

# DEGREE MODIFICATION OF ENGLISH PAST PARTICIPLES: THE CASE OF *VERY*

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We clarify the conditions under which English past participles accept modification by the intensifier *very*. The study focuses on data like the following:

- (1) a. \**very acquainted with the problem*
- b. *very touched by the movie*
- c. *fully acquainted with the problem*

The contrast is surprising because *acquainted* passes standardly accepted tests for adjectivehood and, moreover, admits degree modification, as (1c) shows. The difference between the two must therefore lie in the finer details of the semantics of participles and of *very*. Specifically, we show that *very* is felicitous only with predicates which are associated with scales that lack a maximum endpoint.

## 1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to make a small contribution towards answering the following question: What types of degree modification do English past participles accept? This question is of interest for both theoretical and pedagogical reasons. As a teacher of English to non-native speakers, the first author has been confronted with the fact that her students rarely use any other intensifier than *very* and, to a lesser degree, *quite*. This poverty of vocabulary is not only unfortunate because it limits the student's ability to express him- or herself with the same subtlety as a native speaker; it can also lead to errors, such as in (1a), a perhaps surprising example in light of its virtual synonymy with the grammatical (1b):

- (1) a. \*We were very acquainted with the problem.
- b. We were very familiar with the problem.

Thus, one reason to examine the problem of degree modification of participles is to uncover an explanation for contrasts such as this one, which can in turn help students better learn the use of intensifiers in English.

In addition, however, degree modification remains one of the less well-studied areas within contemporary semantic theory. There is at least one major descriptive study (Bolinger) with broad empirical coverage, but many of its insights are vaguely formulated or simply not generalizable (see below for one example). And although there is a fair amount of formal work on the basic semantics of degree expressions (see e.g. Kennedy for a recent survey), these works have focused more on the interaction of degree expressions with comparative constructions than on their interaction with intensification. Since English has a very rich collection of intensifying (and attenuating) expressions, it is

reasonable to assume that such expressions will offer insight into the semantic (and ultimately, conceptual) scales we use in ascribing properties to individuals. The examples in (2), which include both acceptable and unacceptable collocations, hint at the complexity of these facts:

- (2) a. an extremely polished presentation/??a completely polished presentation  
 b. \*an extremely prepared talk/a completely prepared talk  
 c. a much-discussed problem/\*a very discussed problem  
 d. \*a much-known problem/a well-known problem  
 e. \*very acquainted with the facts/fully acquainted with the facts

Given space limitations, we limit our discussion to just one contrast: that illustrated in (e). We proceed as follows. We first clarify the nature of the problem, which we argue involves the nature of the scales with which participles such as *acquainted* are associated, and then turn to a preliminary solution.

## 2. Identifying the Problem

Consider (1a) again, which is unacceptable because of an incompatibility between the intensifier *very* and the participle *acquainted*:

- (1a) \*We were very acquainted with the problem.

The inability of *very* to modify *acquainted* is surprising for two reasons. First, although it is often difficult to tell whether a given participle is a verb or an adjective, *acquainted* passes at least two standard tests for adjectivehood. First, it can be prefixed with “negative” *un-*, which attaches to adjectives in order to form new adjectives, but does not attach to verbs. (See e.g. Levine and Rappaport for discussion; note that this *un-* should not be confused with the “reversive” *un-* of *do/undo*):

- (3) We were unacquainted with the problem.

Given that *unacquainted* is an adjective, it follows that *acquainted* must be one as well. A second

argument for considering *acquainted* an adjective is that it can appear as the complement to the verb *seem*, which allows adjectival, but not verbal, complements:

- (4) The scientists seemed acquainted with the problem.

Thus, insofar as *very* can modify adjectives, and insofar as *acquainted* appears to be an adjective, there should be no inherent syntactic incompatibility between the two.

The second reason that (1a) is puzzling is that *acquainted* would also appear (at least at first blush) to be semantically compatible with *very*. *Very* is of course restricted to modifying adjectives that can be intensified, or to put it more formally, whose interpretations introduce some reference to degree. Adjectives whose interpretations do not introduce any reference to degree, such as *former*, cannot accept modification by *very*:

- (5) ??The very former candidate

However, the interpretation of *acquainted* does admit reference to degree, as the examples in (6) show:

- (6) a. We were acquainted to some degree with the problem.  
 b. We were barely acquainted with the problem.

