

Towards a Unified Analysis of *quite*

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## 1.0 Introduction

The adverbial modifier *quite* is exceptional in that it appears in front of not only verb phrases, but also a variety of other phrases, including noun phrases, adjective phrases, and prepositional phrases. It is also an interesting item of study because its effects on the phrases it modifies at first seem disparate.

In negative contexts, such as *Jenn didn't quite finish her homework* or *My cousin is not quite a woman*, *quite* serves to imply that the action or attribute defined by the predicate is almost true. In positive contexts, as in *She's quite a student* and *The sky is quite blue*, the use of *quite* somehow magnifies the attribute or entity being modified.

Additionally, in negative contexts *quite* often produces multiple readings. For example, *We don't quite own the house* can be interpreted in several ways. In one reading, a couple has paid off 18 years of a 20-year mortgage, and is expected to own the house at a point in the near future. In another, a couple has been renting a house for 20 years and so does something which is similar to owning the house, but which cannot exactly be classified as such. There is no evident syntactic reason for multiple readings with *quite*; thus we are led to search for a semantic or pragmatic explanation, or else to consider the possibility that *quite* is not one word, but rather several homophonous words, each with its own properties of usage.

This thesis examines the varied range of use and effect of the word *quite* in American English, in an attempt to move towards a unified theory of the word. The general questions to be addressed are:

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- 1) What is the basic function of *quite*, if any, and how does this function account for the seemingly distinct effects of *quite* when appearing in front of VPs, NPs, and APs?
- 2) What is the reason behind multiple readings in negative contexts?
- 3) What is the role of pragmatics in the ultimate interpretation of utterances with *quite*?
- 4) How can *quite*'s odd and ungrammatical environments be explained by the proposed theory?

Section 2 introduces the range of data and raises more specific questions than the ones above about the interaction of *quite* within various phrasal categories. In addition, a basic introduction is given to both situation aspect and lexical decomposition, two bodies of linguistic theory that provide a framework for the analysis that follows.

Section 3 attempts to answer both the general and specific questions set forth by providing a theory in which *quite* exists as one word, with the function of extracting scalar properties from a phrase in order to convey more specific information about the degree of truth of the modified phrase. First, *quite* in its negative contexts is explored. The nature and origin of the scale extracted by *quite* are identified. Multiple readings and scale coercion are discussed in the context of pragmatics. Next, *quite* is examined in positive contexts with APs and NPs, and its ungrammaticality with VPs explained (\**Jenn quite finished her homework*).

## 2.0 Range of use of *quite*

This section lays out the boundaries of *quite*'s usage with VPs, NPs and APs. The most significant questions raised here include: the ungrammaticality of *quite* with non-negated

VPs, the origin of multiple readings, and the contrast in acceptability between various sentences with *quite* within a specific phrasal category.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.1 Negative contexts

*Quite* can appear in front of all three categories in a negative context.

### 2.1.1 VPs and polarity sensitivity

With VPs, *quite* appears only in explicitly negated contexts:

- (1) Terry didn't quite recover from her illness.
- (2) \*Terry quite recovered from her illness.

The preliminary contrast between the acceptability of *quite* in negative and positive polarity environments raises the question of its possible status as an NPI, or negative polarity item. Ladusaw (1980) discusses negative polarity items as items which can appear only when preceded by an affective trigger – this being a word or phrase that negates or somehow questions the truth of the proposition. NPI's cannot appear in any other contexts, most noticeably in overtly positive contexts. Sentences (3)-(6) demonstrate the usage of *any*, a common NPI in English. Examples of affective triggers are shown in bold.

- (3) \*I have eaten any pizza.
- (4) I have **not** eaten any pizza.
- (5) **Have you** eaten any pizza?
- (6) She **denied** that she had eaten any pizza.

*Quite* can appear only in front of an overtly negated predicate. When used in the scope of a trigger that simply questions the predicate, the result is ungrammatical:

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis considers the occurrence of *quite* only with predicative phrases. Phrases such as *?I saw not quite a woman*, in which *quite* is modifying a non-predicative NP, are not discussed.

(7) \*He denied that Terry had quite recovered from her illness.

Thus, while *quite* is not a negative polarity item, its usage with verb phrases does seem polarity dependent, as it cannot appear with any verb phrases in a non-negated context. I hope to account for this in the theory that follows.

We see instances of multiple readings with some verb phrases when modified by *quite*:

(8) We don't quite own the house.

(8a) We've paid off 18 out of 20 years of our mortgage.

(8b) We have been renting the house for 20 years.

It is important to note that in (8a), there is the expectation that the subject will be owning the house in the near future, while (8b) conveys that the subject is doing something similar to owning a house, with no expectation of ownership in the future. One could imagine even more readings, but readings similar to (8a) and (8b) emerge as the most salient when the utterance comes without context. Sections 3.1.3 and 3.1.4 show how the proposal made above about the singular function of *quite*, along with its pragmatic environment, accounts for the emergence of multiple readings.

### 2.1.2 NPs

Noun phrases are comfortably modified by *quite* in negative contexts:

(9) My cousin is not quite a woman.

(10) Beth is not quite a student.

