THE GRADEABILITY OF ‘DELICIOUS’ IN NATIVE SPEAKER CORPORA

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Introduction

This paper is an account of a corpus investigation into whether and to what extent delicious is treated as a gradeable adjective in native speaker corpora.

I had noticed that some of my students tended to use very to intensify delicious as in *It was very delicious, which sounded intuitively unnatural to me as a native English speaker. I would error-correct such utterances, and prompt students to use absolutely or other maximizers (1.2) in conjunction with delicious when they wished to emphasize the notion of ‘deliciousness’.

When broaching the subject with colleagues, opinion was split as to whether very delicious was in fact any less natural than absolutely delicious, and I was led to question my intuition. When I referred to the grammar in order to confirm my intuition, I determined that delicious must be an ungradeable as opposed to a gradeable adjective (1.3) because absolutely delicious sounded natural, but very delicious did not.

However, it was still only my intuition telling me that *very delicious was unnatural, and I considered that a corpus study, as ‘a more reliable guide to language use than native speaker intuition’ (Hunston 2002, p.20) was in order.

1. Literature review

1.1 Intensifiers

Intensifiers, drawn from a class of words known as ‘adverbs of degree’, are used in conjunction with adjectives in order to grade the intensity of the adjective. The most common intensifier of adjectives is the adverb very (Greenbaum and Nelson 2002, p.96)
Most notable authorities on grammar (including Greenbaum and Nelson (2002), Parrott (2000), and Celce-Murcia and Larson-Freeman (1999)) maintain that intensifiers can only be used in conjunction with gradeable (see below, 1.3) adjectives.

However, certain types of intensifiers can be used with ungradeable or non-gradeable (1.3) adjectives. Among this special class of intensifiers are ‘intensifiers of absoluteness’ such as absolutely, completely or totally (Parrott 2000, p.37).

1.2 Maximizers

‘Intensifiers of absoluteness’ (1.1) have also been termed ‘maximizers’ (Penston 2005). Lorenz (1999) classifies maximizers as “adjectives that denote ‘full, complete, perfect, whole’” (Lorenz 1999, p.97). This paper investigates those maximizers identified by Lorenz (1999), namely: absolutely, completely, entirely, fully, perfectly, purely, thoroughly, totally, utterly, and wholly. (Lorenz 1999, p.97)

1.3 Gradeable and ungradeable adjectives

It has been suggested that gradeable adjectives are those that we can grade the intensity of using intensifiers. For example, it is possible to indicate the point on a scale of adjectives such as hot by using intensifiers, as in quite hot, very hot, and extremely hot (Greenbaum and Nelson 2002, p.96).

Ungradeable or non-gradeable adjectives (the two terms are used synonymously) include those, it is claimed, the intensity of which cannot be graded because they express extreme qualities, such as terrified, furious, and starving (Parrott 2000, p.23).

Such adjectives cannot, according to grammarians, be graded with adverbs of degree such as very, as in *very terrified. It is possible, however, to modify ‘extreme quality’ ungradeable adjectives with intensifiers of absoluteness (above, 1.1.1) – or ‘maximizers’ (Penston 2005) – such as absolutely as in absolutely terrified (Parrott 2000, p.23). Maximizers cannot, however, be used to modify most gradeable adjectives, as in *absolutely big (Lorenz 1999).
1.3.1 Determining the gradeability of adjectives

Jackson (2002, p.66) posits two criteria which should be fulfilled before we can classify an adjective as gradeable:

a) the adjective should have a comparative and superlative form, and;

b) the adjective should be modifiable by intensifiers such as *very*.

However, he also states that:

“the gradeable/non-gradeable distinction may not always be clear cut. In particular, essentially non-gradeable adjectives may, in certain contexts, become gradeable by virtue of how speakers choose to use them.” (Jackson 2002, p.67) (italics added)

He uses the example of ‘unique’ to illustrate his point, explaining how this essentially ungradeable adjective – by virtue of its meaning ‘without equal’ – is sometimes nevertheless intensified by native speakers as in ‘She is very unique’. He argues that we must either conclude that such instances are erroneous uses of English, or that “unique has developed a use that allows it at least to be intensified [although] we might baulk at comparison” (Jackson 2002, p.67)

Jackson (2002) suggests that ‘unique’ is used by some native speakers as a gradeable adjective, at least in respect of the fact that they intensify it with *very*. He also suggests, however, that we might recoil from the idea of *unique* being used in its comparative form, e.g. *She is more unique than me*. He doesn’t mention anything about the superlative form *the most unique*, as in *She is the most unique person I know*, which seems, on the face of it, intuitively acceptable.

