

# TERRIFIC-LOOKING CREATURES AND TERRIFIC, FUNNY GUYS: ON THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH TERRIFIC<sup>1</sup>

**PALOMA NUÑEZ PERTEJO**

Universidad de Santiago de Compostela  
pnunez.pertejo@usc.es

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## Abstract

The term *terrific*, in line with the development of a number of evaluative adjectives over the course of the history of English, such as *awesome*, *bare*, *brutal*, *massive* and *wicked*, has come to express positive meanings where it originally conveyed negative ones. This kind of lexical semantic change, well-documented across languages, has been referred to in the literature as ‘(a)melioration’, ‘elevation’ or ‘improvement of meaning’ (cf. Culpeper 1997, among many others). The current paper employs a corpus methodology to trace the history of *terrific*, using three synchronic and diachronic corpora representing the two supranational varieties of the language, namely British English and American English. The sense development of the adjective is examined in light of parameters such as syntactic function (attributive vs. predicative use), principal collocations, and dialectal variation (British vs. American usage).

**Keywords:** *terrific*, intensifying/evaluative adjectives, semantic change, (a) melioration, grammaticalization.

## Resumen

Al igual que ha sucedido con la evolución histórica de otros adjetivos de carácter evaluativo, tales como *awesome*, *bare*, *brutal*, *massive* y *wicked*, *terrific* ha pasado

de tener un significado claramente negativo a uno positivo. Este cambio semántico, que está documentado en diferentes lenguas, se denomina en la literatura especializada ‘melioración de significado’ (cf. Culpeper 1997, entre otros). El objetivo principal de este trabajo es llevar a cabo un estudio exhaustivo de la historia de *terrific* a través de una metodología basada en el análisis de diferentes corpus representativos de las variedades de inglés británico y americano con el fin de ver la evolución semántica de este adjetivo a la luz de distintos parámetros, tales como función sintáctica (atributiva o predicativa), colocaciones, y variación dialectal (inglés británico vs. inglés americano).

**Palabras Clave:** *Terrific*, adjetivos intensificadores/evaluativos, cambio semántico, melioración de significado, gramaticalización

## 1. Introduction

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As is widely recognized in the literature, certain semantic domains are marked by rapid lexical change, especially “colloquial and emotive terms of approval or disapproval” (Mair 2006: 38-39). Particularly sensitive to semantic change is the field of intensifiers, an area in language that remains relatively unstable and unsettled, and which is constantly under renewal. Indeed, the competition and recycling of intensifiers has been the norm from the Old English period to the present (cf. Bolinger 1972; Altenberg 1991; Ito and Tagliamonte 2003; Méndez-Naya 2008a, 2008b; Tagliamonte 2008).

‘Intensifiers’, also known as ‘degree modifiers’<sup>2</sup> or ‘degree words’, have been the object of a great deal of scholarly discussion since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> They are used to convey emotion, an essential component in human communication, and this may be one of the reasons why interest in this specific domain has increased recently (cf. Lorenz 2002; Nevalainen and Rissanen 2002; Paradis 2003; Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005; Tagliamonte 2006, 2008; Traugott 2006; Athanasiadou 2007; Xiao and Tao 2007; Núñez-Pertejo 2013; Calle-Martín 2014). Thanks to advances in computational and theoretical linguistics, with the development of computerized corpora, and also to developments in the study of semantic change and grammaticalization processes, there has been renewed interest in the topic from different perspectives (cf. Méndez-Naya 2008a: 213).

Intensifiers have been defined as “elements which modify another element with respect to degree” (Athanasiadou 2007: 560). They are also typically indicative of a specific type of adjective modifier, “one which corresponds to adverbs of degree; and certainly this is the most common semantic type” (Allerton 1987: 16), like

*very* in “very good” or *absolutely* in “absolutely necessary”.<sup>4</sup> However, there are adjectives that also fulfill an intensifying function, such as *terrific* in “terrific despair”; these are usually referred to as ‘intensifying’ (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 429), ‘reinforcing’ adjectives or ‘reinforcers’ (cf. Paradis 2008). “The relationship between a reinforcing adjective and its nominal head is comparable to the relationship between a reinforcing adverb and its adjectival head” (Paradis 2008: 337), since their diachronic development typically runs in parallel, as in pairs like *absolute/absolutely*, *total/totally*, *awful/awfully* and *terrible/terribly*.

Because of their semantic make-up, these adjectives are particularly prone to experience semantic change, which makes them a very productive area for research. In this paper I will address one largely unexplored case: the evaluative adjective *terrific*.

