

# *I quite fancy this: Quite as a degree modifier of verbs in written*

## **British English**

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on the readings of *quite* as a degree modifier of verbs in written English on the basis of the British National Corpus (BNC). The study explores the semantic constraints that govern the relationship between *quite* and the verbs it combines with in terms of their conceptualization, which reflects the presence or absence of boundaries, i.e. boundedness/unboundedness. Two types of gradable verbs are distinguished: those which are associated with a boundary and those which are not. It is shown that the gradable features of the verbs that apply to *quite* must harmonize with the grading function of *quite* for a successful match.

## **1 Introduction**

Research on the interpretations of *quite* (e.g. Bolinger 1972; Paradis 1997) shows that it is contextually a very flexible item which selects for gradability. This paper takes a closer look at *quite* in order to account for its readings as a degree modifier of verbs<sup>1</sup> in written British English. The general framework of the study is cognitive (Langacker 1987), and as a starting point, Paradis's (1997, 2001) model of degree modifiers is used. Paradis (1997, 2001) shows that there must be a relationship of harmony between the bounded/unbounded mode of construal of *quite* and the adjective it applies to. Such a relationship is predictable unless the configuration of the collocating adjective has been contextually modulated in terms of boundedness. Inspired by Paradis (1997, 2001), it is proposed in this paper that a similar relationship of harmony exists between the bounded/unbounded mode of construal of *quite* and the verb it applies to. To exemplify, if the mode of construal of the collocating verb is clearly bounded, then *quite* functions as a bounded maximizer in expressing the exact correspondence with what is expressed by the verb, as in *I quite understand*<sup>2</sup>, but if the mode of construal of the collocating verb is unbounded, then *quite* functions as an unbounded booster, as in *I quite fancy this*. The hypothesis is that the configurational reading of the verb that combines with *quite* constrains the reading of *quite*. The hypothesis is tested against data based

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<sup>1</sup> Here and throughout this paper, I use the term *verb* to refer to the main verb in a verb phrase that *quite* takes scope over as a degree modifier.

<sup>2</sup> All examples are mine unless otherwise stated.

on 31 random occurrences of *quite* as a modifier of verbs<sup>3</sup> in the written part of the BNC (British National Corpus). From these, a number of representative examples are chosen in order to illustrate the use of *quite* as a degree modifier of verbs. The corpus data are used for illustrative purposes only.

## 2 Identifying and explaining the readings of *quite* as a degree modifier of verbs

The purpose of this section is twofold: (i) to identify the interpretations of *quite* as a degree modifier of verbs, and (ii) to explain these in terms of their conceptualization, which reflects the presence or absence of boundaries. However, before dealing with these two purposes, I take a brief look at the structure of the present study.

### 2.1 Presentation of the study

I will start by giving the established readings of *quite* according to one lexicographical reference work, i.e. Cobuild (1987). This is done in section 2.2, which will also shed light on some semantic aspects of *quite*. In section 2.3 I present the conceptual basis of the readings of *quite* within the general framework of cognitive linguistics (Langacker 1987). For a model of degree modifiers, Paradis (1997, 2001) is used. Subsection 2.3.1 takes up the general theoretical background of the study, whereas subsections 2.3.2 and 2.3.3 go into details about what is required in terms of configurational meaning from those adjectives and verbs which accept *quite*: subsection 2.3.2 deals with the modes of construal of degree modifiers and their adjectives, whereas subsection 2.3.3 discusses how boundedness is conceptualized in those verbs that combine with *quite*. Having presented the conceptual basis of the various interpretations of *quite*, I then suggest a categorization of the readings of *quite* as a degree modifier of verbs at the end of section 2.3.3. The actual use of *quite* as a degree modifier of verbs in the BNC data will be examined in section 3. Section 4, finally, provides a conclusion of the main results of the study.

### 2.2 Quite and meaning

As a starting-point, I have drawn the established readings of *quite* from Cobuild (1987). The entries and illustrations are given below. I have indicated the synonyms of *quite* by means of square brackets in each entry.

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<sup>3</sup> All the occurrences of *quite* as a degree modifier of verbs in the data amount to 95 cases. Of these, 31 cases occur in affirmative contexts and 64 in negative contexts. For reasons stated in section 2.2, only affirmative contexts are included in the present study.

- a) *Quite* [rather; relatively] means to a fairly great extent or to greater extent than average, e.g. He was *quite* young... He calls *quite* often... I *quite* enjoy looking round the museums.
- b) *Quite* [–] is used to emphasize the complete degree or extent to which something is true or is the case, e.g. I stood *quite* still... You're *quite* right... I *quite* understand... Oh I *quite* agree.
- c) *Quite* [entirely] is used with a negative to say that something is almost the case or is very close to the state or situation stated; it is also used to reduce the force of the negative, for example for reasons of politeness or lack of certainty, e.g. It doesn't look *quite* big enough... It somehow didn't *quite* fit together... I'm not *quite* sure.
- d) *Quite* [exactly, just] is used with a negative to express doubt and hesitancy about information, the nature of something, or how to act, e.g. I don't know *quite* how to deal with that one... Dr Benson went out to Canada, I don't know *quite* where... No one knew *quite* where to start.
- e) *Quite a* or *quite some* [phenomenal] is used to say that a thing or person is of a very unusual, exceptional, or exciting nature, e.g. It was *quite* a sight... My heavens, you have *quite* a memory. I'd forgotten that song.
- f) You say *quite* or *quite so* [–] to express your agreement with what someone has just said, e.g. 'It does a lot for police-public relations.' – '*Quite.*'

As mentioned in Cobuild (1987), *quite* expresses two different degrees, i.e. that of a moderate degree, synonymous with *rather* (entry a) and that of a maximum degree (entries b and c). It is reasonable to assume that entries (b) and (c) refer roughly to the same maximizing degree, even though a synonym is missing in entry (b). One way to test this is to replace the meaning of *quite* in these entries with the meaning of one of its cognitive synonyms, e.g. the maximizer *completely*<sup>4</sup>, as exemplified by *I stood completely still* (entry b) and *I'm not completely sure* (entry c).