It is notable that NPs also get multiple interpretations with negative-context *quite*, more so than verb or adjective phrases. In sentence (9), for example, we can imagine that *my cousin* is a teenage girl who has almost completed puberty, or alternatively, that *my*

*cousin* is a grown man who looks, acts, and feels like a woman but is not actually female. Similarly, in sentence (10), Beth could be a 4-year-old about to enter kindergarten, or a college-age girl who sits in on a class at the university but does not pay tuition or receive a credit for the course.

### 2.1.3 APs

Negative-contexts adjective phrases vary in their acceptability with *quite*. For instance, a detailed context would be needed to explain the utterance of sentence (11), while sentence (12) is easily understood.

(11) #This shirt is not quite soft.

(12) I'm not quite certain I remembered to lock the door.

We wonder about the distinction between these two types of APs and why one is easily interpreted while another's meaning is heavily dependent on context.

## 2.2 Positive contexts

Noun phrases, and even more so adjective phrases, are readily modified by *quite* in positive contexts<sup>2</sup>:

(13) Your son is quite handsome.

(14) Mike is quite a smoker.

There are some instances, though, in which the use of *quite* is odd with NPs and APs:

(15) #The bug is quite dead.

(16) #Mike is quite an ex-smoker.

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<sup>2</sup> There is some question as to how common the use of *quite* with APs is in American English. Phrases such as *I'm quite happy* or *My leg is quite sore* are perhaps heard more frequently in British English. However, these constructs are understood, and some used fairly regularly, in American English, and so I have included them here as valid data. British English does exhibit additional uses of *quite* that do not appear American English, such as the utterance *Yes...quite*. Constructs such as these are not addressed in this thesis.

The contrast between the acceptability of *quite* in these contexts again leads us to ask what it is about the semantic properties of certain phrases that results in an odd reading when modified by *quite*, and how the listener interprets these sentences when uttered.

### 2.3 Background theory

This section introduces situation aspect and lexical decomposition. While both of these fields are complex bodies of theory, this paper is concerned only with a very basic understanding of each. Situation aspect will be revisited in section 3.1.1.1, and lexical decomposition in section 3.1.3.

#### 2.3.1 Situation aspect

Aktionsarten, as explained by Dowty (1979), is a system of classifying predicates according to the semantic nature of the action involved. Smith (1997) states that the important factors for aspectually classifying a predicate are as follows:

[+/- static]: Whether or not the event is an action or a state of being.

[+/- telic]: Whether or not a given event has an inherent goal, or endpoint, at which the action is complete. Examples of this are *cross the street* and *notice a man*. This endpoint need not be reached in order for the predicate to be considered telic; for instance, a man who is crossing the street is performing a telic action, whether or not he actually makes it to the other side. As long as the action is progressing towards an endpoint, it is considered telic.

[+/- durative]: Whether or not the event in question is ongoing. Examples of a [+durative] event include *know French* and *is walking*. An example of a [-durative] is the previous example of *notice a man*.

To *notice a man* is an instantaneous event; the only way one can *notice* for more than an instant is to notice more than one thing, in which case multiple non-durative noticing events are in fact taking place.

The four most basic verb classes can be defined using the three above characteristics:

stative:        [+static]

                 [-telic]

                 [+durative]

example:      *These students **know French**.*

activity:       [-static]

                 [-telic]

                 [+durative]

example:      *She was **running** when I saw her.*

accomplishment:   [-static]

                 [+telic]

                 [+durative]

example:      *Bill is **painting a picture**.*

achievement:     [-static]

                 [+telic]

                 [-durative]

example:      *I **noticed a man** in the shadows.*

Note that the entire predicate or sentence, not just the verb itself, must be considered in determining its aspectual class. The predicate *paint a picture* is an accomplishment, since the completion of the picture signifies the end of the action. With the predicate *paint*, however, there is no longer a specific endpoint imposed on the action, so it becomes atelic ([-telic]) and therefore an activity.

### 2.3.2 Lexical decomposition

Lexical decomposition deals with specific words and the units of meaning that combine to create the meaning of the whole. For example, we have a notion of what a *girl* is, but what exactly relates a *girl* to a woman? And in what sense does a *woman* differ from a *man*? Napoli (1996) gives a basic introduction to lexical decomposition by showing that we can break words down into component properties in order to better understand what exact properties relate them to each other. Considering the contrast between *girl*, *woman*, and *man*:

*girl*: [+female]  
[-post-pubescent]

*woman*: [+female]  
[+post-pubescent]

*man*: [-female]  
[+post-pubescent]

Note that there are many additional features shared by these three words – such as [+human], [+sentient] – but that in the analysis above, only the distinctive features are shown. What separates a *girl* from a *woman* is the experience of puberty, and both of these are distinguished from *man* by the attribute [+/- female].<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gender marking could just as easily be described as [+/- male]. In this case, there is not a clear-cut sense of one gender being the absence of another. Other attributes have more reason for demanding the positive role; for example, [+/- post-pubescent] seems a more likely choice than [+/- pre-pubescent], since

A lexical analysis is useful in situations where the root of a distinction comes from within the particular words themselves, rather than from broad syntactic or semantic categorizations.

### 3.0 Semantic and pragmatic analysis of *quite*

This section provides an analysis of *quite* in which its function is singular: to convey more specific information about the degree of truth of the predicate by extracting scalar properties from that which it modifies, placing the subject on the scale on either side of its point of origin.<sup>4</sup> In negative contexts, the subject is placed to the left of the point, and in positive contexts, to the right. When *quite* appears in front of a phrase that has no defined scale or endpoint, it coerces an interpretation in which this framework exists.