There is no definitive list of ungradeable adjectives, and whether or not certain adjectives are gradeable continues to be a matter of debate among academics and native-speakers alike (Greenbaum and Nelson 2002).

1.4 ‘Delicious’
There are numerous meanings conveyed by the word *delicious*, but the one at the center of the current investigation is that defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “highly pleasing or enjoyable to the bodily senses, esp. to the taste or smell” (Simpson 2011).

In this paper, *delicious* is presumed to be an ‘extreme quality’ ungradeable adjective (above, 1.3), and therefore not subject to intensification by *very*, but able to be modified by *absolutely* and other maximizers.

There is support for classifying *delicious* as an ungradeable adjective in, among others, Penston (2005), Backhouse (1994), and Lorenz (1999). Penston (2005, p.54) includes delicious in an illustrative list of ungradeable adjectives, while Backhouse (1994, p.38) states:

“Semantically, DELICIOUS is an implicit superlative standing at the end-point of a scale and relating to NICE, etc., as ENORMOUS relates to BIG; as such it may not be modified by graders (VERY, etc.).”

Lorenz (1999, p.157) suggests that because the intensifier in *very delicious* is ‘the weaker link’ and the adjective is ‘marked for emphasis’, *delicious* ‘would therefore more suitably be amplified by maximizers such as absolutely, quite or completely’.

*Table 1*, below, shows my intuitive judgement of the acceptability of *delicious* as intensified by *very*, maximized by *absolutely*, in its comparative form *more delicious* and in its superlative form *most delicious*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Intuitive acceptability</th>
<th>Example sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>intensifier</td>
<td>unacceptable</td>
<td>*(It was) very delicious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>acceptable</td>
<td>*(It was) absolutely delicious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comparative</td>
<td>unacceptable</td>
<td>*(It is) more delicious (than X)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>superlative</td>
<td>acceptable</td>
<td>*(It is) the most delicious (X I have ever eaten)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1*

A table to show the intuitive acceptability of *delicious* as intensified by *very*, maximized by *absolutely*, in its comparative form and its superlative form.
2. Methodology

2.1 Scope and focus of investigation

Most of the attention will be given in this investigation to examining whether and in what circumstances delicious is intensified by very in native speaker corpora, and whether and in what circumstances the comparative form of delicious, i.e. more delicious, is used. There are several reasons for this approach.

Firstly, constructions containing very delicious and more delicious seem intuitively unacceptable (Table 1), so when these forms do occur, it is desirable to gain a more detailed understanding of their usage. Secondly, if an adjective is amenable to intensification by very, and also has a comparative form, there would seem to be a very strong case for it being a gradeable adjective (1.3.1). As the superlative form of delicious seems intuitively acceptable anyway (Table 1), this would appear to be a less pertinent criterion in determining its actual gradeability. Thirdly, it has proved linguistically problematic to parse the periphrastic superlative (the) most (Lorenz 1999, p. 62) from the intensifying most. As such, constructions containing most delicious have not been investigated.

Significant attention has also been given to the question of whether absolutely is a more typical collocate of delicious than very (4.1.1). This is due to the fact that ungradeable adjectives are purportedly able to be modified by maximizers but not intensifiers (1.1 and 1.2, above), and gradeable adjectives are purportedly unable to be modified by maximizers (1.3). This consideration therefore forms a central part of determining whether delicious is in fact gradeable. Absolutely is also my intuitive substitute for very when correcting students who use *very delicious, and it is important for me to confirm whether such corrections are justified.

Some attention has also been given to the statistical significance of alternative maximizers of delicious (4.1.2)

2.2 Computer corpora
In modern times the methodology entailed by corpus linguistics almost always involves the use of computers to process very large databases of written and transcribed spoken language. The computer software used to access and analyze electronically held corpus data is able to rapidly process millions of words of language, and present the results of searches along with useful statistical information. Concordance lines – a search term or ‘node word’ presented in the center of the screen in its original context – comprise the primary format of data presentation (Hunston 2002).

Corpora and concordance lines can be used to obtain information about how language works that might not be apparent or obvious by using native speaker intuition (Hunston 2002). Any findings derived from corpus research, however, are not necessarily generalizable to the whole of language the corpus purports to represent. Such findings can only be used as evidence to support propositions about language usage in general, as even the biggest collections of corpora cannot claim to represent the entire language (Hunston 2002).

