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“Very” As a Criterion of Structure

0. Introductory remarks

0.1. The behaviour of *very* in English has received a considerable amount of attention by students of the language. The approach has usually been from two directions: from the point of view of usage and from the point of view of grammatical description. While the two are by no means mutually exclusive, they start from opposite standpoints — one from the actual or desired distribution of *very* in the language, the other from the value it has for the part-of-speech classification of certain grammatical forms of uncertain or disputed status.

This paper will deal with the latter aspect of the problem but will also refer to the former for guidance in an area which is “difficult even for native speakers”¹ and in which the author’s intuition of a non-native speaker of English cannot be relied upon.

0.2. The use of *very* as a criterion of structure has been particularly fashionable among structuralists, who have often included *very* in their test frames for adjectives.² Nor has its significance been overlooked by transformationists: Chomsky himself claims that “the use of *very* is crucial for recognition of adjectives”.³

I propose therefore to examine how *very* is used with adjectives and in particular how it can help in distinguishing them from nouns on the one hand and from *-ing* and *-ed* forms of verbs on the other.

¹ Winifred E. Jones and Earle W. Brockman, *The Key to English — Adjectives*, London—New York—Toronto, 1965, p. 75.

² Thus Francis (*The Structure of American English*, New York, 1958, p. 268), Roberts (*Patterns of English*, New York, 1956, p. 16), Hill (*Introduction to Linguistic Structures*, New York, 1958, p. 203).

³ *Third Texas Conference on Problems of Linguistic Analysis in English*, Austin, 1962, p. 77.

0.3. The discussion that follows will be based on three assumptions whose overall validity will not be questioned but whose range and implications will be closely examined:

- (a) *very* is used with adjectives;
- (b) *very* is not used with nouns;
- (c) *very* is not used with verbs.

0.3.1. *Very* is an eminently adjectival (and adverbial) intensifier. Since it has been claimed that it can serve as a decisive criterion for the recognition of adjectives (see footnotes above), one might perhaps wish to postulate a negative rule saying that no adjective that fails to meet this criterion can be accepted as a full adjective. We shall try to see to what extent a rule of this kind can be regarded as useful for the grammatical description of English.

0.3.2. The intensifier *very* does not operate in front of nouns. This would mean that in all those cases in which *very* is found before a grammatical form that has the characteristics of a noun, conversion into a full-fledged adjective must be assumed. (It is important in this respect not to confuse the intensifier *very* with the adjective *very*, illustrated in the following examples:

You are the very man I wanted to see.
This is the very thing I want to find out.
This very day.

Notice that in these examples *very* is always preceded by *this/that* or the definite article. When such a definite determinative is lacking, the use of *very* is ungrammatical:

- * He is a very teacher.
- * A very house is being built in my street.
- * Very people believe this.
- * They are playing very football.)

0.3.3. The intensifier *very* does not operate with verbs. Sentences like the following are ungrammatical:

- * It very pleases me.
- * It pleases me very.
- * He has always very written interesting letters.
- * Did you very meet your friend yesterday?

One may therefore assume that the intensifier which stands before a participle could only have been added when the participle was intuitively felt to be operating as an adjective. Thus the adjectival interpretation of the *-ing* and *-ed* forms in the following examples is warranted by the fact that the forms in brackets are ungrammatical:

He was very pleased. (*Something very pleased him.)
It was very interesting. (*It very interested me.)⁴

1. The use of 'very' with adjectives

1.1. The intensifier *very* accompanies adjectives in a way which rather resembles the behaviour of the markers of comparison. That is why it is only used with descriptive adjectives, not with categorizing (or limiting) adjectives: *very Shakespearean studies, *very naval forces, *a very marital status, *the very French Foreign Minister, etc. When *very* appears with an adjective that normally belongs to the categorizing class, this is an indication that the adjective in question has also acquired a descriptive meaning: She is very French. He has a very musical voice. His voice is very musical. (Cf.: *very musical instruments; *These instruments are very musical.)⁵

1.2. Since *very* alternates with the markers of comparison (either inflectional or analytical), it is not used with adjectives in the comparative or the superlative:

- * He is the very most stupid man I know.
- * She is very older than her sister.
- * They live in a very smaller town now.