## 2. *Terrific*: from negative to positive superlativity

Most intensifiers have undergone ‘delexicalization’, one of the general processes of grammaticalization, in that their original lexical content has been ‘reduced’ or ‘lost’, and they have become intensifying markers (cf. Partington 1993: 183; Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005: 284-285); *very* being a notable case here. As will be shown, *terrific* has not lost its lexical content but, over the course of time, has clearly ‘improved’ or ‘(a)meliorated’ its original meaning (cf. Culpeper 1997; Schendl 2001; Fortson 2003). ‘(A)melioration’ is thus the tendency for a word “[to] become associated with more favorable concepts than before” (Moessner 2003: 150), as illustrated by *nice*, from Latin *nescius*, originally ‘simple, ignorant’, but now ‘friendly, approachable’ (cf. Fortson 2003: 650; also Traugott 1996: 3).<sup>5</sup> In turn, the opposite process to (a)melioration is usually referred to as ‘pejoration’ or ‘degeneration of meaning’ (cf. Moessner 2003: 149), that is, “the tendency to semanticize the more negative connotations of a word” (Traugott 1996: 3), as illustrated by Old English *stincan* (Present-day English *stink*) ‘to smell’ > Middle English ‘to smell obnoxious’.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED s.v.<sup>6</sup> *terrific* adj.), *terrific* entered the English lexicon in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century as a loan partly from French *terrifique* and partly from Latin *terrificus*. Its first recorded use dates from 1667, in the sense ‘causing terror, terrifying; terrible, frightful; stirring, awe-inspiring; sublime’ (OED s.v. *terrific* adj. 1), which highlights “an extreme point on a scale of ‘content X’” (Paradis 2008: 335):

- (1) The Serpent... with brazen Eyes And hairie Main *terrific* (1667 MILTON *Paradise Lost* vii. 497).

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *terrific* had already developed a new sense, one which no longer relates to its ultimate etymological origin (i.e. Anglo-Norman *terroure* > Middle French *terreur*, Latin *terror* ‘intense fear, awe, terror, dread’), but rather indicating an entity as being ‘of great size or intensity; excessive, very severe, tremendous’ (*OED* s.v. *terrific* adj. 2.a). Thus, the superlative meaning of ‘terror’ attested in (1) has generalized to ‘high degree’ (cf. Paradis 2008: 336 on the semantic development of *terrible*):

- (2) How cou’d..Porphyrión of *terrific* size..stand against the Warrior-goddess?  
(1743 M. TOWERS tr. Horace *Lyric Pieces* II. v. xviii. 325).

It can be argued, then, that grammaticalization is at work at this stage, for *terrific* has acquired a more subjective meaning as a degree word.

Finally, the positive and more affective sense of something being ‘approved-by-the-speaker’, the sense that is so prominent today, ‘amazing, impressive; excellent, exceedingly good, splendid’ (*OED* s.v. *terrific* adj. 2.b), appears towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

- (3) The last lines of the first ballad are simply *terrific*, —something entirely different to what any English author would dream of, much less put on paper.  
(1871 *Athenaeum* 21 Oct. 540/1 (*adv.*).

As will be shown below (cf. Section 4.2), there is a further development in the history of the adjective, since ‘positive’ *terrific* may also occur independently, that is, without a following nominal head, as an emphatic, enthusiastic form of commendation, as in the following example from the *OED* (s.v. *terrific* adj. 2.b):

- (4) “Thanks awfully,” said Rex. “That’ll be ripping”. “Fine!” said Derek Yardley.  
“Great! *Terrific!*” (1930 D. G. MACKKAIL *Young Livingstones* xi. 271).

It seems from examples such as (4) that *terrific* has “become conventionalized into what we may call a response particle” (Adamson 2000: 62), equivalent to *fine* or *great*, following the ellipsis of a predicative construction such as [*it is*] *terrific* (cf. Adamson 2000: 62). In other words, it is not a single referent that arouses enthusiasm, as in (3), but the whole situation. All this can be taken as a further step in the grammaticalization cline of *terrific* (cf. Adamson 2000: 62), in that the adjective can have scope over larger discourse chunks.

In view of this, a number of questions emerge:

- (i) What is the exact frequency over time of each of the senses identified by the *OED*? This will be tested in three comparable corpora of British and American English (see Section 3 below). Did these senses develop in a similar way in the two varieties, or can differences be discerned?
- (ii) Is there a correlation between semantic development and syntactic

function? Syntactic function is understood here in terms of the contrast between attributive (e.g. *a terrific noise*) and predicative (e.g. *the food was terrific*) use. That is, how does the contrast between attributive and predicative position correlate, if at all, with the various senses of *terrific*?

(iii) What is the influence of collocation? Which nominals co-occur primarily with the various senses of *terrific* over time?

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: the corpora used are described in Section 3, followed by the findings from the corpus analysis in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 summarizes the main conclusions of the study.

### 3. Survey of the corpora

Since, as we have just seen, *terrific* became part of the English lexicon in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, and its sense development was completed by the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when sense 2b ‘impressive, excellent’ is first recorded, the focus of the present analysis will be primarily on the Late Modern English period (1700-1920). With this in mind, and in order to answer the research questions formulated in Section 2 above, two corpora were selected which were deemed suitable for a comparative analysis of Late Modern British and Late Modern American English: the *Corpus of Late Modern English Texts*, version 3.0 (CLMET3.0; cf. De Smet, Diller and Tyrkkö 2011) for Late Modern British English, and the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA), compiled by Mark Davies at Brigham Young University (<http://corpus.byu.edu/coha/>) for Late Modern American English.

CLMET3.0 is a large collection of texts covering the period 1710–1920, divided into three 70-year subperiods. The texts making up the corpus comprise five major genres, as indicated in Table 1, all written by British authors who were native speakers of English. In total, CLMET3.0 contains over thirty-four million words of running text, of which 20,547,199 correspond to narrative texts, fictional and non-fictional. It thus constitutes an ideal tool for the study of qualitative and quantitative change in Late Modern British English.

