
Ambiguous Evaluative Adjectives as a Major Source of Expressive Intensifiers in German

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Expressive intensifiers (EIs) in German such as *voll* ‘fully’ and *total* ‘totally’ differ from common intensifiers like *sehr* ‘very’ regarding their syntactic distribution: they can occur in the so-called ‘NP-external intensifying construction’ which is frequently used in colloquial German (*Du hast gestern voll/*sehr die geile Party verpasst*. ‘Yesterday, you missed EI/*very a cool party’, cf. Gutzmann & Turgay 2015).

Web-based corpus research shows that the chief (but not only) source lexemes for EIs are ambiguous evaluative adjectives (AEAs) such as *krass* lit. ‘crass’, *pervers* lit. ‘perverse’ and *übel* lit. ‘bad’ (cf. Androutsopoulos 1998). Example (1) shows the use of *übel* as an evaluative adjective that apparently expresses a positive evaluation through the speaker and not a negative one.

- (1) Ein typisches Slayer-Konzert, aber das war auch verdammt geil.
Und die Bassdrum war übel. (DECOW16A)
‘A typical slayer concert, but it was damn good, too. And the bass drum was AEA.’

Even though the development of evaluative adjectives into intensifiers has received considerable attention in diachronic research – the phenomenon of AEAs has been neglected so far. In my talk I will show the advantages the developmental path ‘adjective with a specific meaning > AEA > intensifier’ has over other paths. Whereas e.g. exclusively negative evaluative adjectives are initially restricted to utterances with a negative evaluation and must undergo a lengthy process of semantic bleaching to be useable in positive contexts, AEAs are possible in all kinds of contexts ‘from the outset’.

References: Androutsopoulos, J. (1998): Deutsche Jugendsprache. Frankfurt: Lang. • Gutzmann, D. & Turgay, K. (2015): Expressive intensifiers and external degree modification. In: The Journal of Comparative German Linguistics 17(3), 185–228.