It is for this reason also that forms like *inner*, *innermost*, *inmost*, *outer*, *outermost*, *utmost*, *upper*, *uppermost*, *utter*, *uttermost* do not accept *very*; neither do adjectives that originated as Latin comparatives, such as *exterior*, *interior*, *inferior*, *superior*, *major*, *minor*, *junior*, *senior*, etc. (when they are used in their full meanings).

1.3. For reasons of semantic incompatibility, *very* generally fails to collocate with adjectives denoting qualities that do not come in degrees. However, when the meaning becomes a little less definite, *very* is used quite freely:

⁴ It may be mentioned in this connection that certain other intensifiers — sometimes offered as a criterion of adjectivity — pattern also with verbs and are therefore unreliable as aids for discriminating between adjectival and verbal uses of participles. The participle in the sentence: *I was quite (so, rather, most, really) pleased* cannot be regarded as adjectival on the strength of any of the intensifiers used, since the following are also possible: *It quite pleased me. It rather pleased me. It really pleased me. It pleased me so. It pleased me most.*

⁵ If *very* is accepted as the decisive criterion of the adjective status, then categorizing adjectives should, strictly speaking, be excluded from the class of adjectives. There are some other grounds on which they could also be excluded. First, they do not compare. Second, they operate only in the attributive, not in the predicative, position. Thus, they could not be viewed, in Chomsky's terms, as the products of transformations starting from predicative kernel sentences. In the case of categorizing adjectives, all but one of the syntactic criteria (that of attributive use) seem to be in conflict with the morphological criterion (i. e., adjectival suffixation).

... because life holds no future for it. This is very wrong. (Nigel Dennis, "Happy to Make a Splash", *The Sunday Telegraph*, Oct. 27, 1963, 16)

... pushed his plan too far too fast. But he was very right about one thing: ... (Mark Frankland, "Flawed logic in the new Comecon", *The Observer*, Feb. 16, 1964, 8)

Hanga, thirty-two, is big, very black and a little frightening — ... ("Road for Zanzibar", *The Sunday Times*, Jan. 26, 1964, 15)

But the problem of neo-colonialism is very present in Africa; ... (Anthony Sampson, "How not to talk to Africans", *The Observer*, March 22, 1964, 11)

1.4. Apart from these semantic restrictions that affect the collocation of *very* with adjectives, there are also certain syntactic (or at least semantico-syntactic) considerations which make for reduced collocability of *very* and some adjectives.

Thus the adjectives *sole*, *lone*, *chief*, *main*, *live*, *only*, *sheer*, *mere* reject not only *very* but also most other adjectival features (comparison, predicative use, coordination with other adjectives, etc.) and are certainly less adjectival than full adjectives. (This is just another illustration of the notion of cline or gradience.)

With adjectives beginning in *a-*, *very* again faces a number of restrictions. Generally speaking, *very much* is regarded as "more correct", but *very* is also found:

... but there's power there and energy and freshness and the possibility of ruin. I'm very aware of that. (Robert Lowell in conversation with A. Alvarez, *The Observer*, July 21, 1963, 21)

Afraid takes *very* in the sentence-final position but prefers *very much* when followed by *to* or *that*; *alive*, on the other hand, would rule out *very* on semantic grounds (like *dead*) in the sentence-final position but would accept it more easily in an example like the following:

He is very alive to the problem.

When forms like *due* or *able* refuse to collocate with *very* (as in the examples "You wouldn't be able to stand it", or "Two days before I was due to return to England, they took me sailing"), this is already a strong indication of their defective status as descriptive adjectives; as soon as *very* is used, the meaning (at least in the case of *able*) shifts in the descriptive direction:

He is a very able and extremely interesting man.

