

Grammaticalisation and subjectification of death-related intensifiers in the history of English

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Intensifiers have figured prominently in the literature on semantic change as one of the most conspicuous cases of ‘recycling’ (Tagliamonte 2008), owing to their susceptibility to variation and rapid change (cf., among others, Macaulay 2006; Méndez-Naya 2008; Nevalainen 2008), hence Bolinger’s famous reference to their ‘picture of fevered invention and competition’ (1972: 18).

This paper also approaches intensifiers, and aims at tracing the diachronic evolution of three death-related intensifiers in English, namely *dead*, *to death* (cf. Margerie 2011), and certain uses of the verb *die for*, as illustrated in (1)-(3) below:

(1) *Our goal is to make it just **dead** easy for people to find what they want*, (COCA. 2011. CBS News_Morn).

(2) *It was tough to make pars and every time we did we were tickled **to death***. (BYU-BNC. 1990. *How we won the open: the caddies’ stories*).

(3) *I had been **dying for** this guy at work to ask me out, and he finally did*. (COHA. 2000. ‘When I knew she was a true friend’. *Redbook*, 195(3)).

In particular, it is shown that these intensifiers fit into the grammaticalisation cline described by Adamson (2000), according to which intensifiers originally indicate descriptive or literal meanings ((4)-(5)), gradually develop subjective readings (6)-(7), that is, non-literal meanings, but which can still conjure up death to a certain extent, and at a final stage they grammaticalise as intensifiers (cf. (1)-(3) above). In spite of this, the three intensifiers under analysis here differ in regard to their degree of grammaticalisation (cf. Hopper and Traugott 2003), *dead* showing the most advanced stage in the process.

(4) *Thine eyes, those christall phialls, which impars The perfect balme, to my **dead**-wounded brest*, (EEBO. 1593. Barnabe Barnes. *Parthenophil and Parthenophe Sonnettes, madrigals, elegies and odes*. Sonnet LXXXVII).

(5) *VWhen Helena was to be stoned **to death***, (EEBO. 1599. Robert Albott. *VVits theater of the little world*).

(6) *and therefore it is better to leave this tender one in her own Country, then to make her **dye for** Sorrow in this our hard Country, and severe Climate*. EEBO. 1683. Johannes Commelin. *The Belgick, or, Netherlandish hesperides*).

(7) *and also that he must that very day of necessity return to the City, though the truth of it was, he had no mind longer to continue in the company of a man that he hated **to death***. (EEBO. 1674. Charles Cotton. *The fair one of Tunis*).

Data for this diachronic semantic study are drawn from a variety of sources, including the *OED* quotation database, the online database *Early English Books Online* (EEBO), the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA), the *Brigham Young University-*

British National Corpus (BYU-BNC), and the *Contemporary Corpus of American English* (COCA).

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Sources

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