COHA, in turn, is a 400-million-word corpus of historical American English that covers the period 1810-2009. In terms of periodization, only the decades 1810-1819, 1820-1829, 1830-1839, 1880-1889, 1910-1919 were taken into consideration here, so as to make the two corpora used chronologically more comparable. COHA comprises four different genres, fiction, non-fiction, magazine and newspaper; the two latter categories of texts are not represented in CLMET3.0, and therefore, as indicated in Table 2 below, only fiction and non-fiction texts (a total of 47,439,765 words) have been examined in the present study.

Tables 1 and 2 give overviews of the number of words analyzed per genre and subperiod in CLMET3.0 and COHA, respectively:

CLMET3.0	1710–1780	1781–1850	1851–1920	TOTAL
<b>Narrative fiction</b>	4,642,670	4,830,718	6,311,301	15,784,689
<b>Narrative non-fiction</b>	1,863,855	1,940,245	958,410	4,762,510
<b>Drama</b>	407,885	347,493	607,401	1,362,779
<b>Letters</b>	1,016,745	714,343	479,724	2,210,812
<b>Treatise</b>	1,114,521	1,692,992	1,782,124	4,589,637
<b>Other</b>	1,434,755	1,759,796	2,481,247	5,675,798
<b>TOTAL</b>	10,480,431	11,285,587	12,620,207	34,386,225

Table 1. Number of words analyzed per genre and subperiod in Late Modern BrE (CLMET3.0)

COHA	1810s	1820s	1830s	1880s	1910s	TOTAL
<b>Fiction</b>	641,164	3,751,204	7,590,350	11,215,065	11,935,701	35,133,484
<b>Non-fiction</b>	451,542	1,461,012	3,038,062	3,820,766	3,534,899	12,306,281
<b>TOTAL</b>	1,092,706	5,212,216	10,628,412	15,035,831	15,470,600	47,439,765

Table 2. Number of words analyzed per genre and decade in Late Modern AmE (COHA)

In order to supplement the data from CLMET3.0 and COHA, an additional analysis was conducted on the contemporary usage of *terrific*. For this purpose, I used a sample of 15,909,312 words of Fiction from the *British National Corpus* (BNC), dating back to the 1990s.

To represent Contemporary American English, the last two decades in COHA, 1990-1999 and 2000-2009 (Fiction and Non-Fiction), were used. Word counts corresponding to COHA are shown in Table 3 below:<sup>7</sup>

COHA	1990s	2000s	TOTAL
<b>Fiction</b>	13,272,162	14,590,078	27,862,240
<b>Non-fiction</b>	3,104,303	3,121,839	6,226,142
<b>TOTAL</b>	16,376,465	17,711,917	34,088,382

Table 3. Number of words analyzed per genre and decade in Contemporary AmE (COHA)

These various materials and databases yielded a number of tokens of *terrific* which were judged to be adequate for a qualitative analysis. The distribution of the adjective, both chronologically and dialectally, is set out in Table 4. As can be seen from the normalized frequencies in this table, *terrific* is more frequently attested in Contemporary British English than in Late Modern British English (1700-1900), while the reverse seems to be true of American English (cf. also Section 4.1 below).

<i>Terrific</i>	Tokens	NF
CLMET3.0 (Late Modern BrE, 1710-1920)	237	0.689
BNC (Contemporary BrE)	157	0.986
TOTAL BrE	394	0.783

COHA (Late Modern AmE, 1810-1910)	533	1.123
COHA (Contemporary AmE)	319	0.935
TOTAL AmE	852	1.045
TOTAL (BrE + AmE)	1,246	0.945

Table 4. Frequency of *terrific* in the three corpora under scrutiny (NFs = frequencies normalized per 100,000 words)

## 4. Data and findings

### 4.1. Semantic distribution of *terrific* on the chronological dimension

An analysis of the various corpora yields the results displayed in Tables 5-7. As can be seen, all occurrences of *terrific* were classified according to the sense of the adjective they were considered to express, that is, 1, 2a or 2b (cf. Section 2 above). However, and as often happens in processes of semantic change, not all instances could be ascribed definitively to one of the three senses in question. Therefore, a fourth group, for which the label ‘overlapping’ has been adopted from Robinson (2010), had to be established, in order to accommodate uses whose exact semantic import was not sufficiently clear, as in the case of (5) and (6) below. As Robinson points out, overlapping uses can be “the first signals of a particular category being used in a novel way” (2010: 102):

- (5) On the neck of this child was a *terrific* black bruise. (BNC, Lee, 1985-1994, *Dark Dance*)
- (6) It carried all of the Salvation Army workers to and from their stations, hauled all of the supplies on its roof, inside, on its fenders, and later also on a trailer.

It ran day and night almost without end, two drivers alternating. It was a sort of super-car, still in the service, to which Salvationists still refer with an affectionate amazement when they consider its *terrific* accomplishments. (COHA, Booth, 1919, *The War Romance of the Salvation Army*)

In (5), senses 1 ('frightful') and 2a ('tremendous') of *terrific* overlap, whereas in (6) its senses 2a ('tremendous') and 2b ('amazing') overlap.

