

## Great big stories and tiny little changes: tautological SIZE-adjective clusters in Present-day English

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This case study focuses on intensificatory tautological constructions (e.g. *tiny little bird*, *big huge pay rise*). The attention that intensificatory tautology has elicited in previous literature is scarce and often centred on specific aspects of its Present-day English (PDE) distribution. Formally, tautological intensificatory patterns often involve the combination of two synonymous SIZE-adjectives (e.g. *massive great*, *tiny little*) in a given order (i.e. *great big* but not *big great*). Functionally, they are standardly associated with emphatic descriptive modifying functions and informal styles (Matthews 2014: 364; Coffey 2013: 59; Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 561–2). This contribution takes a corpus-based, synchronic standpoint in order to (a) refine previous literature's account of the formal and functional distribution of tautological SIZE-adjective clusters in PDE and (b) assess the significance of tautological intensification for functional–structural descriptions of the English Noun Phrase. The analyses indicate that PDE intensificatory SIZE-adjective clusters have a wider functional distribution than has hitherto been observed, with reinforcer and adverbial intensifying functions slowly developing alongside the descriptive modifier functions. More generally, the article shows that tautological SIZE-adjective clusters create pockets of interpersonal meanings whose impact on the formal and functional structure of the NP needs further exploration.

**Keywords:** tautological intensification, SIZE-adjective cluster, English Noun Phrase

### 1 Introduction

Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 561–2) briefly note the existence of two intensifying adjectival constructions in Present-day English: INTENSIFICATORY TAUTOLOGY (the syntactic juxtaposition of two cognitively synonymous adjectives, e.g. *massive great mountains*, *whole complete thing*) and INTENSIFICATORY REPETITION (the iteration of one and the same adjective, e.g. *long long way*, *old old story*). This case study focuses on the former of these intensificatory options, i.e. the intensificatory tautology construction.

Probably because of its (relatively) low frequency in the language, the attention that intensificatory tautology has traditionally received is relatively scarce. Insightful remarks on either specific tautological clusters or on the register(s) where tautological intensification is often attested are found in previous literature (see the comments on *tiny little*, *great big*, *big fat* in Matthews 2009, 2014; Coffey 2013; also section 2 below). However, no in-depth study of intensificatory tautology as a 'type' of intensificatory strategy in English (understood, in line with Traugott & Trousdale 2013: 14ff., as a (sub)schematic construction) has been carried out so far, either synchronically or diachronically.

It is the aim of this article to (begin to) fill the gaps in previous literature by (a) exploring the nature and distribution of tautological intensification in Present-day English (henceforth PDE) and, on the basis of the latter analysis, (b) assessing the significance of tautological intensification for synchronic descriptions of the English Noun Phrase (henceforth NP). The investigation concentrates on the most frequent tautological cluster combination (see Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 562), i.e. that created by the juxtaposition of two SIZE-adjectives (e.g. *big fat*, *great huge*, *tiny little*, etc. On this restriction, see also section 2 below).

The article is structured as follows: section 2 briefly summarises previous literature on tautological intensification. Section 3 outlines the methodology. Sections 4–6 are devoted to the formal and functional analysis of selected tautological clusters in PDE, whereas section 7 summarises the main findings of the article and their significance for NP research.

## 2 Tautological intensification: previous literature

It has often been pointed out in previous literature that tautology is cross-linguistically associated with the conveyance of intensity/emphasis (Rubino 2005: 19; Benczes 2014: 440). The tautological clusters examined here are no exception to this: for instance, *tiny little* in a *tiny little bird* is used to point to a bird of an ‘exceptionally small size’; *great big* in a *great big hole*, *his great big party* highlights the magnitude (physical or otherwise) of an entity/event. As indicated in the Introduction, this article focuses on combinations of SIZE-adjectives only (e.g. *great big*, *tiny little*, *big huge*). Similar clusters with other (non-dimensional) adjectives are of course attested in PDE (e.g. *basic fundamental*, *complete whole*, *remote rural*). The overall frequency of these other synonymic adjective clusters is (among other considerations) too low to make robust claims regarding their syn-semantic distribution and therefore they have not been included in the study. In order to make this restriction clear, the article adopts the term SIZE-adjective cluster to refer to the phenomenon that occupies us here.

Tautological SIZE-adjective clusters are briefly discussed in Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 562). They categorise them as ‘intensificatory tautology’ constructions and observe that they are frequently found with adjectives of ‘very large’ or ‘very small’ size (e.g. *great big*, *tiny little*), often in informal styles and oral domains. Structurally, they see them as standard cases of ‘stacked modification’, i.e. in a *tiny little bird*, *little* first creates a nominal with *bird* (*little bird* ‘bird of small size’) which is subsequently modified by *tiny* ([*tiny* [*little bird*]) to express, as noted above, ‘a bird of an extremely small size’.

Recent work, however, challenges Huddleston & Pullum’s (2002) claims. Coffey (2013: 64ff.) queries a too-lineal correlation between tautological clusters and the notion of intensification. He singles out the cluster *tiny little* and suggests that this combination may sometimes be semantically less intensive than the use of *tiny* by itself (he compares *tiny little grocers* with *tiny grocers*) because of the association

of *little* with affective meanings. Like Coffey (2013), Matthews (2014: 99) notes the difficulty of teasing apart affection and degree emphasis in clusters where *little* is involved. Nevertheless, the emphatic nature of the tautological construction seems for him – as for Huddleston & Pullum (2002) – to be an essential property of the cluster (Matthews 2009: 365). Furthermore, Matthews (2009, 2014: 100) takes issue with Huddleston & Pullum’s (2002) view on the stacked nature of adjective clusters, suggesting instead that both adjectives jointly modify the head noun as a single unit. Matthews (2014: 99; see also 2009: 364) also briefly comments on the fact that SIZE-adjective clusters are not only restricted to ‘specific adjectives’ (i.e. large/small size adjectives) but also to adjectives ‘in specific orders’ (e.g. *great big* and *tiny little* are preferred over *big great* or *little tiny*). Coffey’s (2013: 59) corpus data, however, reveal diverging ordering preferences for some of the clusters discussed by Matthews (2009; see section 4.2 below).

As may be obvious from the Introduction and the brief summary above, previous accounts on SIZE-adjective clusters, while very insightful, leave room for further investigation. On the one hand, the more theory-oriented investigations (Huddleston & Pullum’s 2002; Matthews 2014) are based on the scholars’ perceptive insights rather than on an analysis of large-scale data. On the other hand, the recent corpus-based work (Coffey 2013) aims at providing greater descriptive adequacy of specific patterns without engaging with wider questions on the structure of the NP. The present case study bridges the two approaches by using corpus-based methods to not only uncover general patterns of use across SIZE-adjective clusters but also test the validity of previous theory-oriented claims regarding SIZE-clusters and explore the clusters’ overall significance for the formal and functional make-up of the English NP.

### 3 Method

Three readily available compilations were used for the analysis, i.e. the *British National Corpus* (henceforth BNC1990), the *Collins WordBanks Online* and the newly compiled Spoken BNC2014 (henceforth BNC2014). The three corpora offer a variety of written and spoken texts and their combination provides adequate chronological coverage of the present-day English period (1960–2014).<sup>1</sup> Only the British English data within each compilation were used for the study.

