shall undergo a further qualitative study. The next step will focus on the use of *real* in the patterns ‘*real* + noun’ and ‘*real* + adjective’ in a diachronic dataset COHA⁸ (400 million words). Therefore, Section 3.1 selects four collocates—*problem*, *question*, *issue* and *value*—for a detailed analysis of how *real* develops emphasizing forces. Section 3.2 selects *good* and *nice* for the investigation into how such collocations contribute to the intensifying/emphasizing uses of *real*. Here, *real* is primarily used as Intensifier (e.g. *real good*) that modifies either adjectives or adverbs, though the position it occurs in varies from attributive, predicative to adjunctive. In this study, the main reason for the limited sampling is my research time, and hopefully in the future study I will analyse a wider range of collocates of *real* in each period.

Before reading the data, I will specify the criteria that distinguish different uses of *real* in different positions in the following section.

2. Test for *real*

As an adjective, *real* may be used as an emphasizing adjective with little semantic content but amplifying the speaker's stance (e.g. *a real hero*). *Real* have homonyms that can be in both an attributive and predictive use (Quirk et al. 1972: 430).

- (10) Those are **real** flowers. [central adjective]
 ~ Those flowers are **real**, not artificial.

In (10), *real* means 'existing physically' and is called central adjective. According to Quirk et al. (1972: 402), adjectives which can function both attributively and predicatively are 'central' adjectives, while those satisfying only one criterion are called 'peripheral' adjectives. From a functional perspective, when *real* retains its literal senses (as in *real estate*), it is a typical classifying adjective (Sinclair et al., 1990, p. 67) that indicates things are either in a particular class (existence/immovable property) or not.

As an adverb, *real* may intensify gradable adjectives and other clausal constituents (e.g. *She may have really damaged the friendship*).

To be clear, the tests for *real* as classifying adjective (Classifier), emphasizing adjective (Emphasizer) and intensifying adverb (Intensifier) are summarized in the table below.

predicative alternation test	a real and national feeling ~ the feeling is real and national [Classifier] a real hero ~ the hero is real [Emphasizer] a real bird ~ the bird is real [Classifier] Notes: real indicating immovable property as in <i>real estate</i> , <i>real property</i> is Classifier
substitution for <i>very/extremely</i>	She is real happy. ~ She is extremely happy. [Intensifier] She treated us real nice. ~ She treated us very nice. [Intensifier]
addition of <i>and</i>	have a real nice time ~ ?have a real and nice time ~ have a very nice time [not Classifier, but Intensifier]
substitution for <i>absolute(ly)/complete(ly)</i>	He is a real success. ~ He is an absolute success. [Emphasizer/ emphasizing adjective] He real likes it. ~ he absolutely likes it. [Emphasizer/ emphasizing adverb]

Figure 2. Tests for grammatical categories of *real*

The category ‘bridging’ stands out when none of the tests is able to distinguish Classifier from Emphasizer/Intensifier.

alternation test	What is the real problem on earth? \leadsto the problem is real [bridging]
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Though a predicative alternation test produces a grammatical result, *real* also takes on a focusing reading in contrast to other possible problems. The *problem* is truly existing and meanwhile the subsequent *on earth* renders a heightening effect to *real* in this context. Here, ‘bridging’ is in its literal sense, standing for the ‘inter-between’ usage of Classifier and Emphasizer/Intensifier.

3. Discussion

3.1 Diachronic study: *real* + noun

This section selects four nouns in collocation with *real*: *problem*, *question*, *issue* and *value*. The first three words are among the top 10 frequent collocation under a ‘*real* + noun’ query in COCA (see Appendix1 for the currently most frequent 30 words *real* combines with), and a quick test (see Appendix 2) reveals their emphasizing uses outweighing the other functions (viz. Classifier and bridging use). The fourth noun *value* is added to the list due to its long continuous records in COHA (from 1810s to 2000s), and *real* today may function as Emphasizer when co-occurring with the adjective-like noun ‘valuable’. For a better understanding of why *real* sometimes functions as noun-emphasizer in Present-day English, successive stages of high-frequent collocates (i.e. *real problem/question/issue*) have to be studied. The tables below show three grammatical functions of *real* and the distributions within each 10-year time slot. The percentages are derived as follows. For example, in 1990-2000s, the total frequency of *real value* is 38, and 13 cases are reported as Classifier, thus $\frac{13}{38}$ or 34.2% in Figure 3.

