THE GRAMMATICALIZATION OF PRIVATIVE ADJECTIVES: THE CASE OF MERE

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1. INTRODUCTION

Present Day English (PDE) mere is a negative intensifier, or downtoner in the sense of Quirk et al. (1985: 430, 590), having “a lowering effect, usually scaling downwards from an assumed norm”. Mere developed from a privative adjective meaning ‘pure, unmixed’ through a process of grammaticalization and subjectification. Privative adjectives are adjectives which denote or predicate privation, i.e. adjectives whose meaning is characterized by the absence of a certain quality or attribute (cf. also Leisi, 1967). Other examples include bare ‘uncovered’, German bloß ‘uncovered’, or the now obsolete German adjective lauter ‘pure, unmixed’. Privative adjectives come to be grammaticalized with a more subjective meaning frequently.

In this paper I present a case study for mere. First, the present day adjectival status of mere is discussed, showing that PDE mere is a peripheral adjective and may be regarded as grammaticalized. Then a short corpus analysis of mere is presented with data from the British National Corpus (BNC), showing that mere is used in only a small number of different patterns in PDE. The second part of the paper describes the diachronic situation for mere. Based on the analysis of two diachronic corpora, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) quotations database and the Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence (PCEEC), I will trace the emergence of

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1 Here I would like to thank Arja Nurmi who made this corpus available for me.
today’s intensifier mere from its oldest meaning ‘pure, unmixed’ via the metaphorical meaning ‘morally good’.

2. SYNCHRONIC MERE

2.1. The categorial status of PDE mere

In grammars of English, members of the category adjective are defined with recourse to the following properties (cf. e.g. Quirk et al., 1985; Biber et al., 1999; Huddleston and Pullum, 2005) where central members of the word class display all of the properties: (i) use in attributive position, i.e. as modifiers of nouns, (ii) predicative use, i.e. as complements, (iii) gradability, meaning that they can be modified by degree adverbs and (iv) degree of comparison, i.e. comparative and superlative uses. It will be shown that in PDE mere is not a central adjective according to these criteria.

2.1.1. Attributive use. In fact, mere only fully fulfils the first of the four defining criteria for adjectives. The corpus examples show that mere is exclusively used in attributive position as modifier of nouns. But in its attributive use, too, mere is quite restricted: Firstly, it occurs in a limited set of patterns. These uses will be analyzed in detail in Section 2.3. Moreover, when there is more than one adjectival modifier within the premodifying string, mere is always first. In the BNC there is only one occurrence where mere is preceded by another adjective.

(1) The conflicts and inconsistencies present in our commonsense and other mere primitive concepts of inquiry are resolved in a procedure which exhibited a harmony between presumption, aim, and method
(BNC 2)

The item other, however, is a word whose categorical status is equivocal. It has both determiner-like and adjective-like properties. In examples as the above other is part of the determiner-unit: it helps the hearer to establish which instances the speaker is referring to, indicating that the instances referred to are not identical with other discourse referents (cf. Breban, 2006: 147ff for a detailed analysis of other). Items like other have therefore been called ‘postdeterminers’ (cf. Sinclair, 1991: 70; Halliday, 1985: 162; Quirk et al., 1985: 262) or ‘semi-determiners’ (cf. Biber et al., 1999: 280). As part of the determiner-unit, postdeterminers immediately follow the (central) determiner in the NP and precede all (other) modifiers. If other is regarded as part of the determiner-unit, then mere in the above example is not preceded by another modifier, but is itself the only modifier within the NP.