2.3 The Bank of English

The corpora which were used for this investigation are those held jointly by The University of Birmingham and HarperCollins Publishers, and known as the ‘Bank of English’. The corpora are comprised of over 450 millions words of spoken and written native varieties of English, in both formal and informal registers.

*Table 4* (p.12) shows the full list of sub-corpora contained in the Bank of English. It is hoped that some useful insights might be obtained from examining which sub-corpora certain collocations tend to occur in the most. It is important to note that the Bank of English contains significantly more data from written, British English than other modes and varieties of the language.

2.4 T-scores and Mutual Information (MI) scores

T-scores and Mutual Information (MI) scores have been used to statistically grade the significance of collocations revealed in this corpus study. MI scores have been used primarily as a measure of the strength of the collocations and t-scores primarily as a measure the certainty of the collocations (Hunston 2002).
Church, Hanks et al (1994) suggest that intersecting MI scores and t-scores to identify statistically relevant collocations is a good way to avoid both the ‘very high frequency words that may be too compositional to be of interest’ revealed by relying on t-scores alone, and the ‘low frequency pairs that are too specific to a particular corpus’ revealed by relying on MI scores alone. However, they concede that intersecting t-scores and MI scores in this way may cause us to ‘miss many interesting pairs’ (Church, Hanks et al. 1994, p.168).

For this reason, in this paper, ‘interesting’ collocations (namely very delicious and more delicious in the sense that they are both intuitively unnatural) will be given further attention even if they are found to be statistically significant according to only one of these measures. In determining the relevance of the collocations overall, however, those collocations statistically significant in both measures will be given greater emphasis.

### 3. Analysis

#### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Word type</th>
<th>Collocate</th>
<th>Total frequency in corpora</th>
<th>Frequency with “delicious”</th>
<th>MI score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does not collocate with ‘delicious’</td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>fully</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>purely</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistically significant (MI score&gt;3)</td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>utterly</td>
<td>5,988</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8.15</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>absolutely</td>
<td>26,719</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>7.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>perfectly</td>
<td>16,514</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>totally</td>
<td>23,489</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistically insignificant (MI score&lt;3)</td>
<td>comparative</td>
<td>more</td>
<td>974,471</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>2.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>intensifier</td>
<td>very</td>
<td>436,637</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>completely</td>
<td>32,920</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>entirely</td>
<td>22,708</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td></td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>thoroughly</td>
<td>8,039</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>wholly</td>
<td>6,018</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A table to show intensifier, maximizer, and comparative (non-)collocates of ‘delicious’ ranked by MI score
3.1 Analysis of statistical significance

3.1.1 (Non-)collocates of ‘delicious’ by MI score

Table 2 (above) shows intensifier, maximizer, and comparative (non-)collocates of delicious ranked by MI score. The most significant maximizer collocate of delicious according to the MI score ranking is utterly. The maximizer utterly occurs 5,988 times in total in the corpora, and on 24 of those occasions, it occurs together with delicious. After utterly are absolutely, perfectly, and then totally in the fourth highest position among the maximizers of delicious. The maximizers fully and purely were not found to collocate at all with delicious in the corpora, and completely, entirely, thoroughly and wholly all failed to qualify as significant maximizer collocates of delicious, with MI scores of less than 3. The comparative more and the intensifier very were not found to be significant collocates by MI score.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Word type</th>
<th>Collocate</th>
<th>Total frequency in corpora</th>
<th>Frequency with “delicious”</th>
<th>T-score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does not collocate with ‘delicious’</td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>fully</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>purely</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistically significant (t-score&gt;2)</td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>absolutely</td>
<td>26,719</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>7.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>comparative</td>
<td>more</td>
<td>974,471</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>6.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>utterly</td>
<td>5,988</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>perfectly</td>
<td>16,514</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>intensifier</td>
<td>very</td>
<td>436,637</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>totally</td>
<td>23,489</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistically insignificant (t-score&lt;2)</td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>wholly</td>
<td>6,018</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maximizer</td>
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<tr>
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<td>maximizer</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maximizer</td>
<td>completely</td>
<td>32,920</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A table to show intensifier, maximizer, and comparative (non-)collocates of ‘delicious’ ranked by t-score
3.1.2 (Non-)collocates of ‘delicious’ by t-score

Table 3 (above) shows intensifier, maximizer, and comparative (non-)collocates of delicious ranked by t-score. The most significant maximizer collocate of delicious according to the t-score ranking is absolutely. The maximizer absolutely occurs 26,719 times in total in the corpora, and on 55 of those occasions, it occurs together with delicious. After absolutely are utterly, perfectly, and then totally in the fourth highest position among the maximizers of delicious. As with the MI score rankings, fully and purely did not collocate at all with delicious, and completely, entirely, thoroughly and wholly all failed to qualify as significant maximizer collocates of delicious, with t-scores of less than 2. The comparative more and intensifier very were both found to be significant collocates by t-score.