	Collocate	1810-1820s	1830-1840s	1850-1860s	1870-1880s	1890-1900s	1910-1920s	1930-1940s	1950-1960s	1970-1980s	1990-2000s
1	<i>Value</i>	64.3%	74.7%	68.2%	74.7%	48.6%	34.6%	47.2%	34.6%	47.7%	34.2%
2	<i>Problem</i>	/	/	/	100%	36.4%	17.5%	26.3%	20%	8.0%	5.1%
3	<i>Question</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3.4%	1.3%
4	<i>Issue</i>	/	/	0	11.1%	0	5.0%	10.4%	8.6%	3.2%	3.3%

Figure 3. *real* as Classifier

	Collocate	1810-1820s	1830-1840s	1850-1860s	1870-1880s	1890-1900s	1910-1920s	1930-1940s	1950-1960s	1970-1980s	1990-2000s
1	<i>Value</i>	14.3%	15.7%	18.2%	5.7%	27.0%	14.1%	11.3%	3.8%	2.3%	10.5%
2	<i>Problem</i>	/	/	/	0	18.2%	7.5%	8.2%	5.7%	9.6%	8.0%
3	<i>Question</i>	40%	45.5%	55.3%	25.5%	13.4%	5.7%	15%	10.1%	6.3%	3.8%
4	<i>Issue</i>	/	/	0	0	31.5%	40.0%	39.6%	29.7%	20.2%	16.7%

Figure 4. *real* of bridging use

	Collocate	1810-1820s	1830-1840s	1850-1860s	1870-1880s	1890-1900s	1910-1920s	1930-1940s	1950-1960s	1970-1980s	1990-2000s
1	<i>Value</i>	21.4%	8.4%	13.7%	19.5%	24.3%	51.3%	41.5%	61.5%	50%	55.3%
2	<i>Problem</i>	/	/	/	0	45.5%	75%	65.5%	74.3%	82.4%	86.9%
3	<i>Question</i>	60%	54.5%	44.7%	74.5%	86.6%	94.3%	85%	89.9%	90.3 %	95.0%
4	<i>Issue</i>	/	/	100%	88.9%	68.5%	35.0%	50%	61.7%	76.6%	80.0%

Figure 5. *real* as Emphasizer

Generally, Classifier *real* remains prominent in collocation with *value* though the emphasizing use has been gaining its ground during the course of 200 years. Early classifying adjective *real* expresses an inherent property of the monetary worth of an object. In (11) however, *real value* represents the actual or inherent ability of an individual in contrast with what *you are honestly worth*.

- (11) "... So pray be quiet, and not attempt to pass for any more than you are honestly worth, which is little enough, to be sure." I have known boys and girls at school attempt to pass for more than their **real value**. [COHA 1849 FIC WreathsFriendship]
(Test: Classifier; real value ~ the value is real)

In 1940s, *real value* has gone beyond the immovable monetary property of a substance and has begun to describe abstract qualities of humans.

- (12) In his Introduction he says, it is in modern times only that this science has assumed a **real value**, and a practical importance, under the researches of those eminent men, who have cultivated the philosophy of mind, on the principles which are acted upon in physical science... [COHA 1833 MAG NorthAmRev]
(Test: bridging use; a real value ~ a value is real)

Though *real* passes predicative alternation test, it extends the meaning ‘practical, realistic’ to a further emphasizing reading ‘valuable, important’. Here, *real value* is used to describe the usefulness of *this science* in relevance to *physical science*. A careful analysis of all bridging uses leads to four semantic transition cases where *real value* extends its meanings gradually from true monetary worth to anything that is worth to have. In addition to ‘really existing qualities’, *value* has a second reading as ‘practicality’ in (12), ‘potential benefits for human life’ in (13), ‘positive evaluation of *every fact of existence*’ in (14) and ‘positive evaluation of human traits’ in (15):

- (13) Property is what a great proportion of mankind are struggling to obtain, and many at the hazard of their lives ... It has in it, therefore, a **real value**, and ought not to be wantonly destroyed while it may be used as an instrument for benefiting mankind. [COHA 1815 NF Inconsistent]
- (14) A Great peculiarity of the Christian religion is its transforming or transmuting power. I speak not now of the regeneration which accomplishes in the individual soul, but of the change it works upon things without. It applies the touchstone to every fact of existence, and exposes its **real value**. [COHA 1847 NF CrownThornsToken]
- (15) He fell into the sport readily enough, but if I had known his **real value**, I should have not kept him from me by idle words. [COHA 1894 FIC GoldMine]

