"Ich hab letztens im Internet total den süßen Hund gefunden" – Grammaticalization paths of NP-external degree modifiers in German

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Colloquial German features a special kind of degree modifier that can occur outside of typical syntactic contexts for degree modifiers. A typical degree modifier such as *sehr* ('very') usually stands inside an predicative AdjP (1) or inside an NP (2) (cf. e.g. Duden 2022: 837–842).

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

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

The degree modifiers discussed here, *total* (lit. 'totally') and *voll* (lit. 'full, completely'), occur in what has been named "external degree modification constructions" (Gutzmann & Turgay 2015, Gutzmann 2019) as in (3).

(3) Ich hab letztens im Internet total den süßen Hund gefunden.
    I have recently in.the internet DM the cute dog found
    'I have recently found DM the cute dog on the internet'
    (deCow14 ID b9a5d2c5787b24dd0e587cdf401185894eca)

Previous studies such as Gutzmann & Turgay (2015) argue that expressive intensifiers such as *voll* and *total* intensify the adjective even if they occur outside of an NP. Based on corpus data from the deCow16B (Schäfer & Bildhauer 2013, 2018), we suggest a cognitive, usage-based perspective on a possible grammaticalization path these intensifiers take and conclude that they are developing into intensifiers with a scope over whole NPs and not just adjectives. For this we analyzed 1,860 occurrences of *total* and 2,836 occurrences of *voll* in regard to features of the modified NP (head, adjective, definiteness), their scope, and the main verb of the sentence they occur in.

We propose that this widened scope over whole NPs develops through occurring with phrasemes as critical contexts (cf. Diewald 2002), such as in (4), where the scope of the intensifier ranges over the phraseme as a whole.

(4) In der Nacht geht da voll die Post ab!
    in the night goes there DM the post off
    'A lot is happening there at night.'
    (deCow14 ID d726665b2c9d4e66fdd54855ab1a14d7b42a)

From this total and voll start occurring outside of definite NPs without adjectives that are not part of phrasemes, which can be seen as isolating contexts for their new grammaticalizing function, as shown in (5).

(5) Das ist ja voll der Quatsch, den ich hier höre!
    That is PART DM the nonsense that I here hear
    'That is PART DM the nonsense that I hear here!'
    (deCow14 ID 11334deeb68a02e528eeebea3492abc26f97)

The synchronic result of the grammaticalization leads to a semantically underspecified target of the intensifier. This semantic underspecification goes along with a wider scope over NPs which no longer need an adjective.

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