Though the function of *quite* is constant, its ultimate effect depends on the properties of the phrase it modifies. For example, verb phrases in negative contexts generally result in a scale of entailed events, and noun phrases in a scale of entailed characteristics of the entity modified. In positive contexts, the extracted scale is made up of degrees within the modified phrase, such as *quite handsome* being a high degree of *handsome*.

Much of what is inferred from the use of *quite* is pragmatic; in this theory, its basic semantic function will be explained along with a discussion of the pragmatic issues involved in its interpretation.

### 3.1 *Quite* in negative contexts

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puberty “gives” something, and to be a woman presupposes that one was once a girl. Thus it seems the distinctive feature between *girl* and *woman* should exist in the *woman* and be absent in the *girl*.

<sup>4</sup> There are many possibilities for a graphical representation of a scale; in this paper, the scales are represented linearly from left to right. To the left of the point of origin is the space in which the predicate is negated; to the right, the space in which the predicate is realized.

When appearing in negative contexts, *quite* gives us more specific information about the near-truth of the modified phrase. While a negated utterance without *quite* tells us only that the predicate is not true, *quite* adds the knowledge that it is, in fact, almost true. It does this by drawing out a scale of entailments from the modified phrase and placing the subject on the scale close to the point at which the utterance becomes true.

### 3.1.1 Effect of *quite* on verb phrases

When modifying verb phrases, *quite* generally implies that at the time of reference ( $t_r$ ) of the utterance, the event modified has not been realized, but is close to the point of occurrence, in that most of the entailed events leading up to it have been completed.<sup>5</sup>

(17) Terry didn't recover from her illness.

(18) Terry didn't quite recover from her illness.

When *quite* appears in front of the predicate *recover from her illness*, it conveys that the action almost reached its endpoint, and thus that the proposition *Terry recovered from her illness* was almost true at a point in the past.

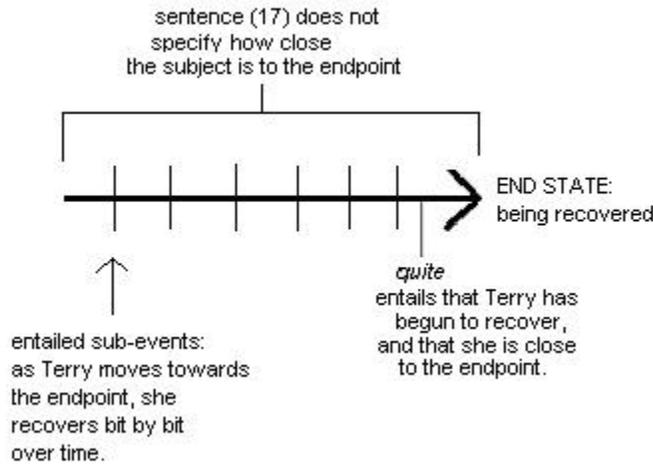
We can view the scale extracted by *quite* as one of entailed events. For Terry to eventually be recovered, and thus the action complete, she first has to complete the entailed sub-events of recovering. The scale, then, consists of parts of recovery – and as Terry moves closer and closer to the endpoint, she has completed more and more parts of this activity. The same is true of John painting the picture; as he moves along the activity line towards the endpoint, he has completed more and more acts of painting (if he is painting a person, maybe he paints an arm, then a leg, then another leg, and so on), until

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<sup>5</sup> As discussed in section 2.1.1, verb phrases often get multiple readings. This section deals with the reading in which it is expected that in the future, the predicate will be true of the subject. The other reading, in which there is no such expectation, along with the question of in what way the subject is *not quite* the predicate, will be addressed later on in section 3.1.2.

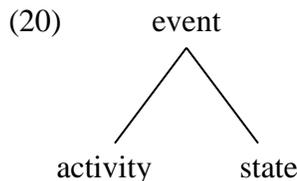
eventually he has completed enough painting acts to have *painted a picture*. Diagram (19) shows how *quite* in sentence (18) uses this scale to give the listener more specific information than does (17) about the truth of the predicate.

(19)



### 3.1.1.1 Aspect Coercion

We can understand more about the effect of *quite* in sentence (18) by looking at event structure more closely. The predicate in the original sentence (17) is classified as an accomplishment<sup>6</sup>, thus consisting of a progression towards a defined endpoint. Grimshaw (1990) cites Postejovsky (1988) as breaking down event structures further into multiple aspectual categories, and gives the example of an accomplishment being represented as follows:



<sup>6</sup> The aspectual classes of the examples in this paper were determined using diagnostic tests developed in Dowty 1979.

In *Terry recovered from her illness*, the activity is that of recovering, and the end state is the state of Terry being healthy again. The accomplishment predicate encompasses both the activity and the eventual point at which the resultant state is reached. The event is complete once the endpoint is reached, even though the resultant state itself (such as the painted picture) may exist for some time.

We see, then, that the scale of entailed events extracted by *quite* is essentially the same as the activity portion of the accomplishment structure. Since the accomplishment *recover from her illness* already consists of a pre-endpoint activity, all *quite* does is to place the subject at a point close to the endpoint, where the event is complete.