In general, *real* in collocation with *value* gradually acquires a positive evaluative meaning beyond certainty of existence over time; on the path of delexicalization, the modal meaning of *real* becomes minor when a speaker is purely emphatic about some adjectival quality (e.g. *It is of real value!*)

Emphasizing use has gained its ground since twentieth century. In an example of 1930s, *real value* describes a human property that has outstanding

- (16) “It isn’t bluffing!” she cried indignantly. “It’s just telling the world what your real value is, and getting it in hard cash! If you would do that, we could move out of this horrible little dump and build over in Jersey!” [COHA 1935 FIC FortuneMensEyes]
(Test: Emphasizer; real value \neq value is real)

ability of making *hard cash*. The extensive use of ‘!’ reinforces the emphasizing effect of *real* that expresses the speaker’s strong emotions (cf. ‘You should tell the world what your value is/ how valuable you are and just make hard cash!’). The following extraction shows another heightening case of *real* in a special structure:

- (17) “On the one hand there is the haste to finish as much as he can before it is too late. Hoping, against the odds, that he will be able to leave an estate, something of real value, for his sons and daughters, his old mother and his widow. [COHA 1982 FIC ColorPurple]
(Test: Emphasizer; real value \nearrow value is real)

This whole prepositional phrase performs a function similar to a post-nominal adjective ‘valuable’ (cf. ‘something of real value’ vs. ‘something so valuable’). In general, there is a tendency that *real value* emerges in the contexts of less monetary relevance.

The other three collocates, *real problem*, *real question* and *real issue*, share a similar pattern of the functional distribution of *real* in history. Despite the difference in starting points, or the time when the earliest instance is recorded in COHA, *real* of all these three collocates has a steadily increasing proportion of emphasizing function in contrast to its classifying and bridging uses. *Real* of *real question* has demonstrated a competitive jostling of ‘bridging use’ (55.4%) versus ‘Emphasizer’ (44.7%) around 1850s to 1860s, after which *real* continues delexicalizing toward a sheer emphasis use (e.g. 95% in 1990-2000s). The two uses are shown in the below:

- (18) America is willing enough to accept Oregon at the hands of Spain; but the **real question** at issue is, has Spain the power of bestowing Oregon on America! [COHA 1845 MAG LivingAge]
(Test: bridging use; the real question at issue \leadsto the question at issue is real)
- (19) Of course he’ll try. The **real question** is whether she’ll let him. [COHA 1999 FIC Mov:MusicHeart]
(Test: Emphasizer; the real question \nearrow the question is real)

Again, the bridging case reflects traces of grammaticalization, and example (18) shows a highly frequent⁹ structure ‘real question at issue is...’ before 1950s. In the above clause, the problem of Spain’s power in controlling Oregon is truly existing and needs to be faced. The prepositional phrase *at issue* (immediately after *question*) renders a focusing effect to this *question*, and in this context *real* acquires an emphasizing meaning that the very *question* of Spanish power is being hotly discussed. This observation of *real question* supports the importance of contextual modulation (e.g. *at issue*) in driving grammaticalization of *real* by activating its inherent semantic components (‘true, significant’).

As for *real* of *real problem*, the contrastive context is key to facilitating the grammaticalizing use. *Real* in the following examples is in bridging use:

- (20) Another spot might be to show newspaper headlines of different states in deep, deep trouble as an announcer asks, “Where’s the **real problem**?” Right now people are convinced the problem is Washington, D.C., whether it’s the President or Congress. [COHA 1992 FIC Atlantic]
(Test: bridging use; real value \leadsto value is real)
- (21) Such high finance is beyond the comprehension of most Navajo women, many of whom have never been to school and must make a thumbprint for their “signatures.” A more **real problem** in Janet’s struggle to feed her family is that of the vast, raw distances of the Southwest sheep country. [COHA 1968 MAG GoodHouse]
(Test: bridging use; real value \leadsto value is real)

Example (20) expresses that the problem is existing and is in either *the President* or *Congress*. *Real* indicates the most appropriate selection from the two choices (in contrast to the underlined problem.) and thus achieves a highlighting effect on this exact problem. Similarly, the writer of (21) makes a comparison between the *high finance* of West countries and *Southwest sheep country* and thus *real*, marked by the comparative *more*, stresses Janet’s most urgent *problem* which is food rather than school. To sum up, *real* achieves its focus on specific entities (*problem*) via contextual contrast.

