On *very*-intensified superlatives[1]

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Abstract. Most theories of *very* treat it as a degree modifier whose distribution is restricted to positive-form APs. Against this view, Goncharov (2024) has argued that *very* has a much wider distribution, highlighting cases like *the very beginning*, *the very same*, and *the very man* and arguing for a unified analysis. While Goncharov (2024) represents a major step towards understanding *very*, there is another use of *very* that, though it has been noted in passing, has not been closely scrutinized: *very*'s use in superlatives (*very best*). In this paper, I examine *very*-intensified superlatives more closely to gain a fuller understanding of *very*. I start by arguing that *very*'s use in superlatives should be unified with its other uses; then, I turn to the question of what a unified, degree-based theory of *very* would have to look like. Ultimately, I pursue a new theory of *very* built on (a) a new approach to comparison classes; and (b) Fitzgibbons et al.'s (2008) claim that *-est*, like the positive morpheme *pos*, invokes a standard-degree.

Keywords: degree modifiers, superlatives, degrees, comparison classes, intensification.

1. Introduction

Existing theories of degree constructions typically treat the English *very* as an archetypal modifier of gradable adjectives (Wheeler, 1972; Klein, 1980; von Stechow, 1984; Kennedy and McNally, 2005). Focusing on cases like (1), these theories claim that *very* is a standard-booster: while *Sarah is tall* is true iff Sarah's height meets the contextual height-standard, (1) is true iff Sarah's height meets an even higher standard. On these theories, *very* in (1) requires a gradable adjective like *tall* as an argument; corresponding to this theoretical claim, many have assumed that *very* in (1) can only modify gradable adjectives, contrasting *very* with other intensifiers that, they say, have a wider distribution (e.g. McNabb, 2012; Beltrama and Bochnak, 2015).

(1)   Sarah is very tall.

Although *very* has a reputation for being an intensifier that can only modify positive-form adjectives (a "true degree modifier," as McNabb, 2012 puts it), Goncharov (2024) has recently argued that *very* has a wider distribution than previously thought, highlighting the existence of cases where *very* appears not in a positive-form AP but rather in a construction with a temporal or spatial noun (2a), in a DP with *same* (2b), or in an "emphatic definite description" (2c).

(2)   a.   The very beginning/end/front/back
        b.   Sarah and Bill read the very same book.
        c.   Sophie is talking to the very man we saw yesterday.

As Goncharov (2024) notes, (2) is compatible both with a view where *very* has a wider distribution than previously thought and with a view where *very* in (2) and *very* in (1) are distinct, homophonous lexical items; to argue against the latter possibility, Goncharov shows that mul-

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tiple intensifiers cross-linguistically, such as *samyj* (Russian) and *pàts* (Lithuanian), have all of the uses that the English *very* does. This suggests that the "non-canonical" uses of *very* in (2) are not quirks of English but rather exemplify a cross-linguistically available intensification type. Accordingly, Goncharov argues that any theory of *very* should unify (1) and (2).

Although Goncharov (2024) represents a major step towards a fuller understanding of *very*, there is a use of *very* beyond the uses in (1)-(2) that–though it has been noted in passing (Bylinina and Sudo, 2015; Goncharov, 2024; Alstott, 2025)–has not been closely scrutinized: namely, *very*'s use in superlatives. On top of the examples in (3), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008–) contains hits for a variety of *very*-intensified superlatives, including synthetic ones (4a-b) and analytic ones (4c-d), suggesting that the occurrence of *very* with superlatives is fully productive (*pace* Bylinina and Sudo, 2015; Goncharov, 2024).[2]

(3)   a.   The very best/worst day of my life
         b.   Jim is one of the tallest students but not the very tallest one.

(4)   a.   That was one of the longest plate appearances of the year, but that was not the very longest plate appearance... (Source: FanGraphs)
         b.   *Game of Thrones* is among the very biggest shows on TV. (Hollywood Reporter)

(5)   a.   Democrats, likely caucus-goers, rated the war in Iraq as the very most important issue on a long list of issues... (Source: NPR)
         b.   She tried the very most difficult pieces in the coloratura canon. (Source: NPR)

No theory known to me has put forth a formal or informal hypothesis about the role of *very* in (3)-(5); Goncharov (2024), for instance, notes the existence of *very*-intensified superlatives but does not attempt to extend her analysis of (1) and (2) to these cases, stating that she is unsure of *very*'s role in superlatives and leaving *very*-intensified superlatives to future research.

In this paper, I investigate *very*-intensified superlatives more closely in the hope of gaining further insight into the intensification strategy exemplified by *very*. I start by addressing the question of whether *very* in (3)-(5) is the same as *very* in (1)-(2), presenting two arguments in favor of a unified analysis and against an analysis where *very* in (3)-(5) has a different lexical entry than *very* in (1)-(2). The first argument for a unified analysis, which is implicit in Goncharov's (2024) brief discussion of *very*-intensified superlatives, is cross-linguistic: *samyj* and *pàts*, the Russian and Lithuanian analogues of *very*, can also occur with superlatives. This suggests that the use of *very* in (3)-(5) is not an accident of English but a core feature of the intensification strategy exemplified by *very*, *samyj*, and *pàts*. My second argument for a unified analysis, which is novel, rests on the observation that while the truth-conditional role of *very* in singular superlatives is hard to pin down, *very* in plural superlatives has the truth-conditional role of a standard-booster. The fact that *very* is a standard-booster in plural superlatives as well as in other constructions, I argue, lends credence to a unified analysis of (3)-(5) and (1)-(2).

After arguing that a theory of (1) and (2) should extend to *very*-intensified superlatives, I turn to the question of what a unified, degree-based theory of *very* would have to look like. To start, I

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[2]*Very* can also modify *first/last*; I assume that *first/last* are superlatives (Alstott, 2025).

show that we cannot generate a *very*-intensified superlative by pairing the classic degree-based theory of *very* (von Stechow, 1984; Kennedy and McNally, 2005, etc.) with a standard entry for *-est* (Heim, 1999). In other words, the classic approach to ((1)) in degree semantics, when paired with a standard *-est*, runs into a compositional issue in a DP with *very* and *-est* together.

After showing the tension between the classic degree-based theory of *very* and the standard approach to superlatives, I pursue a new degree-based theory of *very* that allows us to keep the standard approach to superlatives intact. The theory in question is built on (a) a new theory of comparison classes; (b) Fitzgibbons et al.'s (2008) claim that *-est*, just like the positive morpheme *pos*, invokes a standard-degree. The theory, which relies heavily on standard-boosting, straightforwardly captures cases where *very* modifies positive forms and superlatives, and it correctly predicts the ban on *very* in comparatives (#*John is very taller than Bill*); furthermore, I show that my theory can provide a preliminary account of the cases in (2) if we make some particular structural assumptions and posit an indirect degree-based component in these cases.