3.2 Analysis of mode and variety of English

3.2.1 ‘Very delicious’ and ‘more delicious’

Table 4 (below) shows the total number of occurrences of very delicious and more delicious along with the sub-corpora they appear in, sorted from the lowest to highest number of occurrences. The vast majority of occurrences of both very delicious and more delicious are in British written English, but there is also at least one occurrence of each in Australian written English and American written English, as well as one occurrence of very delicious in British spoken English.

3.3 Analysis of concordance lines

3.3.1 Very delicious

Appendix 1 lists the occurrences of very delicious, and the contexts in which it appears. By examining the corpus reference and publication codes, we can see that both the first (VD1) and second (VD2) occurrences of very delicious were in the same publication, and were probably used by the same writer.
The writer’s style is informal, and as ‘Nice balance of acidity and fruit, good zesty mouthful’ (VD1) shows, his or her article does not consist of grammatically complete sentences, but rather resembles something of a stream of consciousness. VD3 and VD7 are written in a similar style.

In VD3 very is used as an intensifier twice in short succession, ostensibly for anaphoric rhetorical effect. In VD6 and VD9 very delicious occurs in reported speech, in VD9 the quote being tellingly attributed to a Japanese supermarket executive. VD15 can be set aside from the current

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-corpus name</th>
<th>Number of occurrences of “very delicious”</th>
<th>Number of occurrences of “more delicious”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US academic books</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK New Scientist</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US public radio</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK Economist</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK BBC radio</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US spoken</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>UK Business</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>US papers</td>
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<tr>
<td>US ephemera</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA Canadian mixed corpus</td>
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<tr>
<td>US books</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK Guardian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK Sun/NoW</td>
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<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK ephemera</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK Times</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>OZ papers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK spoken</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK Independent</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK magazines</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td><strong>Total occurrences</strong></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td><strong>65</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A table to show the number of occurrences of very delicious and more delicious in each of the Bank of English corpora

The writer’s style is informal, and as ‘Nice balance of acidity and fruit, good zesty mouthful’ (VD1) shows, his or her article does not consist of grammatically complete sentences, but rather resembles something of a stream of consciousness. VD3 and VD7 are written in a similar style.

In VD3 very is used as an intensifier twice in short succession, ostensibly for anaphoric rhetorical effect. In VD6 and VD9 very delicious occurs in reported speech, in VD9 the quote being tellingly attributed to a Japanese supermarket executive. VD15 can be set aside from the current
investigation as it contains a use of *delicious* the meaning of which is different from that defined in 1.4, above. In VD16 *very delicious* occurs in transcribed speech.

3.3.2 More delicious

*Appendix 2* lists the occurrences of *more delicious*, and the contexts in which it appears. There are some significant themes and patterns in the usage of *more delicious*, as evidenced in the corpora, that will briefly be summarized here. The concordance lines have been grouped for ease of reference.

The instances comprising *Group A* have been disregarded due either to the fact that:

a) they feature uses of ‘more’ not in the adverbial sense of ‘to a greater extent or degree’, but in an adjectival sense of ‘in a greater quantity or amount’, as in MD11, ‘one or more delicious fish dishes’; or

b) they feature uses of *delicious* where the meaning or nuance is different to that defined in 1.4, above, as in MD30, ‘the more delicious tales’

*Group B* is comprised of instances where adverbs such as ‘even’, ‘much’ or ‘far’ have been used to emphasize the comparative form of *delicious*, as in MD18, ‘this will make them even more delicious’.

*Group C* is comprised of instances that convey ‘ever increasing’ intensity, as in MD36, ‘Each page looks more delicious than the next’.

*Group D* gathers together negative constructions as in MD2, ‘there is nothing more delicious’.

Finally, *Group E* comprises the remaining instances of *more delicious*, where usage appears intuitively unnatural and unidiomatic.