As for pure Emphasizing use, *real* usually comes in the structure ‘the real problem is not...but...’ where *real* no longer indicates existence but the ‘keyness’ of one cause. The exact structure ‘the real question/issue is not...but...’ is also found in *real question* and *real issue* and *real* is an Emphasizer to accentuate the importance of *question* and *issue*.

Generally, *real* of the four collocates discussed shows an ongoing semantic as well as grammatical change. *Real* in the bridging contexts usually has two readings, actuality and emphasis. The structural (e.g. *of real value*), semantic (e.g. *his real value*), and discoursal (e.g. contextual contrast; the exclamatory clause) contexts facilitate a more grammaticalized reading of *real*.

3.2 *real* + adjective

This section focuses on two collocational pairs, *real good* and *real nice*. *Good* and *real* are two prominent collocates in modern English after a quick search ‘real + adjective’ in COCA, and in COHA they both show high frequency continuously from 1810s to 2000s.

There are three positions where ‘*real* + adjective’¹⁰ occurs: at an attributive position before a noun phrase (NP), at a predicative position after a copular verb, or at freer positions like an adjunct modifying a verb phrase (VP), for example,

- (22) I can farm **real good** and take care of horses. We could save our money and buy us a farm together and ... [COHA 2001 FIC Play:BambamUncivil]

Wherever ‘*real* + adjective’ emerges, *real* functions as Intensifier or Emphasizer depending on the gradability of the adjective/adverb. The following two tables draw on data from COHA and list *real*’s three functions in its corresponding positions. In the category ‘sum’, numbers in parenthesis refer to the raw frequency of tokens used in one particular period. The category ‘?’ stands for problematic instances as a result of proper names (e.g. **Real Good** Construction Company) or misspellings.

	Position of <i>real good</i>	Function of <i>real</i>	1810-1820s	1830-1840s	1850-1860s	1870-1880s	1890-1900s	1910-1920s	1930-1940s	1950-1960s	1970-1980s	1990-2000s
	N/A <i>real good</i> is NP	*Classifier	77.8%	69.6%	27.1%	18.9%	19.7%	8.8%	9.4%	5.0%	1.6%	2.5%
	Attributive	Intensifier	0	8.7%	18.8%	12.2%	32.8%	32.4%	35.8%	36.0%	21.2%	32.5%
		bridging use	22.2%	21.7%	25%	44.6%	13.1%	33.8%	24.5%	11.2%	11.6%	6.3%
	predicative	Intensifier	0	0	27.1%	14.9%	18.0%	13.2%	9.4%	14.3%	27.5%	30.0%
		bridging use	0	0	2.1%	10.8%	16.4%	4.4%	5.7%	5.0%	6.3%	3.4%
	end position after VP (Adjunct)	Intensifier	0	0	0	0	0	7.4%	15.1%	31.1%	30.2%	25.7%
Sum			100% (9)	100% (23)	100% (48)	100% (74)	100% (61)	100% (68)	100% (53)	100% (161)	100% (189)	100% (237)
?						2						3

Figure 6. *real good* in COHA

	Position of <i>real good</i>	Functions of <i>real</i>	1810-1820s	1830-1840s	1850-1860s	1870-1880s	1890-1900s	1910-1920s	1930-1940s	1950-1960s	1970-1980s	1990-2000s
	Attributive	Intensifier	/	0	63.6%	40.6%	61.1%	60.0%	48.9%	43.0%	36.7%	33.3%
		bridging use	/	0	0	3.1%	0	0	4.4%	5.6%	2.2%	1.2%
	Predicative	Intensifier	/	100%	36.4%	46.9%	36.1%	32.5%	37.8%	43.9%	53.3%	53.1%
		bridging use	/	0	0	0	0	2.5%	0	0	0	0
	end position after VP (Adjunct)	Intensifier	/	0	0	9.4%	2.8%	5.0%	8.9%	7.5%	7.8%	8.6%
Sum			/	100% (2)	100% (11)	100% (32)	100% (36)	100% (40)	100% (45)	100% (107)	100% (90)	100% (81)
?							1 token	1 token				