In addition to the degree-based theory of *very* advanced here–which deviates markedly from past theories of *very*, including Goncharov's–there is an alternate strategy for dealing with *very*-intensified superlatives that one could pursue: the strategy of trying to extend Goncharov's (2024) non-degree-based theory of (1)-(2) to superlatives. I do not assess the viability of this strategy in this short paper; Goncharov (2024) appeared after my SuB presentation and was developed independently of the current theory, and thus I have not yet engaged in a detailed comparison of the two proposals. However, comparison of my degree-based theory and Goncharov's non-degree-based theory is an important avenue for future research. In fact, Goncharov (2024) herself highlights the need to articulate a unified degree-based theory of *very* and compare it to her proposal. This paper articulates just such a unified degree-based theory, opening the door to fruitful comparison between degree-based and non-degree-based approaches.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 argues in favor of a unified analysis of *very*-intensified superlatives and other uses of *very*. Section 3 shows that a compositional issue arises in *very*-intensified superlatives if we pair the classic theory of *very* in degree semantics with the standard theory of *-est*. Section 4 presents the basic idea behind a new degree-based theory of *very* that allows us to keep the standard approach to superlatives intact. Section 5 shows how my theory captures the use of *very* with positive forms and superlatives, while section 6 discusses how my theory can be extended to the cases in (2). Section 7 concludes.

2. Two arguments in favor of a unified analysis

Very-intensified superlatives only raise questions for existing theories of *very* if *very* in (3)-(5) is the same lexical item as *very* in other environments; as such, I begin by rehearsing two arguments for a unified analysis.

2.1. A cross-linguistic argument (Goncharov, 2024)

One argument for unifying *very*-intensified superlatives and other uses comes from the fact that *samyj* and *pàts*, the only other intensifiers known to occur in the full range of non-superlative

environments in which *very* can occur, can also modify superlatives (Goncharov, 2024). *Samyj*, e.g., appears not just in positive-form APs (6a), DPs with temporal/spatial nouns (6b), DPs with *ta že* 'same' (6c), and emphatic definites (6d), but also in superlatives (6e). According to Goncharov (2024), (6a-e) are semantically on a par with the parallel *very*-sentences in English.

(6)   a.   Samyj vysokij čelovek
           SAMYJ tall   man
           'the very tall man'[3]

       b.   v samom načale
           at SAMYJ beginning
           'at the very beginning'

       c.   ta že   samaja mašina
           that FOC SAMYJ car
           'the very same car'

       d.   tot samyj čelovek
           that SAMYJ man
           'that very man'

       e.   samyj (naj)-vysšij
           SAMYJ SUP-high.SUP
           'very highest'

On a non-unified analysis where the *very* we see in superlatives and the *very* we see in (1)-(2) are distinct items are homophonous in English, it is surprising that every intensifier known to occur in all the constructions in (1)-(2) can also intensify superlatives. To account for the cross-linguistic data, such an analysis would need not only a homophonous *very*, but also a homophonous *samyj* and *pàts*, which is stipulative and misses a generalization. By contrast, on a unified analysis where the *very* we see in superlatives is the same as the *very* we see in (1)-(2), it is unsurprising that there are other intensifiers that have the full range of uses that *very* has.

To conclude this subsection, I note that the intensification strategy used by English, Lithuanian, and Russian is not the only strategy that languages use to intensify superlatives. In Dutch and German, for example, one intensifies superlatives using the prefix *aller-* (e.g. German: *aller-beste* 'very best'), a prefix which–unlike *very*, *samyj*, and *pàts*–has no uses outside of superlatives and cannot, for example, modify positive forms (Lamoure and Sleeman, 2023).

The existence of intensifiers like *aller-* does not undermine a unified analysis of *very*-intensified superlatives and other uses of *very*. Rather, the German data merely suggest that the type of intensification exemplified by *very*/*samyj*/*pàts* is not available in every language and that languages without this type of intensifier have other strategies for intensifying superlatives.

2.2. A novel semantic argument

Although the cross-linguistic facts from section 2.1 already motivate pursuing a unified analysis of *very*-intensified superlatives and other uses of *very*, we could increase the plausibility of a unified analysis if we could establish that there are cases where *very* in superlatives has the same semantic contribution as *very* in other uses. In this subsection, I argue that while *very*'s contribution in **singular** superlatives is hard to pin down and not obviously related to the contribution of *very* in other uses, *very* in **plural** superlatives has the contribution of a standard-booster, just like *very* in certain other uses. In other words, the *very* we see in superlatives, just like the *very* we see outside of superlatives, can be a standard booster. This fact, I suggest,

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[3]As Goncharov (2024) notes, assimilating (6a) to the English *very tall* breaks with a tradition of referring to (6a) as a superlative; see her Appendix for arguments that this break from tradition is warranted.

lends credence to a unified analysis of *very*-intensified superlatives and other uses of *very*.

To make this more concrete, let us look at the role of *very* in singular superlatives and plural superlatives in turn. If we look at singular superlatives only, it seems unclear whether *very* in superlatives is semantically the same as any other use of *very*. For example, *very* in singular superlatives seems quite different from *very* in positive-form APs: while the *very* we see with positive forms has truth-conditional import (7a) and a standard-boosting effect, *very* in singular superlatives seems to lack truth-conditional import altogether, as shown by the oddity of (7b). Additionally, *very* in singular superlatives has (at least at first glance) no obvious semantic similarities with the uses of *very* in (2) beyond a vague sense of intensification.

(7) a. Sarah is tall but not very tall.
     b. #Sarah is the tallest student but not the very tallest student.

When we look at plural superlatives, however, we see that *very* in these cases has clear truth-conditional import and a standard-boosting effect, like *very* in positive-form APs. To put it more precisely: plural superlatives have been argued to be sensitive to a standard-degree (Fitzgibbons et al., 2008), and *very* in plural superlatives boosts that standard-degree. In (8), e.g., *the best applicants* are the ones who meet a high standard of quality (as Fitzgibbons et al. (2008) argue), while *the very best applicants* are the applicants who meet an even higher standard of quality.[4]

(8) A:Why wasn't Eli on the shortlist? You once told me he was one of the best applicants!
     B: He was one of the best applicants, and that's why he got an interview. But although
     he was somewhere among the best applicants, he wasn't one of the very best applicants.
     And only the very best applicants made the shortlist.

The fact that *very* in superlatives is a standard-booster when its effect is truth-conditionally visible favors a view where *very*-intensified superlatives are not *sui generis* but rather unified with other uses of *very*. The challenge for a unified theory is to explain why *very* sometimes has a clear standard-boosting effect (positive APs, plural superlatives) and sometimes has an effect that is not clearly analyzable as standard-boosting (singular superlatives plus the cases in (2), which lack degree morphology and thus *prima facie* cannot invoke a standard-degree). In what follows, I show that despite this variation in *very*'s semantic effect, a unified degree-based theory is tenable. To deal with *very*'s lack of truth-conditional import in (7b), I appeal to the semantics of *the*; I further argue that *very* in (2) is analyzable as a standard-booster after all.