As is evident from Cobuild (1987), entries (c) and (d) differ from the other entries in terms of negation: in entries (c) and (d) *quite* is in the scope of a negative element, which is not the case with the other entries. When *quite* is preceded by such an element, I interpret it as carrying either (i) an approximating function, or (ii) a maximizing function. The approximating function of *quite* is illustrated, for instance, by the Cobuild-example *It somehow didn't quite fit together* (entry c). Here *quite* approximates a required limit and indicates that something falls short of that limit. There is, however, a suggestion that the thing in question is not far from reaching the limit; there is thus an

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<sup>4</sup> *Completely* and *quite* in its maximizer reading represent a type and a degree of synonymy that Cruse (1986: 265–291) terms as *cognitive synonymy*. This means that they are not completely interchangeable but they can express minor differences of meaning. These differences, however, do not affect the truth value of the proposition (Paradis 1997: 66–71).

implication of ‘almost’ present, as Cobuild (1987) notes, which makes the boundary between “did fit” and “didn’t fit” seem less definite. *Quite* hence softens the force of the negative, as Cobuild (1987) points out. When carrying this approximating function, *quite* is often placed immediately after the negating particle *not*, as in *It ...didn’t quite fit...* (entry c). By contrast, in the maximizing function of *quite* (entry d), there seems to be no such tendency as regards the placement of the negating particle and *quite*. As Cobuild (1987) notes, *quite* in these examples carries the meaning of *exactly* and *just*, i.e. it functions like a focus item stressing precision.

*Quite* has some of the characteristics of a focusing item also in entry (e), where it seems to reveal how the entity in question has reached the limit of ‘qualification’ in terms of what is required from a prototypical example of such an entity. In the Cobuild-example *My heavens, you have quite a memory. I’d forgotten that song* (entry e), *quite* appears to emphasize the high degree of centrality that can be linked to the nominal *memory* in this context. At the same time it also seems to enhance the positive evaluation that is implied. *Quite* can, however, also intensify emotionally strong nominals that are negatively loaded, as in *It was quite a shock*.

Finally, entry (f) in Cobuild (1987) exemplifies the role of *quite* as a response item which is used in isolation without a head and which expresses agreement with the previous speaker.

The above survey of the established readings of *quite* illustrates how many of its readings are linked to completeness and perfectivity. Diachronically, there has been a relation between *quite* and completeness, even though there has also been a parallel weakening of its grading force, which has resulted in the two present-day readings of *quite*, i.e. the reading of a maximum degree and the reading of a moderate degree (OED s.v. *quite*; Paradis 1997: 72). From the list of entries from Cobuild we can see that when *quite* combines with verbs (illustrations in entries a–d), the interpretations, regardless of the fact whether the context is negative or affirmative, result in these roughly two different values of degree. However, in order to capture the constraints that govern the semantic harmony between *quite* and its verb, it is useful to focus on affirmative contexts only (cf. entries a–b in Cobuild). The reason for this is that when *quite* occurs in the scope of a negative element, it tends to be less selective in its choice of verbs. Bolinger (1972: 227) demonstrates this, for instance, with the verb *swallow*: the completive feature of *swallow* can be denied (i.e. *I didn’t quite swallow it*) but it cannot be intensified affirmatively (i.e. *\*I quite swallowed it*). I found similar cases in my corpus and they are illustrated by examples (1) and (2):

- (1) It didn't quite work. BDFSM 1518
- (2) It cannot quite manage. BDH8R 3967

The examples (1) and (2) show how it is acceptable to use *quite* with the verbs *work* and *manage* in negative contexts but in the corresponding affirmative contexts, i.e. *?It quite worked* and *?It quite manages*, this seems not to be the case.

### 2.3 The conceptual basis of the readings of quite

The purpose of this section is to outline the conceptual basis of the readings of *quite* within the cognitive linguistic framework (Langacker 1987). For a model of degree modifiers, Paradis (1997, 2001) is used. I will first provide the general theoretical background of the study (subsection 2.3.1) before going on to identify what is required in terms of configurational meaning from those adjectives and verbs that combine with *quite* (subsections 2.3.2 and 2.3.3, respectively).

#### 2.3.1 Theoretical background

This section gives the general theoretical background of the present study. It is based on the cognitive linguistic framework (Langacker 1987), and for a model of degree modifiers, Paradis (1997, 2001) is used. According to cognitive linguists, language is considered to be an essential part of human cognition. From this follows that there are clear correspondences between conceptual structures and linguistic structures, and that linguistic knowledge is processed like any other knowledge by means of cognitive abilities. Following Langacker (1987) and Paradis (1997, 2001, 2003), I argue that linguistic items map onto concepts in a cognitive network. This network consists of domains, which roughly correspond to all kinds of complex cognitive structure that we store in memory. There are two types of domains, i.e. the content domain and the schematic domain (Paradis 1997: 48–49). Content domains represent meaning proper (i.e. linguistic meaning and encyclopaedic meaning), whereas schematic domains provide the representations for various configurative templates. Both these domains are conceptual in character and reflect the way we perceive the world. Apart from these conceptual domains, there is an operating system which consists of different types of construals which are imposed on the domains by speakers and addressees in actual language use. Construals represent ways of structuring conceptual domains in terms of highlighting those conceptual areas that are relevant for the meaning that is intended in each particular context. They reflect four general cognitive processes, namely (i) the choice of *Gestalt*, (ii) the focusing of attention, *salience*, (iii) the ability of making judgements, *comparisons*, and (iv) the selection of speaker *perspective* (Croft & Wood 2000: 55–56). It should be noted that the construals are kept apart only by definition; in actual use they are highly interrelated and dynamic, thus enabling contextual flexibility.