Figure 7. *real nice* in COHA

As is shown in Figure6, the intensifying use has been increasing in general. The bridging use peaks around 1990s to 1920s which sees the emergence of adverb-intensifier *real*. The first instance that *real* intensifies an adverb (e.g. *I like it real good*) is recorded in 1916, though this is late in comparison with its intensifying adjectives in the beginning of 1800s. Finally between 1990s to 2000s, the bridging use is of minor proportion in contrast to its intensifying use.

One important difference between the above two figures is an additional role of *real* as Classifier. This is due to the fact that *good* is a noun referring to good things, good deeds or kindness of a person (e.g. It will blind their eyes to the real good). The relevance of human beings relates to the bridging use. The following paragraphs will discuss in what context a bridging use emerges, and how bridging case relates to classifying and intensifying use.

Bridging use of *real*, in its early time before 1900s, often expresses a positive recognition of the inner quality (i.e. *good*) of a person; the goodness in an individual often relates to some religious belief:

- (23) “Oh, Annie, my darling, my darling, I don’t know; I am afraid not. Heaven is not for such as I am,” Georgie cried, piteously, while Annie continued: “Why, sister? yes it is; and you are **real good**, and you’ll come some day, and find me waiting for you right by the door; but, Georgie,”... [COHA 1872 FIC EdnaBrowningThe]

Here, the *real good* will end up in *heaven*. The syntactic role of *real* should first depend on the word of class of *good*. *Good*, as the head of predicative complement, can be interpreted as ‘a good person’ (noun) and also ‘kind-hearted’ (adjective) in such a religious context. These two readings share similarity as they both index individuals’ positive evaluation.

Also, *real good* being in an attributive position, *real* has several readings—noun-classifier, noun-emphasizer and adjective-intensifier—thus a ‘bridging’ function (e.g. a real good cook and gambler):

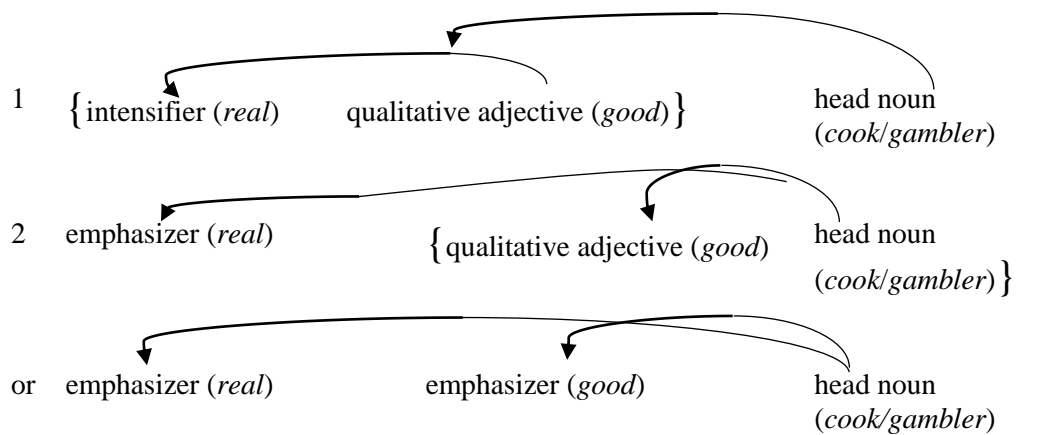


Figure 8. The possible functions of *real*

Since there is a close link between *real* and *cook/gambler* (cf. He's a real cook and gambler), an insertion of *good* blurs this original relationship. This indeterminate grammatical function also reflects the polysemy of *real* and the mutual influence of its literal and more delexicalized senses.

Early instances of *real* as Intensifier (in *real good*) is found within some special verb phrase such as *have a real good time*, *have a real good dinner*, *take a real good care of*, and *take a real good nap*. *Real good*, as a semantic unit, expresses the speaker's positive evaluation of how enjoyable or pleasant the day is; the addition of *real* reinforces the goodness of the time (cf. have a good time). Though at first *real good* (when *real* functions as Intensifier) is largely limited to these idiomatic verb phrases, (viz. verb with opaque meanings + NP), later it begins to occur alone as is shown in the examples (24) and (25).