CLMET3.0	<i>Terrific</i> 'frightful'		<i>Terrific</i> 'excessive'		<i>Terrific</i> 'excellent'		Overlapping	
	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF
1710-1780	2	0.019					2	0.019
1780-1850	65	0.575	18	0.159	3	0.026	22	0.194
1850-1920	24	0.190	52	0.412	2	0.015	47	0.372
TOTAL	91	0.264	70	0.203	5	0.014	71	0.206

Table 5. Distribution of *terrific* per sense and subperiod in Late Modern BrE (CLMET3.0; NFs per 100,000 words)

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BNC	<i>Terrific</i> 'frightful'		<i>Terrific</i> 'excessive'		<i>Terrific</i> 'excellent'		Overlapping	
	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF
1984-1995			33	0.207	113	0.710	11	0.069

Table 6. Distribution of *terrific* per sense in Contemporary BrE (BNC; NFs per 100,000 words)

COHA	<i>Terrific</i> 'frightful'		<i>Terrific</i> 'excessive'		<i>Terrific</i> 'excellent'		Overlapping	
	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF
1810s	8	0.732					5	0.457
1820s	58	1.918	5	0.095			23	0.441
1830s	58	0.545	15	0.141			64	0.602
1880s	25	0.166	23	0.152			58	0.385
1910s	19	0.122	83	0.536			89	0.575
1990s	2	0.012	30	0.183	108	0.659	22	0.134
2000s	5	0.028	18	0.101	115	0.649	19	0.107
TOTAL	175	0.214	174	0.213	223	0.273	280	0.343

Table 7. Distribution of *terrific* per sense and decade in Late Modern and Contemporary AmE (COHA; NFs per 100,000 words)



Turning to the results in Table 5, these illustrate how *terrific*, though part of the English lexicon from the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, was still a low-frequency item a century later, at least in British English, with only four tokens recorded in the first subperiod of CLMET3.0 (1710-1780). During the second subperiod (1780-1850), a clear predominance of sense 1, that is, the original sense of *terrific*, can be appreciated, as in (7) below:

- (7) A gigantic monster, they said, had arrived the night before, armed with a gun and many pistols, putting to flight the inhabitants of a solitary cottage through fear of his *terrific* appearance. (CLMET3.0, Shelley, 1818, *Frankenstein*)

By contrast, sense 2a ('excessive'; example 8), with only 18 tokens, is far less frequently attested, while only three tokens of sense 2b ('excellent') have been recorded (cf. example 9):

- (8) The exertions made by Sir Thomas Wyatt had brought him a little in advance of the others. Furiously goading his horse, he dashed down the hillside at a *terrific* pace. (CLMET3.0, Ainsworth, 1843, *Windsor Castle*)
- (9) "Well hit, by Jove," says little Osborne, with the air of a connoisseur, clapping his man on the back. "Give it him with the left, Figs my boy".  
Figs's left made *terrific* play during all the rest of the combat. (CLMET3.0, Thackeray, 1843, *Vanity Fair*)

This situation reverses in the transition from the second to the third subperiod of CLMET3.0 (1850-1920) in that sense 2a ('excessive') increases its frequency at the expense of sense 1 ('frightful'), whose frequency of use diminishes when compared to the previous subperiod (1780-1850). This is a clear indication that *terrific* is losing part of its negative connotations in favour of more neutral shades of meaning while not yet acquiring the positive meaning it has today. Therefore, the two isolated examples of 'positive' *terrific* found in subperiod 3 simply confirm that this new meaning is still emerging and has not become totally established.

Concerning the use of *terrific* in Contemporary British English, it seems evident from the results in Table 6 that the original sense of *terrific* ('frightful') is no longer clearly attested, although there are a few cases in which the meaning of the adjective could still be interpreted as sense 1 ('frightful') and sense 2a ('excessive') overlapping:

- (10) Delaney pulled up, frightened at the sight of the dismembered barricade at the bottom, but began shouting for her as he dropped down. "Nell!" He kicked the wreckage aside, and ran into the empty engine room, searching, as the Russian looked anxiously back up the stairway, listening to the tremendous

blows echoing through the ship. There was one last *terrific* crash. Then silence. (BNC, Bedford, 1985-1994, *The Titron Madness*)

What is clear from Table 6 is that sense 2b ('excellent') is, not surprisingly, the most frequently attested in the BNC, while sense 2a ('excessive') is still reasonably frequent. Examples (11) and (12) below illustrate these two senses in the BNC, respectively:

(11) And write the poems that will win your heart. I feel *terrific* now I've made a start – I'll have another book before I quit. (BNC, Cope, 1985-1994, *Making cocoa for Kingsley Amis*)

(12) And I suppose if you don't have a fridge you don't have to go out and buy all sorts of junky things like eggs and mayonnaise and ice-cream to fill it up with. It must save a *terrific* lot of shopping. (BNC, Dahl, 1985-1994, *Matilda*)

Turning now to American English, we find that COHA shows quite a similar picture. In the first decade (1810s), *terrific* is very uncommon and only the negative sense ('frightful') is recorded. From the first to the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there is a sharp, drastic increase in the overall frequency of the adjective, but most tokens (58) still represent the negative sense, as against only 5 tokens of the sense 'excessive' (cf. Table 7 above). However, from 1830 onwards, negative *terrific* starts to lose ground, in keeping with the general tendency observed (also in British English) for the negative sense to be gradually replaced by more neutral shades of meaning; note in this regard that the almost wholesale replacement of sense 1 ('frightful') by sense 2a ('excessive') becomes especially noticeable from the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Interestingly, no cases of 'positive' *terrific* have been found in Late Modern American English, either in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which could be taken as an indication that this new sense develops in AmE somewhat later than in BrE, though further evidence is obviously needed to confirm this.<sup>8</sup>

However, in the 1990s and 2000s, the picture is completely different, since *terrific* 'excellent' has become by far the most frequently attested meaning in COHA, and the same applies to the BNC data:

(13) "We're going to stuff some twigs in the big spaces. Even though there are still little spaces, the water can't go through as fast as it wants to. You'll see, this dam will make a *terrific* pool". Andrew nodded and laid another stone in place. (COHA, Wallace, 1993, *The Seduction*).