4. Interpretation
4.1 Interpretation of statistical significance analysis

4.1.1 ‘Very delicious’ versus ‘absolutely delicious’

It is clear from the evidence presented in both Table 1 and Table 2 that, statistically, absolutely is preferred to very when emphasizing the notion of ‘deliciousness’. The strength of the collocation between absolutely and delicious is over five times that of very and delicious, as measured by MI score. The certainty of the collocation absolutely delicious is almost 2 times that of the collocation very delicious as measured by t-score. Additionally, absolutely delicious occurs almost 3.5 times more frequently than very delicious.

Statistically, then, it is clear that absolutely is preferred to very in ranking the intensity of delicious. But what does this mean in practical terms? One of the most prominent uses of corpus studies is to determine the centrality or typicality of particular linguistic constructions (Biber, Conrad et al. 1998). By examining the language usage of ‘the mass of ordinary writers’ (Sinclair 1991, p.17) we are able to determine normative linguistic constructions. As Stubbs (2001, p.3) puts it:

“Corpus linguistics… investigates relations between frequency and typicality, and instance and norm. It aims at a theory of the typical, on the grounds that this has to be the basis of interpreting what is attested but unusual. Priority is given to describing the commonest uses of the commonest words.”

I would argue that the 16 occurrences of very delicious in the corpora make it an ‘attested but unusual’ construction.

Furthermore, the fact that very delicious occurs in the corpora should not convince us that it is a permissible construction. The misspelling *suprising appears 54 times in the same corpora. Should we therefore be convinced that *suprising is an acceptable spelling of the word surprising? I would argue that we should not, and I tend to agree with Hunston (2002, p.22) and Lorenz (1999, p.18), among others, who submit that native speaker intuition should remain the ultimate authority on questions of language permissibility.
While *very delicious* may be attested in the corpora, I maintain that it is neither typical nor permissible. *Absolutely delicious* is both more idiomatic, and more in line with propounded grammatical explanations. *Absolutely delicious* remains statistically significant even when interesting the two measures of MI score and t-score. The same cannot be said of *very delicious*.

### 4.1.2 Other maximizers of ‘delicious’

Maximizer collocates of *delicious* which were shown to be both strong (MI score over 3) and certain (t-score over 2) were: *utterly, absolutely, perfectly,* and *totally*. It would seem then that I would be able to advise future students with some confidence that these words are the ones typically used by native speakers to emphasize the notion of ‘deliciousness’.

It is also important to note that the data in *Tables 1* and *2* suggest that the maximizers identified in 1.2 are not all substitutable. Indeed, *purely* and *fully*, fail to collocate with *delicious* at all, and *wholly, thoroughly, entirely,* and *completely*, are not significant collocates by either MI or t-score. To say these maximizers are synonyms would not, therefore, be completely true when using them to emphasize the notion of ‘deliciousness’.

### 4.2 Interpretation of mode and variety of English analysis

#### 4.2.1 ‘Very delicious’ and ‘more delicious’

We might be tempted to conclude from *Table 4*, above, that *very delicious* and *more delicious* are constructions more acceptable in written English than other modes, and in British English than other varieties. However, this would be a spurious assumption, because the Bank of English contains more data from written English and British English sources, so we would expect to find relatively more occurrences appearing in these categories anyway. In fact, the only reasonable conclusion we can make from this data is that *very delicious* and *more delicious* are constructions that appear in both written and spoken modes of English, and also appear in three major native varieties of English.

### 4.3 Interpretation of concordance lines analysis
4.3.1 Very delicious

Although there does not appear to be any kind of overarching system which might regulate or predict the usage of very delicious, we might tentatively suggest that very delicious tends to be used more in casual written or spoken situations, where traditional grammatical expectations are suspended (e.g. VD1, VD3, VD7, VD16). This is, however, a weak hypothesis in the absence of further evidence. We might also suggest that idiomaticity may sometimes be suspended in favor of rhetorical effect (e.g. VD3). This hypothesis would also require much more investigation in order to be confirmed. There is also some evidence to suggest that very delicious is a construction used by non-native speakers of English, as in VD9.

4.3.2 More delicious

Because there is significantly more evidence for the usage of more delicious than very delicious, it might not be unreasonable to conclude from this evidence that more delicious tends to be used idiomatically in the following ways:

c) in conjunction with adverbial phrases which further emphasize the comparative (Group B);
d) in constructions of ‘ever increasing intensity’ (Group C); and
e) and in negative constructions (Group D).

