Totally tall sounds *totally* younger. From meaning composition to social perception.[*]

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Abstract

Research on meaning typically separates *semantic* meaning − the linguistic content conventionally associated with an expression − from *social* meaning − the social qualities and attributes that expressions convey about their users. This divide, however, has recently been questioned by work pointing to a principled connection between these domains ([1], [9]). Using the intensifier *totally* as a test case, I extend this program by showing that, in contexts where only a speaker-oriented reading is possible, the social meaning of the intensifier − measured in terms of Age, Gender, Solidarity and Status perception − is more prominent than in those where a lexically compositional interpretation is licensed. I explain this difference in terms of the interactional pragmatic effects that speaker-oriented *totally* indexes, which are conversely missing for the lexical reading. These results reveal a principled connection between the two dimensions of meaning, meanwhile pointing to social perception as a novel methodology for research in experimental semantics.

1   Introduction

Linguistic expressions carry two distinct kinds of content. On the one hand, they convey a *semantic* meaning, with which they are conventionally associated in the grammar of a language. On the other hand, they convey a *social* meaning (e.g., [7]), that is, a package of typified socio-psychological qualities about the identity of language users, including demographic categories (e.g., gender, age) and more specific *social types/personae* (e.g., "Jocks", "Burnouts", "Yuppies" and similar. See [2], [19] for further discussion). These varieties of content, despite the common label, are seen ultimately as pertaining to independent domains. Recognizing their different status, however, does not entail that the two are inherently disjointed. In particular, social meaning, despite its contingent nature, has been shown to be highly systematic and readily available to listeners' cognition (e.g., [21], [6]). As such, a question remains open: do these two types of meaning interact with one another to determine what an expression "says" when used in communication?

To address this question, it becomes crucial to focus on cases in which social meaning attaches to expressions that *do* have non-trivial semantic and pragmatic content. [17] in particular argues that, for non-phonological kinds of variation, the relationship between linguistic forms and social meaning is crucially mediated by the pragmatic effects of the expression. For example, she claims that the association of command imperatives with male gender in American English is grounded in the activity of ordering pragmatically indexed by the form, which in turn becomes associated with a typical affective disposition of men. More recently, [1] build on

[12]'s observation that demonstratives like *this* and *that* index a sense of "emotional closeness between speaker and hearer" (p. 351), anchoring these social effects to the presupposition that the addressee must be able to consider the speaker's relation to the NP referent in the discourse context. [9] argues that *need to*, in comparison to *have to/got to*, encodes an obligation directed the hearer's well being, thus indexing an additional component of care/presumptuousness.

Taken together, these results provide evidence that social and semantic content are connected in a principled fashion. However, as the investigation of this area has just begun, a number of issues remain open. The present paper aims to cast light on the following: do the effects of semantic properties extend to attributes of social meaning that transcend the here-and-now of the interactional context and involve more durable categories about the social identity of the speaker?

2   *Totally*: a promising case study

The intensifier[1] *totally* features considerable empirical richness in terms of both its semantic and social content, thus emerging as a ripe testbed to investigate possible answers to the question posed above. On the social front, native speakers agree that this expression conveys a flavor of marked informality and reduced social distance, in that it suggests that the interlocutors are close to one another, share a set of norms or values and easily agree on the content of the conversation. Asides from these effects, the intensifier additionally conveys a set of social attributes about the social identity of its typical users, which track macro-social categories - e.g., *young* and *female* - as well as more specific personae and social types - e.g., "Valley Girl", "Cheerleader".[2] *Totally* likewise presents a rich empirical picture on the semantic and pragmatic front. On a general level, the intensifier combines with a bounded scale and requires that the scalar maximum on such a scale be reached. It is precisely through the way in which this scale is supplied that variation enters the picture. In standard cases, the scale is provided by the subsequent predicate, as in (1): both *full* and *agree* come with a bounded ordering hardwired in their lexical meaning, providing *totally* with an argument to operate on. I refer to these as instantiations of *lexical totally*. In other cases (as in (2)), though, *totally* combines with predicates that do *not* supply a scale, operating on the *commitment* that the speaker has towards the proposition ([14], [10]). I refer to these cases as *speaker-oriented totally*.[3]

(1)	a.	The bus is *totally* full.	Lexical
	b.	She *totally* agrees with me.	Lexical
(2)	a.	You should *totally* click on that link! It's awesome.[4]	Speaker-oriented
	b.	Man in "I have drugs" shirt *totally* had drugs.[5]	Speaker-oriented

Despite sharing reference to maximality, the speaker-oriented usage of *totally* is empirically distinct from the lexical one. First, because it does not combine with a lexical scale, it cannot be replaced by modifiers like *partially* and *almost* (in (3a)). Second, it contributes its meaning

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[1]For a discussion of the sociolinguistic behavior and distribution of intensifiers, see [22]

[2]Entries from the website Urban Dictionary (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=totally) include labels such as "ditzy young girls", "Valley Girl Speak", "girly girls, poppers, and rich spoiled little brats".