(14) She was a beauty then and she's a beauty still. "You look *terrific*," I tell her, "and I'm not just saying that —it's the truth. (COHA, Boyle, 2001, *A friend of the earth*)

As shown in Table 7, 0.659 and 0.649 represent the normalized frequencies of 'positive' *terrific* in the 1990s and 2000s, respectively. In contrast, 0.012 and 0.028 correspond to *terrific* 'frightful' in the 1990s and 2000s, while 0.183 and 0.101 correspond to *terrific* 'excessive' in the same decades. It is clear, then, that the positive meaning of the adjective has ousted the other two senses, especially sense 1, *terrific* 'frightful', whose use has dramatically decreased over time, even though it has not completely disappeared, as shown in the following example:

- (15) As soon as the god was supposed to have entered the priest, the latter became violently agitated, and worked himself up to the highest pitch of apparent frenzy, the muscles of the limbs seemed convulsed, the body swelled, the countenance became *terrific*, the features distorted, the eyes wild and strained. (COHA, Ehrenreich, 2007, *Dancing in the streets: a history of collective joy*)

Despite the fact that the time periods selected for the present study do not coincide exactly and are thus, not wholly comparable, *terrific* seems to be more common in American English than in British English in the Late Modern English period (NFs: 1.123 and 0.689 respectively; cf. Section 3 and Table 4 above). However, in Contemporary English, the reverse seems to be true, and *terrific* is (only) slightly more frequently attested in BrE than in AmE (NFs: 0.986 and 0.935 respectively; cf. Section 3 and Table 4 above), although all these findings should be treated with caution due to the differences between the three corpora under scrutiny.

Semantically speaking, it seems that *terrific* has evolved along similar lines in both varieties, although sense 2b ('amazing') may have appeared somewhat later in AmE and, consequently, sense 1 ('frightful') might have been 'retained' longer in the AmE than in BrE.

#### 4.2. Syntactic function

As described above, syntactic function is here understood in terms of the contrast between attributive and predicative position. Moreover, an additional 'use' or 'function', here referred to as 'independent', has also been distinguished, to accommodate cases in which *terrific* is used on its own, as an independent, enthusiastic term of commendation (cf. Section 2).

Tables 8 and 9 below show the results obtained from CLMET3.0 and BNC corresponding to Late Modern and Contemporary BrE, respectively, while Table 10 shows the results obtained from COHA, corresponding to Late Modern and Contemporary AmE:

CLMET3.0	Attributive		Predicative	
	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF
1710-1780	4	0.038		
1780-1850	76	0.673	32	0.283
1850-1920	103	0.816	22	0.174
TOTAL	183	0.532	54	0.157

Table 8. Syntactic distribution of *terrific* in Late Modern BrE (CLMET3.0; NFs per 100,000 words)

BNC	Attributive		Predicative		Independent	
	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF
	67	0.421	51	0.320	28	0.175

Table 9. Syntactic distribution of *terrific* in Contemporary BrE (BNC; NFs per 100,000 words)

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COHA	Attributive		Predicative		Independent	
	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF
1810s	11	1.006	2	0.183		
1820s	63	1.208	23	0.441		
1830s	104	0.978	30	0.282		
1880s	88	0.585	18	0.119		
1910s	168	1.085	23	0.148		
1990s	92	0.561	56	0.341	14	0.085
2000s	86	0.485	50	0.282	21	0.118
TOTAL	612	0.750	202	0.247	35	0.042

Table 10. Syntactic distribution of *terrific* in Late Modern and Contemporary AmE (COHA; NFs per 100,000 words)

As Table 8 clearly shows, *terrific* is found mostly in attributive position in the Late Modern BrE period;<sup>9</sup> actually, in more than 77% of the tokens in CLMET3.0, the adjective precedes a nominal element. In turn, this percentage is even higher (almost 82%) in COHA, at least in the period 1810-1910 (cf. Table 10 above).

From the results in Tables 9 and 10, we can see that *terrific* is also more frequently attested in attributive position in Contemporary British and American English, thus preceding a nominal element, but its frequency in predicative position has risen with respect to the previous period scrutinized. This could be taken as an

indication that the tendency towards attributive position observed in the Late Modern English period has started to decline, and *terrific* begins to appear in predicative position more often than before.

As regards the ‘independent’ use, this seems to be relatively modern, with the only cases attested in the corpora corresponding to Contemporary British and American English, as in (16) and (17) below (cf. also Tables 9 and 10 and example 4 above):

(16) Anna let out a cry of disbelief and joy. “What is it?” “Novy Mir’s taken two of my poems”. “That’s wonderful, darling! *Terrific!* It’s high time. You’re a marvelous poet”. (BNC, Thomas, 1985-1994, *Lying together*)

(17) She drew herself up, pleased, and gulped the lemonade. “*Terrific!* Great timing!” “He might have done a jig”. (COHA, Karon, 2000, *A New Song*)

Used in this way, *terrific* becomes very emphatic in that it provides “speaker-oriented claims about extreme ends of scales” (Athanasiadou 2007: 562). In such cases, its scope extends over the sentence as a whole and is oriented more towards discourse functions.