4.4 Is ‘delicious’ treated as a gradeable adjective?

The main aim of this paper was to determine whether and to what extent delicious is treated as a gradeable adjective in native speaker corpora. As discussed in 1.3.1, above, adjectives have been considered gradeable if they have comparative and superlative forms, and they are modifiable by intensifiers such as very. I have amended these criteria slightly in this paper (2.1) and focused mainly on whether delicious is used in its comparative form; and whether it is amenable to intensification by very or whether it is more typically maximized by words such as absolutely.

In this corpus study, I have adduced evidence to show that the comparative form of delicious, i.e. more delicious, is used idiomatically by native speakers, particularly in the kinds of constructions outlined in 3.3.2. There are also attested instances of delicious being modified with very, although
due to lack of evidence, no typically characteristic constructions can be identified with any confidence (3.3.1).

I would argue, however, that delicious is generally treated as an ungradeable adjective, bearing in mind:

a) the high statistical significance of absolutely and other maximizer collocates of delicious in the Bank of English;

b) the fact that these maximizer collocates are significant both in terms of MI score and t-score;

c) the fact that idiomatic use of the comparative form more delicious tends to be restricted to the kind of constructions identified as Group B, Group C and Group D (3.3.2)

d) the fact that more delicious is not significant when intersecting MI score and t-score;

e) the fact that very delicious has such a low overall frequency of occurrence; and

f) the fact that very delicious is not significant when intersecting MI score and t-score.

**Conclusion**

I would suggest that this corpus study provides us with substantial evidence that delicious is treated as a non-gradeable adjective by native speakers, which, in addition to the support marshaled for delicious as an ungradeable adjective in 1.4, above, gives us reasonable grounds to assert that delicious is in fact ungradeable. This research has also show than maximizers identified in 1.2 cannot be treated as synonyms when used in conjunction with delicious.

Questions which remain to be addressed by further research include:

- what the implications are for other seemingly ‘extreme quality’ ungradeable adjectives, such as ‘amazing’ or ‘wonderful’, which my students also sometimes intensify with very;
- whether and in what way inclusion of the periphrastic superlative form (the) most delicious would affect the results of this research;
- whether constructions such as very delicious are more typical in non-native speaker corpora than native speaker corpora (research conducted by Lorenz (1999) suggests they are)
- what the relevance of evidence derived from native-speaker corpus research is to learners of English, bearing in mind the rise of English as an International language.
Bibliography


Appendix 1:  
16 occurrences of ‘very delicious’ in multiple corpora

(VD1) Corpus brbooks/UK.  Text <tref id=BB------625>.  
region, which reminds us of a swan in flight - long-necked but quite bulbous in the body. Also an excellent wine, it perhaps comes just below Guy Bossard's in the pecking order, but is also very delicious. Nice balance of acidity and fruit, good zesty mouthful. Just what good Muscadet should be like. <p> Every year top Muscadet producers in the Loire submit their special Cuvée wines for the 

(VD2) Corpus brbooks/UK.  Text <tref id=BB------625>.  
and the grape is capable of making some very fine wines. This example has fullish flavour and marked bouquet. <p> Light, fresh and smooth, rounded and with a delightful sweet finish. <p> Very delicious Gewürztraminer, strong spicy flavour. Matured in oak for three years, a powerful, heady wine with a rich, long finish. <p> A fairly sweet wine, full of succulent rich grape flavours. Described 

(VD3) Corpus brmags/UK.  Text <tref id=MBX------21>.  
carrot were entombed in an insipid jelly. This is bursting with goodies simply packed into a mould and held together by pouring a little savoury jelly round them. Very little effort to do, very delicious - and impressive looking because the ingredients are handsome. Just right for a picnic lunch in the garden or a late-night supper party. Serves 6 <p> about 9 oz cooked chicken meat, cut into 

(VD4) Corpus brmags/UK.  Text <tref id=MBX----795>.  
tucker away around the back is a bare little room serving breakfast, lunch and tea. <p> Offering a fairly cheap and very delicious lunch has made Villandry very popular, so customers sit hugging-mugger, passing the plates or wistfully requesting a fork. This is not a criticism of the nice waiters and waitresses. they often 

(VD5) Corpus brmags/UK.  Text <tref id=MBX----1241>.  
the tinned varieties are the 101-things-you-can-do-with-a-tin-of-Campbell's-mushroom-soup recipes that you see on the side of the tins. Someone once tried to convince me that you can make a very delicious 'Tuna Bake' with a tin of Campbell's mushroom and a packet of cornflakes: need I say more? One of my myths about soups is that you need a stock. Yes, it tastes fantastic made from broths that's 