<sup>1</sup> The *British National Corpus* contains over 100 million words of spoken and written English produced between 1960 and 1995, mostly from British English varieties (see [www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/corpus/index.xml](http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/corpus/index.xml); last accessed 17 April 2017). The Spoken BNC2014 corpus will be, when completed, a 10 million-word compilation of ‘informal, spoken interactions between speakers of British English from across the United Kingdom’ (<http://cass.lancs.ac.uk/>; last accessed 30 January 2017). At present, it contains c. 5 million words. I am very grateful to Robbie Lowe and Andrew Hardie (Lancaster University) for allowing me to use the compilation for this article. The *Collins WordBanks Online Corpus* ‘contains 550 million words from a wide range of texts from various sources, both written and spoken, and accounts for no less than 8 varieties of English’ (see [www.collins.co.uk/page/Wordbanks+Online](http://www.collins.co.uk/page/Wordbanks+Online) (last accessed 17 April 2017)). It covers the period 2001–5.

The tool *Phrases in English*<sup>2</sup> was used to retrieve all [ADJ ADJ] 2-gram clusters in the BNC1990 with a minimum of 5 tokens of frequency. A similar POS-tag search was carried out in the *Collins WordBanks* corpus. From the initial list of adjective clusters, all pairs featuring two SIZE-adjectives were selected (24 clusters).<sup>3</sup> However, as n-gram clusters are based on raw frequencies only, statistical tests of collocational strength (MI scores and T-scores) were carried out to ensure the robustness of the pairs.<sup>4</sup> Only those pairs with an MI- and T-score value of 3.5 or above were selected for the analysis (see (1) below).<sup>5</sup>

(1) BIG FAT, GREAT BIG, BIG HUGE, TINY LITTLE, GREAT MASSIVE

For each cluster, all tokens were retrieved across the three corpora and manually checked. Discarded examples included:

- Cases where one of the adjectives (often the rightmost one) is part of either another collocation or a fixed expression with a noun. See the case of *big brother* and *Great Dane* in examples (2)–(3) below:
  - (2) ‘In a way, I maybe asked for it,’ Cynthia said. ‘I know I go on a bit. It’s just that he’s such a **great big brother**.’ (Collins, BB-gF022241)
  - (3) Recently, until his untimely death, equally well-attired, he walked his **massive Great Dane** on the Ardrossan beach. (Collins, NB5-010509)
- Instances where the noun modified by the adjective cluster either has been omitted or is unclear (this only applies to tokens attested in the spoken part of the corpora):
  - (4) It’s not a **great big** [unclear]. (BNC, HE9628)
  - (5) a big graph like and and I only need a **little tiny** ... (BNC, FME706)

In addition, cases where the selected SIZE-adjectives appear in three-adjective clusters (see examples in (6)–(7) below) were discarded from the main dataset but saved in order to investigate them separately at a later stage (see [section 5](#) below):

- (6) And it’s a **huge great big** muscle but it can get a little bit er inflamed, as it passes over the front edge of the kneecap there (BNC, G5U99)

<sup>2</sup> See <http://phrasesinenglish.org/searchBNC.html> (last accessed 17 April 2017).

<sup>3</sup> The clusters retrieved were: GREAT BIG, TINY LITTLE, BIG LONG, BIG HEAVY, POKY LITTLE, SMALL THIN, SMALL LITTLE, WEE SMALL, BIG THICK, MASSIVE GREAT, HUGE GREAT, BIG TALL, GREAT HIGH, GREAT FAT, GREAT HEAVY, GREAT WIDE, HUGE BIG, MASSIVE BIG, PUNY LITTLE, BIG CHUNKY, BIG MASSIVE, LARGE FAT, TINY MINUTE, DIMINUTIVE LITTLE.

<sup>4</sup> The BNC and the *Collins WordBanks* corpus include in-built statistical tools that allow this type of statistical calculation.

<sup>5</sup> There are no standard thresholds of significance for MI and T-score calculations (Stubbs 1995: 40). Previous literature, however, notes that MI-values over 2 tokens indicate ‘linguistically interesting phenomena’ (Ghesquière *et al.* 2013: 96, citing Clear 1993). A value of 3 is taken as default setting for the *congrams* function in *WordSmith* (Scott 2004). These thresholds were taken into consideration in the present study when setting the cut-off point for cluster selection at the 3.5-value (for both MI and T-score tests).

- (7) Oh dear. I never forgot that woman as long as I live. Ooh **great big fat** horrible woman she was (Collins, SB3-00118)

#### 4 SIZE-adjective clusters: analysis of their behaviour

##### 4.1 General remarks

**Table 1** summarises the overall frequency of the selected SIZE-adjective clusters in the corpora. Capitalisation represents cluster lemmas; e.g. HUGE BIG stands for both *huge big* and *big huge* patterns (see [section 4.2](#) below on the order of these clusters). Figures in square brackets record normalised figures per million words.

A close look at the table shows that all adjectives included in the SIZE-clusters are gradable (all of them denote a particular point on a scale) and relatively schematic (they can map meanings onto different types of scales). Whether the scale they map onto is a physical dimension (e.g. *massive hole*), a non-physical dimension (e.g. *big voice*), a temporal (e.g. *little minute*) or a metaphorical one (e.g. *fat lie*), depends primarily on the nominal referent they combine with and the context of use (Lorenz 1999: 56; Murphy 2003: 39).

Furthermore, the adjectives in these clusters can be subdivided into two different groups depending on their mode of gradability (Paradis 1997: 47–8). Adjectives such as *big*, *great* and *little* are scalar, i.e. they map a given property onto different points of a scale range. By contrast, adjectives such as *tiny*, *huge* and *massive* are extreme (Paradis 1997: 54), i.e. they are conceptualised as always occupying either the uppermost (*huge*, *massive*) or the lowermost (*tiny*) point of a scale. Without going into too much detail, this difference can be easily captured by looking at the type of degree modifiers that they tend to combine with: scalar adjectives often accept degree modification by boosters such as *very* or *really* (e.g. *really big*, *very little*), whereas extreme adjectives usually combine with maximisers such as *totally* or *absolutely* (e.g. compare *totally massive*, *absolutely huge* with *?very huge/massive*). These modification patterns are of course tendencies rather than hard-and-fast-rules:

Table 1. *SIZE-adjective clusters across corpora*

Cluster	BNC1990	Collins WordBanks	BNC2014	Total
BIG FAT	67 [0.7]	142 [0.3]	22 [4.6]	231 (13%)
BIG HUGE	6 [0.06]	17 [0.03]	6 [1.3]	29 (2%)
GREAT BIG	376 [0.8]	449 [4.6]	77 [16]	902 (52%)
GREAT MASSIVE	14 [0.14]	16 [0.03]	17 [3.5]	47 (3%)
MASSIVE BIG	9 [0.09]	18 [0.03]	13 [2.7]	40 (2%)
TINY LITTLE	169 [1.7]	215 [0.4]	90 [18.8]	474 (27%)
Total	641 [6.7]	857 [1.5]	225 [49.4]	1,723 (100%)

Table 2. *SIZE-adjective clusters: spoken data*

Cluster	BNC1990	BNC2014	Total
BIG FAT	24 [2.3]	22 [4.5]	46 (7%)
BIG HUGE	6 [0.6]	6 [1.46]	12 (2%)
GREAT BIG	255 [24.4]	76 [16.08]	331 (51%)
GREAT MASSIVE	14 [1.3]	17 [3.5]	31 (5%)
MASSIVE BIG	9 [0.8]	13 [2.7]	22 (3%)
TINY LITTLE	121 [11.6]	89 [18.5]	210 (32%)
Total	429 [41.8]	223 [48]	652 (100%)

pragmatic factors need to be considered when selecting a particular intensifier–adjective combination (see Paradis’ 1997: 59 concept of ‘contextual modulation’).