Events other than accomplishments are coerced into accomplishments as a result of the scale extraction by *quite*. Moens and Steedman (1988) introduce the term *coercion* and explain that an event of one aspectual class is sometimes reinterpreted as being of another class as a result of certain tenses and adverbial modifiers. de Swart (1998) states that:

Typically, coercion is triggered if there is a conflict between the aspectual character of the eventuality description and the aspectual constraints of some other element in the context. The felicity of an aspectual reinterpretation is strongly dependent on linguistic context and knowledge of the world. (360)

In this case, the conflict triggering coercion is the attempt by *quite* to extract a pre-endpoint scale from an aspectual class that has either no scale or no endpoint inherently present in its structure. When *quite* appears with an aspectual class other than accomplishments, the extraction of the scale forces the listener to reinterpret the event as an accomplishment. The point at which the modified phrase becomes true is the endpoint of the coerced accomplishment, and the pre-endpoint activity, or scale of entailed events, consists of any sub-events necessary to the completion of the original event. The

following discussion explains this analysis in the context of each of the remaining three verb classes.

#### Achievements

(21) The hiker didn't reach the top of the mountain.

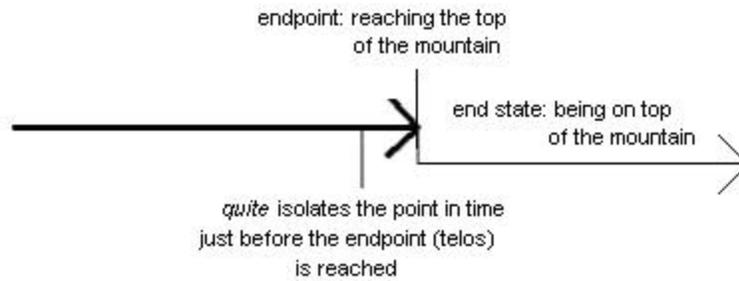
(22) The hiker didn't quite reach the top of the mountain.

The predicate *reach the top of the mountain* is classified as an achievement.

Achievements, we remember, consist of a point only, signifying both the beginning and end of an event. Yet when *quite* is added in sentence (22), the event described is known as having been somehow close to complete. This goes against the nature of an achievement, and so we are forced to reinterpret the aspectual class of the predicate in (22).

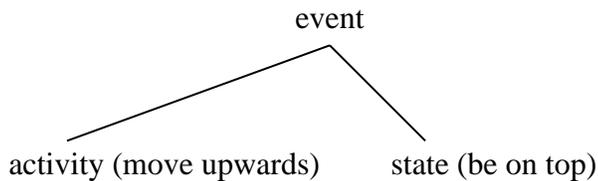
The predicate in sentence (22) fits the category of accomplishment. While *reach the top of the mountain* is still an instantaneous event, *quite* extracts the pre-endpoint activity that necessarily leads up to the point of the achievement. This completes the accomplishment structure. In order for the hiker to reach the top of the mountain, the hiker must first be moving towards the top. Once the top is reached, the hiker is in the resultant state of being on top of the mountain. Both the activity and its resultant state are needed for the reaching event to be complete, even though the achievement itself describes only the moment at which the top is reached. The addition of *quite* conveys that the hiker is, at  $t_r$ : 1) moving towards the top of the mountain, and 2) at a point almost on top of the mountain, as shown in diagram (23).

(23)



By drawing out a scale of events that are entailed in the achievement, *quite* widens the view of the utterance to include a larger event than simply the moment at which the top is reached. This makes sense when the achievement's structure is broken down in a similar way to that of an accomplishment:

(24)



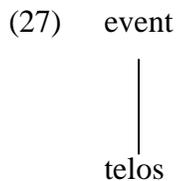
The achievement predicate encompasses only the meeting point of activity and state. The real-world event, however, still entails the prior activity of moving towards the top. Because *quite* actually coerces the meaning of the utterance to include a portion of the entailed activity, we are made aware of where the hiker is on his journey, instead of having his whereabouts exist in the world but not be made clear to us in the actual utterance.

Not all achievements are coerced into accomplishments this easily with *quite*, as seen in the contrast between sentences (25) and (26).

(25) Lisa didn't lose her set of keys.

(26) #Lisa didn't quite lose her set of keys.

Sentence (26) is not generally understood as an instance of accomplishment coercion, as in, “Lisa almost lost her keys, but didn't.”<sup>7</sup> Our theory above explains why. Though both this example and that of the hiker are considered achievements, there is an important distinction between the two. In (26), there is a clearly defined endpoint, but there is no sense even outside of the viewpoint of the utterance of any progression leading up to that point. Its event structure looks like this:



As in the previous example, the achievement is represented by a point – here, the point at which Lisa actually loses the keys. *Quite* cannot easily widen the view of the utterance to include the activity leading up to the end state, because there is no such activity.

When a sentence like this is uttered, the listener is forced to create a context in which an activity does exist; a possible situation is one in which Lisa is known to be forgetful and somewhat “talented” as losing keys, and one family member says to another, “Lisa didn't quite lose her set of keys yesterday, but she tried pretty hard.” Perhaps Lisa kept leaving them behind at various stores in the mall, and if her sister hadn't picked them up for her, she would have lost them. This “leaving them behind” action is then an event entailed in losing her keys, and so in this way she was close to losing them.