(VD6) Corpus brmags/UK.  Text <tref id=MBX----1269>.  
is very much en prince," adds Kenneth Rose. "If she has a lunch party, there's practically a footman behind the chair. The food she serves is like English pre-War country-house cooking and very delicious - such as scrambled egg with asparagus, followed by chicken or veal and then black cherries in liqueur with meringue and vast quantities of thick cream." Many of the Queen Mother's old friends 

(VD7) Corpus guard/UK.  Text <tref id=NB3--990113>.  
the back and well on their way to becoming lobster masala. They're channel-surfers, these lobsters, because they've somehow got themselves onto Rick Stein's Seafood Odyssey over on bbc2. And very delicious they look, too. Almost as good as the turbot, done with leeks and apples, calvados, cider, button mushrooms and creme fraiche. You just know that's a winner, don't you? Trouble is, you need a 

(VD8) Corpus oznews/OZ.  Text <tref id=NA---950122>.  
were outraged. <p> Grant wrote: 'When I stayed at the Lake Vyrnwy Hotel this summer I am very sorry that I sometimes referred to a (very nice) male member of staff as # The breather and to a very delicious) vegetable dish as 'Farmer's Underwear'." <p> Both jokes were childish but were meant to be private and not all mean spirited." <p> <b> DIBBEN K </b> TEENS CHARGED OVER ASSAULTS By KAY DIBBEN A
on sale in Japan for the first time. The Millin brand rice is the first 15-tonne shipment after Japan lifted its import ban on rice. A Tokyo supermarket executive described it as "very delicious". A 2kg pack costs Y=860 ($A11.60) while a 5kg pack costs Y=2140 ($28.89). The rice is being sold through 62 outlets in major cities.

A Tokyo supermarket executive described it as "very delicious". A 2kg pack costs Y=860 ($A11.60) while a 5kg pack costs Y=2140 ($28.89). The recipe for lamb kidneys on page 188 can also be used for goat or even veal.

is a roast leg. Other cuts, like the shanks and shoulder, are excellent for braising. Ground lamb is also good for sausage and patties. The liver and kidneys of baby lamb and goat are very delicious. Cook the liver as you would calves' liver (page 175); it is much smaller, so count two portions per liver.

Dick and his family won't eat them, though, because they contain minced pork; further proof of the insanity of vegetarianism. Being only fair-weather vegetarians, though, both Dick and Oliver

do not eat them, though, because they contain minced pork; further proof of the insanity of vegetarianism. Being only fair-weather vegetarians, though, both Dick and Oliver

of a Marks & Spencer's foodhall. The best thing about the first course, a butternut squash and apple soup, was that it was served individually from a big silver tureen. There's something very delicious about chugging through Clapham eating soup spooned from a big silver tureen. The fact that it was obviously freshly prepared, and served with two sorts of bread - onion and Parmesan - was a big) broke the line. No matter, that night there was more lovely food to consume, including a gorgeous sea trout that my boy Pete (not on the course) had caught that very afternoon, and a very delicious trifle. The following morning we were taken to the river Lyd. Here I caught three beautiful wild brown trout almost immediately on a dry fly - a Parachute Black Gnat. Dry flies are really

favour the troglodyte large white asparagus, which personally I don't think is a patch on our more bosky and pungent green variety. But served with boiled potatoes and hollandaise, it's very delicious. The trouble is, what with eating in cellars and so much Spargel being consumed, along with so much gassy beer, the whole of Berlin has the distinctive, complex odour of asparagus pee. Other

know what to do about it. She couldn't very well sack Lawson and anyway she is a bad sacker." Tuesday June 13: Went to a lunch given by the chairman of Lloyd's. In came Mary Archer looking very delicious. She represents the external people in the syndicates. Marcus Kimball, who is on the same committee, said at first they were worried that she would be letting Jeffrey Archer know what was going

you. Well all I've had today is a corned beef sandwich that I made myself out of a roll with a bit of coleslaw inside and then I bought this rabbit from Thomas's which was very delicious. I wish I'd bought two more we could have them they were really tasty. It was shortbread just with chocolate on but by the time I had my break they were more or less closed
Group A: Disregarded in the current inquiry