3. Trying to extend the classic degree-based theory of *very* to superlatives

Having argued for unifying *very*'s use in superlatives with other uses, I now show that if we try to formalize a unified analysis by pairing the classic degree-based theory of *very* with a standard entry for *-est* (Heim, 1999), we run into a type mismatch in *very*-intensified superlatives.

To illustrate this tension between the classic degree-based theory of *very* and the standard view

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[4]Examples like (8) chafe against Bylinina and Sudo's (2015) brief speculation about *very* in their conclusion, where they conjecture that *very* in superlatives must be something other than a standard-booster. Bylinina and Sudo (2015) do not provide arguments for this position, however, as *very* is not their primary concern.

of *-est*, I start by reviewing the standard theory of *-est* (section 3.1) and the classic degree-based theory of *very* (section 3.2) in turn, using Kennedy and McNally's (2005) theory of *very* as an exemplar. In section 3.3, I show that if we combine the theories from section 3.1 and section 3.2, we cannot generate a *very*-intensified superlative. The upshot is that any theory of *very*-intensified superlatives must depart from a Kennedy and McNally (2005)-style theory of *very*, depart from the standard theory of *-est*, or both. In sections 4-6, I opt to depart from a Kennedy and McNally (2005)-style theory of *very* but maintain the standard theory of *-est* and maintain the idea that *very* is degree-semantic. As mentioned above, I leave comparison of this degree-based view and Goncharov's (2024) non-degree-based view to future research.

3.1. Background: The standard theory of *-est* (Heim, 1999)

The starting point for the contemporary semantic literature on superlatives is Heim (1999), and Heim's (1999) theory remains standard today. Heim's (1999) theory of superlatives uses $\langle d,et \rangle$ entries for gradable adjectives like *tall* (Cresswell, 1976) and assigns *-est* the entry in (9b).

(9)   a. $[\![tall]\!] = \lambda d. \lambda x:$ d is a height-degree. x's height $\geq$ d
      b. $[\![-est]\!] = \lambda G_{\langle d,et \rangle}. \lambda C_{\langle e,t \rangle}. \lambda x: x \in C \land \forall y \in C\ [\exists d\ [G(d)(y) = 1]].$
           $\exists d\ [G(d)(x) = 1$ and $\forall z\ [[z \in C$ and $z \neq x] \to G(d)(z) = 0]]$

(9b)'s second argument is a comparison class, a variable denoting the set of entities relevant for the superlative description. For example, the comparison class in *the tallest tree* is the set of relevant trees. (9b) takes a a degree predicate G, a comparison class C, and an entity x as arguments. It presupposes that $x \in C$ and that every member of C has a degree on the G-scale; when defined, it returns true iff x has a higher G-scale degree than any other individual in C.

To see (9b) in action, consider a DP like *the tallest tree*, which receives LF (10a) under Heim's (1999) theory. Note that *-est* moves from its base position and leaves a trace of type *d*.

(10)   a.   [the [C -est [λd. d-tall tree]]]
       b. $[\![(10a)]\!] = \iota x. \exists d\ [x$'s height $\geq$ d and x is a tree and
            $\forall z\ [[z \in C$ and $z \neq x] \to \neg[z$'s height $\geq$ d and z is a tree]]]

As shown in (10b), (10a) ends up denoting the tree s.t. every other tree in the comparison class is shorter than it, as desired. Note that although Heim (1999) focuses on singular superlatives, her theory is the basis for all past theories of plural superlatives, which posit that they have LFs like (10a) plus covert distributivity (Stateva, 2005; Fitzgibbons et al., 2008; Scontras, 2008).

3.2. The classic theory of *very* in degree semantics

Now, I introduce the classic degree-based theory of *very*, using Kennedy and McNally (2005) as an exemplar. My choice of exemplar is not crucial; the issue that arises when we pair Kennedy and McNally (2005) with Heim (1999) extends to any degree-based theory of *very* that I know.

Kennedy and McNally's (2005) theory of *very*, which is similar to older theories and focuses on the relation between cases like (11a) and (11b), rests on a view where cases like (11b) contain

a covert morpheme *pos* at LF (von Stechow, 1984). On this view, (11b) has the LF in (11c).

(11)   a.   Sarah is very tall.
         b.   Sarah is tall.
         c.   [Sarah [C [pos tall]]]

Pos, as defined in (12a), takes a degree predicate *G* (type $\langle d,et \rangle$), a comparison class *C*, and an entity *x*, returning true iff *x* meets or exceeds STANDARD(G)(C), which is the standard-degree on the *G*-scale as computed for the set *C*. Using this entry, (11c) comes out true iff Sarah's height meets or exceeds STANDARD($[\![$tall$]\!]$)(C), i.e. the standard of height for the comparison class. The comparison class is, by assumption, the set of relevant individuals, so the predicted meaning for (11c) is "Sarah counts as tall when compared to the relevant individuals."

(12)   a. $[\![$pos$]\!] = \lambda G_{\langle d,et \rangle}.\ \lambda C_{\langle e,t \rangle}.\ \lambda x.\ G(\text{STANDARD}(G)(C))(x) = 1$
         b. $[\![$(11c)$]\!] = 1$ iff Sarah's height $\geq$ STANDARD($[\![$tall$]\!]$)(C)

Kennedy and McNally (2005) assume that *very* has the same semantic type as *pos*. The difference is that while *pos* computes the standard relative to the whole comparison class, *very* computes the standard relative to the subset of the comparison class that meets the positive standard (Klein, 1980). (13b) formalizes this idea, where BOOST(G)(C) means "the standard-degree on the *G*-scale as computed for the subset of *C* that meets the positive standard." Using this entry, (13a) comes out true iff Sarah's height meets or exceeds BOOST($[\![$tall$]\!]$)(C). BOOST($[\![$tall$]\!]$)(C), the standard of height for tall people, will be greater than STANDARD($[\![$tall$]\!]$)(C), the standard of height as computed for everyone. Thus, (11a) ends up entailing (11b), as desired.

(13)   a.   [Sarah [C [very tall]]]
         b. $[\![$very$]\!] = \lambda G_{\langle d,et \rangle}.\ \lambda C_{\langle e,t \rangle}.\ \lambda x.\ G(\text{BOOST}(G)(C))(x) = 1$
         c.   BOOST(G)(C) = STANDARD(G)($\{x \in C: G(\text{STANDARD}(G)(C))(x) = 1\}$)

3.3. The compositional issue

The above theory of *very*, when paired with Heim's theory of *-est*, cannot generate a *very*-intensified superlative. To see this, observe that Heim's LF for *the tallest tree*, repeated below in (14), has nowhere that our classic entry for *very* (type $\langle \langle d,et \rangle, \langle et,et \rangle \rangle$) can attach.