[3]The OED added a dedicated entry to this flavor of *totally* in 2005: "In weakened use, as an intensifier: (modifying an adjective) very, extremely; (modifying a verb) definitely, absolutely."

[4]https://www.facebook.com/TheBiscuitGames/posts/488916347870627 accessed on June 5th 2015

[5]http://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/wtf-florida-man-in-i-have-drugs-shirt-totally-had-drugs-6542858

at the non at-issue level, as shown by the fact that it cannot be challenged independently from the rest of the propositional content.[6]

(3)   a. # You should *partially/almost* click on that link! It's awesome.

b. She should *totally* click on that link!
B: # **No!** She should click on that link, but you're not committed to saying that!

As far as the exact nature of the contribution of *totally*, the intensifier operates as a conversational operator, emphasizing the speaker's intention to make the proposition become shared knowledge for all the interlocutors, thus enriching the Common Ground of the conversation (see [3] for a full formal analysis). As a result, while primarily representing the speaker's perspective, *totally* carries implications for the hearer's position as well. This makes it crucially different from seemingly similar operators like *definitely* and *certainly*, which are instead grounded in private, individual certainty of the speaker towards the truth of the proposition. While subtle, this difference emerges in particular environments. In the following exchange, for example, while expressing individual certainty sounds somewhat deviant, *totally* can be used to dispel the doubt that the interlocutor expressed.

(4)   Mark: I can't remember if your name is Emily.

a. Emily: Oh, yes, it's *totally* Emily!

b. Emily: #Oh, yes. It's *definitely/certainly* Emily.

That the commitment intensified by *totally* crucially bears on the hearer emerges even more clearly in contexts in which the intensifier is used out of the blue. Let us consider (2b) again. On the one hand, the presence of *totally*, by pushing for the addition of the proposition to the Common Ground, signals the shareworthiness of the event described (e.g., it is particularly outlandish or funny). On the other hand, without a previous discourse move introducing uncertainty, pure epistemic operators like *certainly* and *definitely* sound bizarre.

(5)   Man in "I have drugs" shirt {*totally*/#*definitely/certainly*} had drugs.

Finally, an intermediate variety of *totally* occurs with *extreme* adjectives ([16]) − e.g.,*awesome*, *amazing* − which do *not* lexicalize a bounded scale but refer to properties to an inherently high degree, making it easier to coerce their open scale into a bounded one ([18]). Here, *totally* appears to be less deviant than pure speaker-oriented *totally* with respect to the diagnostics discussed above.[7]

(6)   a. Bob is totally awesome

b. ?# Bob is {**not** *totally*/**almost** *totally*/**completely**/**entirely**} awesome.

3   From semantic to social meaning: hypotheses

Previous work (e.g., [17], [1], [9]) has shown that expressions that affect the social positioning of the interlocutors as they proceed in the exchange are particularly suitable candidates to convey social information about the identity and attributes of language users. The question therefore emerges as to whether, in a parallel fashion, the different variants of *totally* also index a particular kind of alignment and range of interpersonal stances. On the one hand, the lexical

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[6]From this perspective, it shows compositional properties similar to other expressions that specify the attitude of the speaker such as expressives ([20]) and certain evidentials ([8])

[7]The symbol ?# indicates a minor degree of deviance in comparison to cases marked with #.

variant hardly features any cue of this sort: by maximizing the degree to which a property applies, it serves a bare informational function. On the other hand, the pragmatic move associated with speaker-oriented *totally* contributes to highlight the conversation as a joint activity, underscoring the engagement of the speaker with establishing a stock of shared knowledge with the hearer. In addition, when used to strengthen commitment to propositions uttered out of the blue (see (5) above), *totally* also presupposes a shared evaluative stance between the interlocutors, requiring that they converge on the reason that makes the proposition shareworthy (e.g., its absurdity.) I hypothesize that, in light of its implications on the positioning of the interlocutors, speaker-oriented *totally* emerges as a more suitable linguistic resource to convey the social identity of its users than lexical *totally*. Moreover, if this hypothesis is confirmed, I hypothesize that, with extreme adjectives, the social meaning of *totally* should have intermediate salience between the lexical and the speaker-oriented use, mirroring the gradience emerging in the semantics.