When linguistic items activate conceptual patterns, they give rise to lexical meanings. What domains are evoked and which types of construals are imposed on the domains, determines whether there is semantic contrast or not. Open word class items foreground concepts from the content domain, whereas function word items, like degree modifiers (e.g. *quite*), foreground concepts from the schematic domain, such as boundaries and scales.

### 2.3.2 *The modes of construal of degree modifiers and their adjectives*

The present section deals with the configurational meaning of degree modifiers and their adjectives, i.e. the modes of construal that they map onto. Previous research on degree modifiers of adjectives (e.g. Paradis 1997, 2001) has shown that it is possible to predict from the modes of construal of the combining items the harmony of a match. If the degree modifier and the gradable adjective map onto the same type of construal, the result is a successful match, as in the combination *quite/very long*, but if they map on to different types of construals, the result is disharmonious, as in *\*completely long*. Langacker (1988: 102) calls this mechanism *valence*: “a valence relation between two predications is possible just in case these predications overlap, in the sense that some substructure within one corresponds to a substructure within the other and is construed as identical to it”. Paradis (1997, 2001) shows that the relevant construal operation in the degree modifier-adjective combinations is the assignment of boundaries, i.e. the dichotomy of boundedness and unboundedness. She divides degree modifiers into two main types schematically: those that map on to the mode of construal of totality (i.e. non-scalarity) in terms of grading and those that map on to the mode of construal of scalarity in terms of grading (Paradis 1997: 28; 64–66). Her classification is presented in Table 1.

<b>Totality modifiers</b>		
reinforcers	maximizer	<i>quite, absolutely, completely, perfectly, totally, entirely, utterly</i>
attenuators	approximators	<i>almost</i>

<b>Scalar modifiers</b>		
reinforcers	boosters	<i>very, terribly, extremely, most, awfully, jolly, highly, frightfully</i>
attenuators	moderators	<i>quite, rather, pretty, fairly</i>
	diminishers	<i>a (little) bit, slightly, a little, somewhat</i>

**Table 1. Degree modifiers divided according to their degree force, i.e. reinforcing or attenuating, and according to their type of grading, i.e. totality or scalar (Paradis 1997: 28).**

Totality modifiers, such as the maximizers *quite* and *completely*, relate to a definite and precise property of the adjective: the meaning of the adjective either

applies in a certain situation or it does not. For instance, there is usually no arguing about what *quite/completely identical* means. On the basis of the ‘either-or’ conception, totality modifiers are considered to be bounded in terms of their mode of gradability. By contrast, scalar modifiers, such as the booster *very* and the moderator *quite*, are unbounded as to their mode of gradability, since they do not indicate a fixed value of the adjective they apply to but specify a range on an open-ended scale of the quality involved. They are thus associated with the ‘more-or-less’ conception. Both among totality modifiers and scalar modifiers there are those that reinforce and those that attenuate some value of the collocating adjective. The groups of totality modifiers and scalar modifiers can thus be said to form an imaginary continuum, respectively, which extends from the minimum degree force-item (e.g. diminisher in the scalar modifier group) to the maximum degree force-item (e.g. booster in the scalar modifier group). The members of each of these paradigms denote more or less the same degree<sup>5</sup>. As Table 1 shows, *quite* occurs both in the maximizer paradigm and in the moderator paradigm. In determining the correct degree reading of *quite*, it is necessary to pay attention to contextual clues, which will often, but not always, disambiguate the two readings<sup>6</sup>.

Like degree modifiers, gradable adjectives can be conceptualized in terms of their mode of configuration. Paradis (1997: 63) divides them into three groups, which are based on two criteria of gradability, i.e. (i) the type of degree modifier the adjective may combine with, and (ii) the type of oppositeness involved in the conceptualization of the adjective. Based on these criteria, gradable adjectives fall into three groups which are presented in Table 2.

Defining features	Scalar adjectives	Extreme adjectives	Limit adjectives
Degree modifiers	scalar	totality	totality
Oppositeness	antonymy	antonymy	complementarity

**Table 2. Criteria for the division of adjectives into scalar adjectives, extreme adjectives and limit adjectives (Paradis 2001: 53).**

Scalar adjectives (e.g. *good, long* and *interesting*) form the most typical group of gradable adjectives since they fulfil all the criteria which are traditionally used for gradability (Paradis 1997: 64). Furthermore, they manifest all the features that Cruse (1986: 204) defines as typical features of antonyms. Apart from being fully gradable, i.e. being able to occur in the comparative and the superlative, the members of an antonymic pair denote some variable property, such as

<sup>5</sup> In this respect they are *cognitive synonyms* (Cruse 1986: 265—291); see footnote 4.