(14)   [the [C [-est [λd. d-tall tree]]]]

If *very* attaches to any node other than *tall* or [λd. d-tall tree], there will be type mismatch between *very* and its sister; *very* needs a first argument of type $\langle d,et \rangle$, and the only $\langle d,et \rangle$ nodes in (14) are *tall* and [λd. d-tall tree]. While inserting *very* next to *tall* or [λd. d-tall tree] avoids immediate crash, we still run into type issues down the line. In particular, if *very* applies to *tall*, the result of combining them (type $\langle et,et \rangle$) cannot compose with *-est*'s trace (type *d*). And if *very* applies to [λd. d-tall tree], the result (type $\langle et,et \rangle$) cannot compose with *-est*.

The crux of the compositional issue is that our classic *very*, just like Heim's *-est*, requires a degree-semantic argument (type $\langle d,et \rangle$) and subsequently outputs a non-degree-semantic ob-

ject. Because of this, in a DP with just one gradable predicate, *very* and *-est* compete for insertion: there is nowhere *-est* can attach once *very* takes its first argument or vice versa. Note that this problem is highly general in the following sense: as far as I know, all variants of the classic degree-based theory of *very* and all degree-semantic theories of *-est* posit that these items take a gradable predicate and return a non-degree-semantic object. It follows from this (for the reasons above) that if we pair any classic degree-based theory of *very* with any degree-based theory of *-est*, we run into a compositional issue in DPs with *very* and *-est* together.

4. Proposal: A new theory of *very*

In this section, I present the core idea behind a new theory of *very* that seeks to unify all of its uses while maintaining a standard, Heim (1999)-style approach to superlatives. The theory I will pursue agrees with the classic degree-based theory of *very* that *very* is at its core degree-semantic and a standard-booster, and it seeks to unify all uses of *very* under the heading of standard-boosting (even the uses without degree morphology). While my theory borrows the idea that *very* is a standard-booster, it avoids the compositional issue from section 3.2 by severing *very* from gradable predicates. On my theory, *very* does not take a gradable predicate as argument; its only argument is a comparison class, and outputs a modified comparison class.

To make this work, I rely on three background assumptions. First, as hinted at above, I follow Fitzgibbons et al. (2008) in assuming that *-est* is standard-sensitive. In particular, for any degree predicate G and set of entities S, I posit not only a positive standard-degree (call it $\text{STANDARD}_{pos}(G)(S)$) and a boosted positive standard-degree (call it $\text{BOOST}_{pos}(G)(S)$) but also a superlative standard-degree $\text{STANDARD}_{sup}(G)(S)$ and a boosted variant $\text{BOOST}_{sup}(G)(S)$. As in Kennedy and McNally (2005), the boosted standards are defined in terms of their non-boosted versions. For example, $\text{BOOST}_{pos}(G)(S)$ is the result of applying $\text{STANDARD}_{pos}(G)$ to the subset of S that meets $\text{STANDARD}_{pos}(G)(S)$. $\text{BOOST}_{sup}(G)(S)$ is similarly defined.

(15) $\text{BOOST}_{pos}(G)(S) = \text{STANDARD}_{pos}(G)(\{x \in S: G(\text{STANDARD}_{pos}(G)(S))(x) = 1\})$

Second, I assume that the comparison class of *pos* and *-est* is not a set but rather an ordered pair consisting of (a) the set of relevant entities; (b) the set of positive and superlative standards for the relevant adjectives, as computed for (a). In other words, if S is the set of salient entities, then *pos*/*-est*'s comparison class is an ordered pair with two sets: (a) S itself; (b) the set containing, for every relevant adjective A, the positive and superlative standard-degrees for S.

(16)   Let S be the set of relevant atomic entities in a context c. Then,
         $[\![C]\!] = \langle S,$
         $\{d: \exists A [A \text{ is relevant in } c \wedge [d = \text{STANDARD}_{pos}([\![A]\!])(S) \vee d = \text{STANDARD}_{sup}([\![A]\!])(S)]]\}\rangle$

For example, let's say the relevant people are Meg, Al, Ben, and Dan; the only relevant adjective is *tall*. Further suppose that one must be 69in to count as a tall member of this group and 72in to be one of the tallest. Then, $C = \langle \{\text{Meg, Al, Ben, Dan}\}, \{69\text{in}, 72\text{in}\}\rangle$.

On top of these assumptions about *pos*/*-est*, I posit that *same*, nouns like *beginning*, and a silent element in *the very man* take a comparison class with a structure like (16). I show in section

6 that this assumption, when paired with a *very* that modifies comparison classes like (16) and works for positive forms and superlatives, allows for a preliminary account of *very*'s other uses.

Having laid out my core assumptions, I conclude this section by introducing my entry for *very* (17), which takes an ordered-pair comparison class like (16) and returns a modified comparison class. When looking at (17), note that I use First(C) and Second(C) to refer to the first and second members of the ordered pair C. Additionally, for a given set S, I use STANDARDS($[\![A]\!]$)(S) as shorthand for the doubleton set containing STANDARD$_{pos}$($[\![A]\!]$)(S) and STANDARD$_{sup}$($[\![A]\!]$)(S).

(17) $[\![$very$]\!]$ = λC: Second(C) $\in$ D$_{\langle d,t \rangle}$. $\langle$First(C),
        $\{$d: $\exists$A [STANDARDS($[\![A]\!]$)(First(C)) $\subseteq$ Second(C) $\wedge$
        [d = BOOST$_{pos}$($[\![A]\!]$)(First(C)) $\vee$ d = BOOST$_{sup}$($[\![A]\!]$)(First(C))]$\}\rangle$

In a nutshell, *very* takes an ordered-pair comparison class C, presupposes that its second member is a set of degrees, and returns a modified C whose second member contains boosted standard-degrees. To be more precise, the first member of the ordered pair $[\![$very C$]\!]$ is the same as the first member of C, but the second member of $[\![$very C$]\!]$ contains standard-degrees that are boosted relative to those in C. In particular, for every gradable adjective A whose positive and superlative standards are in the second member of C, the second member of $[\![$very C$]\!]$ contains BOOST$_{pos}$($[\![A]\!]$)(First(C)) and BOOST$_{sup}$($[\![A]\!]$)(First(C)). For example, if the first member of C is {Meg, Al, Ben, Dan} and the second member of C contains the (unboosted) positive and superlative height-standards for these people, $[\![$very C$]\!]$ has the denotation in (18).

(18) $[\![$very C$]\!]$ = $\langle$\{Meg, Al, Ben, Dan\},
        $\{$BOOST$_{pos}$($[\![$tall$]\!]$)(\{Meg, Al, Ben, Dan\}), BOOST$_{sup}$($[\![$tall$]\!]$)(\{Meg, Al, Ben, Dan\})$\}\rangle$

As an aside, note that going forward, I sometimes refer to Higher^G(C) and Lower^G(C); these are abbreviations for the two degrees in Second(C) for which G is defined. For example, Higher$^{[\![tall]\!]}$(C) and Lower$^{[\![tall]\!]}$(C) are the two degrees in Second(C) for which $[\![$tall$]\!]$ is defined, i.e. the two height-degrees in C. Higher$^{[\![tall]\!]}$(C) is the higher of the two height-degrees in Second(C), and Lower$^{[\![tall]\!]}$(C) is the lower of the two. For example, if $[\![$C$]\!]$ = $\langle$\{Meg, Al, Ben, Dan\},\{69in, 72in\}$\rangle$, Lower$^{[\![tall]\!]}$(C) = 69in and Higher$^{[\![tall]\!]}$(C) = 72in.