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<sup>7</sup> An additional reading of this is one in which Lisa did something similar to losing her keys – like misplacing them temporarily. Again, readings such as this will be addressed in section 3.1.2.

Thus achievements vary in their readiness to appear with *quite*, due to the presence (or lack thereof) of an activity assumed to precede the event denoted in the utterance. When an utterance such as (26) is produced, the listener is forced to imagine a possible scale of entailments extracted by *quite* in order to make sense of the utterance.

#### Statives and activities

Statives and activities, when modified by *quite*, show the same accomplishment coercion, but understandably through a different process than achievements.

(28) We don't quite own the house.

(29) He's not quite running.

While neither statives nor activities are telic, *quite* coerces an accomplishment reading out of (28) and (29) by pushing the modified event into the end state, and drawing out the scale of entailed events from the point at which the event becomes true. So while the end state in (28) is the state of ownership, and in (29) is the activity of running, *quite* has widened the view of the utterance to include the events leading up to that end state and thus to the fulfillment of the predicate.

#### 3.1.2 Two readings: accomplishment and resemblance

Until now we have set aside the additional reading of many of the examples with *quite* discussed in the previous section. We have observed that sentences (26) and (28) get not only the “accomplishment” reading already explained, but can also get a “resemblance” reading. In fact, though some verb phrases can get the accomplishment reading only with the help of a detailed context (as in the case of Lisa and her set of keys), almost all, if not all, verb phrases can get the resemblance reading. This is because while in the accomplishment reading, *quite* draws out a scale of entailed events, in the resemblance

reading the modified predicate is seen not in terms of its relation to time and other events, but instead in terms of the properties that define it. It is by its inherent properties that a verb like *running* is distinguished from *waddling* or *walking*; any verb can be defined by some set of properties, even if there does not exist a set of sub-events necessary to its completion. Because of the nature of events, the accomplishment reading carries the expectation at  $t_r$  that at some point in the near future, the predicate will be true (though just as in the example of the man crossing the street, we see that the accomplishment does not always become true).

The property-based scale is the basis of the interpretation of *quite* with noun phrases; for this reason, we will explore the issues involved in multiple readings in the context of noun phrases, returning later to more deeply examine the occurrence of multiple readings with verb phrases.

### 3.1.3 Noun phrases and multiple readings

(30) My cousin is not quite a woman.

(30a) My cousin is a teenage girl going through puberty.

(30b) My cousin is a transgendered man who looks, feels, and acts like a woman but is not biologically female.

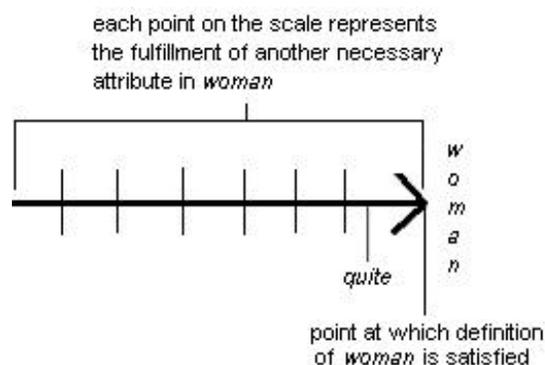
These readings represent situations in which the subject can almost be classified as a *woman*, but is *not quite* in the state of womanhood due to the absence of an essential characteristic. The theory explaining multiple readings is that while the semantic function of *quite* is singular, the pragmatic context surrounding the utterance generates multiple interpretations. Two factors are at work here: 1) the manner in which the subject

differs from the modified phrase, and 2) whether or not there is a time-connected expectation that the modified phrase will eventually be true of the subject.

### 3.1.3.1 Determination of missing attribute(s)

In the case of sentence (30), we can imagine an end state *woman*, and a property-based scale leading up to this end state displaying all of the necessary attributes entailed in being a woman. These are things such as [+human], [+female], and [+post-pubescent], as seen in the introduction to lexical decomposition in section 2.3.2. It is important to note that these attributes do not come in any certain order, because to be female does not entail being human, and so on. This is in contrast to the scale extracted by *quite* in the accomplishment reading, where each point on the scale represents an event further along in time than the previous (entailed) event. On the property-based scale, as the subject acquires more and more attributes of a woman, he or she moves closer to the end state *woman*, and when sentence (30) is uttered, is one or a few crucial characteristics away from being a woman. A graphical representation of this idea is shown below in (31).

(31)



Therefore *quite* extracts a scale of necessary attributes from the modified entity, and tells us that the subject possesses almost all of these attributes. The specific interpretation of the manner in which the subject is *not quite* the modified entity (not old

enough, not female, etc.) depends on which attribute the subject does not possess. This is determined not by *quite* but rather from the context, common ground, or further elaboration by the speaker. In (30a), *my cousin* is a teenage girl – a female who is not [+post-pubescent]. In (30b), *my cousin* is also close to *woman*, but in this case the missing attribute is that of [+female]. In both cases *quite* is drawing out a scale of entailed subparts and placing the subject close to the endpoint. The task of determining how many, and which, attributes are missing, is left up to pragmatics. This is instrumental in allowing for the wide range of subtle interpretations possible with *quite*, depending on context and the speaker's intent.