<sup>6</sup> Out of context it is impossible to say what *quite* means. Even with contextual clues it may sometimes be difficult to interpret the correct reading of *quite*. In such cases the intonational patterns of the speaker may be helpful. Paradis (1997: 18) shows that when the tone is on the adjective, *quite* functions as a maximizer, but when it receives the tone, it has a moderating effect.

length, speed or merit. When intensified, the members of a pair move in opposite directions along the scale which represents degrees of the relevant variable property. For this reason, examples like *very heavy* and *very light* are more widely separated on the scale of weight than *fairly heavy* and *fairly light*. Another feature of antonymic pairs is that the members of a pair do not strictly bisect a domain but there is a region on the scale relating to a range of values of the variable property which does not apply properly to either term of the pair. A statement like ‘It is neither long nor short’ refers to such a region and is, therefore, not paradoxical. Antonyms and scalar adjectives can thus be conceptualized in terms of ‘more-or-less’, i.e. in terms of an unbounded range on a scale. In consequence, they combine with scalar degree modifiers, as exemplified by *quite/very/fairly long*.

Extreme adjectives (e.g. *excellent*, *huge* and *brilliant*) are like scalar adjectives in that they are antonymic and conceptualized in terms of a scale. On this scale, however, they do not denote a range like scalar adjectives do, but an ultimate point. In this respect, they can be described as implicit superlatives in that they express a superlative degree of a particular feature. On the basis of this characteristic, then, extreme adjectives are considered to be gradable bounded adjectives. They thus combine with totality modifiers, as exemplified by *absolutely excellent* or *totally brilliant*.

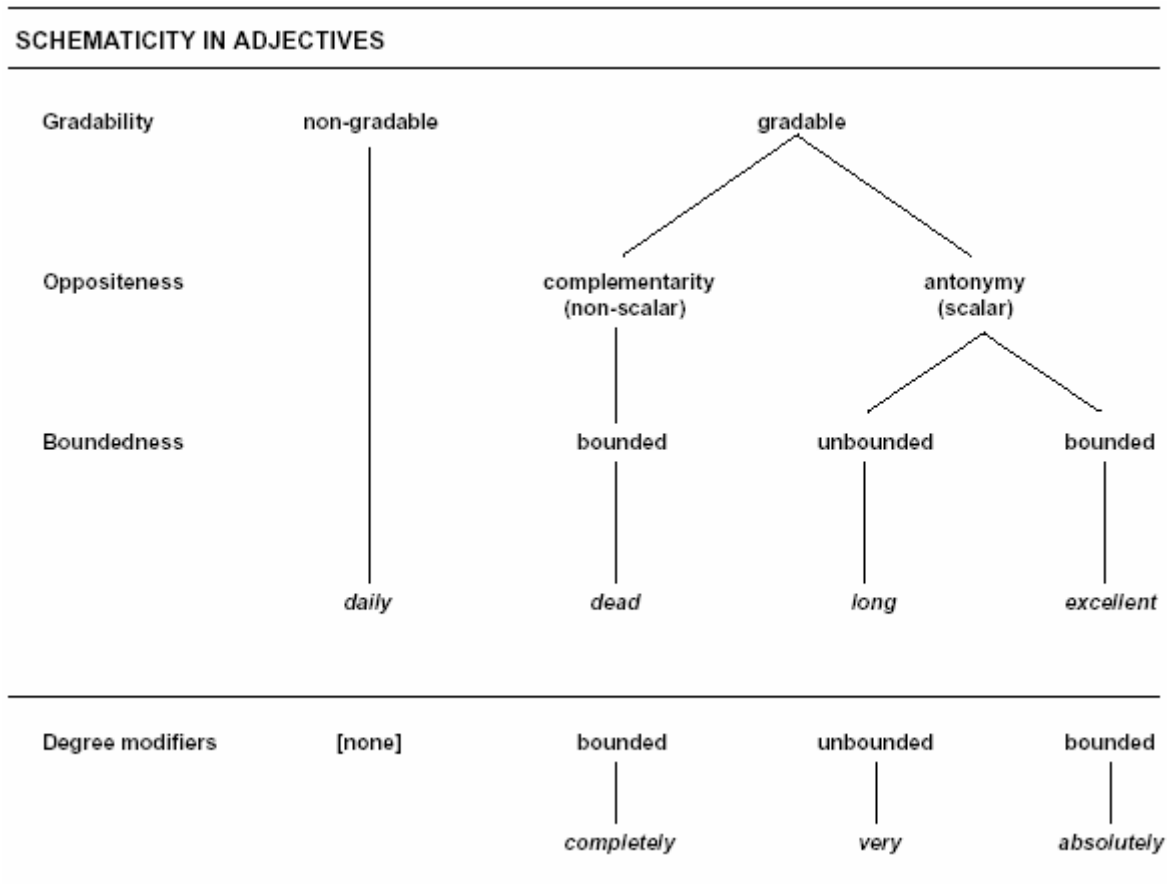
Finally, limit adjectives (e.g. *dead*, *true* and *identical*) are only marginally gradable as they fulfil only one criterion of the criteria traditionally used for gradability, i.e. they accept degree modifiers (Paradis 1997: 64). Most limit adjectives have what Warren (1992: 19) calls *fixed reference*: language users tend to agree both on the meaning of the adjective and on its application. A *dead body* is usually a *dead body* for all language users. This characteristic reflects the complementary nature of limit adjectives: they are conceptualized in terms of ‘either-or’. They can thus be described as being associated with a definite boundary and, in consequence, they combine with totality modifiers, as exemplified by *completely dead* or *almost identical*.