Finally, note that the compositional machinery below will sometimes invoke degrees like Higher$^{[\![\lambda d.\ [d\text{-tall tree}]]\!]}$(C) rather than Higher$^{[\![tall]\!]}$(C). As I've set things up, however, these two degrees are the same: since $[\![$tall$]\!]$(d) and $[\![\lambda$d. d-tall tree$]\!]$(d) have the same definedness conditions (d must be a height-degree), Higher$^{[\![\lambda d.\ [d\text{-tall tree}]]\!]}$(C) and Higher$^{[\![tall]\!]}$(C) both refer to the higher of the height-degrees in Second(C). Given this, I opt to always use the shorter name.[5]

5. Capturing *very* in positive-form APs and superlatives

Having laid out the basic idea behind my proposal, I now show how it captures *very* in positive and superlative APs. Recall that we want *very* to have a truth-conditionally visible effect with positive forms and plural superlatives but no truth-conditional import with singular superlatives.

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[5]Note also that since (16) refers to the relevant **adjectives**, C cannot, e.g., contain STANDARD$_{pos}$($[\![\lambda$d. d-tall tree$]\!]$)(C), whatever that would be, since [λd. d-tall tree] is not an adjective.

Starting with positive-form APs, I model the difference between *Sarah is tall* and *Sarah is very tall* as follows. I assign *Sarah is tall* the LF in (19a) and use the entry for *pos* in (19b), both of which are standard *modulo* our new comparison classes.

(19) a. [Sarah [C [pos tall]]]
     b. $\llbracket pos \rrbracket = \lambda G_{\langle d,et \rangle}. \lambda C. \lambda x. G(\text{Lower}^G(C))(x) = 1$

In (19a), *pos* takes $\llbracket tall \rrbracket$, C, and Sarah as arguments. I assume that the presence of *tall* makes this adjective relevant, and hence, C in ((19a)) is an ordered pair consisting of (a) the set of relevant entities; (b) the set containing the positive height-standard for (a), the superlative height-standard for (a), and possibly some non- height standards as well. With this in mind, consider the truth-conditions in ((20)), noting that these truth-conditions make reference to $\text{Lower}^{\llbracket tall \rrbracket}(C)$, the lower of the two height-degrees in C. $\text{Lower}^{\llbracket tall \rrbracket}(C)$ is nothing but the positive-form standard-degree on the $\llbracket tall \rrbracket$ scale,[6] so *Sarah is tall* is true iff Sarah's height meets the positive standard.

(20) $\llbracket (19a) \rrbracket = 1$ iff Sarah's height $\geq \text{Lower}^{\llbracket tall \rrbracket}(C)$

Turning to *Sarah is very tall*, I assume the LF in (21a). The difference between (19a) and (21a) is that in the latter, the comparison class of *pos* is $\llbracket very\ C \rrbracket$, not C. As a result, (21a) yields the truth-conditions in (21b). As discussed in section 4, the height-degrees in $\llbracket very\ C \rrbracket$ are boosted relative to their counterparts in C, and thus $\text{Lower}^{\llbracket tall \rrbracket}(\llbracket very\ C \rrbracket) > \text{Lower}^{\llbracket tall \rrbracket}(C)$. It follows from this that (21b) asymmetrically entails (20), with *very* boosting the standard.

(21) a. [Sarah [[very C][pos tall]]]
     b. $\llbracket (21a) \rrbracket = 1$ iff Sarah's height $\geq \text{Lower}^{\llbracket tall \rrbracket}(\llbracket very\ C \rrbracket)$

Moving on to plural superlatives, I model the difference between *the tallest trees* and *the very tallest trees* as follows. For the former, I adopt a simplified version of Fitzgibbons et al.'s (2008) theory, one that uses LFs like (22a) and the *-est* in (22b).[7] Note that I adopt a mereological approach to plurality (Link, 1983) where plural individuals are sums of atomic individuals; sums are related to their subparts via the parthood relation ⊑.

(22) a. [the [C [-est [λd. *[d-tall tree]]]]]
     b. $\llbracket -est \rrbracket = \lambda G_{\langle d,et \rangle}. \lambda C. \lambda X: \forall y \in \text{First}(C) [\exists d [G(d)(x) = 1]].$
        $G(\text{Higher}^G(C))(X) = 1$ and
        $\forall Y [[Y \in \text{First}(C) \text{ and } G(\text{Higher}^G(C))(Y) = 1] \rightarrow Y \sqsubseteq X]$

As shown in (23a), *-est*'s first argument in (22a) contains Link's distributivity operator *; (23a) relates a degree *d* and a (singular or plural) entity *X* iff all of *X*'s atomic parts are trees whose height meets *d*. As shown in (23b), *the tallest trees* will presuppose that every member of First(C) has a degree on the scale denoted by (23a); in other words, every member of First(C) is a tree. As a result, First(C) is a set of trees, while Second(C) contains the positive and superlative $\llbracket tall \rrbracket$-standards for that set of trees. When defined, *the tallest trees* denotes the unique

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[6]I make the auxiliary assumption that the positive standard must be lower than the superlative standard.
[7]See Fitzgibbons et al. (2008) for conceptual arguments that slightly more complexity is needed.

X with the following properties: (a) *X*'s parts are trees whose height exceeds $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$;[8] (b) for any relevant (singular or plural) tree *Y* all of whose parts exceed $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$, *Y* is a subpart of *X*. In other words, *the tallest trees* is predicted to denote the maximal plurality all of whose parts exceed $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$, which (by definition) is the superlative standard for trees.

(23) a. $[\![\lambda d. \text{*}[\text{d-tall tree}]]\!] = \lambda d. \lambda X. \forall x \sqsubseteq X$: x's height $\geq$ d and x is a tree

    b. $[\![(22a)]\!]$ is defined iff $\forall Y \in \text{First}(C)$: $\exists d [[\![\lambda d. \text{*}[\text{d-tall tree}]]\!](d)(Y) = 1]$.
        When defined, $[\![(22a)]\!] = \iota X. [\![\lambda d. \text{*}[\text{d-tall tree}]]\!](\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C))(X) = 1$ and
        $\forall Y [[Y \in \text{First}(C) \text{ and } [\![\lambda d. \text{*}[\text{d-tall tree}]]\!](\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C))(Y) = 1] \rightarrow Y \sqsubseteq X]$

Just as *the tallest trees* refers to the maximal plurality whose parts meet $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$, *the very tallest trees* (24) will refer to the maximal plurality whose parts meet $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}([\![\text{very } C]\!])$. For the reasons above, $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}([\![\text{very } C]\!])$ will always be greater than $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$; as a result, *the very tallest trees* denotes a subplurality of *the tallest trees*, as desired. To see this, suppose that that three trees (A, B, and C) meet $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$ but only A and B meet $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}([\![\text{very } C]\!])$. In this scenario, $[\![\text{the tallest trees}]\!] = A \oplus B \oplus C$, while $[\![\text{the very tallest trees}]\!] = A \oplus B$.

