

# ***That story is hella awkward!* Tracing the diffusion and usualization of *hella*-intensification**

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The intensifier *hella* is rather (in)famous for its flexible syntactic distribution, its status as a regional shibboleth of Northern California and the Bay Area, and its etymology. It thus comes at little surprise that the expression has recently gained some serious interest among syntacticians, (perceptual) dialectologists, and (diachronic) construction grammarians (see e.g., Adams 2009; Boboc 2016; Bucholtz 2006; Bucholtz et al. 2007; Hoffmann & Trousdale 2011; Russ 2013; Trousdale 2012; Wood 2019).

From a cognitive perspective, it appears that the emergence of *hella* is a straightforward case of coalescence brought about by an increase in usage-frequency of the original utterance *hell of a*, which eventually led to automatization and phonetic reduction: *hell of a* > *helluva* > *hella*. This fails to explain, however, why the syntactic distributions of *hella* and its source form exhibit noteworthy frequency asymmetries. Unlike *hell of a* and *helluva*, which prototypically modify nouns, *hella* seems to mainly modify adjectives (e.g. *hella good*, *hella righteous*; here competing with more conventional intensifiers like *very* or *really*) and only more recently nouns (e.g. *hella things*, *hella people*; here competing with *a lot of* or *many*) in PDE. Also, historically, the most frequent element to follow both *hell of a* and *helluva* is *lot*, while *hella lot* is comparatively rare. How do we get from (a) *hell of a* N to *hella* ADJ? According to Trousdale (2012), it is the pre-adjectival position of *hell of a* in utterances like *a hell of a nice thing* that essentially gave rise to the decategorialization of the entire pre-head material and its reduction. Yet, data from the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA; Davies 2010) indicate that modified NPs are also relatively infrequent. Seeing that the syntagmatic associations between the elements in the pattern (a) *hell of a* N may be stronger than in the case of (a) *hell of a* ADJ N, at least from a historical perspective, it is difficult to argue for a clear path in the emergence of *hella*.

The goal of the present study is to revisit the emergence and usualization of *hella* with regards to its parent forms by utilizing both historical and contemporary corpus and web-based data of American English. It will be argued that *hella* has mainly piggybacked on the diffusion of its phonetic and functional relatives *sorta*, *kinda*, and *lotta*. Additionally, it will be shown that, despite the conventionalization of *hell of a* in English in general, *hella* remains mainly a localized phenomenon, its pop-culture-induced awareness, which has been shown to be major boost for other contemporary construction (cf. Daugs 2019), notwithstanding. To account for the changes on the theoretical end, the study draws on Schmid's (2020) Entrenchment-and-Conventionalization Model, which unifies the cognitive and social dimensions of language and thus lends itself to account for the case of *hella*-intensification at the individual as well as communal level.

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