Most gradable adjectives have a biased reading of gradability. For instance, the biased reading of *clear* out of context is as a limit adjective, since its meaning can be paraphrased as ‘not unclear’. It is the content domain that governs the bias for, in this case, the bounded ‘either-or’ construal. Sometimes, however, the adjective *clear* can be coerced into an unbounded mode of construal, as in *By now I have a (fairly) clear idea about the recipe Benjamin used*. In this example the moderator *fairly* restricts the unbounded interpretation of the adjective *clear*. Paradis (1997: 59) terms such a process *contextual modulation* and points out that it takes place within monosemy, i.e. it does not usually alter the established or biased meaning of the adjective.

The way the gradable adjective is conceptualized in terms of its mode of construal determines its choice of degree modifier: adjectives with unbounded modes of construal (i.e. scalar adjectives) tend to select degree modifiers with



unbounded modes of construal (i.e. scalar modifiers); whereas adjectives with bounded modes of construal (i.e. extreme adjectives with a scalar conceptualization and limit adjectives with a non-scalar conceptualization) usually choose degree modifiers with bounded modes of construal (i.e. totality modifiers). Figure 1, which is adopted from Paradis (2001: 54), demonstrates the patterns that degree modifiers and adjectives form in terms of gradability, oppositeness and boundedness.



**Figure 1.** The non-gradable and gradable dichotomy and the three basic types of boundedness (Paradis 2001: 54).

Figure 1 suggests that the degree modifier *quite* can combine with any type of gradable adjectives. It co-occurs with unbounded adjectives when it is used as a moderator (e.g. *quite long*), whereas it combines with two types of bounded adjectives when it is used as a maximizer: either with extreme adjectives with a scalar conceptualization, e.g. *quite excellent*, or with limit adjectives with a non-scalar conceptualization, e.g. *quite long*.

### 2.3.3 How is boundedness conceptualized in those verbs that combine with *quite*?

This section focuses on the relationship between *quite* and the verbs it combines with in terms of their conceptualization, which reflects the presence or absence

of boundaries. As the preceding survey of degree modifiers of adjectives based on Paradis (1997, 2001) shows, the relevant construal operation in degree modifier-adjective combinations is the assignment of boundaries, i.e. the dichotomy of boundedness and unboundedness, which in adjectives is linked to scalarity/non-scalarity and gradability in general. Gradability, however, is not only a feature of adjectives but it can also be found in nouns and verbs (see e.g. Bolinger 1972). What is common for all, as we perceive them, gradable words is that they have a feature which varies in intensity and which can be reinforced. The mode of gradability in nouns, i.e. the dichotomy of unboundedness and boundedness, is traditionally associated with countability (mass nouns/countable nouns), whereas in verbs it is usually related to aspectuality<sup>7</sup>, encompassing the type of situation expressed by the verb (the *aktionsart*) as state/activity verbs or events (continuous/non-continuous, or telic/ non-telic)<sup>8</sup>. State and activity verbs tend to function like unbounded entities (comparable to mass nouns), whereas event verbs usually function as bounded entities (and hence like count nouns). As Brinton (1998: 37) exemplifies, event verbs give rise to count nouns (e.g. *arrive* > {*an*, \**much*} *arrival*; *perform* > {*one*, \**a great deal of*} *performance*), while state and activity verbs yield mass nouns (e.g. *live* > {*a quantity of*, \**one*} *living*, *run* > {*much*, *a\**} *running*).

One traditional way of dealing with verbal aspect is Vendler (1967), which proposes four situation types. They are presented in Table 3.

Class		
1	<b>states</b> (static, durative, nontelic)	<i>e.g. live, know, hate</i>
2	<b>activities</b> (dynamic, durative, nontelic)	<i>e.g. swim, play</i>
3	<b>accomplishments</b> (dynamic, durative, telic)	<i>e.g. grow up, run a race</i>
4	<b>achievements</b> (dynamic, punctual, telic)	<i>e.g. arrive, die, win a race</i>

**Table 3. Vendler's (1967) classification of situation types**

When dealing with these, one should note that the whole verb phrase enters into the expression of *aktionsart*. For instance, the verb *run* in *Benjamin ran* is an activity verb, whereas in *Benjamin ran home* it is an accomplishment verb. In consequence, many verbs belong to more than one class by virtue of having several related uses. On the basis of dynamicity, one can distinguish three classes: activities, accomplishments and achievements. When defining these

<sup>7</sup> I adopt Brinton's (1998: 38) definition of aspectuality which encompasses both aspect and *aktionsart*. By aspect is meant "the view taken of a situation, either as a whole/complete (perfective) or incomplete/ongoing (imperfective)". By *aktionsart* is meant "the inherent temporal nature of a situation, whether static or dynamic, punctual or durative, and telic (having a necessary endpoint) or atelic".

<sup>8</sup> The term *situation* is used in this paper to refer to "a conceptual relationship which involves a relation and participants and contains a temporal dimension" (Dirven & Radden 1999: 549).

classes, I make use of *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (henceforth CDP; s.v. *action verb*), if not stated otherwise.

An *activity verb* (e.g. *drive*, *laugh*, or *meditate*) describes something that goes on for a time but has no inherent endpoint. It is possible to stop doing such a thing but it is not possible to complete it. It is, however, possible to have done it as soon as one has begun doing it. An *accomplishment verb* (e.g. *paint a fence*, *solve a problem*, or *climb a mountain*) describes something that goes on for a time toward an inherent endpoint. Since it takes a certain time to do such a thing, one cannot be said to have done it until it has been completed. Accomplishments are thus bounded by their inception and completion points (Croft 2000: 13). Frawley (1992: 183–184; 192) calls accomplishments ‘resultatives’ and shows that they are ambiguous with *almost*. For example, in *Benjamin almost painted a fence* the interpretation depends on what *almost* has in its scope, i.e. either the inchoative process itself – the event did not occur at all –, or the end-point – the event is claimed to have occurred but was not quite completed. An *achievement verb* (e.g. *reach a goal*, *drop an egg*, *hear an explosion*), in comparison, describes (i) the culmination of an activity (e.g. *finish a job*), (ii) the effecting of a change (e.g. *fire an employee*), or (iii) undergoing a change (e.g. *forget a name*). Such an activity does not go on for a period of time but it may be the culmination of something that does. Croft (2000: 11) observes that in an achievement only the first point of the result state is profiled, i.e. the point which represents the transition from the rest state to the result state. The focus is thus on the fact that a boundary has been passed; it is not on the new state. This does not, however, block the semantic interpretation of the result state having been reached.