(24) [the [[very C] [-est [λd. *[d-tall tree]]]]]]

Turning to singular superlatives, I assign *tallest tree* the LF in ((25)a); note that it lacks *.

(25) a. [C [-est [λd. [d-tall tree]]]]

    b. $[\![(25a)]\!] = \lambda x.$ x's height $\geq \text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$ and $x \in [\![\text{tree}]\!]$ and
        $\forall y [[y \in \text{First}(C) \wedge y\text{'s height} \geq \text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C) \wedge y \in [\![\text{tree}]\!]] \rightarrow y \sqsubseteq x]$

Assuming that nouns like *tree* denote sets of atoms in the absence of a covert *, $[\![\text{tallest tree}]\!]$ (25)b will be a set of atoms. More specifically, $[\![\text{tallest tree}]\!]$ is true of *x* iff (a) *x* is a atomic tree whose height meets $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$; (b) for any relevant tree *y* who meets $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$, *y* is a subpart of *x*. Since the only subpart of an atomic individual is itself, it follows that $[\![\text{tallest tree}]\!]$ is true of *x* iff *x* is the **only** tree that meets $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$. If there are no trees whose height meets $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$ or multiple such trees, (25)b denotes $\varnothing$, and *the tallest tree* is undefined.

To explain why the definedness of singular superlatives is not perceived as dependent on the value of a standard-degree, I assume (following Fitzgibbons et al.) that when we utter *the tallest tree* in a context where there are no trees or multiple trees who meet $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$, we "readjust" the standard to avoid crash, i.e. we give $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$ a value that lies between the tallest tree's height and the next tallest tree's. Due to this adjustment, *the tallest tree* becomes defined: it refers to the unique tree that meets the adjusted superlative standard.

At this point, we predict that $[\![\text{the tallest tree}]\!] = [\![\text{the very tallest tree}]\!]$ when both are defined, explaining *very*'s lack of truth-conditional role in singular superlatives. To see this, let's say Tree A is the tallest tree, i.e. the sole tree that meets $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$. Let's also say that *the very tallest tree* is defined: there is a unique tree that meets $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}([\![\text{very } C]\!])$. Since $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}([\![\text{very } C]\!]) > \text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$ and only Tree A meets the latter, the very tallest tree must be Tree A.

Given this equivalence, the question arises of why one would ever refer to Tree A as *the very*

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[8]See section 4 for why I am referring to $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{tall}]\!]}(C)$ here and not $\text{Higher}^{[\![\lambda d. \text{*}[\text{d-tall tree}]]\!]}(C)$.

tallest tree rather than as simply *the tallest tree*. My theory predicts that one might use *very tallest* to highlight how tall Tree A is; by using *very tallest*, one signals that Tree A exceeds the (adjusted) superlative standard not by a bit but by a significant amount. While there is something right about the idea that *the very tallest tree* emphasizes Tree A's height, further research into when *very*-intensified superlatives are preferred over non-intensified ones is needed.

To conclude, note that I predict the ban on *very* in comparatives (**Al is very nicer than Ben*): *very* needs a comparison-class argument, but comparatives contain no *C* on standard theories.

6. Beyond positive forms and superlatives

Having shown that my theory can provide a unified account of *very tall* and *very tallest*, I next offer a preliminary extension of my theory to *very* in "precision cases," DPs with *same*, and emphatic definites. In each case, I argue that the role of *very* can be conceptualized in terms of standard-boosting and formalize this conceptualization using my entry for *very*.

6.1. *Very* in "precision cases"

Very in "precision cases" (*the very beginning*, *the very front*) has a truth-conditional contribution that falls naturally into the category of standard-boosting. To see this, consider the following examples, which highlight *very*'s truth-conditional import in "precision cases":

(26)   a.   Most people give up on New Year's Resolutions sometime in the beginning of the year, but Eli's laziness is next-level: he gave up at the <u>very</u> beginning of the year!
        b.   **Context**: A got movie tickets and wanted to be as close to the screen as possible. A: I was able to score seats somewhere in the front of the theater, but sadly, I didn't manage to get seats in the <u>very</u> front of the theater.

In (26), one can think of *beginning/front* as sensitive to a standard-degree; *the beginning of the year*, e.g., is intuitively the maximal time-interval in the year that meets a high threshold of earliness. Like the standard-degree in positive-forms and superlatives, the "earliness threshold" that an interval must meet to count as part of *the beginning* is vague in most contexts. Once we realize that *beginning/front* are standard-sensitive, *very*'s role in (26) is naturally analyzed as a form of standard-boosting: while *the beginning of the year* is the maximal interval that meets a high threshold of earliness, *the very beginning of the year* is the maximal interval that meets an even higher threshold. In other words, *the very beginning* denotes a salient initial subinterval of *the beginning*. See Goncharov (2024) for similar ideas formalized in a different system.

To formalize this analysis, I assume a domain D_i for time-intervals, give *the beginning* the LF in (27a), and give *beginning* the entry in (27b). Note that $\subseteq$ is the subinterval relation here.

(27)   a.   [the [C [beginning]]]
        b. $\llbracket$beginning$\rrbracket = \lambda C. \lambda t \in D_i.$ $\llbracket$early$\rrbracket$(Higher(C))(t) = 1 and
              $\forall t'$ [[$t' \in$ First(C) $\wedge$ $\llbracket$early$\rrbracket$(Higher(C))(t') = 1] $\rightarrow t' \subseteq t$]

In short, I claim that *beginning* lexicalizes the meaning "earliest part." To that end, I make

certain assumptions about the adjective *early* (which I invoke in (27b)) and *beginning*'s comparison class. Regarding *early*, I follow von Stechow (2007) and use an entry like (28): *early* takes a time-point t, an interval t', and is true iff all subintervals of t' precede or overlap t.

(28) $\llbracket \text{early} \rrbracket = \lambda t.\ \lambda t'.\ t$ is a point and $\forall t'' [t'' \subseteq t' \rightarrow [t'' < t$ or t'' overlaps t]]

I assume that *beginning*'s comparison class is an ordered pair consisting of two sets: (a) the set containing the salient time-interval and its subintervals; (b) the set containing the positive and superlative standards of earliness, as computed for (a). Note that for a given set of times S, $\text{STANDARD}_{pos}(\llbracket \text{early} \rrbracket)(S)$ is the time-point t such that for any $t' \in S$ that counts as "early," $\llbracket \text{early} \rrbracket(t)(t') = 1$.[9] The superlative standard is similarly defined. Note that since Second(C) is a doubleton in a *beginning*-DP, I refer to Higher(C) in *beginning*'s entry rather than Higher^G(C).

