

# Post-Intensifying: The Case of the Ass-Intensifier and Its Similar but Dissimilar Danish Counterpart

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## 1. Introduction

Language is a “moving target”. The meaning and use of elements of a language can change within observable time periods. An example of language change is the contemporary, American English colloquial use of the *ass*-intensifier, such as in “a grown-ass man”. Here the word *ass* is not a lexical item. The sentence does not mean “a grown-posterior man”. It does not mean “a grown-donkey man”. It does in fact mean something similar to “a very grown man”. A misunderstanding would arise if one assumed that the *ass*-part of the sentence is to be understood as was once the case, solely by means of some lexical item. This is a reason for why it is important to examine the *ass*-intensifier – as a tool to help understand the English language and its usage. The *ass*-intensifier is an American English phenomenon; for simplicity’s sake, I will in the body of the article primarily refer to it as English, knowing that it is not applicable to all parts of the English language.

Prior to the analytical parts of the article, a brief overview of selected parts of the literature on the *ass*-intensifier is provided. Then, the *ass*-intensifier is explored by method of corpus-based study in three parts. One part examining the intensifier in adjective phrases, another part examining the intensifier in instances of noun intensification, and a third part partly examining the Danish counterpart *rov*, which is another case of an *ass*-intensifier, and partly comparing the findings to the English intensifier. A plausible outline of the future of the English *ass*-intensifier is discussed, and it will be argued that the intensifier has two distinct meanings in English and that intensification by a grammaticalized version of a lexical item for posterior is not exclusively an English phenomenon, showing a cross-linguistic link.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Prior research

The prior research on the topic of the *ass*-intensifier in colloquial American English is scattered and somewhat incoherent. To say, however, that the *ass*-intensifier has received no attention would be wrong and therefore 3 examples of the existing literature on the topic will be presented. Diana Elgersma describes the *ass*-intensifier “as a suffix, which attaches to adjectives” (1998, 7) in a piece of literature widely recognized as one of the first examples of a scholar paying serious (however short) attention to the phenomenon of the *ass*-intensifier.

Daniel Siddiqi (2011, 16-17) focuses on the meaning of the *ass*-intensifier which he finds to be similar to *very*. Like Elgersma, he argues the intensifier to be suffixal, while at the same time arguing that it could be an infix. He points to an interesting constraint on the intensifier, namely that it cannot be phrase-final (Siddiqi’s choice of words). It needs to appear to the right of the adjective it is modifying and to the left of the head the adjective modifies. This wording is shown to be inaccurate in 3.1. According to Siddiqi, (1a) is acceptable and (1b) unacceptable.

- (1) a. That is a big-ass lollipop.  
 b. \*That lollipop is big-ass.

Further inquiry into the possibility of the *ass*-intensifier appearing phrase-finally is presented in 3.1.

There are three things to mention in relation to the two abovementioned examples of work in the field: 1) Both label the intensifier as an affix, respectively suffix and infix; 2) they both stress that the *ass*-intensifier needs to modify an adjective; 3) they are both articles of no more than two pages. While both clearly are instances of serious work, they both, naturally, lack the depth that one could expect of an article in the range of 20 pages or more.

The third and final point of entry in the overview of prior research is different in regard to length. Wilson Joseph Miller wrote his Master’s thesis on grammaticalization, focusing on the specific example of the *ass*-intensifier. Herein he had the opportunity to go in-depth on the subject in a way that Elgersma and Siddiqi could not. He takes a different approach to the terminology than the two above in that he calls the *ass*-intensifier a clitic (Miller 2017, 38). This is based in the framework of grammaticalization, and because grammaticalization can be valuable in terms of accounting for the diachronic development of the intensifier, some key concepts will be elaborated.

## 2.2 Grammaticalization

Antoine Meillet first used the term “grammaticalization” in 1912, and in many ways his century-old definition is still adequate to describe its use. For Meillet, grammaticalization was “the attribution of grammatical nature to a formerly autonomous word” (translated in Smith 2011, 367). This means that grammaticalization is a process in which the grammatical nature of a word is increased, that is, it moves along the prototypical cline shown in (2a).