### 3.1.3.2 The temporal connection

The other relevant issue in the realm of multiple readings is the split between (30a) and (30b) in terms of the expectation that the modified phrase will become true. In (30a), there is a natural assumption made by the listener that *my cousin* will, at a point in the near future, be a woman. (30b), on the other hand, carries no such expectation. The interpretation of (30a) resembles the accomplishment reading we saw in verb phrases; there is an eventual endpoint, and it is assumed at  $t_i$  that the endpoint will be reached. (30b) gets a resemblance reading, in which the subject closely resembles a woman, but cannot be classified as one, and is not necessarily expected to be one in the future.

Though the scale in both readings is one of attributes, (30a) nonetheless results in an accomplishment reading. This is due to the temporal component of the attribute [+post-pubescent]. A subject that possesses all attributes of a woman except [+post-pubescent] is expected to at some point become [+post-pubescent], since the attribute is attached to time. The attribute [+female] does not have this same temporal connection,

and so it makes sense that one would not normally expect the attribute to change over time. When verb phrases are modified by *quite*, the accomplishment reading comes about when the scale is one of events, because they are inherently connected to time. As we see here, any phrase whose contextually relevant subpart is time-connected will result in an accomplishment reading when modified by *quite*.

And certainly with additional context and conversation, more interpretations could arise; for instance, one in which *my cousin* is about to undergo a sex-change operation and so is expected to be a woman in the near future. This, again, is dependent on the conversational participants' knowledge of the special time-connected context surrounding the attribute [+female] – that it can change, and is about to change. The semantic function of *quite* itself does not include any attachment to time or to specific attributes.

It follows from the above discussion that entities with no time-connected properties will not result in the accomplishment reading.

(32) That is not quite a chair.

Sentence (32) can generally only be uttered to describe something that closely resembles a chair, not something that will in the near future become a chair. The only way this utterance could be understood in the accomplishment sense is if both the speaker and the listener are aware of a time-connected context surrounding the missing attribute (as in the case of [+female] and the sex-change operation). If this context is not immediately apparent, it can be hinted at by the use of *yet*, which imposes the time element outside of the function of *quite*:

(33) That is not quite a chair. (uttered in a factory whose purpose is to change tables into chairs through a series of steps)

(34) That is not quite a chair yet.

#### 3.1.4 Revisiting multiple readings in verb phrases

When verb phrases result in multiple readings, as in the case of *We don't quite own the house*, the accomplishment and resemblance readings are distinguished by the extraction of two distinct scales by *quite* – one of entailed events, as seen in section 3.1.1, and one of entailed properties, as seen in the previous section.

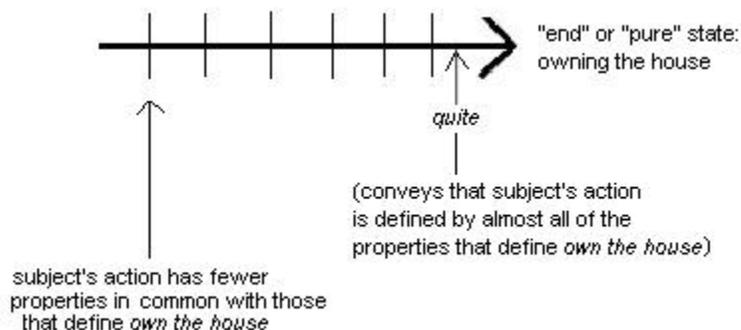
(35) We don't quite own the house.

(35a) We've paid off 18 out of 20 years of our mortgage.

(35b) We've been renting the house for 20 years.

(35a) is an example of an accomplishment reading – *own the house* is the end state, and the scale drawn out from the endpoint is that of the entailed events leading up to it. The resemblance reading paraphrased in (35b), in contrast, considers *own the house* in relation to its definition. This reading can be represented using the property-based scale:

(36)



The split between multiple readings with verb phrases seems more drastic than that with noun phrases, since it is based on a different scale altogether rather than just the presence

or absence of a time attachment. However it still seems reasonable to say that the extraction by *quite* of one scale or the other depends on the pragmatic context surrounding the utterance.

### 3.1.5 Scale coercion by *quite* with APs

Many negative-context adjective phrases modified by *quite* result in an odd interpretation when uttered without context, but can be used and understood in the right situation. Frequently these are phrases that have no defined set of subparts which *quite* can reference in order to draw out the scale of entailment:

(37) #Your shirt is not quite soft.

In the above example, there is no exact point at which *soft* becomes true. Instead this is pretty much based on speaker judgment, with no defined set of attributes inherent to the word itself which *quite* can access. This is unlike most noun phrases, which, as we saw above, are clearly defined. Other APs that cannot be interpreted as having a clear-cut beginning point, such as #*not quite interesting* and #*not quite grateful*, result in this same oddness when modified by *quite*.