1.5. Although nouns are frequently used adjectivally — especially in the attributive position⁶ — they can perhaps only be

⁶ Cf. John Dawkins, "Noun Attributives in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*", *American Speech*, XXXIX, New York, 1964, pp. 33—41, and Philip B. Gove, "Noun Often Attributive and Adjective", *American Speech*, XXXIX, New York, 1964, pp. 163—175.

said to have become full adjectives when they begin to accept *very*:

The water is very salt and buoyant, and I can... (C. Isherwood, *Down There on a Visit*, London, 1962, 105)

His very giant strides... (ex. given by Dawkins)

a very signal achievement vs. *a very signal beacon (ex. given by Dawkins)

In the above examples we are faced with the full conversion, which cannot very well be said of the sentence:

These houses are stone.

because the transform:

These houses are very stone.

is at least questionable if not ungrammatical.⁷ Most other cases of attributive nouns are not even questionable but downright ungrammatical when *very* is added: *a very head man, *the very city transport, *a very goods train, *very university people, *very sea powers, *very family duties, etc. In this respect, attributive nouns behave like categorizing adjectives.

1.6. Any other form may be said to have become an adjective when it accepts *very*, as seen in the following examples:

...one of the youngest companies, which considers itself to be very go-ahead, says... ('Swell Noel' for Charity. *The Sunday Telegraph*, Dec. 22, 1963, 11)

...and the critical comments are all very apropos. (Maurice Cranston, *The Idealists and Young Mr Eliot*, *The Sunday Times*, Feb. 2, 1964, 37)

2. The use of 'very' with '-ing' forms

2.1. The first group of *-ing* forms to be considered here⁸ are those which are not at all verbal forms (participles) but should rather be regarded as the products of suffixation, the suffix being *-ing* added to compound forms (consisting of nouns, adjectives and adverbs + verbs) that cannot stand independently as infinitives and consequently cannot have their own verbal tense: awe-inspiring (*to awe-inspire, *I awe-inspire), heart-breaking (*to heart-break, *I heart-break), good-looking (*to good-look, *I good-look), easy-going (*to easy-go, *I easy-go), hard-working (*to hard-work, *I hard-work), far-reaching (*to

⁷ It is interesting to note that *stone* is here "more adjectival" than *signal* in *the signal beacon*, as *stone* moves freely into the predicative position while *signal* remains fixed in the attributive position (*the beacon is signal). But *very* would seem to be decisive for the attainment of the full adjectival status.

⁸ This analysis will deal only with adjectival and participial *-ing* forms. The *-ing* forms that are nominal in their underlying structures are excluded: writing material ← material for writing.

far-reach, *I far-reach), etc. The transformational sequence by which these forms are generated could be described as follows: this inspires awe → *this awe-inspires → this is awe-inspiring, it breaks (one's) heart → *it heart-breaks → it is heart-breaking, (?) he looks good → *he good-looks → he is good-looking, (?) he goes easy → *he easy-goes → he is easy-going, it reaches far → *it far reaches → it is far-reaching, he works hard → *he hard-works → he is hard-working. *Very* collocates quite easily with such compound adjectives when the first element is adjectival or adverbial; when it is nominal, however, the intensifier is used less freely (mainly in the attributive rather than in the predicative position), to become practically inadmissible in some cases (e. g., *a very sea-faring nation, *the nation is very sea-faring).

There is one more problem in this connection, namely, that combinations of this kind sometimes appear to be verbal in character, as in the following two examples quoted by Scheurweghs:⁹

She won't even let me have a baby-sitter on the nights I'm fire-watching.

Tony had been map-reading in the back of the car.

Very is, of course, impossible here, and so are all other adjectival criteria (comparison, coordination with adjectives of undisputed status, use with linking verbs other than *be*); the trouble is that '*on the nights I fire-watch' and '*Tony had map-read' are also ungrammatical.

2.2. There are a few adjectives in *-ing* which, though historically connected with verbs, never operate as verbs — only as adjectives. Their adjectival status is further strengthened by the fact that their stems cannot be used as verbs either: cunning — *to cun; outstanding — *to outstand; uncomprehending — *to uncomprehend; unfeeling — *to unfeel, etc. Such forms accept *very* quite easily.

