

Degree adverb semantics and emotion

Why do emotionally charged expressions become adverbs of degree, while emotionally neutral expressions don't have such a use? For instance, the adverbs in (i) can be read as degree intensifiers, while the adverbs in (ii) can only be read as ad-sentential modifiers (yielding a rather strange sentence).

- (i) John is f***ing / ridiculously / damned tall.
- (ii) ?John is usually / normally / typically tall.

In this paper, I will propose that emotive adverbs do not really have a separate degree intensification sense, but that rather the emotive content itself is directly responsible for the intensifying effect. That is, sentences like (i) should be compared to constructions like *_John is so tall that X_*, where a similar contrast between emotive and non-emotive results *X* can be observed: (iii) is fine, but (iv) is strange. In particular (iv) can't mean that John isn't really very stubborn.

- (iii) John is so stubborn, { it's ridiculous / it angers me }.
- (iv) ?John is so stubborn, { it's normal / it leaves me cold }.

Based on earlier work, I will explain these contrasts in terms of inferences licensed by the lexical semantics of adjectives. Subsequently, I show that such an analysis has profound consequences for how we view expressive emotives like *_f***ing_*, since we will need to assume that the expressive content of such expressions intrudes into the descriptive domain.