- (2) a. Content item → grammatical word → clitic → inflectional affix (Hopper and Traugott 2003, 7).

Miller’s argument is that the *ass*-intensifier has undergone this process from content item over grammatical word to now a clitic, but that it has not (yet) developed into an inflectional affix. He believes it to be a clitic because it is flexible in its syntactic restrictions, that is, it has the ability to intensify nouns (Miller 2017, 38). The cline of grammaticalization is revisited in 4.2, and in 3.2, I return to the question of noun intensification and argue that Miller’s examples are in fact not examples of noun intensification but that examples of this do exist.

Given the length restriction, this article focuses on the synchronic use of the *ass*-intensifier. I still choose to include a section on grammaticalization because the point in exploring the synchronic use of the *ass*-intensifier is that the use of the word *ass* has transgressed its earlier uses. Hereby I mean that it is no longer sufficient to speak of *ass* as only a lexical item with 4 old and 4 modern senses of meaning (Miller 2017, 10-11). The point being that the usage of the word has undergone a change, and the framework of grammaticalization and Miller’s thesis can be a way of understanding that change. Miller’s diachronic analysis is then to be understood as the historical component to this synchronic analysis. Also, as will be apparent in the next section, I share Miller’s classification of the *ass*-intensifier as a clitic.

## 2.3 The question of terminology

The three points of entry in the overview of prior research are chosen partly due to them being important instances of work and partly due to the diversity of the field of study they display. A somewhat extensive amount of terminology has been used to this point to characterize the intensifier. Elgersma calls it a suffix, Siddiqi says that it has suffixal qualities while also arguing it to be an infix, and Miller decides to call it a clitic. Discussions over terminology are perhaps not that uncommon in scholarly fields and perhaps not that surprising in this field, given that clitics and affixes share

important properties and often overlap in functions (Spencer and Luís 2012, 4). This article will also take a stance in the ongoing discussion of terminology. I agree with Miller’s diachronic analysis of the *ass*-intensifier and find his grammaticalization framework to be the best possible tool to analyze and explain its development. I also agree with his argument of the intensifier being a clitic. “A genuine affix only attaches to words of a particular category ... But the clitic [possessive] ‘s attaches to whatever word it happens to be next to” (Spencer and Luís 2012, 1). The *ass*-intensifier does not attach to whatever word it happens to be next to, there are specific syntactic constraints that will be examined in 3.1 and 3.2. It is, however, not confined to words of a particular word class, and therefore I, like Miller, find clitic to be the best way to label it. Furthermore, one could use the term enclitic, since, as will be shown, the intensifier attaches to the right edge of the host (Spencer and Luís 2012, 1). It is post-intensifying, in other words.

The point of sections 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 has been to place this article both in a historical context and in a discussion of terminology regarding the *ass*-intensifier. The following sections 3.1 and 3.2 consist of analyses of the two distinct uses of the intensifier that I believe to be a part of the present-day colloquial American English, while 3.3 is an analysis of the Danish counterpart *rov* and a comparison between the instances.

### 3. The *ass*-intensifier in English and Danish

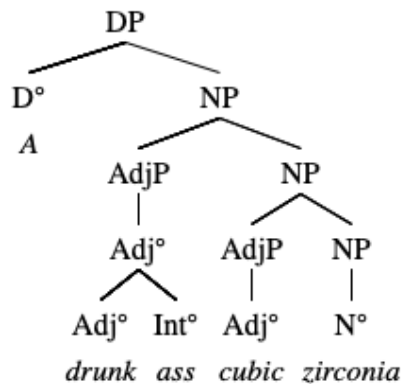
#### 3.1 The *ass*-intensifier in adjective phrases