2.3. Chomsky has shown¹⁰ that *-ing* forms traceable to the substring 'it V one' (where 'one' is a human object) are adjectival. As such, they accept *very*: interesting, shocking, puzzling, amusing, embarrassing, boring, satisfying, fascinating, thrilling, astonishing, disappointing, alarming, etc. But it should be added that these forms are adjectival only when they are collocable with *very* — as attributives and in what is potentially a sen-

⁹ *Present-Day English Syntax*, London, 1959, p. 155.

¹⁰ "A Transformational Approach to Syntax", *Third Texas Conference on Problems of Linguistic Analysis in English*, Austin, 1962, p. 149; slightly elaborated by P. Roberts, *English Sentences*, New York, 1962, pp. 153–154.

tence-final position. As soon as they are followed by a direct object, however, they reject *very* and become verbal in character:¹¹

*You are very embarrassing me.

*She was very amusing them with her stories.

*This surely ought to be very worrying not only us but also others.

When a prepositional phrase follows an *-ing* form of this kind, *very* remains possible and the adjectival interpretation is uncontested:

All this is /very/ puzzling to foreign observers who wonder ...
(Jacques Marcuse, "The Panama uprising is still raging in Peking",
The Sunday Times, Jan. 19, 1964. 3)

2.4. Similar reasoning applies to some other *-ing* forms, not derived from the substring 'it V one'. They, too, reject *very* and remain verbal when followed by a direct object:

He had long since thought up the joke himself and had, indeed, been gently willing me into making it. (C. Isherwood, *Down There on a Visit*, London, 1962, 289)

... air of innocence which he seemed to be daring us to challenge. (C. Isherwood, o. c., 210)

If he were commanding soldiers and they refused to follow him ... (C. Isherwood, o. c., 109)

In their adjectival functions, however, these forms accept *very*:

But Lord Chandos, Chairman of the National Theatre Board, is very willing to talk. (Nicholas Tomalin, "The Wars of the Rises", *The Sunday Times*, Feb. 16, 1964, 31)

They think they are being very daring because ... (C. Isherwood, o. c., 42)

... I told him in a commanding voice. It *must* have been /very/ commanding, because he instantly obeyed! (C. Isherwood, o. c., 37)

2.5. All other *-ing* forms, regardless of their origin or behaviour in different syntactic contexts, become clearly adjectival when they are collocable with *very*. Whether they will earn an adjective label in the dictionary (in other words, whether the intuition of a native speaker will feel them as adjectives in the first place), will depend on the hitherto unexplored and

¹¹The rule formulated here is very strong, yet not unexceptional if one is to accept Poutsma's assertion ("Participles", *English Studies*, 1, Groningen, p. 162) that even an adjectival present participle may govern a non-prepositional object. He quotes Dickens (*Nicholas Nickleby*, II, 11b): If Mrs. Nickleby took the apartments without the means of paying for them, it was very unbecoming a lady. — My informants were rather reluctant to accept the sentence as grammatical, even on the combined authority of Dickens and Poutsma.

undefined statistical considerations which probably underlie all notions of grammaticality.¹²

3. The use of 'very' with '-ed' forms

3.1. Parallel to the two kinds of *-ing* forms noted above (2.1. and 2.2.), there are also two kinds of *-ed* forms: real adjectives formed with the derivative suffix *-ed* and adjectival or verbal participles built by adding *-ed* (or other past participial morphemes) to the infinitive.

Real adjectives are formed by adding the suffix *-ed* to either bound or free bases (synchronically speaking, of course). Examples with bound bases are the following: *naked*, *wicked*, *ashamed*, *sacred*, and perhaps a few others. Free bases are nouns, frequently with attributives: *gifted*, *talented*, *skilled*, *bearded*, *conceited*, *old-fashioned*, *middle-aged*, *blue-eyed*, *kind-hearted*, *long-haired*, *thick-skinned*, *one-sided*, *four-legged*, etc. But there is a problem with this group — namely, that it is not always possible to say with certainty whether the base is a noun or a verb, as seen in the examples like *brick-tiled*, *sunburned*, *well-shaped*, *short-lived* (for which Poutsma even requires the pronunciation [ˈʃɔ:tˈlaɪvd] to indicate its nominal origin).¹³

As far as collocation with *very* is concerned, restrictions are mainly semantic (except in the case of *ashamed*, which is historically a past participle). This is true equally of those adjectives that are based on nouns and of those whose origin is less clear.