(24) They took some more pictures and we | started to walk toward the hangar.
 "How does it feel to be home?" another reporter yelled. "Good." "**Real good,**" Buzz added. [COHA 1961 FIC Carpetbaggers]

(25) "Hey, how's Ma these days?" Jules asked, backing off. "**Real good.**" "And Betty?" "I don't know, the same." "Grandma?" "I guess the same." "Take care of yourself, kid!" Maureen did not look toward the woman in the car. [COHA 1969 FIC ChosenPlaceThe]

Since 1960s, *real good* has been occurring alone frequently in response to the how-questions about one's feelings and health. This paper includes such independent use into the category of 'predicative' use as 'I'm fine/very good/real good'. The emergence of *real good* in phatic talk may imply the fact that *real* has become a common and even old means of emphatic expression, and it no longer exaggerates items in a hyperbolic way. There seems to be a

consensus that intensifiers, chiefly employed to express emphasis, thrive on innovation and competition (Bolinger, 1972, p.18; Quirk et al., 1972, p. 590; Lorenz, 2002, p.143). In other words, older items such as *real* may eventually lose their force of expressivity when being progressively delexicalized. However, whether *real* is gradually losing its expressivity (in the way *very* does) requires further research by drawing abundant data.

When it comes to *real* in collocation with *nice*, it mainly functions as Intensifier of adjective/adverb throughout history from 1830s to 2000s. First, the earliest example records the intensifying case of *real* which together with *nice* occurs in a predicative position after copular verb *is*:

- (26) “We’ve been getting this room made lately, and I tell you it’s **real nice**, so private, like!” said our hostess, with a complacent air. [COHA 1839 FIC NewHome--Wholl]

Even in late 1990s, *real nice* in a predicative position is usually found in the structure ‘it’s/that’s real nice to/of ...’ or ‘you look real nice’ which expresses gratitude or make compliment to the listener in casual communication. This point relates back to the use of *real good* in phatic talk where *real* as Intensifier has been in common use since 1910s. Furthermore, the two strings *real nice* and *real good* share similarity in terms of the high frequency of occurring within the structure ‘verb with opaque meanings + NP’, for example, *have real nice time*, *have a real nice visit*, *have a real nice chat*, *pay real nice attention to*. *Real* intensifies *nice* in these examples, and *real nice*, together, describes the quality of the *time*, *visit*, *chat* and *attention*.

The first record of *real nice* functioning as Adjunct is found in 1870s (e.g. *get along real nice together*), and *real nice* modifies a more varied VP since 1920s, for example, *curtsey real nice*, *minuet real nice*, *shoot real nice*, *settle down real nice*, *shine memories up real nice*, *smile real nice*. The widening scope of VP shows the enriched semantic content of *nice* (e.g. *nice* means ‘elegantly, politely’ in *curtesy real nice*), and this in turn implies the versatility of *real* as it intensifies different adverbial qualities. One good example of such versatility is the conventionalized Intensifier *very* which has undergone full delexicalization and now is able to modify almost any adjective and adverb in English. Accordingly, the variety of VP may indirectly imply the ongoing delexicalization of *real* as it gradually sheds literal senses and describes a wider range of qualities indicated by the co-occurring adverb. This point is further supported by the generally increasing collocational variety and frequency of *real* + adjective/adverb from 1810s to 2000s (see Appendix 4).

In general, the observation of *real good/nice* shows the ongoing grammaticalization of *real* which shifts category from adjective to adverb-intensifier. However, the above analysis does not fully answer the question

whether the emergence of intensifying use of *real* is influenced by *really* (i.e. whether *real* is suddenly used as an intensifier via a shortcut of the occasional subtraction of *-ly* of *really*). The current observation shows that *real* develops the intensifying meaning from truth-emphasis via positive evaluation of the adverbial/adjective qualities. Still, further research on the use of *really* is needed for its possible intervening impact on the delexicalization of *real*.