Dirven & Radden (1999) survey situation types<sup>9</sup> within a cognitive linguistic framework and they employ the following three criteria when distinguishing between different situation types: (i) the property of *changeability*, as defined in terms of involving a change or not; (ii) the property of *duration*, as defined in terms of the length of time which an event takes, and (iii) the property of *boundedness*, as defined in terms of limitation in time by means of a beginning and an end. Dirven & Radden (1999: 550) argue that changeability is the most important property of situations because “[a] change in a situation attracts our attention more than anything else”. They classify events as changeable situations and states as non-changeable situations. Dirven & Radden (1999: 552) illustrate, among other things, that the two main situation types differ in terms of their temporal structure: events allow one to ask by means of a *when*-question for the moment in time at which something happened (e.g. *When did she smash the winning ball?*) whereas states do not (e.g. *\*When does she love tennis?*).

Previous research (e.g. Hay, Kennedy & Levin 1999; Tsujimura 2001) has shown that the traditional ways of dealing with verbal aspect (e.g. Vendler 1967)

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<sup>9</sup> See footnote 8.

do not account for the behaviour of various degree verbs. From the point of view of the present paper, what seems to be problematic is the mismatch in terms of conceptualization between *quite* and the degree verb it combines with. To illustrate, *quite* expresses a maximum degree, i.e. is conceptualized as bounded, when combining with some state verbs, which are usually conceptualized as unbounded, as they tend to last indefinitely. The examples *I quite agree/understand*, i.e. ‘I completely agree/understand’ (cf. entry (b) in Cobuild; see section 2.2) illustrate such problematic cases. In order to approach the problem and to survey in general how boundedness is conceptualized in those verbs that combine with *quite* I have used Kennedy & McNally (1999) as a starting-point, which considers the relation between event structure and the scalar structure of gradable properties associated with the situation. Kennedy & McNally (1999: 174) demonstrate that deverbal adjectives with totally closed scales correspond to “incremental theme”<sup>10</sup> verbs. They argue that there is

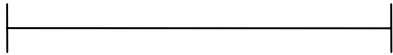
a homomorphic relationship between the events they denote and (some measurable property of) their incremental theme arguments ... [I]t is precisely this homomorphism that is responsible for the scalar properties of the derived adjectives, because it provides a template for building a closed scale, specifically a scale with a lower endpoint that corresponds to the minimal (sub)event involving (a minimal part of) the incremental theme or the relevant measurable property, and an upper endpoint that corresponds to the maximal event involving (all of) the incremental theme/property. (Kennedy & McNally 1999: 174)

To illustrate the close correspondence between deverbal adjectives with totally closed scales and incremental theme verbs, Kennedy & McNally (1999: 175) provide examples such as *a partially eaten meal* and *a fully understood problem*. In *a partially eaten meal*, the meal is the incremental theme in the situation described. There is a mapping between the progress of the event of eating and a property of the meal, i.e. the quantity/volume of the food that it includes/holds. In consequence, the degree to which the meal can be said to be eaten corresponds to the degree to which it has progressed through an event of eating. Since it is possible to define a beginning point and an endpoint for this event (i.e. when the meal is untouched and completely eaten, respectively), it is also possible to identify a lower bound and an upper bound for the scale of “eatenness” of the meal. A totally closed scale is illustrated in Figure 2<sup>11</sup> :

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<sup>10</sup> Dowty (1991) describes the entity undergoing the incremental change the incremental theme. For instance, in *mow the lawn*, the lawn is the incremental theme since it is possible to determine the progress of the entire event by looking at the state of the lawn.

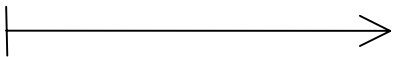
<sup>11</sup> The illustrations of the scales are mine.



**Figure 2.** A totally closed scale, as illustrated, for instance, by *a partially eaten meal* and *a fully/well understood problem* (examples by Kennedy & McNally 1999: 175).

In comparison, the participle *understood* (e.g. *a fully understood problem*) does not, at first sight, seem to correspond to a prototypical incremental theme verb, as Kennedy & McNally (1999: 179) point out. However, if we consider how it is possible to measure the progress in our understanding in terms of the quantity of the facts/issues that we understand, then the relation to an incremental theme verb seems perhaps to be clearer. Other examples of totally closed scale-participles that I can think of are, for example, *a fully known fact* and *fully agreed standards*. The fact that these participial adjectives are combined with a proportional modifier like *fully* indicates that the adjectives are associated with totally closed scales. Such adjectives also tend to accept the modifier *well* (Kennedy & McNally 1999: 173).

A participial adjective like *needed*, by contrast, does not refer to a totally closed scale since it does not accept *fully*, as exemplified by *?a fully needed rest* (Kennedy & McNally 1999: 174). It does, however, accept the modifier *much*, as in *a much needed rest*, which in Kennedy & McNally (1999: 173-176) is linked to a scale that is only partially closed, i.e. it is closed only on the bottom end. Such a scale is illustrated in Figure 3:



**Figure 3.** A partially closed scale, as exemplified by *a much needed/wanted rest* (examples by Kennedy & McNally 1999: 174-176).