Tables 11, 12 and 13 show the syntactic distribution of the adjective per sense and subperiod/decade in British and American English, respectively (overlapping cases have obviously been excluded from the count):

CLMET3.0	<i>Terrific</i> ‘frightful’				<i>Terrific</i> ‘excessive’				<i>Terrific</i> ‘excellent’			
	Attrib.		Predic.		Attrib.		Predic.		Attrib.		Predic.	
	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF
1710-1780	2	0.019										
1780-1850	45	0.398	20	0.177	14	0.124	4	0.035	2	0.017	1	0.008
1850-1920	21	0.166	3	0.023	41	0.324	11	0.087	1	0.007	1	0.007
TOTAL	68	0.197	23	0.066	55	0.159	15	0.043	3	0.008	2	0.005

Table 11. Syntactic distribution of *terrific* per sense and subperiod in Late Modern BrE (CLMET3.0)

BNC	<i>Terrific</i> ‘excessive’				<i>Terrific</i> ‘excellent’			
	Attrib.		Predic.		Attrib.		Predic.	
	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF
	30	0.188	3	0.018	37	0.232	48	0.301

Table 12. Syntactic distribution of *terrific* per sense in Contemporary BrE (BNC)

COHA	<i>Terrific</i> 'frightful'				<i>Terrific</i> 'excessive'				<i>Terrific</i> 'excellent'			
	Attrib.		Predic.		Attrib.		Predic.		Attrib.		Predic.	
	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF
1810s	8	0.732										
1820s	39	0.748	19	0.364	5	0.095						
1830s	37	0.348	19	0.178	13	0.122	2	0.018				
1880s	20	0.133	5	0.033	19	0.126	4	0.026				
1910s	13	0.084	6	0.038	75	0.484	8	0.051				
1990s			2	0.012	25	0.152	5	0.030	46	0.280	48	0.293
2000s	2	0.011	3	0.016	16	0.090	1	0.005	50	0.282	45	0.254
TOTAL	119	0.145	54	0.066	153	0.187	20	0.024	96	0.117	93	0.114

Table 13. Syntactic distribution of *terrific* per sense and decade in Late Modern and Contemporary AmE (COHA)

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As shown in Table 11, when *terrific* expresses sense 1 ('frightful') and sense 2a ('excessive'), the nominals with which it co-occurs tend to be found in attributive position, and the same holds true for *terrific* 'excessive' in Contemporary British English (cf. Table 12). However, when the adjective expresses sense 2b ('excellent'), the nominals with which it co-occurs are more frequently attested in predicative position.<sup>10</sup>

As regards American English (cf. Table 13), results point to a similar syntactic distribution, since *terrific* 'frightful' and *terrific* 'excessive' tend to precede the nominals they modify. When *terrific* means 'excellent', it is still found more commonly in attributive position, but its frequency in predicative position has risen significantly, which seems to suggest that there is a tendency for the adjective to change its syntactic distribution when it comes to the expression of positive meanings, since predicative position is more emphatic and, therefore, the positive qualities of the nominals co-occurring with the adjective are reinforced. The fact that the adjective starts to be found in predicative position more frequently can be considered a previous step towards the 'independent' use of *terrific*, that is, when it is used to express enthusiastic commendation, as in examples (4), (16) and (17).

#### 4.3. Referents of nominals collocating with *terrific*

Lexical meaning is usually characterized as not being "static and determinate" (Hartman 2015: 87), that is, meaning is clearly not invariant. In turn, lexical items should not be accounted for as simple 'containers of meanings', while the role of

‘context’ needs to be taken into account when describing lexical meaning (cf. Hartman 2015: 87).

Apart from the different meanings *terrific* expresses per se (cf. Section 2 above), the adjective can also be described in terms of its potential nominal collocations; in other words, the nominals collocating with *terrific* have been found to fall into a number of reasonably clear semantic groups. Thus, depending on the specific meaning *terrific* expresses (either ‘frightful’, ‘excessive’ or ‘excellent’), it tends to be attested in combination with nominals belonging to different semantic groups.

#### 4.3.1. *Terrific* ‘frightful’

The original sense of *terrific* occurs with two sets of nouns in the corpus which, each in its own right, can be *terrifying*, *frightful*, *awe-inspiring*: nouns denoting physical attributes which can easily be perceived with the senses (e.g. *form, shape, guise, appearance, semblance, expression, countenance, scowl, look, image, scene, aspect, picture, figure, feature, presence*), as in (18); and nouns designating divinity, religious objects and experiences and supernatural phenomena (e.g. *Yamen (lord of Hell); visitation (of God); cross, temple, spirit, prophecy, superstition, sermon*), as in (19):

- (18) We have been taught to tremble at the *terrific visages* of murdering janizaries. (COHA, Hamilton, Madison, Jay, 1817, *The Federalist on the New Constitution*)
- (19) Lisbon is a huge ruinous city, still exhibiting in almost every direction the vestiges of that *terrific visitation* of God, the earthquake which shattered it some eighty years ago. (CLMET3.0, Borrow, 1842, *Bible in Spain*)

This negative sense also occurs with nouns whose content can be ‘told’ or ‘related’ in some way (e.g. *legend, account, report, story, theme, description, thoughts*), as in (20), and with nouns designating natural scenery and natural phenomena (e.g. *scenery, storm, tempest*), as in (21). In combination with the adjective, all these nouns convey an adverse meaning, i.e. they inspire terror or fear:

- (20) This evening gossip, and the *terrific stories* of Indian warfare to which it gave rise, produced a strong effect upon... (COHA, Irwing, 1836, *Astoria, or, anecdotes of an enterprise beyond the Rocky Mountains*)
- (21) While I watched the *tempest*, so beautiful yet *terrific*, I wandered on with a hasty step. (CLMET3.0, Shelley, 1818, *Frankenstein*)

All these nouns are primarily concrete and non-gradable.