Bolinger (38) suggests that *very* is typically compatible only with what he calls “essence” adjectives – those which would take *ser* rather than *estar* if translated into Spanish. While in this particular case, Bolinger’s proposal appears to work (\**ser/estar familiarizado*), it is not obviously applicable e.g. to the participle *organized*, which allows modification by *very* (see (7a)), despite the fact that the use of its translation, *organizado*, in a similar context would carry *estar*; nor is it extendable to *known*, which resists modification by *very* ((7b)), despite the fact that its Spanish equivalent (*conocido*) never or almost never takes *ser*, at least in Peninsular Spanish. (Also see McNally for an additional criterion for classifying *organized* as an “accident” adjective and *known* as an essence one):

- (7) a. The presentation was very organized.  
 b. \*That problem is very known.

We must therefore look elsewhere for a solution to the problem of intensifier/past participle compatibility, ideally one which preserves Bolinger's intuition to the extent that it is correct. Since the problem does not appear syntactic, we now turn to some finer semantic details involving past participles and their intensifiers.

### 3. Past Participles and Scales

We suggest that the facts involving *very* and past participles such as *acquainted* are related to a paradigm of contrasts involving intensification of adjectives. Specifically, certain adjectives such as *empty* and *awake* disallow modification by *very* and similar intensifiers, despite being gradable and thus compatible with other types of degree adverbs, as illustrated in (8):

- (8) a. The bowl is \*very/\*extremely/\*slightly empty.  
 b. The bowl is entirely/partly empty.  
 c. The baby is \*very/\*extremely/\*slightly awake.  
 d. The baby is entirely/partly awake.

The facts with *acquainted* and *known* are strikingly, if not totally, similar:

- (9) a. We are \*extremely/\*slightly acquainted with the problem.  
 b. We are entirely/partly acquainted with the problem.  
 c. The facts are \*extremely/\*slightly known.  
 d. The facts are entirely/partly known.

Adjectives which allow modification by *very*, such as *tall*, differ from those which do not in that the former relate individuals to scales which do not have endpoints, or at least not salient ones. For example, it is not obvious what natural limit there would be to a scale of tallness, or what it would mean for an individual to be maximally tall (notice that to be "maximally tall" is not the same as being taller than anyone/anything else, but rather to be

as tall as anyone/anything could be). In contrast, adjectives like *empty* intuitively relate individuals to scales which do have endpoints: it is straightforward to identify, for most given objects, what it would mean for them to be maximally empty (or full).

Interestingly, we can establish the same contrast in the participle domain. Participles like *acquainted* resemble *empty* in that, for any given object or body of information, intuitively it seems possible to identify a maximum (or minimum) degree of familiarity with that object/information. In this sense, *acquainted* relates an individual (the knower) to a scale with an endpoint. Not all participles are so clearly like this: *educated* is one example. In most contexts it is not obvious what a maximum degree of education would be, insofar as the amount of knowledge one could acquire is extremely large, if not unlimited. And, as is predicted by the generalization suggested here, *educated* admits modification by *very*:

- (10) a very educated person

Thus, while the generalization needs further confirmation, it seems promising.

Now we must turn to the following question: Why should *very* be incompatible with predicates which make reference to scales with an endpoint? Adapting the analysis of adjectives in Kennedy 1997, we can say that *very*, when combined with an adjective such as *tall*, results in a property which associates an individual (the one who is very tall) with a relatively high point on the scale of tallness. Crucially, that high point is relative to some *standard* which might be either contextually determined or linguistically expressed (as, for instance, when we say *Sally is tall for a woman of her age*). Although the standard for the scale of tallness may vary, we know that it will not be an endpoint, since we observed above that the tallness scale has no fixed endpoints. We might thus tentatively propose the following informally stated condition on the use of *very*:

- (11) *Very* can only combine felicitously with predicates which are associated with scales whose standard is not an endpoint on the scale.