This is not to say, however, that these utterances do not occur. One can easily imagine a situation in which sentence (37) is uttered and the listener is forced to create some concept of the point at which an item becomes *soft*. An example of this is if a man puts a shirt in the dryer to soften it, and when it comes out it's not as soft as he had desired or pictured it to be. He could then utter sentence (37). In situations like this, the modified adjective is forced by *quite* to become some kind of defined entity or state which has almost been reached – the state of softness, in the case of (37). This is often

perceived in the way an utterance such as (37) is spoken – *That shirt is not quite “soft,”* as if *soft* is some separate state that the shirt has *not quite* reached.<sup>8</sup>

This idea is supported by the fact that certain APs are perfectly acceptable with *quite*. *Not quite certain*, or *not quite satisfied*, can be uttered with ease. These words – *certain*, *sure*, *ready* – seem more like resultant states of an accomplishment. One works towards being *ready*, and eventually arrives in the state of readiness. For this reason there is no sense of coercion by *quite* with these phrases, because a scale and a defined endpoint are already in place.

Another way in which sentence (37), and those like it, would become easily understood is with the addition of *enough* – as in, *Your shirt is not quite soft enough*. *Enough* imposes a defined point within the realm of *soft*; in its presence, *quite* can extract a scale of all values of *soft* before this point, and can position the subject on the scale close to the imposed point where *soft* becomes *soft enough*.

### 3.2 *Quite* in positive contexts

While *quite* puts the subject of negative-context utterances to the left of the endpoint, in positive contexts the subject is put to the right of the endpoint. To the right of the endpoint is the range in which the modified phrase is true. This occurs easily when the modified phrase itself has subparts, as in the case of most adjective phrases, whose degree can be heightened or lessened using words like *very* and *somewhat*. The scale that *quite* extracts is one of degrees. Just as in negative contexts, when *quite* appears in front of a phrase that does not have an inherent range, the listener is forced to interpret the situation in such a way that the range is coerced into existence.

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that negative-context adjective phrases, when modified by *quite*, are not restricted to just the resemblance reading, but can also get the accomplishment reading when the missing attribute is

### 3.2.1 *Quite* with APs and degree coercion

(38) The sky is quite blue today.

(39) Your son is quite handsome.

In the above examples, it is fairly clear that *quite* is magnifying the adjective in some way. To say *Your son is quite handsome* conveys that the son being talked about is handsome to a notably high degree. This says more than the statement *Your son is handsome*, which neglects to specify the degree of handsomeness.

So while the word *handsome* alone describes a state that a noun can exist in, the actual idea of handsomeness is one with an inherent range of values – which is why we can say somebody is *more handsome* than another person. What *quite* does is to explicitly reference this scale and place the subject to the right of the “norm” – whatever we mean when we simply say somebody is *handsome*.<sup>9</sup>

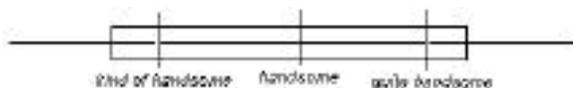
The reason why certain types of adjective phrases are odd with *quite* in a positive context is similar to the reason behind odd readings with APs in a negative context. While in negative contexts there is no defined point from which *quite* can draw out a scale of entailment, in positive contexts the modified phrase is only a point, and there is no scale of degrees *within* the phrase that can be isolated and modified by *quite*:

(40) #The bug is quite dead.

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known to be time-connected in the context of the utterance.

<sup>9</sup> This norm can be modified by all kinds of degree words, which effectively place the subject on different points of the scale. For example, *kind of handsome* implies less than the usual *handsome*, while *quite handsome* implies more handsomeness than the norm:



The phenomenon of degree words modifying a scale of a property is well-documented by Horn (1989).

Verb-derived adjectives, as in sentence (40) and in other examples such as *#quite frozen* and *#quite broken*, clearly sound odd, just as it sounds strange to say a woman is *#very pregnant*. When these utterances do occur, the degree modifiers are actually coercing a scale out of a word that does not normally have any sense of degree. Often the phrase *#quite dead* is used in a facetious or dramatic context, when extra emphasis is being placed on the situation; for example, a squirrel which falls out of a tree and dies might be described simply as *dead*, while a squirrel run over by four trucks is more likely to be described as *quite dead*.

### 3.2.2 NPs: “emphasis” vs. “action extension”

The nature of *quite* in positive contexts with noun phrases is complex. There seem to be two categories of NPs, which elicit different effects from *quite*.

Sentences (41) and (42) are examples of what we will call the “emphasis” reading on NPs.

(41) Rudy Giuliani is quite a mayor.

(42) Your brother is quite a basketball player.

NPs that get the emphasis reading are almost always professions or titles of some sort, and the subject is being seen as a remarkable version of this profession or title.

Paraphrases for these sentences can be seen below.

(41a) Rudy Giuliani is a remarkable mayor.

(42a) Your brother is a remarkable basketball player.

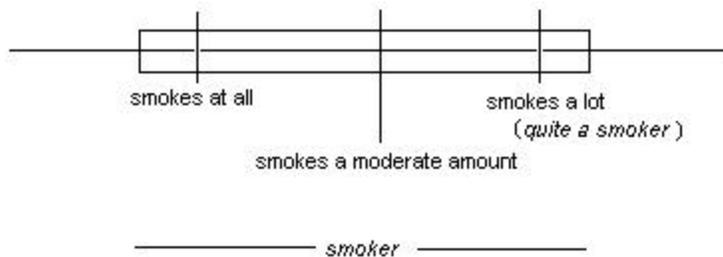
Generally these utterances are taken to mean remarkable in a good sense, though certainly context and intonation can reverse the meaning. Regardless, the primary effect of *quite* in these utterances is one of emphasis.