#### 4.3.2. *Terrific* 'excessive'

Unlike *terrific* 'frightful', *terrific* 'of great size or intensity' is associated with gradable nouns, that is, nouns designating 'gradable' properties that can thus collocate with adjectives expressing the degree to which the property holds (cf. Morzycki 2009; cf. also Paradis 2008 and Hartman 2015: 91 on particular modes of scalar construal), e.g. *pace*, *stature*, *effect*, *impact*, *power*, *size* (example 22), as well as nouns denoting some kind of emotion, which can be either 'negative' (e.g. *hatred*, *rage*, *jealousy*, *fury*, *agony*, *indignation*) or 'positive' (e.g. *excitement*), as in (23) and (24), respectively:

- (22) This was a great chance to hit him so exactly at such a range. His skull is now in England, exhibiting the *terrific effect* of the heavy ball. (CLMET3.0, Baker, 1854, *The Rifle and the Hound in Ceylon*)
- (23) His gestures were lighter and quicker; he had nothing of Cyril's ungainliness; he had not Cyril's limitless taste for sweets, nor Cyril's *terrific hatred* of gloves, barbets, and soap. He was much more dreamy than Cyril, and much busier. (CLMET3.0, Bennett, 1908, *The Old Wives' Tale*)
- (24) And when the little creature turned and made straight for the door of Professor Farrago, our revered chief, the *excitement* among us was *terrific*. (COHA, Chambers, 1915, *Police!!!*)

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#### 4.3.3. *Terrific* 'excellent'

To explore the semantics of the nominals co-occurring with *terrific* 'excellent', I have used data from the BNC and from the last two decades of COHA (1990 and 2000), since, as noted above (Section 4.1), no tokens of positive *terrific* were attested in COHA in the period 1810-1910, and only five were found in CLMET3.0, three of which belong to the period 1780-1850, and the remaining two to the period 1850-1920 (see Table 5 above).

The nouns co-occurring most frequently with *terrific* 'excellent' are *idea* (7 tokens in COHA, 5 in the BNC), *time* (6 tokens in COHA, 1 in the BNC), *guy* (5 tokens in COHA) and *stuff* (4 tokens in COHA):

- (25) "You mean you want to use them? You're not rejecting them?" He laughed. "On the contrary, I plan to give them special status. That is, if you like the idea." "How could she not like it?" "It's a *terrific idea!*" (BNC, Howard, 1985-1994, *Miracles can happen*)
- (26) I want to tell you all woof, and say that I've had a *terrific time* during the last few months. (COHA, Bradfield, 2006, *Dazzle the Pundit*)
- (27) Lanny was a *terrific guy*, but he was getting up there, fifty-one this last birthday. (COHA, Barr, 2004, *Flashback*)



(28) BRUNO That was *terrific stuff! Terrific stuff!* We can use all that. I'll need some background on these kids... men. (COHA, 1996, *Courage Under Fire*)

The positive sense of *terrific* occurs with “referents of everyday close importance to a speaker” (Robinson 2010: 89), like family, friends, etc.:

(29) You've got the right balance of humour and affection, and that wonderful warm openness. You'd be a *terrific mother*. (BNC, Anderson, 1985-1994, *The Spice of Life*)

This positive meaning also occurs with nouns denoting physical appearance and condition (e.g. *condition, figure, shape, body, look*, etc.), as in (30), as well as with nouns referring to food and beverage, as in (31):

(30) Althea has a *terrific*, voluptuous *figure*. (COHA, 1999, *Mumford*)

(31) an art gallery she'd visited, a *terrific* Spanish *beer* she'd discovered. (COHA, O'Brien, 1992, *The People We Marry*)

## 5. Conclusions

This study of the historical development of the polysemous adjective *terrific* has shown that “polysemy is far from being a stable phenomenon” (Robinson 2010: 85), and that evaluative adjectives like *terrific*, given their semantic make-up, are prone to experience semantic change. On the one hand, I have explored the semantic and functional development of the adjective *terrific* and, on the other, have tried to answer the research questions posed in Section 2, based on different parameters of use.

First, three different senses were identified for *terrific*, recorded in the OED as chronologically successive: (i) a negative sense, ‘frightful’, ‘terrifying’; (ii) a more ‘neutral’ sense having to do with the construal of an entity as being ‘of great size’, ‘tremendous’; (iii) a positive sense, which is very prominent today, ‘amazing’, ‘excellent’. All examples retrieved from the three corpora here were classified accordingly, with the exception of some dubious cases, which were grouped under the label ‘overlapping’, adopted from Robinson (2010).