4   The experiment

4.1   Methods

I test these hypotheses via a social perception experiment. This methodology, which has long been used to investigate language attitudes ([13]; see [4] for a literature review), is based on the assumpion that social evaluation is a proxy into the social meaning conveyed by an expression, as it allows us to measure fine-grained changes in social meaning in relation to a manipulated factor. In the first step, I conducted a study to construct the evaluation scales to be used in the perception experiment. The study was designed with the software Qualtrics and subsequently circulated on Amazon Mechanical Turk. 60 subjects, self-declared speakers of American English and between 18 and 35 years old, were paid $0.50 for participating. The subjects were asked to provide a series of adjectives to describe the social identity of the speaker of sentences containing *totally*. Based on the most recurring adjectives, eight evaluative dimensions were selected. Four of these dimensions, which I label Solidarity attributes, are predicted to be positively affected by the presence of *totally*. They include *Frendliness, Coolness, Outgoingness, Excitability*. The other four dimensions, which I label Status attributes, express identity categories that should be negatively affected by the presence of the intensifier and include *Articulateness, Maturity, Intelligence, Seriousness*.

4.1.1   Stimuli

2 factors were crossed in a 3x4 design. The first factor manipulates the semantic variant of *totally* along the lexical vs speaker-oriented axis of variation. To cue lexical *totally*, the intensifier was used next to bounded adjectives (or *absolute adjectives*, [11]), which lexicalize a bounded scale as part of their lexical meaning (e.g., "bald"). To cue the speaker-oriented reading, it was used next to unbounded adjectives (i.e., *relative*, e.g., "tall"), which offer a commitment scale as the only possible target. In addition, *extreme adjectives* (e.g., *awesome, amazing*) were used as an intermediate case between the two other categories. Following the hypotheses outlined above, I predict the following effects on the social perception of *totally*.

	Adjective type	Example	Semantic type	Likelihood to convey social meaning
(7)	Bounded	Bald	Lexical	Low
	Extreme	Awesome	Intermediate	Medium
	Unbounded	Tall	Sp-oriented	High

An additional factor, the type of modifier accompanying the adjective came in four different conditions: the target intensifier, *totally*; two control intensifiers: *really* and *completely*; and the positive, non-intensified form. On the one hand, *completely*, contrary to *totally*, is exclusively able to target lexical scales, resulting in ungrammaticality when used with a open-scale adjective. On the other hand, *really* is not sensitive to scale structure ([15], [5]): since all the adjectives used in the experiment are scalar, the intensifier should always operate at the lexical level. Accordingly, I predict that, if an effect of semantic type of *totally* is observed on social meaning, the same effect should not be observed on the two control intensifiers. Finally, the positive form serves as a baseline condition to isolate the social meaning of the intensifier from the one contributed by the other elements in the sentence, as discussed below. 12 items, each with a different set of adjectives, were crossed in a Latin Square Design.

4.1.2 Procedure

Every subject saw a total of 12 written sentences, one sentence for each condition. Each sentence was followed by ten questions. The first two questions are targeted at the demographic characteristics of the speakers and provide fixed alternatives as possible responses.[8] The other eight questions are aimed at assessing Solidarity-based and Status-based traits of social meaning. They were presented in the form of a 1-6 Likert scale, where 1 indicated the minimum value and 6 the maximum value. The study was created with Qualtrics and carried out online. 36 self-declared native speakers of American English, aged 18-35, were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk and compensated $2 for their participation.

4.2 Results

To conduct the analysis, the social evaluation of the sentence with the positive form of the adjective was subtracted from the evaluation of the sentence with either *totally*, *completely* or *really*. This made it possible to filter out the effects on the social meaning independently introduced by other elements, isolating those induced by the intensifier. On the resulting differences, statistical analysis was conducted on the following dimensions: Age, Gender, Solidarity attributes and Status attributes, obtaining four separate metrics for assessing the social meaning contributed by each intensifier. For each dimension, a two-way ANOVA was carried out to verify the effect of the two factors (Scale type and Intensifier type). In the event that a higher-level effect was present, planned paired t-test were carried out to verify the effect of Scale on each intensifier.