Focusing now on the *SIZE*-adjective clusters as wholes, stark frequency differences are observed, with *big fat*, *great big* and *tiny little* accounting for over 90 per cent of the attested tokens. Note, however, that *SIZE*-adjective clusters are infrequent overall: *great big*, the most frequent cluster on the list, amounts to fewer than 20 tokens per million words in any given corpus. A diachronic, cross-corpora look at the data suggests a noticeable increase of all *SIZE*-clusters in PDE. Admittedly, this figure is based on the distributional frequencies of the clusters in both spoken and written domains rather than on spoken language only (where previous literature suggests that *SIZE*-adjective clusters are most frequently attested). When only the spoken subcorpora are considered, usage frequencies still increase – although less noticeably (from 46 to 48 tokens per million words; see table 2).<sup>6</sup>

A detailed analysis of the behaviour of the clusters is provided in sections 4.2 and 4.3 below.

#### 4.2 Formal behaviour

This section focuses on two main aspects, i.e. the syntactic behaviour of *SIZE*-adjective clusters and their cluster-internal ordering preferences.

As regards syntactic behaviour, previous researchers have classed *SIZE*-adjective clusters as attributive-only constructions (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 561). The corpus data considered here support the claim, with over 99 per cent of the tokens scrutinised featuring attributive uses. Some examples where *SIZE*-clusters occur in predicative ((8)–(9)) and postpositive positions ((10)–(11)) are, however, found. In most cases, the examples feature *GREAT BIG*, although some tokens of other *SIZE*-adjective clusters are also attested ((10)–(11)):

<sup>6</sup> The data from the BNC1990 come from the ‘demographically sampled’ spoken subcorpus as that is the part of the BNC1990 that allows most reliable comparisons with the BNC2014 (Robbie Lowe, p.c).

- (8) Alice: Says it's me birthday on twenty seventh of February, I want a watch. Anyway she says which one do you want? I says that one, sixty four er er pound something  
 Kathleen: Bloody hell!  
 Alice: and, oh it's gorgeous, **great big**, you know (BNC, KGL209)
- (9) Arthur: Yeah, they go— got it and swung it up like that, and I'm sure to— the stallion couldn't find where it ... ! I thought well, what a carry *on*!  
 Evelyn: <unclear>  
 Arthur: Mind you, if they got big hooves like plates of meat <pause> you know, **great big** (BNC, KBB796)
- (10) I've got a bump...twenty-seven on my left knee. All **huge big** and **red** and **puffy** and **very squidgy** and like because I'd been sunbathing the actual (Collins, SB3-001406)
- (11) [flies] that had been attracted to the corpse. Perhaps a dozen of them, **big fat** and **black**, took to the air and buzzed lazily. (Collins, BB-M022179)

Moving on to linearity issues, previous scholarship has commented on the organisational preferences of specific SIZE clusters. As regards 'large size' adjective combinations, the order *great big* (e.g. *a great big hole*) is 'normal' for the cluster GREAT BIG. Speaker preference is noted as the main factor motivating the choice (see Matthews 2014: 99; also Coffey 2013: 56). For small-size clusters (TINY LITTLE), both Matthews (2009: 364) and Coffey (2013) favour the order *tiny little* over *little tiny*. Matthews (p.c.) relates the variation to prosodic differences (intonation and rhythm). Coffey's (2013) corpus-based study explores a number of possible motivating factors, i.e. domain<sup>7</sup> (spoken vs written texts), register (formal vs informal communication), type of nominal head and modification preferences (i.e. presence/absence of intensifiers) of the cluster, as well as speaker's sex and age. However, only the first factor appears to have a noticeable impact on the ordering of the cluster, in that '*little tiny* is almost twice as frequent as *tiny little* in the spoken data, and *tiny little* is by far the more frequent phrase in the written language' (Coffey 2013: 59).

Table 3 records the order preferences of the SIZE-adjective clusters considered here.

Overall, the results align with previous scholars' suggestions. *Great big* is indeed the most frequent order of the GREAT BIG cluster in the data (cf. Matthews 2014). Also, in line with Coffey's (2013) claims, TINY LITTLE shows itself as a reversible cluster, either pattern being amply attested (but note that no prosodic tests were carried out in order to explore the rhythmic difference between *little tiny* and *tiny little*).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the figures provide a relatively straightforward cline of reversibility across clusters. At the irreversible end of the continuum stand GREAT BIG and BIG FAT. MASSIVE GREAT, TINY LITTLE, MASSIVE BIG and BIG HUGE feature (in that order) more reversible options.

<sup>7</sup> Note that here I am reproducing the terminology (i.e. the term *domain*) used in Coffey (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Prosodic information is not systematically available for the spoken subcorpora used here (the BNC1990 includes audio recordings only for some of the spoken examples, but neither audio facilities nor any prosodic notation is provided in either the *Collins WordBanks* spoken data or the BNC2014).

Table 3. *Frequency distribution across SIZE-clusters and patterns*

Cluster	GREAT BIG		MASSIVE GREAT		MASSIVE BIG		BIG HUGE		BIG FAT		TINY LITTLE	
	<i>great</i> <i>big</i>	<i>big</i> <i>great</i>	<i>massive</i> <i>great</i>	<i>great</i> <i>massive</i>	<i>massive</i> <i>big</i>	<i>big</i> <i>massive</i>	<i>big</i> <i>huge</i>	<i>huge</i> <i>big</i>	<i>big</i> <i>fat</i>	<i>fat</i> <i>big</i>	<i>tiny</i> <i>little</i>	<i>little</i> <i>tiny</i>
Tokens	902 (100%)	0 (0%)	45 (96%)	2 (4%)	13 (33%)	27 (67%)	16 (55%)	13 (45%)	231 (100%)	0 (0%)	293 (62%)	181 (38%)



The reasons behind the preferences for one or another pattern within a cluster are however more difficult to ascertain. Focusing first on the claims put forward by previous scholarship, speaker preference cannot be usefully measured when readily available, large-scale corpora are taken as the methodological basis of the investigation. Medium (i.e. spoken vs written), register and modification preferences do not seem to have a noticeable effect on cluster order in the corpora either. Note, in this respect, that Coffey's (2013) suggestions about the differences in the order of TINY LITTLE across speech and writing may be less significant than expected, as the TINY LITTLE tokens attested in written texts in the corpora frequently come from stretches of spoken language in novels and/or magazines (e.g. fictional dialogue, indirect representation of speech, interviews, etc.; see example (12) below).