Data analysis showed that *terrific* was a low-frequency item in late Modern British English (CLMET3.0), especially during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the same is true of the first decade of COHA (1810s). As regards contemporary data, normalized frequencies show that the adjective is more frequently attested in Contemporary British English (BNC) than it was in the previous subperiod, while the reverse is true of American English (cf. Section 3 and Table 4 above).

The original, negative sense of the adjective is clearly predominant in both varieties well into the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when its frequency starts to decrease.

This can be taken as an indication that *terrific* is losing part of its negative connotations in favour of more neutral shades of meaning. It goes without saying that the positive sense of the adjective is hardly attested in the late Modern English period, with only 5 tokens recorded in CLMET3.0, and none in COHA in the subperiod 1810-1910. This situation is clearly reversed in the contemporary data, for the original sense is almost non-existent (no tokens in the BNC and only 7 in COHA, the 1990s and the 2000s), while the positive sense has become by far the most frequent in both varieties. It can be concluded, then, that *terrific* seems to have evolved along similar lines in both British and American English: *terrific* ‘frightful’ > *terrific* ‘tremendous’ > *terrific* ‘excellent’, although the latter, positive sense might have appeared somewhat later in American English and, consequently, its original sense, ‘frightful’, retained longer in this variety.

Second, as far as syntactic distribution is concerned, understood here in terms of the contrast between attributive and predicative use, the analysis has shown that *terrific* is more frequently attested in attributive position, especially during the late Modern English period. In fact, in more than 77% of the tokens in CLMET3.0 and almost 82% in COHA, *terrific* precedes a nominal element. This predominance of the adjective in attributive position is also observed in the contemporary data, although there has been a significant increase in the use of *terrific* in predicative position. Apart from attributive and predicative use, an additional and relatively recent one was also distinguished, referred to here as ‘independent’, which accommodates those cases where *terrific* is used as an enthusiastic, emphatic term of commendation.

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In answer to the question of whether there is a correlation between semantic development and syntactic function, the data seem to suggest that such a correlation does indeed exist. Thus, when *terrific* conveys negative meaning (‘terrifying’, ‘causing terror’), or when it means ‘tremendous’, both in late Modern and Contemporary English, it is typically found preceding the nominals with which it co-occurs. However, when used with its positive meaning, a predicative position, which is more emphatic, becomes more frequent, perhaps to reinforce the positive qualities of the nominals with which *terrific* co-occurs, and as a prior step to the ‘independent’ use of the adjective, as described in Section 4.2.

Finally, turning to the influence of collocations, it has been shown that depending on the specific meaning *terrific* expresses (whether ‘frightful’, ‘tremendous’ or ‘excellent’), the adjective tends to be attested in combination with nouns belonging to different semantic groups. Thus, when *terrific* is used in its negative sense, it typically co-occurs with nouns referring to something that can be perceived with the senses, for example *shape* or *form*; it also occurs with nouns whose content can be ‘narrated’ in some way, like *story* or *legend*; also with nouns designating natural

phenomena, such as *storm* or *tempest*, as well as with nouns referring to religion or divinity, for example *cross* or *sermon*. All these nouns, when used in combination with the adjective, inspire terror or fear. In turn, *terrific* ‘excessive’, ‘tremendous’, is associated primarily with nouns profiling “single properties that can be graded” (Paradis 2008: 337), such as *pace* or *size*, unlike *terrific* ‘frightful’, which tends to co-occur with concrete and non-gradable nouns. In such cases, the adjective has the potential to express the degree to which the property of the noun holds, thus operating as a degree modifier. As regards ‘positive’ *terrific*, this is especially frequent with referents that are close or important to the speaker, such as family and friends (cf. also Robinson 2010: 89 on the collocations of *awesome* ‘great’).

It can therefore be concluded that the original superlative meaning of *terrific* evolved over time into a more subjective one expressing ‘high degree’. Later on, a further development in its grammaticalization cline took place, in which *terrific* started to be used as a sort of response particle, similar to terms like *fine* and *great*, after an ellipsis of the predicative construction of the type [*it is*] *terrific* had taken place.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> This term has been used by Biber et al. (1999: 564), among others.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Stoffel (1901); Bolinger (1972); Partington (1993); Paradis (1997), to mention a few.

<sup>4</sup> For a classification of intensifiers, cf. Quirk et al. (1985: 445-446, 589ff); Altenberg (1991); Paradis (2000); Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 585); Athanasiadou (2007); Xiao and Tao (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Lat. *nescius* ‘ignorant’ > Old French *ni(s)ce* ‘stupid’, borrowed into Middle English as ‘stupid’ > ‘shy, bashful’ > ‘fastidious, refined’ > ‘pleasant, appealing’ (Traugott 1996: 3).

<sup>6</sup> Latin *sub verbo* or *voce* (‘under the word or voice’).

<sup>7</sup> Both BNC and COHA were accessed through the interfaces provided by Mark Davies (2004— and 2008—).

<sup>8</sup> There are, however, two instances of *terrific* in the 1910s where senses 2a and 2b overlap thus illustrating the transition from more neutral shades of meaning to positive ones.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, there are no instances of *terrific* in predicative position in the first sub-period of CLMET3.0 (1710-1780).

<sup>10</sup> This applies to results in Table 12, since the number of tokens for *terrific* ‘excellent’ in Late Modern British English, as shown in Table 11 (cf. also Section 4.1 above), is clearly minimal.

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