4.2.1 Age

Age was first converted from a categorial to a continuous variable.[9] A main effect of Adjective (by-subject $F_1(2,70)=18.1$, $p<0.0001$; by-item $F_2(2,22)=8.4$, $p<0.001$) and Intensifier (by-subject $F_1(2,70)=14.5$, $p<0.0001$; by-item $F_2(2,22)=9.4$, $p<0.001$) and an interaction effect

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[8]For Age: Kid / Teenager / Adult / Elderly. For Gender: Male / Could be Either / Female

[9]Every life stage provided in the multiple choice response was assigned a numerical score with increasing value, where Kid=1, Teenager=2, Adult=3 and Elderly=4. This ensures that the higher the Age score, the higher the perceived age of the speaker.

between Adjective and Intensifier (by-subject $F_1(2,70)=10.4$, $p<0.001$; by-item $F_2(2,22)=11.3$, $p<0.001$) were found. The results are plotted in the graph below.
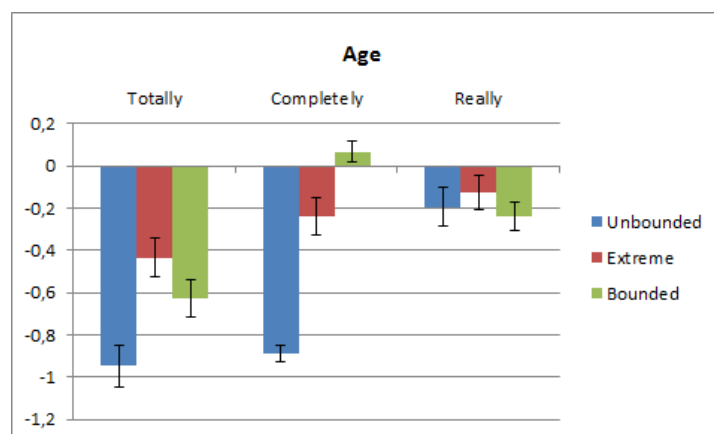

Figure 1: Age perception. The Y-axis indicates the value of the subtraction of the score of each intensifier from the positive form. The X-Axis groups the different intensifiers. The blue bar stands for Unbounded adjectives (e.g. *tall*). The red bar stands for Extreme adjectives (e.g. *awesome*). The green bar stands for Bounded adjectives (e.g. *bald*). Error bars indicate standard errors.

Concerning *totally*, for all adjective types the intensifier caused a lowering of the perceived age of the speaker. However, the effect is significantly stronger with unbounded adjectives than with extreme adjectives ($t(35) = 6.2$, $p < .0001$) or bounded adjectives ($t(35) = 4.1$, $p < .001$). No significant difference was found between Bounded and Extreme adjectives. *Completely* caused an increase in perceived age with bounded adjectives and a decrease with extreme/unbounded ones. No effect was found across adjective type for *really*.

4.2.2 Gender

As with Age, Gender was converted into a continuous variable.[10] An interaction effect was found between Adjective and Intensifier (by-subject $F_1(2,70)=8.2$, $p<0.001$; by-item $F_2(2,22)=7.3$, $p<0.001$). The results are plotted below.

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[10] "Male" =1, "Could be either" = 2 and "Female" = 3. Hence, the higher the resulting score, the higher the likelihood that the person was perceived to be female.
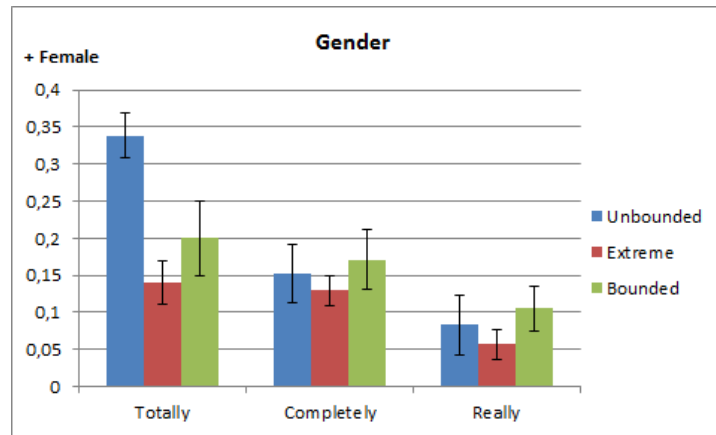
Figure 2: Gender perception.