- (12) 'Do you remember the Polanski movie *Repulsion*, where all you see of the city is a **tiny little** street outside Catherine Deneuve's flat? (BNC, CK41843, *New Musical Express* [arts periodical])

The possible impact of other cluster-internal and contextual determinants was also checked in the data. For intra-cluster motivations, the adjectives' gradability type (scalar vs extreme) was considered (the four reversible SIZE-adjective clusters in the corpus data feature a combination of one scalar and one extreme adjective). However, no systematic lineal preferences were observed across clusters: MASSIVE GREAT and TINY LITTLE seem to prefer the pattern where the extreme adjective precedes the scalar one whereas in MASSIVE BIG and BIG HUGE, the scalar + extreme adjective option is more frequent (see table 3).

Moving now on to contextual factors, it was briefly noted above that SIZE-adjectives map onto different (physical and non-physical) dimensional scales in a flexible manner, i.e. depending on the semantics of the noun with which they combine (compare *a tiny little house*, *a massive great bungalow* with *a tiny little detail*, *massive great bureaucracies*). The preference for one or another adjective order may therefore be influenced by the particular combination of SIZE-adjective cluster and nominal referent. This type of analysis, however, moves away from formal criteria and into functional considerations, and therefore it will be considered in more detail once the functional behaviour of SIZE-clusters is explored (section 4.3 below).

All in all – and in spite of the inconclusive results obtained – the analysis carried out in this section suggests that SIZE-adjective clusters are, formally, linearly flexible constructions with a very strong preference for attributive uses.

### 4.3 Functional behaviour

SIZE-adjective clusters have been associated with standard adjectival functions in previous literature, i.e. as property-assigning or 'descriptive' modifiers of a head noun (see Matthews 2014 or Coffey 2013). The corpus analysis carried out here not only provides support for the association (see table 4 in section 4.3.5, where descriptive modifier uses amount to over 80 per cent of the tokens) but also expands on previous

accounts by exploring (a) the range of descriptive modifier senses that SIZE-clusters can convey and (b) their on-going development as reinforcers and adverbial intensifiers.

#### 4.3.1 *SIZE-adjective clusters as descriptive modifiers*

It is the nature of the nominal head (and the context of use) which determines the type of scale upon which SIZE-adjective clusters prompt meaning. In general terms, spatial scales and, more specifically, ‘physical dimension’ is the meaning they convey most frequently (60 per cent of the tokens across clusters overall). Consider, in this respect, examples (9)–(10) above, where *great big* and *huge big* are used to describe the large physical size of different objects and individuals.

Examples where the nominal heads elicit non-physical or metaphorical dimensional readings of the SIZE-adjective clusters are also recorded in the corpus (20 per cent of the instances). Illustrative examples are provided in (13)–(14). In (13), *massive big* denotes the ‘large size’ of a wedding reception, measured in terms of number of guests and entertainment (rather than the actual physical dimension of the venue). In the same example, *massive great floods* expresses largeness – in terms of amount of water. *Big huge* in (14) conveys metaphorical dimension (‘significance’):

- (13) [A] **massive big** party and go on a long honeymoon in Florida because it is warm and they have lots erm years that there was a continuous series of these **massive great** floods ... until the ice age finally retreated well back. (Collins, NBA-990906)
- (14) ‘It’s been a **big huge** help for us trying to get started over here. This is our way of saying thank you...’ (Collins, MB3-031125)

All the examples noted above qualify as descriptive modifying uses of the SIZE-adjective clusters in that they attribute a particular property to the nominal referent. Further semantic–pragmatic differences among these senses can nevertheless be observed. Examples where the SIZE-adjective cluster conveys physical dimension are more objective (in the sense they can be externally validated, e.g. *massive great house*), whereas uses prompting metaphorical scalar readings of the clusters are more subjective, i.e. their property-ascription is grounded in the speaker’s point of view.<sup>9</sup> These differences are captured in recent functional literature in a distinction between ‘objective’ (in our case, physical dimension meanings of SIZE-adjective clusters) and ‘subjective’ descriptive modifiers (in our case, non-physical and metaphorical senses; cf. Ghesquière 2010, 2014; Ghesquière *et al.* 2013). It is also important to emphasise here that the distinction between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ descriptive modifying uses has to be conceptualised as a continuum where senses may overlap. Consider for instance (15) below where both amount (non-physical dimension) and significance (metaphorical dimension) are prompted.

- (15) this chap from erm was it Tesco’s who had the **big huge** pay rise earns four yes Ian McLauren (Collins, SB1-0106)

<sup>9</sup> Subjectivity is here understood in the Traugottian way, i.e. as the ‘indexing of speaker attitude or viewpoint in discourse’ (see Traugott & Dasher 2005: 20; Traugott 2010: 32).

### 4.3.2 *SIZE-adjective clusters: ambiguous examples*

Overlaps are not only attested within particular functional domains (e.g. different types of descriptive modification; see section 4.3.1 above) but also across functions. For example, previous literature has commented on the fact that that *little*, *teeny* or *wee* may convey non-descriptive, affective meanings when mapped onto metaphorical scales (see Mathews 2009; also González-Díaz 2010). *SIZE*-adjective clusters where *little* conveys affection are indeed attested in the data. In these cases, however, the affective senses overlap with physical dimension denotations. Consider in this respect (16) below. The head noun *thing* conveys an affective meaning<sup>10</sup> which is matched by the semantics of the *SIZE*-adjective cluster and the presence of the deictic demonstrative *this* (which promotes the construction of an involved narrative by bringing the described event ‘metaphorically close’ to the speech event). However, the *SIZE*-adjective cluster in this context also specifies that the individual being talked about is not only positively regarded by the speaker but also ‘of a reduced physical size’.

- (16) Amusement bubbled up in him at **this tiny little** thing with her hands planted firmly on her hips presuming to tell him what he was going to do. (BNC, JY64047)

### 4.3.3 *SIZE-adjective clusters as reinforcers*

Unlike descriptive modifiers, reinforcers<sup>11</sup> do not normally ascribe a property to their nominal referent, but are instead ‘specifiers of degree at the same time as they convey an evaluation of the reliability of the proposition, i.e. they are epistemic markers’ (Paradis 2000: 233). Consider, for instance, the use of *real* in ‘a real help’ (see Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 555): in this example, *real* does not attribute a quality (‘having an objective existence’) to its nominal reference; it signals the speaker’s appreciation of the support by emphasising the degree to which the property expressed by the head noun applies. Syntactically, reinforcers are attributive-only elements and, unlike descriptive modifiers, do not accept degree modification (as they themselves act as specifiers of degree, see the comment above). Examples (17)–(19) below illustrate *SIZE*-adjective clusters in reinforcing function.

- (17) She pushed me over and said, ‘I knew it wasn’t nobody, yow **great big** baby!’  
(BNC, CMD 2453)
- (18) the latest incarnation of Star Wars ultra-baddie Darth Vader is just a **great big** softie.  
(Collins, NBA-020506)
- (19) ‘And?’ ‘And nothing, guy. **Big fat** zero. The place was deserted and I looked like an asshole, going in ready for Christ’ (Collins, BB-M012098)

<sup>10</sup> ‘Used of a human being or person. Cf. *creature*. With modifying word or clause... chiefly in contempt, pity, or affection; formerly also in commendation or honour’ (*OED*, *thing*, n., 10a).