Other NPs, when modified by *quite*, show behavior more consistent with what we have seen so far with *quite*, in that its effect is connected to a sense of scale or degree within the phrase itself.

(43) Mike is quite a smoker.

To say *Mike is quite a smoker* is to say something about the degree to which Mike smokes – namely, that he does it a lot. Thus the addition of *quite* moves Mike higher up on the scale of *smoker*. The scale is made up of the noun-defining action or attribute(s); in this case, the act of smoking. To smoke to a higher degree is to perform more acts of smoking:

(44)



It seems the difference between this action-extending reading and the emphasis reading lies in the type of phrase being modified. In the example of (43), *smoker* is a deverbal noun meaning “one who smokes,” whereas the NPs which get the emphasis reading are not simple descriptions of actions.

This idea is supported further when we look at examples of NPs that can get either reading:

(45) Your father is quite a gambler.

(46) Liz is quite a dancer.

Either of these sentences could get the emphasis reading, if *gambler* and *dancer* are taken to be titles or professions. They also could get the action extension reading, if *dancer* and *gambler* are thought of simply as deverbal nouns instead of specialized titles.

Paraphrases demonstrating the action extension reading are shown in (45a) and (46a).

(45a) Your father gambles a lot.

(46a) Liz dances a lot.

Sentence (42) can also get this reading if basketball player is thought of as a deverbal NP.

We are left now with the question of why, when *smoker* in sentence (43) changes to *ex-smoker*, the resulting utterance sounds strange:

(47) #Mike is quite an ex-smoker.

This utterance can be understood only through the emphasis reading, as if Mike is some kind of anti-smoking crusader, and thus *ex-smoker* is his title or profession. Thus *quite* is expressing that Mike is a remarkable *ex-smoker* – maybe he fights against smoking, picketing nonstop by the side of the road or ripping cigarettes out of the hands of passersby on the street.

The utterance cannot be interpreted, however, as some kind of extension of the act that makes Mike an ex-smoker. He's not an ex-smoker in the sense that he *really* doesn't smoke – and in this way the interpretation differs from that of (43). The meaning of *ex-smoker* depends integrally on the meaning of *smoker*; simply put, it is an absence of the act of smoking, with the requirement that the subject did smoke in the past. Since *ex-smoker* is defined by the absence of an action rather than the presence of one, there is nothing for *quite* to extend to a higher degree.

Similarly, noun phrases that originally get the emphasis reading also present problems when turned into an *ex-* or *former*, as in *#quite an ex-President* or *#quite a former rock star*. The reason is that these NPs also denote an absence – to say somebody is a *former rock star* is a way of saying they are no longer something they used to be. In order for *quite* to have anything to emphasize, this NP must be thought of as a presence rather than an absence – and so when phrases like this are uttered, *ex-President* and *former rock star* are interpreted as being their own defined titles or professions.

### 3.2.3 Why VPs are ungrammatical with *quite* in non-negated contexts

Our analysis thus far should give us a better picture of why *quite* is ungrammatical with all verb phrases in non-negated contexts. Basically what it comes down to is that the nature of an event does not allow for degrees. A VP represents a happening in time that can have stages moving towards completion (thus allowing for the negated-context *quite*), but that once true, is over, and cannot be “brought to a higher degree.” There is no range inside of a completed event, the way that there is an inherent (or possibly coerced) range of degrees in a fulfilled AP or NP.

## 4.0 Summary and conclusion

This somewhat unified account of *quite* presents it as a single word with a single function: to convey specific information about the degree to which the modified phrase holds true of an entity, by extracting scalar properties from the phrase. Its ultimate effect develops, however, from the specific properties of the phrase being modified, and from the pragmatic context surrounding the utterance.

*Quite*'s odd instances in negative contexts can be explained by the unclear definition of the modified phrase, as in *#not quite soft*, or by the absence of a pre-

endpoint progression, as in *#lose her keys* or *#notice the man*. In these instances, *quite* coerces the missing endpoint or scale into existence in order to perform its function. *Quite*'s odd (and ungrammatical) instances in positive contexts can be explained by the lack of scalar properties within the range of truth of the phrase being modified. When these utterances are made, the listener is forced to create an interpretation in which a range of degrees exists, as in *#quite dead*.

Furthermore, we have found that the categorical ungrammaticality of VPs with *quite* in non-negated contexts is due to the fact that a completed event is in the past (relevant to the time of reference), and thus there is no existent range of degrees to the right of the endpoint. This idea is supported by the fact that verb phrases cannot be modified by other degree words: *#very running*, *#more running than...*

Naturally, there remain unanswered questions. For one, it would be ideal to have a more unified explanation of the varied effects of *quite* on NPs in positive contexts. Also, the relationship between positive-context and negative-context *quite* could be explained more fully using principles introduced by Horn (1989). And beyond this analysis, a full exploration of all remaining environments in which *quite* appears (including its modification of non-predicative phrases) might lead to more evidence of this scale-extracting function, or perhaps would uncover another function that has not been made apparent through the examples studied in this analysis. At this point, however, it seems that the general function of *quite* has been isolated and its boundaries of usage explained in relation to its function.

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