All intensifiers increased the likelihood with which the speaker was perceived to be female. The effect of *totally* with unbounded adjectives was significantly stronger than with extreme adjectives ($t(35) = 7.2$, $p < .0001$) and bounded adjectives ($t(35) = 5.1$, $p < .001$). No difference was found for the other intensifiers.

4.2.3 Solidarity

Since their effects were highly similar, Solidarity attributes were analyzed together. Main effects of Adjective (by-subject $F_1(2,70)=11.1$, $p<0.001$; by-item $F_2(2,22)=6.7$, $p<0.001$), Intensifier (by-subject $F_1(2,70)=11.8$, $p<0.0001$; by-item $F_2(2,22)=7.5$, $p<0.001$) and an interaction effect between Adjective and Intensifier (by-subject $F_1(2,70)=8.6$, $p<0.001$; by-item $F_2(2,22)=10.3$, $p<0.001$) were found. The results are plotted below.
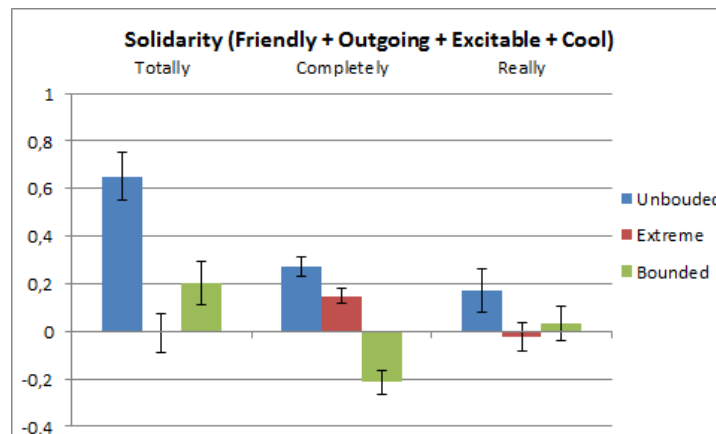

Figure 3: Solidarity perception.

Totally increased the perception of solidarity across the board, but the effect was significantly

stronger with Unbounded than bounded adjectives (t(35) = 7.5, $p < .0001$). No effect of *totally* on extreme adjectives was found. Concerning *completely*, unbounded adjectives record higher Solidarity value than Bounded ones (t(35) = 7.9, $p < .0001$). Concerning *really*, extreme adjectives recording a lower Solidarity value than bounded and unbounded ones (t(35) = 7.4 and t(35) = 6.5 respectively, $ps < .0001$).

4.2.4 Status

The four Status attributes also patterned similarly, and were thus analyzed together. A main effect of Adjective (by-subject $F_1(2,70)=12.1$, $p<0.001$; by-item $F_2(2,22)=6.9$, $p<0.001$) was found, along with a main effect of and Intensifier (by-subject $F_1(2,70)=12.3$, $p<0.0001$; by-item $F_2(2,22)=8.6$, $p<0.001$) and an interaction effect between Adjective and Intensifier (by-subject $F_1(2,70)=9.5$, $p<0.001$; by-item $F_2(2,22)=11.3$, $p<0.001$). The results are plotted below.
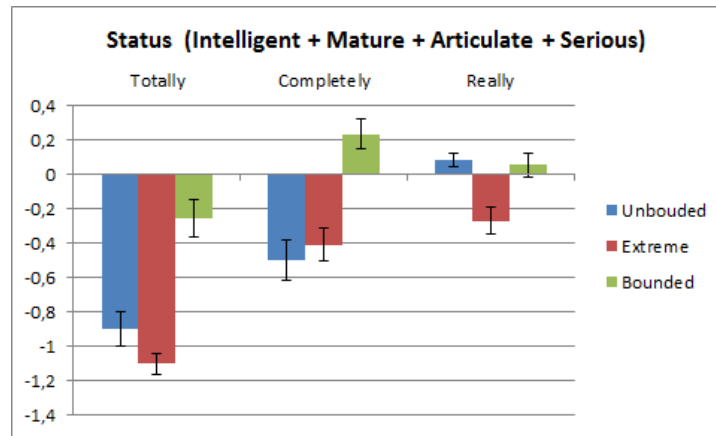

Figure 4: Status perception.