3.2. The parallelism between *-ing* and *-ed* forms extends also to the subclass generated from the substring 'it V one' (see section 2.3. above). All past participles in this subclass (like their present counterparts) easily operate as adjectives and accept *very*, in which case the passive interpretation of the 'be + *-ed*' construction is ruled out. This means that sentences of this type cannot be regarded as passive transforms and cannot, consequently, be turned into the active. As a rule, they cannot be expanded by the agential phrase beginning in *by*. However, 'be + *-ed*' need not always be adjectival. When *very* is impossible, the doer of the action can be expressed and the whole con-

¹² This is not to contradict Chomsky, who claims (in *Syntactic Structures* and elsewhere) that grammaticality — and consequently grammatical classification — is not to be equated with statistical frequency. Some much more complex relationships are probably involved. But it is not easy to see what other, non-statistical, criterion could be responsible for the widespread native feeling that a form like *worrying* or *boring*, taken in isolation, is adjectival rather than verbal — even though both realizations are possible in syntactically different contexts.

¹³ *The Infinitive, the Gerund and the Participles of the English Verb*, Groningen, 1923.

struction becomes verbal, capable of being turned into its active kernel. This can be illustrated by the following examples:

She was surprised. —

- She was very surprised. → *She was very surprised by his behaviour. (*His behaviour very surprised her.)
- She was surprised by his behaviour. (His behaviour surprised her.) → *She was very surprised by his behaviour.

It follows from these two sequences that *very* is introduced before an adjective in the kernel sentence and not before a verbally derived past participle in the transform sentence. An important consequence of this is the fact that, for purposes of grammatical description, *surprised* and other *-ed* forms in the same subclass are adjectives from which it is possible to derive verbs, which then form their own participles formally identical with these adjectives.

This is another point at which the grammatical description (and the native feeling — which amounts to the same thing) must clearly have been influenced by statistics: *-ed* forms of this type are used as adjectives much more frequently than they are as participles in passive constructions.

But this is not the whole story. It seems that the 'pressure of the adjectival pattern' is so strong in the case of these forms that *very* remains at least marginally possible even when the presence of an agent would seem to warrant a passive (i. e., verbal) interpretation:

Wagner, for instance, was very interested in satin and silk ...
(Godfrey Smith, "Masterful Women", *The Sunday Times*, Jan. 19, 1964, 14)

Although not everybody would agree that *in* can serve to introduce an agent, it is not without interest that — forgetting *very* for the moment — an active transform is indeed possible; thus:

Satin and silk interested Wagner.

From this example it is but a short step to an overtly agential passive in which *very* can yet operate (at least according to some informants):

My mother was surprised and very pleased by my reaction.
I was very impressed by his performance under such difficult conditions.

They were very annoyed by the noise.

In these examples, the verbal feature of an overtly expressed agent clashes with the adjectival feature of *very*. Prescriptively one might wish to say that either one or the other is impossible

— and this is what some native speakers intuitively feel; however, since there are others who find nothing incongruous there, a descriptive grammar of English must try to account for the phenomenon. And it is difficult to see how it can do so without resorting to the pressure-of-the-pattern principle. The reasoning may run like this: these forms are unmistakably adjectival in the majority of their uses (*viz.*, as attributives and when standing as sole exponents of nominal predication); in such uses they accept all adjectival properties, including *very*; they accept them also — like most adjectives — when they are expanded by prepositional phrases in the predicative position — even if the prepositional phrase in question happens to introduce an element that might, in a different context, serve as an agent in a passive sentence; here the agential meaning is weakened, in the sense that the noun introduced by *by* cannot become the subject of an active sentence (or more precisely, that the whole structure is not a product of the passive transformation but an independently formed kernel).