<sup>11</sup> There is no standard term in the literature to refer to this modifying function. Paradis (2000), Feist (2012) and Ghesquière *et al.* (2013) use the term ‘reinforcer’ or ‘reinforcing adjective’, whereas Vandewinkel & Davidse (2008) or Ghesquière (2010) prefer ‘emphasizer’ or ‘emphasizing adjective’. In this article I adhere to the former (reinforcer) term to refer to this function.

Note that, in all cases, the clusters do not specify an intrinsic property of their head noun. The ‘baby’ in example (17) does not refer either to a very young child or necessarily a ‘large-size’ (*great big*) human entity. On the contrary, it refers to an adult whom the speaker is not very sympathetic towards because of his/her immaturity. In this context, *great big* works with the noun to convey both negative affection and degree emphasis. A similar explanation applies to (18). The text evaluates the performance of an actor in his role as Darth Vader. Again, *great big* does not describe the size of the actor and/or that of his filmic impersonation but instead highlights the reviewer’s displeasure with his performance (he is a ‘softie’ rather than a ‘proper baddie’). Along the same lines, *big fat* in (19) expresses the disappointing ‘nothingness’ of the speaker’s findings.

It should also be noted here that the standard grammatical tests to prove the non-descriptive nature of reinforcing adjectives (i.e. syntactic position and intensification) work in SIZE-clusters only partially. Syntactically, SIZE-clusters are normally attributive-only constructions (see section 4.1 above) and therefore their predicative use will sound awkward regardless of its (descriptive/reinforcing) function (e.g. *the big huge car* ~ *\*the car is big huge* [descriptive] / *a great big softie* ~ *\*the softie is great big* [reinforcing]). The second criterion (intensification) seems however to be operative: whereas SIZE-adjective clusters in descriptive modification functions combine with degree intensifiers in the corpus (see (20)–(21) below), no tokens of intensified reinforcers were found in the data:

(20) ‘**Very big fat** cheque,’ he added as a wry afterthought. (BNC, JXU3460)

(21) I’d imagined these huge things that were going to suck me to death, but they’re actually little, like, just **very very tiny little** worms, about erm an inch long and very thin (BNC, FYP175)

#### 4.3.4 SIZE-adjective clusters as intensifiers

The last function of SIZE-adjective clusters recorded in the corpus is that of intensifier. This function is, at the time of writing, rather limited: only one example is attested in the corpus data (see (22) below), although an advanced WebCorp search of UK sites reveals some more examples (e.g. *great big little West End show*, *great big small world*). Focusing on the corpus data example proper, *great big* in (22) has to be interpreted as a (sub)modifier of the following lexeme (*little*). Stacked modification does not seem to be a semantically viable option, as a *lump of ice* cannot simultaneously be large (*great big*) and small (*little*) in size. The function of *great big* in this instance seems to be that of booster (i.e. meaning ‘very’).

(22) Erm how about erm when it’s **great big** little lumps of ice falling down what do you call that ends in ail? (BNC, FMG299)

#### 4.3.5 Summary of findings

The distribution of the different functions across clusters is summarised in table 4.

Table 4. *SIZE-adjective clusters across functions*

Patterns	Descriptive modifier	Reinforcer	Intensifier	Ambiguous/other	Total
BIG FAT	163 (70%)	59 (26%)	0	9 (4%)	231 (13%)
BIG HUGE	29 (100%)	0	0	0	29 (2%)
GREAT BIG	780 (86%)	85 (9%)	1 (1%)	36 (4%)	902 (52%)
GREAT MASSIVE	47 (100%)	0	0	0	47 (3%)
MASSIVE BIG	40 (100%)	0	0	0	40 (2%)
TINY LITTLE	400 (84%)	0	0	74 (16%)	474 (27%)
Total	1459 (84.95%)	144 (8%)	1 (0.05%)	119 (6%)	1723 (100%)

The table shows that only GREAT BIG and BIG FAT feature unambiguous examples of reinforcer and intensifier uses. GREAT BIG and BIG FAT are also different from the other SIZE-adjective clusters analysed here in three other respects, namely, both clusters have high token frequencies, are non-reversible (see tables 2–3 above) and feature most of the examples of scattered predicative and postpositive uses of SIZE-adjective clusters. This has not gone unnoticed in previous sources: GREAT BIG and BIG FAT feature individual (sub)entries in some modern lexicographical works (e.g. see *OED*, *great*, adj.). Along the same lines, Coffey (2013: 56), for instance, notes that ‘[f]requency and irreversibility would suggest that “great big” may be best considered as a fully lexicalized phrase’. Furthermore, and although diachronic considerations fall outside the scope of this article, it is worth noting here that the development of reinforcer and degree intensifier functions of GREAT BIG and BIG FAT tallies with well-established historical pathways of lexical change; namely, the grammaticalisation of scalar adjectives into adverbs of degree (i.e. adjective > adverb cline; see among others Peters 1994; Adamson 2000; Méndez-Naya 2008).

- (23) Descriptive objective modification > descriptive subjective modification > reinforcer/intensifier
- |                      |   |                       |   |   |
|----------------------|---|-----------------------|---|---|
| <i>great big dog</i> | > | <i>great big job</i>  | > | <i>great big baby</i>                           |
| <i>big fat man</i>   | > | <i>big fat cheque</i> | > | <i>big fat zero/<br/>great big little lumps</i> |

The cline in (23) also highlights an aspect that so far has been only partially touched upon in the discussion; namely, the extent to which subjectivity operates across the functional distributions mapped out above. In a now classical paper, De Smet & Verstraete (2006) expand on Traugott’s notion of subjectivity by providing a typology that differentiates between ideational and interpersonal subjective notions. In a nutshell, ideational subjective cases include instances where a linguistic expression encodes the speaker’s viewpoint *and* conveys an ideational meaning. Conversely, interpersonal subjectivity subsumes those cases where a linguistic expression ‘merely involves positioning of the speaker with respect to a content’, without propositional meaning (De Smet & Verstraete 2006: 385). Applying this distinction to the functionality of the clusters explored here (see (23)), one may argue that SIZE-adjective clusters in descriptive subjective modifying functions are ideationally subjective (they

ascribe a property to the referent of the noun *and* speaker-based emphasis due to the iteration of the same adjective). SIZE-adjective clusters in intensifier and reinforcer functions are, in different ways, interpersonally subjective. In the case of the intensifier functions, the schematic (scalar) configuration of the SIZE-adjective cluster has been foregrounded at the expense of its lexical content (Paradis 1997, 2000), with the result that the cluster can only convey degree meanings (which are, again, speaker-based). The interpersonal subjective meanings of reinforcers derive from the mapping of the SIZE-adjective cluster onto a scale of evaluation. In either case, the speaker-based grounding is coded semantically and has syntactic consequences (note the syntactic restrictions of reinforcers mentioned above, and the fact that SIZE-clusters in intensifying functions belong to a different grammatical category from that of descriptive modifier uses).

Subjectivity is, in Traugott's (2010) view, a basic requirement for intersubjectivity (understood as the semantic codification of 'the speaker's attention to the addressee self-image', Traugott 2010: 32). While the data do not clearly show any cases of semantically coded intersubjectivity, they record clear examples where SIZE-clusters are *pragmatically* intersubjective. The most frequent cases are those where deictic demonstratives co-occur with SIZE-clusters in descriptive modifying functions (i.e. physical dimension; 62 examples). The context is often informal story-telling situations where the speaker introduces characters or objects important to the core of the narrative (see (24)–(25) below). Deictics are subjective indexes in that they ground the centre of the linguistic event in the speaker (Lyons 1982: 106; Davidse *et al.* 2010a: 12; Traugott & Dasher 2005: 23). However, in these particular examples, they are intersubjective in orientation as they are clearly used for stylistic effect, i.e. to portray a sense of immediacy that intends to involve the addressee in the narration (see Wu 2004: 240; Carlier & De Mulder 2010: 243).