The lower endpoint corresponds to a minimal (sub)event or state which must be reached before the adjectival property can be applied to its argument (Kennedy & McNally 1999: 176). For example, an entity cannot qualify as *needed* until it shows some minimal need relation to someone/something. According to Kennedy & McNally (*ibid.*), such a structure on the adjectival scale mirrors the origins of participial adjectives like *needed/wanted*: they are often derived from atelic verbs which describe situations where there is no maximal event or state. In the same way, there is no natural upper endpoint on the adjectival scale.

When looking at the scale types, i.e. a totally closed scale and a partially closed scale, and the meanings they evoke<sup>12</sup>, it is possible to discern two analogies: (i) an analogy between a totally closed scale and an expression of a maximum degree, which is reflected by the closed upper boundary of the scale;

<sup>12</sup> Based only on the existence of an upper boundary or not. I have disregarded the lower boundaries altogether as they lie outside of the focus of *quite*.

and (ii) an analogy between a partially closed scale and an expression of a relative reinforcing degree, which is reflected by the open upper boundary of the scale. When applying the analogies to the meanings of degree modifiers of verbs, it seems that the closed upper endpoint of a totally closed scale corresponds to the meaning of a maximizer like *completely* or *quite*, as exemplified by *I quite/completely agree/understand*. In these examples the momentary events of agreeing and understanding can be conceptualized as involving a transition from the states of not agreeing/not understanding to the states of agreeing/understanding. The transition can be conceptualized as a definite boundary the passing of which is foregrounded and on which *quite/completely* focus as maximizers. Since there is an event, i.e. a changeable situation, involved, it is possible to ask for the moment in time at which something happened, e.g. *At what point did he completely understand/agree?* (cf. Dirven & Radden 1999). This moment in time can be conceptualized as a definite point.

As for the partially closed scale, it appears to correspond to the meaning of a degree modifier like *much* or *very much*. Since the modifier *much* is restricted in its use with verbs, I will use the booster *very much* (see Table 1 in section 2.3.2) to capture, what I perceive as, the unbounded and relative nature of a partially open scale. As discussed earlier, Kennedy & McNally (1999: 174–176) connect the participial adjectives *needed/wanted* with a partially closed scale but the corresponding verbs *need* and *want* do not seem to harmonize with *quite*, as exemplified by *?Benjamin quite needs to do this* and *?Benjamin quite wants to do this*. However, *quite* does seem to accept some other verbs that express desire<sup>13</sup> the way *need* and *want* do, i.e. the verbs *fancy*, *hope* and *wish* (e.g. *I quite fancy him; I quite hope that you will attend the meeting; I quite wish you would attend the meeting*). Like *need* and *want*, these verbs can be associated with a partially closed scale (e.g. *I fancy him very much; I hope very much that you will attend the meeting; I wish very much that you would attend the meeting*). Apart from classifying *fancy* as a ‘verb of desire’, Levin (1993: 191) also classifies it as an ‘admire’-verb, including in the same category such verbs as *appreciate*, *envy*, *enjoy*, and *like*. All these verbs accept both *quite* and *very much*, which illustrates that they harmonize with the unbounded modes of construal of these degree modifiers (cf. *?I completely like him* etc.). These verbs are often involved in states, i.e. non-changeable and lasting situations, which is why many of them do not readily lend themselves to *when*-questions, as exemplified by *\*When does Benjamin want to win?* and *\*When does Benjamin enjoy/like tennis?* (cf. Dirven & Radden 1999). What seems to be foregrounded in such situations is the lack of a change which can be conceptualized as the lack of a definite boundary on a scale. Such unboundedness is often associated with

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<sup>13</sup> Levin (1993: 194–195) classifies the verbs *need*, *want*, *fancy*, *hope* and *wish*, among other things, as ‘verbs of desire’.

relativity. One can ask, for instance, ‘*How much* do you like him?’ and get answers like ‘I like him *a bit*’ or ‘I like him *very much*’, which specify a range, respectively, on the imaginary scale of ‘liking’. One could also be given the answer ‘I *don’t like* him, but I *don’t dislike* him, either’. An answer like this reveals that there seems to be a region on the scale that lies between those covered by the opposite verbs *like* and *dislike*. In this respect, then, unbounded verbs like the ones above, seem to behave like unbounded adjectives (see section 2.3.2).

The above survey seems to suggest that boundedness in those verbs that combine with *quite* can be conceptualized as the foregrounding of the property of changeability. If the situation involves the foregrounding of a change, i.e. the mode of construal of the verb is clearly bounded, then *quite* functions as a bounded maximizer, as in *I quite agree/understand*. If there is no foregrounding of change involved in the situation, i.e. the mode of construal of the verb is unbounded, then *quite* functions as an unbounded booster, as in *I quite like/fancy this*, i.e. ‘I like/fancy this very much’. Such observations allow me to formulate the hypothesis that it is the configurational reading of the verb in terms of boundedness/unboundedness that constrains the reading of *quite*. The next section takes a look at the actual use of *quite* as a degree modifier of verbs in written British English.

### 3 *Quite* as a degree modifier of verbs in the BNC data

The purpose of this section is to examine the actual use of *quite* as a degree modifier of verbs in the BNC data. As noted earlier, *quite* is used as a maximizer when it takes scope over a verb which maps onto a bounded mode of construal, and it is used as a booster when it takes scope over a verb which maps onto an unbounded mode of construal.