Totally lowered the Status perception across adjective types. Yet, the effect is significantly stronger with unbounded than bounded adjectives (t(35) = 8.1, $p < .0001$). Concerning *completely*, the intensifier with bounded adjectives raises the Status perception, while it lowers it with unbounded adjectives (t(35) = 7.7, $p < .0001$). Concerning *really*, extreme adjectives record a lower Status value than bounded and unbounded ones (t(35) = 7.4 and t(35)=6.5 respectively, $ps < .0001$).

4.3 Discussion

The current study was aimed at investigating how the social perception of *totally* is affected by variations in the semantic properties of the intensifier across different linguistic contexts. Two hypotheses were tested. First, I predicted that, by inviting the hearer to converge on the Common Ground of the conversation and on the evaluation of the anchor proposition, speaker-oriented *totally* would be more likely to convey social meaning than lexical *totally*, which merely modifies the descriptive content of the utterance. The prediction is confirmed: when *totally* occurs next to a unbounded adjective, an environment in which only a speaker-oriented reading is licensed, the speaker is perceived as younger, more likely to be female,

higher in Solidarity and lower in Status than when *totally* occurs next to a bounded adjective and could therefore receive a lexical interpretation. Crucially, the same pattern does not hold for the control intensifiers. As predicted, *really* presents no significant difference across the tested adjective types. Concerning *completely*, an effect of Adjective does emerge for Age, Solidarity and Status. Yet, with the exception of Age, the effect on *totally* is considerably stronger than the one on *completely*, suggesting that the two patterns are most likely not driven by the same source.[11] The second hypothesis study also tested whether the salience of the indexed social meaning reflects the continuum between lexical and speaker-oriented uses, predicting that the social meaning should have intermediate intensity with Extreme Adjectives. This prediction, however, is not borne out, as we observe that for none of the tested dimensions a continuum along these lines emerges.[12]

Taken together, these findings suggest that, when making social evaluations about language users, hearers keep track of the semantic and pragmatic properties of the form, such as the type of scale that the intensifier targets in a given context, pointing to another domain in which semantic and social meaning are connected. To further cast light on this relationship, though, a central issue must be addressed: What is the nature of the process whereby *totally* becomes a vehicle of those specific identity categories? In particular, is the high value of speaker-oriented *totally* along Solidarity-based attributes the result of a reinterpretation at the social level of the speaker-hearer convergence indexed at the pragmatic level? Is it grounded in social knowledge about the types of people that use the expression more frequently? To cast light on the issue, one could compare the social perception of uses of speaker-oriented *totally* that index different degrees of pragmatic inclusiveness between the interlocutors. For example, *totally* in sentences in out-of-the-blue contexts presupposes a shared evaluative stance between the participants that is instead less salient in uses of *totally* with modalized sentences or in responses, and should therefore be an even more salient carrier of social information. I plan to address this question in future research.

5   The broader picture

While representing a preliminary step, the current study opens up a novel area of research on the study of meaning, highlighting the interface between social and semantic content as a ripe, and largely uncharted, domain of investigation. On the theoretical level, this line of research can lead us to adopt a more comprehensive view of linguistic meaning, in which social meaning is seen as a *bona fine* type of content side by side with the logical properties of expressions. On a methodological level, it points to social perception studies as a promising technique to explore the behavioral correlates of semantic and pragmatic features, opening up a novel direction of inquiry for experimental investigations on meaning.

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[11]I speculate that the effects of scale type on *completely* are grounded in the ungrammaticality of the combination, rather than to the particular semantic properties of the expression. As such, the fact that this expression has an effect on the social meaning can be reasonably predicted to being associated with whatever social features are associated with a "default other" who does not fully master the grammar of English, e.g. a particularly young speaker, or one with a low Status. I thank an anonymous NWAV 44 reviewer for suggesting this explanation.

[12]Concerning Solidarity, *totally* has virtually no effect, leaving the perception unchanged. A possible explanation for this could be that, because extreme adjectives have remarkable emotive charge on their own, they are independently associated with high level of solidarity, thus giving rise to a ceiling effect that neutralizes the impact of the intensifier. Concerning Status, *totally* with Extreme adjectives brings about a particularly pronounced lowering of the perception of the speaker. We suggest that the steep drop associated with *totally* might have to do with the fact that combinations like "totally awesome" are stereotypically associated with low-status social groups (e.g. Valley Girls), thus triggering a negative evaluation of the intensifier.

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