- (24) 0022 the next thing you knew she was up to there in **this great big** puddle weren't she  
0012 That was so funny (BNC2014, BSCTR022)
- (25) She's **this massive big** coat on, and I said to her, sh—I said, she said, I said you alright,  
Kerry (BNC, KPV6536)

Finally, the discussion in section 4.2 above considered the possibility that the lineal organisation of the SIZE-adjective clusters may be influenced by functional factors (i.e. the particular combination of the SIZE-adjective cluster and its nominal referent). The data reveal some suggestive differences. In the case of BIG HUGE, it is the pattern *huge big* (as opposed to *big huge*) that tends to combine with nouns that elicit non-physical and metaphorical readings of the cluster. Similar distinctions are found with TINY LITTLE, i.e. it is the *tiny little* pattern (not *little tiny*) which is most frequently found when the cluster conveys descriptive-cum-affective readings. As noted above, however, these differences are suggestive of possible developmental pathways rather than robust synchronic trends.

### 5 Three SIZE-adjective clusters

The discussion in [section 4](#) concentrated on the clustering of two SIZE-adjectives immediately preceding a nominal referent. In this section, a consideration of cases where three SIZE-adjectives co-occur is carried out to test the robustness of the patterns identified so far.

As noted above, SIZE-adjectives vary in their schematicity; i.e. adjectives such as *great* or *massive* are more schematic (i.e. they can therefore map meanings onto a wider range of dimensional scales) than others such as *long* or *tall*. On the basis of this distinction, two different patterns can be observed in the three SIZE-adjective cluster data: cases where three (more) schematic adjectives co-occur (e.g. *a massive great big flask of coffee*) and cases where we have a combination of more and less schematic adjectives (e.g. *great big tall ceilings*) (see [table 5](#)).

As regards the latter combination (clusters of more- and less- schematic SIZE-adjectives), all examples in the data (13 tokens) feature SIZE-clusters already examined, i.e. GREAT BIG (10 tokens), TINY LITTLE (2 instances) and GREAT MASSIVE (1 token), normally occurring on the left of a less schematic adjective (99 per cent of the cases). In other words, the lineal order of the cluster seems to be [GREAT BIG/TINY LITTLE, etc. + less schematic adjective]. The most frequent adjective in the rightmost position is *long* (6 examples), always in combination with GREAT BIG (i.e. *great big long X*). Other examples of rightmost adjectives in these combinations include *broad*, *hefty*, *slim*, *skinny* and *tall*.

(26) No such a thing as bales of straw, it was loose hay stacked, and you used to cut it with a big hay knife. <event: 'bell ring'>Oh, **great big hefty** thing it was, it was an art to cut hay, with these big knives. (BNC, FX139)

(27) <ZF0>let's say something about Edmund Street library . . .  
<M02/> **Great massive tall** rooms and it was scattered er er the original library er of course (Collins, SB1-0839)

The reading most frequently associated with these three SIZE-adjective clusters is physical dimension (i.e. descriptive modifying functions). In example (26), for instance, the denotational vagueness of *great big hefty thing* is later specified in the

Table 5. *Schematic three SIZE-adjective clusters*

Large-size adjective clusters (31 tokens)	great big fat x11; GREAT BIG MASSIVE x7; GREAT BIG HUGE x3; great big humongous x2; enormous great big x2; whopping great big x2; great big large; big huge giant; big massive mega-media; big massive fat
Small-size adjective clusters (9 tokens)	TINY LITTLE TINY x4; LITTLE TINY LITTLE x3; little tiny wee; teensy-teensy tiny little



utterance: the *thing* refers to a knife or tool for cutting hay, which happens to be large in size (*big, great big*). Similar physical dimension readings are obtained in (27). Cases featuring the combination *great big long X* are somewhat different, as in these instances, the SIZE-cluster *great big* is often ambiguous between a degree intensifying ('very') and a descriptive modifying interpretation (i.e. 'large size', either physical or metaphorical) regardless of the noun it co-occurs with (see (28) below).

- (28) you wrote a biography of John Major which was described as being well a **great big long** cuddle with the man it was so complimentary (COLLINS, SB1-0960)

The corpus data also record 40 examples where three (or more) schematic SIZE-adjectives co-occur. In general, the large-size three-adjective cluster combinations either include the cluster *great big* (27 out of the 31 examples) or the adjectives *great* and *big* independently. The small-size clusters are, paradigmatically, less varied, i.e. they always feature *tiny* and *little*, and often one of these two is iterated. Consider table 5 for specific patterns – clusters in capitals represent, as in previous sections, lemmas.

The main difference between these three SIZE-adjective clusters and the two SIZE-adjective options explored in section 4 is pragmatic: the three SIZE-adjective clusters above are more emphatic than the two-adjective ones. In functional terms, however, these three-adjective clusters still behave most frequently as descriptive modifiers. Consider (29)–(30) below, where the clusters highlight the excessively large/small size of a nunnery and a torch.

- (29) Right keep going until you come to a **great big massive** place and that is the nunnery. He said Knock on that door and (COLLINS, SB3-000761)
- (30) Just a little pocket, a **little tiny, tiny** torch with a very strong beam (BNC, KDR1120)

Reinforcer uses are also found, in all cases featuring the pattern *great big fat* (4 examples; see (31)–(32) below). In (31), the negative affective semantics of the nominal head *toad* is matched by that of the premodifying adjective *ugly* and further emphasised by *great big fat*. A similar reinforcer function of *great big fat* is recorded in (32). One may suggest that it is the semantics of the adjective *fat* what prompts the combination of the adjective string with evaluative nominal heads, *great big* being added to highlight further the speaker's viewpoint. A quick look at the BNC shows, for instance, that *fat* and *slob* have a MI- and T-scores of 9.1 and 2.4, respectively – values that are above the thresholds of interesting co-occurrences (see fn. 5 above). Example (32) also features the use of deictic *this*, which renders the combination as (pragmatically) intersubjective.