It is obvious why *very* could not have the upper endpoint of a scale as its standard, since, for instance, a person who is very tall is has the property of being tall to a degree *higher than* the standard. It is less clear why *very* should be incompatible with a standard which is the lower endpoint of a scale, and indeed, we will revise (11) accordingly below.

What happens with predicates like *acquainted* or *empty*, which are associated with scales that have endpoints? For pragmatic reasons, it is reasonable to assume that the standard for those scales will be one of the endpoints. For instance, the standard for emptiness will be the maximum point on the emptiness scale—"totally empty". Given the condition proposed in (11), it will generally be infelicitous for *very* to modify such predicates. Of course, one does occasionally find *very* combined with such predicates for ironic effect (similar to ironic uses with non-degree expressions as in *The victim looked very dead*). However, such uses are the exceptions that prove the rule. Without a standard condition on the use of *very* such as that in (11), it would be impossible to understand ironic uses of it.

The case of *acquainted* is more interesting. Is the standard for acquaintance with someone or something the minimum degree of acquaintance, or the maximum? Consideration of the truth conditions sentences containing the verb *acquaint*, and of the relationship between the verb and the past participle, would suggest that the standard should be the minimum. The truth of a sentence such as *The police acquainted Jones with the facts* is determined by considering whether Jones has received a minimum degree of acquaintance with the facts, as opposed to a maximum degree. That is, it is compatible with the truth of this sentence that Jones be only e.g. partly acquainted with the facts. We might hypothesize, then, that the standard for someone qualifying as acquainted with something is that minimum degree of familiarity with that thing which would be required for the truth of a corresponding sentence involving the verb *acquaint* and reference to the someone in question. And the sort of reasoning used here should be generalizable to the full class of telic verbs, to which *acquaint* belongs.

Why should *very* be incompatible with a predicate whose standard is a minimum endpoint on a scale? After all, it simply serves to relate an individual to a point on a scale which is above the standard, and of course there are many such points above the minimum. Consideration of additional data indicates that it is in fact not incompatible with all such predicates, and that (11) should be revised. Consider the pair *touch/touched*, as used in (12):

- (12) a. The movie touched Alice.  
b. Alice seemed touched by the movie.

*Touch* in this sense is a telic predicate, and by the logic used in the previous paragraph, the standard for the scale of "touchedness" will be the minimum degree of affectedness necessary for a sentence such as (12a) to be true. Interestingly, however, *touched* as used in (12b) accepts modification by *very*:

- (12) Alice seemed very touched by the movie.

The acceptability of (13) thus confirms that (11) needs revision. The crucial difference between *acquaint* and *touch* seems to be that, unlike in the case of *acquainted*, there appears to be no maximum degree to which someone can be (emotionally) touched by something. This difference suggests that (11) should be revised as in (14):

- (13) *Very* can only combine felicitously with predicates which are associated with scales which lack a maximum endpoint.

Why should a condition like (14) hold? We suspect the answer is pragmatic. Given a scale with a maximum endpoint and a standard somewhere below that maximum, the most precise (and thus informative) way to locate an individual on that scale (for example, to express the degree to which someone is acquainted with something) will be by making reference to both the maximum and the standard on that scale, rather than simply to the standard. The semantics of *very* appears to be sensitive only to the standard, making no reference to the maximum. Moreover, English has a series of modifiers which do make reference to both the standard and maximum on a scale: *largely*, *fully*, *completely*, etc. There would therefore appear to be very strong

Gricean pressure not to use *very* when other, more informative modifiers are available.

to the great potential which theoretical work has for improving our ability to explain linguistic facts in a classroom setting.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although this study just scratches the surface of the rich domain of past participial modification, we can at least tentatively conclude that the nature of the scale associated with a past participle—specifically, whether it has a maximum endpoint—will determine whether it will accept modification by *very*. In addition, and more importantly, the study—to the extent it has constructively adapted insights from formal semantics in order to explain the facts in an informal fashion, in a manner which (with further refinement) could be understood by students with little or no background in linguistics—points

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