Very UCLA, totally next in line. Intensification at the socio-semantic interface.

Intro - Intensifiers have long drawn linguists’ attention. While there is consensus that every intensifier presupposes the presence of a scale (Eckardt 2009), research in semantics has shown that such scale can either be directly provided by gradable predicates ((1a-b), Kennedy & McNally 2005), or indirectly recruited via world knowledge ((2a), Bylinina 2011) or via intensification of an expressive dimension ((2b), McCready and Kauffman (2013), Irwin (2014)).

(1a) The house is very big (Gradable)  
(1b) The tank is totally full (Gradable)  
(2a) Your attitude is very UCLA. (Non-gradable)  
(2b) I’m totally next in line! (Non-gradable)

Moreover, research in sociolinguistics has shown that intensifiers’ usage varies across social categories such as gender and age (Macaulay (2006), Tagliamonte (2008)) and is subject to rapid change (Lorenz (2002), Partington (1991)). Addressing the relationship between semantic and sociolinguistic aspects of intensification, a little explored area thus far, is the main goal of the paper.

From semantic to social meaning - It has been noted (Zwicky 2011, McCready & Kauffman 2013) that, while intensification with gradable predicates emerges as fairly neutral (in (1)), the occurrences in (2) index a richer constellation of social information: They are perceived as non-standard and colloquial, and often suggest an association with specific social types (e.g. “Valley girl”, “Generation X”). Yet, while these observations point to a principled connection between social and semantic meaning, they do not explore the nature of this relationship.

Tackling the connection - I argue that two distinct grammatical mechanisms contribute to make intensifiers sociolinguistically salient in the absence of gradability.

MECHANISM 1: COERCING THE ARGUMENT – The intensifier coerces its argument into a gradable property by recruiting a set of stereotypically associated scalar dimensions, as in (2a). Contrary to other cases of coercion (e.g. aspectual coercion, Traxler et al. 2002), this operation does not just fix a mismatch, but also presupposes sufficient shared world-knowledge shared by the interlocutors to figure out what the salient dimensions are. For example, in (2a), both interlocutors need to (i) know the scalar qualities evoked by UCLA (e.g., “easy-goingness”, “love for sports”), and (ii) agree on which of these qualities are to be foregrounded in the discourse. Carrying out this pragmatic work, in a similar fashion to other informally marked linguistic forms (e.g. demonstratives in Potts and Acton (to appear)), requires a certain degree of proximity between the interlocutors, bolstering the informality effect and creating awkwardness whenever such presupposition is not met (e.g. uttering (2a) in a formal context, or where the interlocutors do not share enough knowledge).

MECHANISM 2: RECRUITING EXPRESSIVITY – The intensifier recruits the scale from the speaker’s emotive attitude towards the utterance. From a semantic perspective, the gradable nature of these attitudes makes them good candidates for being targeted by intensification. In addition, it has been shown that instance of so and totally like those in (2b) display the typical syntactic-semantic properties of expressive content (See Potts 2005, Irwin 2014, McCready and Kauffman 2013), providing support to the idea that emotions are semantically recruited in the context. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the move to the expressive dimension has a crucial impact on the discourse situation, as it foregrounds personal dimensions (such as emotions) that are normally dispreferred in formal situations (McCready, p.c.), and which have been claimed (Eckert 2005) to have significant impact in the construction of social meaning and social identity. Hence, the high sociolinguistic salience of (2b), and the markedly informal nature of the related social meanings.

Conclusion –When making use of intensifiers, speakers exploit the semantic notion of gradability as a resource to create a suitable environment for creating social meaning. The paper suggests that different mechanisms for semantic composition impact the way in which language is used for social purposes, advocating an integration of semantics and sociolinguistics.