- (31) ... have to scream at you about MX sometime because I'm so pissed off with the stupid **great big fat** ugly toad. (COLLINS, SB1-1091)
- (32) Oh it was very funny. They were in Istanbul and there was this **great big fat** slob of a sailor <ZGY/> they have ridiculous names I forget what he was called (COLLINS, SB3-001386)



In addition, ambiguous examples (between descriptive modifiers/reinforcer functions) are attested, often featuring small SIZE-adjective combinations. In (33) *tiny little* conveys non-physical, temporal dimension ('limited time') scale, while at the same time projecting the speaker's own judgement, i.e. positive affection towards the work to be carried out:

- (33) John: It's gotta it's almost got a chlorine sound in its name.  
 Andrew: <pause> I can't think of it.  
 John: We'll have we'll we'll have a very short **tiny tiny little** look at it even though it's almost a holiday, right. (BNC, FMR416)

All in all, the functional distribution of three SIZE-adjective clusters closely mirrors that of their two adjective counterparts, therefore supporting the analysis of the semantic-pragmatic patterns discussed in previous sections. The lineal organisation of three SIZE-adjective clusters also suggests that two SIZE-adjective clusters are stable combinations: when they enter three (or sometimes four) SIZE-adjective clusters, it is always another lexical item that 'moves around' to their left or right, possibly as a way of increasing their emphatic load. Potential cases of ambiguity as regards the clusters' internal organization often tend to be resolved either orthographically or prosodically. Note the comma in (30) above or in (34) below, which indicates that here the bracketing is [[*little tiny*] *tiny*] and [*great* [*big fat*]] rather than [*little* [*tiny tiny*]] and [[*great big*] *fat*], respectively). In (35), the intra-cluster division is marked by a pause after *massive* (here we have a four SIZE-adjective cluster, with *humongous* as the rightmost element).

- (34) M&S and Sainsbury's pestos got the thumbs down while Carluccio's own genovese version got a **great, big fat** tick. Funny that. (COLLINS, MB9-040908)
- (35) Wendy They came in **massive** <-|-> **great big humongous** boxes packed with polystyrene actually. (BNC, F8U1120)

The reflections above on the functional and formal organisation of SIZE-adjective clusters open up a more general question, namely, that of their status within the PDE lexico-syntax continuum. This is, *a priori*, a difficult question to tackle. Lexicon and syntax are, in any language, overlapping rather discrete modules (Giegerich 2005: 571ff.). Furthermore, in the case of English, the establishment of lexico-syntactic boundaries is, as experts have previously noted, a 'notorious crux' due to the (comparatively) limited system of inflections of the language (Matthews 1974: 184; Wälchli 2005: 12). The issue is discussed in more detail in section 6 below.

## 6 The status of SIZE-adjective clusters in PDE

The SIZE-adjective combinations studied in this article can be considered 'chunks' or 'multi-word items' (Bybee 2002; Arnaud *et al.* 2008: 111), i.e. phraseological units formed by two frequently co-occurring lexical items (as shown by the MI and T-score tests described in section 3 above). The syntactic relationship between the

two adjectives within the cluster has, however, been the subject of debate in previous literature. Three main options were put forward in previous accounts; namely, (a) the two adjectives are in a relation of submodification; (b) the two adjectives are stacked; (c) they are asyndetically co-ordinated.

Bache (1978: 75) advocates for submodification relations within particular size-clusters, suggesting that *great big* and *tiny little* are ‘fixed collocations where the adverbial value of the first adjective is especially clear’. Note, however, that unlike the submodifying constructions suggested by Bache (1978) (i.e. [ADV ADJ]; e.g. *very happy*, *really sweet*), SIZE-adjective clusters cannot normally<sup>12</sup> be attested in predicative uses (e.g. *the lorry is very big* but *?the lorry is great big*). In addition, as schematic, lexically bleached elements, intensifiers tend not to restrict the range of the items that they intensify.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, the range of adjectives entering SIZE-adjective constructions is rather limited (e.g. *tiny little* and *huge great* sound fine, but *tiny small* or *huge large* are odd; see Matthews 2009: 364; 2014: 98ff.). The data analysis above provide further evidence against submodification: namely, the fact that half of the SIZE-adjective clusters explored above are, to a greater or lesser degree, reversible, a possibility which is not available to any [ADV + ADJ] combination.

Huddleston & Pullum (2002) consider SIZE-adjective clusters ‘stacked’ patterns, i.e. cases where the rightmost adjective creates a unit with the noun which is recursively modified by the second, leftmost adjective (e.g. [a[*tiny*[*little* bird]]]); see also Klein 1998: 137 or Méndez-Naya 2015 for a similar syntactic analysis of co-occurring degree adverbs). Matthews (2014) refutes this suggestion and points out that SIZE-adjective clusters are semantically non-compositional units ‘that, as a whole...modify the head noun’ (Matthews 2014: 100). The data analysis in sections 4 and 5 above tallies with Matthews’ suggestions. SIZE-adjective clusters are, as shown by the examples provided throughout the article, continuous units: other adjectives can appear before or after the selected clusters, but no material can be inserted in-between the two cluster-elements (see also comments in section 5). As regards semantic non-compositionality, note that, in general, the overall emphatic meaning of the cluster is only achieved when the two SIZE-adjective lexemes are combined. For instance, in (36)–(38) below, the reformulation introduced by the speaker(s) introduces a SIZE-adjective cluster – probably with the aim of enhancing the interpersonal import of the speakers’ initial qualification:

- (36) When we went there were a **little** carrier bag with only... a **tiny little** carrier bag (BNC, KSS1390)
- (37) But he had worked with a **big** er in a **great big** firm and he then he branched out on his own you know. (BNC, K6L82)

<sup>12</sup> See the discussion in section 4.1 above.

<sup>13</sup> Again, this statement needs to be qualified – see the comments above regarding the difference between booster and maximisers (Paradis 1997, 2000) and the type of collocates that they combine with.

- (38) people will buy it you see. I mean in Spain they have a **huge** lottery which is got a **huge big** prize (COLLINS, SB1-0630)

The unitary semantic import of SIZE-clusters is also shown by their syntagmatic variability. Consider, in this connection, the examples below, where SIZE-adjective clusters in descriptive modifier functions are coordinated with other adjectives in order to either provide greater descriptive adequacy to the nominal referent (see (39)) or introduce stylistic variation to a written description (see (40)):

- (39) that had been attracted to the corpse. Perhaps a dozen of them, **big fat** and **black**, took to the air and buzzed lazily. One of them smacked drunkenly into (COLLINS, BB-M022179)

- (40) It had tall dark trees on each side, with rhododendron bushes behind, then at the end of the drive some **great big** steps and a **massive** oak front door. (COLLINS, BB-Ym022021)

All in all, the results from the data analysis support the claim that the syntactic structure of SIZE-clusters is one where we have ‘an adjective plus an adjective’ (Matthews 2014: 100–1, 117; 2009: 364) in an asyndetic coordinative relation (this allows for the cluster’s (partial) lineal reversibility and emphatic semantic–pragmatic import due to iteration). This structural make-up aligns SIZE-adjective clusters with another iterative strategy that has only recently (re)gained attention in morphological literature, i.e. tautological synonymic compounds (e.g. *pathway*, *subject matter*, *teensy-tiny*, *teeny-weeny*; see Benczes 2014; Renner 2008). Tautological synonymic compounds (henceforth TSCs) are a subtype of dvanda compounds, defined as units ‘composed of two elements which belong to the same lexical category and are co-hyponyms’ (Renner 2008: 610). Like SIZE-adjective clusters, TSCs are (relatively) infrequent structures, often deployed for emphatic epistemic functions in English. They are also dispreferred in non-attributive functions (e.g. *a teeny-weeny bird* but *?the bird is teeny-weeny*; see Matthews 2009). However, unlike the SIZE-clusters analysed here, the TSC examples provided in the literature on English do not seem to feature reversible cases. In this connection, Benczes (2014: 441, fn. 7) cautiously notes, however, that there is ‘no exhaustive list of synonymous compounds in contemporary language use’.<sup>14</sup>