4. General conclusion

This corpus study has selected prominent collocates and tracked a long-run path of *real* from Classifier to Emphasizer and Intensifier. The complexity of the pathway lies in the two patterns where *real* has usually occurred: *real* + noun and *real* + adjective(s). The two patterns interact with each other when *real* co-occurs with adjective(s) followed immediately by a noun, and in such a situation *real* has several competing readings of noun-classifier, noun-emphasizer and adjective-intensifier (e.g. *real good taste*). According to the data from COHA, *real* has developed noun-emphasizer function (e.g. in 1810s) earlier than its intensifying use (in 1830s), and this implies a positive answer to the research question: whether the development of *real* in the multi-adjectival string (viz. *real* + adjective(s) + noun) contribute to the intensifying/ emphasizing uses. As for the emergence of pure emphasis use, it is facilitated by the structural, semantic and discoursal contexts. For example, the structure ‘(be) of real value’ facilitates the reading ‘real valuable’, the modal *real* adds to the force of the adjective, exclamatory markers and stance drive a more subjective and then emphasizing interpretation. The acquisition of an emphasis force reinforces the result that *real* has dual readings when co-occurring with a gradable adjective (either in ‘*real* + adjective(s) + noun’ or ‘copular verb + *real* + adjective’). More specifically, it is difficult to distinguish the literal meaning ‘vouching for truth of the adjectival quality’ from a delexicalized meaning ‘selecting its degree from the gradable adjectival scale’ (Lorenz, 1999, p. 98, 99; Quirk et al., 1972, p. 447). In accordance with Lorenz’s (1999, p. 98) argument that modality and intensification are in close semantic link especially when the modal adverb modifies a predicative adjective, the current study has found *real* in a predicative position (e.g. “But these rooms are real nice, ain’t they!”) has been used as Intensifier almost all the time in spite of some early bridging uses (e.g. referring to one’s inner quality; often found in a religious discourse). In general, while the pattern ‘*real* + adjective(s) + noun’ shows some early examples of the competing readings of *real* as Intensifier or Emphasizer (e.g. *of a real good taste*), *real* in the pattern *real* + adjective(s) + noun does not seem to contribute to the noun-emphasizer use.

There are three positions where Intensifier *real* is found in the corpus: *real* modifies an attributive adjective, *real* modifies a predicative adjective, and *real* modifies an adverb adjunct. COHA shows an increasing use of *real* in the latter two cases as well as a widening variety of verb phrase (*real good/nice*

modifies). This indicates *real* has undergone a transition toward a more grammaticalized function and meanwhile has begun to shed some of its conceptual meanings. Besides, the use of *real good/nice* in phatic talk and compliment (since 1910s) reflects that *real* as Intensifier has been common in oral communication.

There may be critics of the biased conclusion, because this study only draws on a small scope of items. Though the diachronic study is limited to only six collocates (due to time limit), these collocates imply the general tendency of a gramaticalizing use of *real* as they have been in highly frequent collocation with *real* since 1810s (i.e. the beginning of COHA). This study relates to a series of other questions, for example, the influence of *really* on Intensifier *real*. Future research on the historical development of *really* is needed, and it may show an interesting result if more collocates of *really* and *real* are compared.

Notes

1. This concept basically means a word formation process ‘conversion’ by which a word shifts to another word of class without the addition of affixes. For example, *average* develops its adjectival use from noun.
2. The more widely an Intensifier collocates, the less lexical content it retains. (Partington, 1993, p. 183)
3. It includes both qualitative and classifying uses of prenominal adjectives.
4. A process towards subjectivity exists all along, which is immanent after an objective relationship fades away (Athanasiadou, 2007).
5. Adjectives are categorised into 7 semantic groups, and they generally position before nouns in the following order: value, dimension, physical property, speed, human propensity, age and colour. For example, a beautiful young lady.
6. Contextual modulation is applied to monosemy which may take an excursion from established meaning in some context, just as an extremely weak form of polysemy (Croft & Cruse, 2004, p. 140).
7. The Corpus of Contemporary American English is the largest freely-available corpus of English, and the only large and balanced corpus of American English. It includes 450 million words of texts from 1990 to 2012.
8. Corpus of Historical American English is the largest structured corpus of historical English. It covers 400 million words of text of American English from 1810 to 2009.
9. Almost all the bridging examples before 1950s are found in this structure. Still, the exact number or percentage is not noted down, and thus highly frequent’ should be treated with caution.
10. The extraction of ‘real + adjective’ in COHA automatically includes adjective-form adverbs such as good, nice, bad, fast, etc.

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