MD 3 It made the occasion all that more delicious to know that for a few brief
MD 5 S MEALS IN MINUTES, Mon, bbc1 More Delicious fast food dishes for people
MD 6 today YOU could pocket even more delicious dosh than they did! Nobody won
MD 7 else will you encounter more delicious breasts of duck, grilled and
MD11 restaurant will have one or more delicious fish dishes - moules mariniere,
MD12 are but mock turtle - that more delicious delicacies remain behind?" Time
MD13 near this hostelry. More and more delicious things were put before us and I
MD16 Turn to the next page for two more delicious recipes that make the most of
MD19 If you would like to try out more delicious recipes using Alaska canned
MD22 at The Canonbury Academy.for more delicious ideas, phone Lorna on 071 731
MD23 Vic Goddard tribute offset by more delicious doleful angst. I'll leave you to
MD30 gleefully recounted the more delicious tales of Battle's diva
MD32 was that Wener needs to pen more delicious tunes quickly. Lest - in the
MD35 hanging there is probably no more delicious spectacle in this country than
MD40 is reborn on Wednesday for one more delicious taste-buds escapade; <p> special
MD42 helping of points towards more delicious treats. <p> The Beefeater chain
MD46 in those slacks, now an even more delicious vision. It was like she had
MD54 and refereeing. And with more delicious irony, Graham Dawe ('How Change

Group B: Adverbial phrase used to emphasize the comparative

MD 4 and fluffy and tastes even more delicious if you can find fresh figs to
MD 8 makes those muffins taste even more delicious! <p> Can the same results be
MD 9 to match. To make them even more delicious, I pop my muffins into the
MD10 conscious you can expect even more delicious food alternatives to come along.
MD17 blackberry jellies are all the more delicious if you've picked hedgerow berries
MD18 this will make them even more delicious. Since this is such a good dish
MD20 Weedkiller's Daughter" all the more delicious for its sheer audacity. But by
MD21 Doc-he's turned out to be far more delicious than I deserve. It's the
MD24 exhausted from climbing ever more delicious peaks of pleasure-yet most of us
MD25 Boxer makes her custard even more delicious by folding in lightly whipped
MD26 is heavenly-and will be even more delicious with a few shavings of Perigord
MD28 Paris recently seemed all the more delicious for being eaten within sight of
MD33 I had forgotten just how much more delicious they are than those from the
MD37 analogy suggests an even more delicious irony. As Sara Rosenbaum of
MD43 they can be made to taste even more delicious if marinaded in the fridge for a
MD47 was to gasp, 'It tastes even more delicious than it smells.' You are most
MD48 easy-to-carry sweet - and much more delicious than a packaged candy bar! Any of
MD50 below, which made a much more delicious arrangement. 'The thing about
MD51 cream, as here, it has an even more delicious, nutty flavour.) <p> Add the
MD57 hemisphere made all the more delicious by the fact that one was
MD58 over pine needles (rather more delicious than it sounds), as well as
MD59 made with the local salt (far more delicious than it sounds). There is a
MD64 but to make the meat even more delicious he began hanging it for at least

Group C: Ever increasing intensity

MD36 available. Each page looks more delicious than the next. The recipes are
MD27 gooey cake", with each layer more delicious than the one preceding. Although

Group D: Negative constructions

MD 2 taste. 7 <p> THERE is nothing more delicious on a warm day than an ice-cold
MD15 SOUP </h> <p> There is nothing more delicious on a hot summer's day than a bowl
MD29 receiving end, there's nothing more delicious than having the time to savour
MD31 and no surprise. What could be more delicious than smooth, sweet, silky,
MD44 The results couldn't be more delicious or successful. <p> See for
MD45 that there could be nothing more delicious to touch and fondle. There was,
MD56 in his room. I can think of no more delicious prospect than of a selection of
MD61 in our hands. What could be more delicious? <p> This time, I am really
There's no more delicious way to eat pasta, noodles and Is there anything more delicious than the sight of an idol on the could scarcely be simpler or more delicious. Cheers mate. Nice one. All the

Group E: Unidiomatic usage

boundless desert, desert the more delicious the more solitary it is. There, bottles, and seemed to taste more delicious that way, accompanied by highly
It was hard to say what was more delicious about the entries - their both more dangerous and more delicious. For example, Harry Block's
suggestions. Some of the more delicious ones include spaghetti sauces, and perhaps the stalks are the more delicious part. Crops are being harvested
else at this time of year. Are more delicious varieties simply being ignored by is that junk food is often more delicious than mediocre healthy food. Set a
exterior. The mixture is made more delicious by the Parmesan and lemon. Cooked it was still far healthier and more delicious than anything out of a freezer. off motion sickness, but a more delicious option is to nibble on