

“Du hast eh voll den guten Musikgeschmack!” – Underspecification and grammaticalization of NP-external intensifying constructions in German

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Degree modifiers in German such as *sehr* ('very') usually occur inside a predicative AdjP (1) or inside an NP (2) (cf. e.g. Duden 2022: 837–842).

(1) Der Hund ist sehr süß.
The dog is very cute
'The dog is very cute'

(2) Ich habe einen sehr süßen Hund gefunden.
I have a very cute dog found
'I have found a very cute dog'

However, a special kind of degree modifier can be found in colloquial German, which occurs outside of typical syntactic contexts for degree modifiers. It occurs in what has been named “external degree modification constructions” (Gutzmann & Turgay 2015; Gutzmann 2019) as in (3).

(3) Du hast eh voll den guten Musikgeschmack!¹
you have anyway DM the good taste.in.music
'You have DM a good taste in music anyway!'

Based on a corpus study using data for *total* (lit. 'totally') and *voll* (lit. 'full, completely') from deCow16B (Schäfer & Bildhauer 2013, 2018), we argue that the occurrence of the intensifier outside of the NP is part of a grammatical construction in the sense of Goldberg (2006). Therefore, we assume that the whole structure of intensifier and NP has constructional status. For this we analyzed 1,860 occurrences of *total* and 2,836 occurrences of *voll* in regard to features of the modified NP (head, adjective, definiteness), their scope, and the main verb of the sentence they occur in.

We address two questions: First, what is the semantic impact of the NP-external intensifier on the NP? Second, what caused the grammaticalization leading the intensifier to occur outside of the NP?

Our results concerning the first question, contrary to previous studies such as Gutzmann & Turgay (2015), are that expressive intensifiers such as *voll* and *total* intensify not only the adjective when they occur outside of an NP, but the NP as a whole. This can be seen in occurrences that do not feature an adjective, such as (4).

(4) Ich hab voll den Ohrwurm von dem Lied.²
I have DM the earworm from the song
'I have DM an earworm from that song.'

Not only does a definite NP like in (4) now receive an indefinite interpretation, the NP can be seen as denoting a category within which the agent of the sentence situates itself as a prototypical exemplar. However, the criteria for this prototypicality, which would normally be denoted by the adjective, remain underspecified.

Regarding the second question, we propose that the development of a widened scope of the intensifiers (which ranges over whole NPs and not just adjectives) is carried out through occurring with phrasemes as critical contexts (cf. Diewald 2002). An example is (5), where the scope of the intensifier ranges over the phraseme as a whole.

¹ deCow14 ID 1984fb63c99ea2ccf9b2bf12e0333af15571

² deCow14 ID 2ca1b54e703d86c2e15bcf743209299f648b

(5) Ich krieg gerade schon wieder total die Krise.³
I get right.now already again DM the crisis
'I'm having DM a crisis again.'

From this, *total* and *voll* start occurring outside of definite NPs without adjectives that are not part of phrasemes, which can be seen as isolating context for their new grammaticalizing function, as shown in (4) above. The synchronic result of the grammaticalization leads to the semantically underspecified target of the intensifier. This semantic underspecification goes along with a wider scope over NPs which no longer need an adjective.

³ deCow14 ID 1e3ad051fee06428347ffbba781674e63bd8

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