3.3. There are also past participles that cannot be traced back to the verbs operating in the substring 'it V one' but which nevertheless function adjectivally and accept *very*:

... opinions are very divided. (Sybille Bedford, "The Auschwitz Trial", *The Observer*, Jan. 26, 1964, 12)

His face is very lined and the colour of parchment. (Robert Maugham, "Somerset Maugham at 90", *The Sunday Telegraph*, Jan. 26, 1964, 4)

The Government is naturally very concerned. (A Limit to the Wages-Round, *The Sunday Times*, Dec. 1, 1963, 14)

The results have been very mixed as I saw for myself... (David Willey, "Spectators are menacing Algeria's socialist plan", *The Sunday Times*, Dec. 1, 1963, 2)

One possible explanation for this may be found in the fact that these *-ed* forms are used predominantly in constructions without the agent expressed, so that they become similar in this respect to the group discussed in the preceding section. (The relative infrequency with which the agent is expressed in passive sentences¹⁴ may be partly responsible for the adjectival shift of many past participles.)

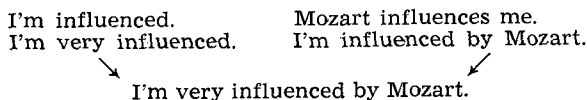
Once *very* becomes common in non-agential constructions, it is much less "offensive" in sentences in which the agent is clearly present. And again, it could only have appeared there in the first place because the *-ed* form in question was intuitively felt to be adjectival, while the fact that it was also collo-cable with *by* was made use of secondarily — as in the follow-

¹⁴ Cf. the following statement made by W. S. Allen (*Living English Structure*, London, 1953, p. 284): "The agent with 'by' is unnatural in English; *most* sentences needing it belong rightfully to the active voice...".

ing example produced by Peter Ustinov talking to Henry Brandon (*The Sunday Times*, Jan. 5, 1964, 22):

...I'm much more influenced by abstract things. I'm very influenced by Mozart, for instance...

This sentence must have been generated from two underlying sets of sentences:



Conclusion

- (1) *Very* is used freely with descriptive adjectives in the positive. Adjectives that do not accept *very* are either not descriptive (but categorizing) or not fully adjectival (but syntactically defective). Some adjectives, and in some of their uses, reject *very* for semantic reasons. Attributive nouns and other constructions can only be regarded as adjectives when they begin to accept *very*.
- (2) All those *-ing* forms that freely collocate with *very* are adjectival. Some of them are true adjectives that have no corresponding verb stems and no potentially verbal syntactic properties. Others are derived from verbs: they are capable of operating in both adjectival and verbal constructions, which are distinguished by means of the criterion of *very*. Statistical considerations are probably responsible for the intuitive native feeling which regards some of these *-ing* forms primarily as adjectives and others primarily as verbs.
- (3) The forms in *-ed* which accept *very* are to be interpreted adjectivally. Some of them are real adjectives with nominal stems. Others are verbal in origin but adjectival in syntactic patterning whenever they are collocable with *very*; when they are not, they function as participles in the passive construction and can, if necessary, be expanded by a prepositional phrase expressing an agent. There are some *-ed* forms whose adjectival nature has become so pronounced that they remain adjectives (and accept *very*) even when a prepositional phrase with *by* would seem to make the whole construction passive.
- (4) Once an *-ing* or *-ed* form accepts *very* in a given structure, it becomes fully adjectival in this particular structure — even though it may be verbal in other structures — and satisfies all other criteria of adjectivity (predicative and attributive use, comparison, coordination with adjectives, use with linking verbs other than *be*, etc.). This is one sense in which *very* serves as a criterion of structure.

- (5) Finally, it is interesting to note that while there may be a number of forms whose adjectival status is generally recognized even though they fail to collocate with *very*, all new candidates coming from other classes (nouns or verbs) and seeking admission to the class of adjectives must satisfy this crucial test of adjectivity. This is the second sense in which *very* can be taken as a reliable criterion of structure.