(29)   Let S be the set containing the salient time-interval and its subintervals.
        Then, $\llbracket C \rrbracket = \langle S, \{\text{STANDARD}_{pos}(\llbracket \text{early} \rrbracket)(S),\ \text{STANDARD}_{sup}(\llbracket \text{early} \rrbracket)(S)\} \rangle$

All the pieces of the analysis are in place, so let us see how it works by looking at an example. Let's say the relevant time-interval is [2pm,4pm], any subinterval ≤2:30pm counts as early, and any subinterval ≤2:15pm is one of the earliest. Then, *beginning*'s C argument is an ordered pair consisting of (a) the set containing [2pm,4pm] and its subintervals; (b) the doubleton set {2:15pm, 2:30pm}. In LF (27a), *beginning* takes this ordered pair as argument, and the result is fed to *the*. *The beginning* is predicted to denote the maximal interval whose earliness meets or exceeds Higher(C). Higher(C) is the earlier of the two earliness standards in the second member of C, which in our example is 2:15pm. Thus, *the beginning* denotes [2pm,2:15pm], i.e. the initial subinterval of [2pm,4pm] that counts as the "earliest part" in the context.

Turning to *the very beginning* (LF: [the [[very C] beginning]]), note that while *beginning*'s comparison class has a different structure type-wise than the comparison class of *pos/-est*, my *very* (17) can still modify it if we assume that times are a subtype of degrees (von Stechow, 2007). After all, while my *very* needs an ordered pair as argument, it puts no type restrictions on First(C) and merely requires its second member to be a degree set. Hence, composition in *the very beginning* does not crash. Looking back to our definition of *very*, we see that because C in *the very beginning* contains the unboosted positive and superlative standards for the *early* scale, $\llbracket \text{very C} \rrbracket$ will contain the boosted positive and superlative standards for that scale. *The very beginning* will denote the maximal interval whose earliness meets Higher($\llbracket \text{very C} \rrbracket$); since the standards in $\llbracket \text{very C} \rrbracket$ are boosted relative to C, Higher($\llbracket \text{very C} \rrbracket$) will be earlier than Higher(C), so *the very beginning* is an initial subinterval of *the beginning*.

6.2. *Very* in DPs with *same*

Very in DPs with *same* also has a role that one can conceptualize in terms of standard-boosting. To see this, consider (30), noting that it has a reading paraphrasable as "Bill leafed through the same type of book as Mary (i.e. a copy of *Catch-22*) but not the same book-token."

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[9]This definition of $\text{STANDARD}_{pos}(\llbracket \text{early} \rrbracket)(S)$ is parallel to the definition of $\text{STANDARD}_{pos}(\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket)(S)$ that I have been assuming. Both follow this schema: for a given set S and adjective A, $\text{STANDARD}_{pos}(\llbracket A \rrbracket)(S)$ is the degree d such that for any x in S that counts as "A," $\llbracket A \rrbracket(d)(x) = 1$. I assume times are subtype of degrees (see below).

(30)   Context: There are four books on a table: two copies of *Catch-22* and two copies of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Bill comes, leafs through one of the copies of *Catch-22*, and leaves. Then Mary comes, leafs through the other copy of *Catch-22*, and leaves.

     a.   Bill leafed through the same book as Mary, but he didn't leaf through the <u>very</u> same book as Mary.

To see how we can start to integrate (30) into the theory, note that one can think of *same* as standard-sensitive: for two things to count as "the same," the number of (salient) properties they have in common must meet a high threshold. Once we realize that *same* can be thought of as sensitive to a threshold/standard, *very*'s role in (30) is naturally analyzed as a form of standard-boosting: while Book A and Book B are *the same* iff the number of shared properties they have meets a super high standard, they are *the very same* iff the number of shared properties they have meets an even higher standard. Two copies of *Catch-22* might have enough in common to meet *same*'s threshold but have too few properties in common to meet *very same*'s threshold.

In the rest of this section, I offer a rough proof-of-concept for how to formalize this analysis of *very same*, which rests on an analogy between *(very) same* and *(very) similar*. Starting with the latter, I assign *Book 1 is similar to Book 2* the LF in (31a) and give *similar* the entry in (31b).

(31)   a.   [[Book 1] [C [pos [$_{AP}$ similar [Book 2]]]]]
     b. $[\![\text{similar}]\!] = \lambda y.\ \lambda d.\ \lambda x.\ |\{P: P(x) = P(y)\}| \geq d$

I treat *similar* as a gradable predicate (type $\langle e, \langle d, et \rangle \rangle$): it takes two individuals *y* and *x*, takes a degree *d*, and returns true iff the number of properties that *y* and *x* share is $\geq d$.[10] There is ample evidence for treating *similar* as a gradable predicate like this (though this evidence has received little attention as far as I know): *similar* can partake in comparatives (*A is more similar to B than C*), take the full range of degree modifiers (*very/quite/fairly/extremely similar*), etc.

In (31a), *similar to Book 2* is modified by *pos*. I continue to assume the entry for *pos* from section 5, but I make one tweak to the definition of *pos*'s comparison class: the second member of *pos*'s comparison class contains standard-degrees not just for the relevant $\langle d, et \rangle$ adjectives but also for any relevant $\langle d, et \rangle$ APs.[11] I assume that *similar to Book 2* is a relevant $\langle d, et \rangle$ AP in (31a), and hence, C in (31a) is an ordered pair consisting of (a) the set of relevant entities, call it *S*; (b) the set containing $\text{STANDARD}_{pos}([\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!])(S)$, its superlative counterpart, and potentially other standards as well. $\text{STANDARD}_{pos}([\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!])(S)$ is the number *d* such that for any $x \in S$ that counts as similar to Book 2, $[\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!](d)(x) = 1$.

With this in mind, consider the truth-conditions in (32), noting that (32) makes reference to $\text{Lower}^{[\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!]}(C)$. $\text{Lower}^{[\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!]}(C)$ is nothing but the positive-form standard on the $[\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!]$ scale;[12] hence, *Book 1 is similar to Book 2* comes out true iff the number of properties that Book 1 and Book 2 have in common is at least $\text{STANDARD}_{pos}([\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!])(\text{First}(C))$. In other words: Book 1, when compared to the other salient individuals,

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[10]It is likely better to say "the number of <u>relevant</u> properties that *y* and *x* share is $\geq d$"; I ignore this wrinkle here.

[11]Technically, given the existence of adjectives like *early*, this type restriction should be relaxed to $\langle d, \langle \tau, t \rangle \rangle$.