One may therefore wonder whether the SIZE-adjective clusters analysed here could be classed as particular instantiations of TSCs. A close look at the data analysis and a consideration of well-attested trends of language change seem, however, to suggest that SIZE-adjective clusters are the product of lexicalisation processes through the ‘freezing’ of syntactic collocational patterns (see Brinton & Traugott 2005: 47ff.; Miller 2014). Firstly, the analyses in sections 4 and 5 above show that particular SIZE-adjectives (i.e. *great* and *big* for the large-SIZE clusters; *little* for the small-SIZE ones) tend to feature across the clusters analysed. *Great*, *big* and *little* could

<sup>14</sup>Note that dvandvas (the overarching category to which TSC belong) are, in English, linearly flexible structures. Some are reversible (e.g. *cat–dog fight*; *green–blue eyes*), whereas others are not (e.g. *bitter–sweet* vs *?sweet–bitter*; *pale–dry* vs *?dry–pale*; Miller 2014: 57).

therefore be considered the central element of a partially schematic SIZE-cluster to which another, semantically related lexical item (i.e. another SIZE-adjective sharing dimensional mappings), is added.<sup>15</sup> This syn-semantic distribution of the clusters fits in well with what Moon (1998: 145-6) describes as lexico-grammatical frames, i.e. phraseological structures with a fixed and a variable slot where ‘the variable element is lexical... and the variations found tend to belong to the same semantic set’. In turn, the semantically determined variability of the cluster allows for certain productivity of the frame: consider not only the different clusters analysed in this article but also those SIZE-adjective combinations that were discarded due to their low scores in the MI and Z- significance tests (*enormous great, puny little, little weeny, whacking great*; see fn. 5 above). Finally, as previous literature has consistently shown, frequent co-occurrence of lexemes sharing core semantic meanings may lead to (co-)lexicalisation (see Lorenz 2002: 149 or Arnaud *et al.* 2008: 111ff.). In this respect, Wälchli (2005:115ff.) further observes that when language structures lexicalise (or, in his own words, become part of the ‘permanent’ lexicon of the language), they characteristically undergo an increase in their token frequency and a gradual loss ‘of context sensitivity’ (what in diachronic linguistics would be classed as ‘grammaticalisation’) that leads to an expansion of their functionality. As noted in section 4.3 above, GREAT BIG and BIG FAT seem to have undergone such a process of lexicalisation: while the other SIZE-adjective units explored here are (relatively) less frequent and have a more restricted functionality (descriptive modification), GREAT BIG and BIG FAT are noticeably more frequent across the PDE corpora and feature new intensifier/reinforcing functions.

## 7 Conclusion

The aims of this article were twofold: at the local linguistic level, to provide an in-depth analysis of the formal and functional characteristics of SIZE-adjective clusters in PDE; at the more general level, to show that intensificatory tautology is a well-established intensificatory strategy in PDE whose impact on current functional-structural descriptions of the English NP has only been partially acknowledged.

Considering first the results of the local linguistic analysis, the corpus investigation revealed that SIZE-adjective clusters have a wider semantic and functional distribution than previously observed. Semantically, previous literature associates SIZE-adjective clusters with descriptive modifier functions where they often convey ‘physical dimension’ meanings. The sections above show, however, that in descriptive modifier functions, SIZE-adjective clusters feature a variety of (non-physical and metaphorical) dimensional senses. As regards functional distribution, the results demonstrate that SIZE-adjective clusters are developing new reinforcer and adverbial intensifying

<sup>15</sup>I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion. The reviewer further points out the similarities of the schematic template of SIZE-adjective clusters with that of [adj+old] combinations such as *good old, silly old, grand old*. The fact that these latter combinations are semantically very different from the SIZE-clusters investigated here precludes the possibility of investigating further concomitances between the two types of clusters.

functions alongside the more ‘standard’ descriptive modifier uses. This functional expansion has a formal correlate: reinforcer and intensifier functions are, at present, mainly limited to non-reversible SIZE-adjective types (especially *great big*) – which in turn indicates the operation of well-established diachronic patterns of lexicalisation.

The article also makes a number of theoretical contributions. Modern linguistic theory standardly assumes that adjectives in NP complex modifying strings are ‘stacked’, i.e. they enter a layered modification pattern where the first (rightmost) adjective creates a unit with the noun that can be successively enlarged by the addition of adjectives placed on the left of the string (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 446; Matthews 2007: 132; 2009: 361; 2014: 87). The syntactic make-up of constructions such as the SIZE-adjective clusters explored here not only challenges the view that stacking should be seen as the default organising principle of adjectives in the NP modifying slot, but also reveals the need for a detailed investigation of how co-ordinative relations operate within the NP premodifying string (in this connection, see Méndez-Naya 2015; Vandelanotte 2002).

Moving from syntagmatic to paradigmatic considerations, the article shows that SIZE-adjective clusters are legitimate functional competitors to a range of well-established (and relatively more studied) intensificatory strategies in English. At the word-formation level, for instance, consider the syn-semantic concomitances between SIZE-adjective clusters and the TSC structures discussed in section 5 above. Furthermore, and also within the realm of morphology, the interpersonally subjective meanings of SIZE-adjective clusters mirror the range of semantic functions typically conveyed by suffixes in English (e.g. *tiny little* vs diminutives such as *-let* or *-ling*, for instance) and in other European languages (note the similarities between the reinforcing uses of large SIZE-adjective clusters and the functional import of augmentative suffixes in some Romance languages such as Spanish: *a great big plan* vs *un planazo*; *a great big problem* vs *un problemón*). SIZE-adjective clusters create further functional competitions with a number of phraseological structures in the NP. A case in point is the ‘standard’ NP pattern of adverbial intensification [ADV ADJ] (compare *a very big lorry* with *a big huge lorry*). Another potential site of functional competition is that established between the SIZE-adjective clusters explored here and the tautological iterations [ADJ ADJ] (e.g. *long-long N*, *old-old N*) briefly described in the Introduction above. The sharing of (and overlaps within) the intensificatory functional space between SIZE-clusters and these other strategies is in need of careful consideration.

Finally, SIZE-clusters are a particular manifestation of ‘accretion’ (i.e. the iteration of linguistic material within a structure; see, for instance, double comparative structures such as *more friendlier*). Functionally, linguistic accretion has often been associated with the conveyance of emphasis at the synchronic level, and conceptualised as remedial mechanism on the diachronic axis. More importantly for the purposes of this article, accretion is, paradigmatically, an innovative mechanism: it leads to the development of new constructions, especially at points in time in which linguistic (sub)systems are in transition (López-Couso 2013; Méndez-Naya 2015). In

the particular case of the Present-day English NP structure, previous literature has provided robust evidence of a significant increase in the number and variety of the structures that fill the NP premodifying slot (see Biber & Clark 2002; Arnaud *et al.* 2008). The on-going lexicalisation of SIZE-adjective clusters examined in this article constitutes another such manifestation of change in (or at least, increasing variability of) the NP premodifying string and, therefore, at the wider level, it constitutes a particular instantiation of the innovative (or, perhaps better, re-novative) impact of accretion on the English NP.

Overall, the present study shows that ‘minor’ strategies such as the SIZE-clusters analysed here are ‘less minor’ when one considers that they create pockets of interpersonal meanings whose impact on the formal and functional make-up of the NP deserves further exploration.

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