#### 3.1 Maximizer

I will start by presenting cases where *quite* combines with various mental verbs and in these gives rise to a maximizer reading, i.e. the meaning of *quite* can be replaced by the meaning of *completely* in all of the instances. Consider examples (3)-(7):

- (3) I *quite understand*. BDJ40 0086
- (4) Mr. Walker: I can *quite understand* the Hon. Gentleman 's neurosis.  
BDG3H 0066
- (5) 'I *quite agree*.' BDJXS 2055
- (6) One *quite sees* that she could not. BDH7P 0946
- (7) 'I *quite forgot* that you don't like it.' BDHGD 3441

I have interpreted examples (3)–(7) as cases of mental verbs with an achievement sense which all involve momentary events. What is foregrounded is the passing from one state to another which can be conceptualized as a boundary. In examples (3) – (7) there is thus a valence relation between the bounded mode of construal of the verb and the bounded mode of construal of *quite*. Apart from combining with *quite*, the above verbs also accept another totality modifier, i.e. the approximator *almost* (e.g. *I almost understand/agree/forgot*) which shows that boundedness is foregrounded in examples (3) – (7).

Other cases of *quite* as a maximizer of verbs are illustrated in examples (8) – (11). Again the meaning of *quite* can be replaced by the meaning of *completely* in these examples.

- (8) But curiously enough the regret she felt, not for anything she had done but for what she hadn't, *quite put an end to* the old wearisome illusion of prosecution and trial. BDHOR 2623
- (9) However, she maintained the moral impetus of her early years, although she had *quite cast off* its derivations and turned her back upon its fraudulent source; the narrow fervours and disapprovals were there, but their objects had subtly altered over the years. BDEFP 004
- (10) Now that Bernard left industrial action to others, the heart had *quite gone out* of the staff's work-to-rule and normal relations were resumed. BDHGJ 2465
- (11) Cathie had recovered completely from her near-abortion, and to Douglas she seemed not only to be glowing with health, but with something else as well, a kind of radiance that had *quite transformed* her. BDJOS 3030

What is common for examples (8) – (11) is the foregrounding of boundedness which is achieved by construing the situations as non-durational events which can be captured by a *when*-question, e.g. example (10): *When had the heart gone out of the staff's work-to-rule? When Bernard had left industrial action to others.* As for example (9), however, it is also possible to construe it as a durational event, i.e. *How long did it take for her to cast off its derivations?*, but in that case the event would still be construed with boundaries, i.e. as an event composed of various bounded subevents as the person in question deals with each derivation at a time.

Relating to the property of boundedness, it was mentioned in section 2.2. that the use of *quite* is often linked to perfectivity. This is also the case with the examples above in some of which a sense of perfectivity is created by means of a perfective particle, e.g. *off* in example (9) and *out* in example (10). The same effect can also be achieved in a situation which involves a non-human being as it often implies an unintending agent, and consequently, less focus on a doing than



on a result (Bolinger 1972: 226). The nominals *regret* in example (8), *heart* in example (10) and *radiance* in example (11) illustrate such cases.

The data show, then, that *quite* is used as a maximizer when it combines with a verb that maps onto a bounded mode of construal. Let us now turn to cases where *quite* is used as a booster.

### 3.2 Booster

Examples (12) – (14) illustrate the uses of *quite* as a booster in which the meaning of *quite* can be replaced by the meaning of *very much*. Consider:

- (12) Richard was a nice man, and ordinarily she would have *quite looked forward to* an evening with him. BDHA7 2517
- (13) 'Louise isn't interested in money as such, but she *quite likes* things. BDG0Y
- (14) I *quite enjoy* shopping. BDEBR 0942

The examples (12)–(14) are similar to examples (3)–(7) in that they all consist of mental verbs. In examples (12)–(14), however, there is no change foregrounded as the situations involve lasting states which can be conceptualized as unbounded. In consequence, *when*-questions do not generally apply to such cases, e.g. \**When does Louise like things?* (example 13). Examples (12)–(14) show, then, how the unbounded modes of construal of *quite* and the verb it applies to harmonize.

In short, the BNC-data suggest that *quite* as a degree modifier co-occurs with verbs that map onto bounded or unbounded modes of construal. There are two types of gradable verbs: those which are associated with a boundary and those which are not. If the mode of construal of the collocating verb is clearly bounded, then *quite* functions as a bounded maximizer, as in *I quite agree/understand*, but if the mode of construal of the collocating verb is unbounded, then *quite* functions as an unbounded booster, as in *I quite like/fancy this*, i.e. 'I like/fancy this very much'. Findings in the data confirm the hypothesis that the configurational reading of the verb that combines with *quite* constrains the reading of *quite* (cf. *?I completely like this* etc.).

## 4 Conclusion

The present study investigates *quite* as a degree modifier of verbs in written British English on the basis of the BNC. It explores the constraints that govern the semantic harmony between *quite* and the verbs it applies to. The study is conducted in the framework of cognitive linguistics (Langacker 1987), and for a model of degree modifiers, Paradis (1997, 2001) is used. The data are based on 31 random occurrences of *quite* as a degree modifier of verbs in affirmative

contexts. The hypothesis is that the configurational reading of the verb that combines with *quite* constrains the reading of *quite*. If the mode of construal of the collocating verb is clearly bounded, then *quite* functions as a bounded maximizer, as in *I quite understand*, but if the mode of construal of the collocating verb is unbounded, then *quite* functions as an unbounded booster, as in *I quite fancy this*. The data confirms the hypothesis in so far as it is based on positive evidence.

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