[12]The $[\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!]$ scale is the number scale; thus, for $\text{Lower}^{[\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!]}(C)$ to mean what we want it to, we must ensure that there are no numerals other than the similarity standards in Second(C). To deal with this, I assume that $[\![\text{pos}]\!](G)(C)$ is defined only if there are exactly two degrees in Second(C) s.t. G(d) is defined.

has enough properties in common with Book 2 to count as "similar to Book 2."

(32) $[\![(31a)]\!] = 1$ iff $|\{P: P(\text{Book 1}) = P(\text{Book 2})\}| \geq \text{Lower}^{[\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!]}(C)$

As shown in (33), *Book 1 is very similar to Book 2* comes out true iff the number of properties shared by Book 1 and Book 2 meets $\text{Lower}^{[\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!]}([\![\text{very } C]\!])$, which is just $\text{BOOST}_{pos}([\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!])(\text{First}(C))$. In other words, just as (31a) expresses the meaning "Book 1, when compared to all salient entities, counts as similar to Book 2," (33) means "Book 1, when compared to entities similar to Book 2, counts as similar to Book 2."

(33) $[\![[[\text{Book 1}][[\text{very } C][\text{pos } [\text{similar Book 2}]]]]]\!] = 1$ iff
         $|\{P: P(\text{Book 1}) = P(\text{Book 2})\}| \geq \text{Lower}^{[\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!]}([\![\text{very } C]\!])$

To see that *very*'s role here amounts to standard-boosting, consider the cases in (34), noting that *compared to*-phrases have been argued to determine the set of individuals relative to which positive-form standard-degrees are computed (i.e. First(C), in my terms). Assuming this analysis of *compared to*-phrases (Kennedy, 2007), (34) teaches us that when First(C)'s members have few properties in common with *Anna Karenina* (34a), we assume a lower threshold for what counts as "similar" than when First(C)'s members share many properties with *Anna Karenina* (34b). Hence, by restricting First(C) to individuals that are similar to Book 2 (i.e. to individuals that that share many properties with Book 2), *very* in (33) boosts the similarity threshold.

(34)   a. Compared to a toenail clipper, this piece of paper is similar to *Anna Karenina*.
         b. Compared to *Catch-22*, *War & Peace* is similar to *Anna Karenina*.

Turning to *same*, I assign *Book 1 is the same as Book 2* the LF (35a) and give *same* the entry in (35b). Note that this analysis of *same* bears many similarities to Charnavel's (2015) analysis, the main difference being that Charnavel (2015) does not treat *same* as standard-sensitive.

(35)   a. [Book 1][C [same Book 2]]
         b. $[\![\text{same}]\!] = \lambda y. \; \lambda C. \; \lambda x. \; |\{P: P(x) = P(y)\}| \geq \text{Higher}^{[\![\text{similar to } x]\!]}(C)$

In short, I propose that *same* in (35a) and *similar* in (31a) both take a C argument whose second member contains the positive and superlative standards on the $[\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!]$ scale; however, *same* invokes $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!]}(C)$ instead of $\text{Lower}^{[\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!]}(C)$. As a result, (35a) will come out true iff the number of properties Book 1 and Book 2 share meets $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!]}(C)$, the "superlative" standard of similarity. Turning to *Book 1 is the very same as Book 2*, it should be clear that it will come out true iff the number of properties the two books share meets $\text{Higher}^{[\![\text{similar to Book 2}]\!]}([\![\text{very } C]\!])$, the boosted "superlative" standard of similarity. Assuming the boosted "superlative" standard is higher than the unboosted one, two things can meet the threshold for *same* but not the threshold for *very same*, as desired.

While this analysis is a rough sketch, it provides a proof-of-concept for how to capture *very same* in terms of standard-boosting. A fuller analysis would need to explain, among many other things, why *same* is intuitively different from *most similar*, whose meaning my *same* lexicalizes. I suspect that the way to differentiate *same* and *most similar* lies in separating "sameness" thresholds from superlative similarity thresholds, but I leave this to future research.

6.3. *Very* in emphatic definite descriptions

To see how we can start to bring cases like (36) into the fold (example from Goncharov), note that one can replace *the very man* in (36) with *the very same man* without a clear meaning shift.

(36)   Sophie is talking to the very man we saw yesterday.

Given that (36) permits a paraphrase with *very same*, the most brute-force way to integrate (36) into the present theory would be to claim that (36) contains a covert *same*. While this idea seems stipulative, it turns out that one can implement this idea in a fairly non-stipulative way. In particular, we can assume, following Goncharov (2024), that all emphatic definites with *very* are anaphoric and furthermore adopt Hanink's (2018, 2021) theory of anaphoric definites. On this view, anaphoric definites contain a silent index head Idx_i with the meaning "same as g(i)"; g(i) is what the assignment function *g* maps to the index *i*. On top of this received theory of anaphoric definites, I make a novel assumption about the type of $[\![\text{Idx}_i]\!]$. In particular, while Hanink (2018, 2021) and Goncharov (2024) assume that $[\![\text{Idx}_i]\!]$ is of type ⟨e,t⟩, I will assume that $[\![\text{Idx}_i]\!]$ additionally takes an ordered-pair comparison class argument. In other words, $[\![\text{Idx}_i]\!]$ lexicalizes the meaning $[\![\text{same}]\!]$(g(i)), where $[\![\text{same}]\!]$ is as defined in section 6.2.

(37)   a. $[\![\text{the very man}]\!]^g = [\![\text{the [[[very C] Idx}_i\text{] man]]}]\!]^g$
          b. $[\![\text{Idx}_i]\!]^g = \lambda C. \lambda x. |\{P: P(x) = P(g(i))\}| \geq \text{Higher}^{[\![\text{similar to g(i)}]\!]^g}(C)$

Returning to (36), I assume that g(i) = "the man we saw yesterday" (see Goncharov (2024) for technical details); given this, the object DP in (36) is predicted to mean "the man who is the very same as the man we saw yesterday," as desired. There is much more to be said about the role of emphatic definites in a degree-based theory, but the analysis in (37) is a starting point.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined an under-studied use of *very*, argued that it should be unified with *very*'s other uses, and pursued a unified degree-based theory of *very* built on a new theory of comparison classes. The next steps for my theory are to (a) scrutinize certain uses more closely, especially *very same* and *the very man*; (b) put forth a restrictive hypothesis about what words have the kind of *C* argument that *very* modifies; (c) adjudicate between my theory and Goncharov's (2024). Regarding (b), I suggest that the kind of ordered-pair comparison class that *very* modifies is present for all and only words that depend on a contextual standard-degree; for non-standard-sensitive words with a *C* argument, such as (possibly) quantifiers (von Fintel, 1994), their *C* is just a set. Regarding (c), one open question concerns whether Goncharov's (2024) non-degree-based theory can extend to superlatives while maintaining the many good predictions of a degree-based, Heim (1999)-style theory of *-est*. Regardless of whether a degree-based or non-degree-based approach is ultimately correct, however, the advances made in this paper open the door to fruitful comparison of two unified theories of *very*.

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