First, two clarifications. The first being that I subscribe to the generative grammar and syntactic trees, more specifically as outlined in Vikner (2019). The second being a note on terminology. When I use the term ‘intensifier’ I use it in the Quirkian sense where it is concerned with the semantic category of degree (Quirk et al. 1985, 589). Quirk et al. distinguish between amplifiers and downtoners; with focus here being on amplifiers. They divide amplifiers into maximizers and boosters (the *ass*-intensifier is in its most common form an example of a booster). Boosters denote a high degree (something is more than the base value when in connection with an intensifier of this type). It is also interesting that both types of amplifiers, and especially boosters, form an open class into which new expressions regularly are created (Quirk et al. 1985, 590). This is what I believe to have happened in the case of the *ass*-intensifier with the intensifier being a fairly recent addition to the category of boosters. Following these clarifications, consider the sentence (3a).

(3) a. A drunk ass cubic zirconia is not as good as a lump of coal. (COCA, n.d.)

(3a) is a case of the most common use of the *ass*-intensifier in English. The most common use is one where the intensifier is attached to an adjective and together with said adjective constitute an adjective phrase. (3b) is how I believe the initial determiner phrase, which is of interest here, should be analyzed syntactically.

(3) b.



This analysis is concerned with the morphological level of the adjective head *drunk ass* because I believe *ass* in this case to be a part of the core of the adjective head, while an analysis simply labelling *drunk ass* as Adj° would be insufficient in the scope of this article. I analyze the intensifier as part of the core of the adjective head because I have been unable to find examples in which the intensifier can be interpreted as intensifying an entire adjective phrase.

As Siddiqi (2011, 16) noted, and as can be seen in (3b), the adjective phrase has a specific syntactic distribution. While Siddiqi argues that it needs to be to the left of the head the adjective modifies, it is more accurate to say that it requires a noun phrase to its right. This is because of examples like (3b) and (3c).

(3) c. I think you're a spoiled ass white boy (COCA, n.d.).

(3c) is an example showing that the *ass*-intensifier does not need to have a noun head to its right. It can also modify a noun phrase of which the first word is an adjective. If indeed true that the intensifier requires a noun phrase to its right, it follows that the adjective phrase with the intensifier cannot appear

phrase-finally or predicatively. The following suggests that what seemed to have been a constant, the inability to appear predicatively, may be less of a given than otherwise thought.

Ben Zimmer (2013) argues that (or wonders if) the syntactic constraint is in fact just that the *ass*-intensifier cannot appear clause-finally, meaning that it can perhaps be used predicatively as long as it is followed by content, one of his examples being (3d).

- (3) d. The father would talk about how *backward-ass* the medical school was in its, say, treatment of severe high blood pressure... (Zimmer 2013).

This is no doubt an interesting find. It is from the Corpus of Contemporary American English and therefore an actual utterance. Whether it is fully acceptable is something open to debate. Zimmer also speculates that (3e) is perhaps acceptable as the adjective phrase is not clause-final but followed by an embedded clause, based on an example from Urban Dictionary.

- (3) e. FDR gave a speech that was so boring-ass (that) I needed a couple of kamikazes afterwards (Zimmer 2013).

While searching COCA I have been unable to find any examples of the *ass*-intensifier positioned right before an embedded clause beginning with either *that* or *I*, and I therefore have trouble agreeing with him that it is acceptable. At least, finding evidence of it already being used has been unsuccessful. The only example of the *ass*-intensifier being used predicatively I have come across in COCA is in fact the one Zimmer is referring to, and to view that as evidence of a widespread use of the intensifier in this way seems a stretch. However, included in Miller's (2017, 50) data is recorded spoken data, and here are two notable examples, (3f) and (3g).

- (3) f. That food was bombass.  
g. That shit's whackass.

These are indeed examples of predicative use of the adjective phrase including the *ass*-intensifier. They are in a minority and, as mentioned above, searching COCA has not yielded similar results. Two explanations seem possible: 1) the examples are anomalous; cases of misuse of the intensifier, or 2) the

examples are pointing towards a development of the usage of the intensifier with a less rigid environment for its distribution.

Siddiqi (2011) argues that the *ass*-intensifier in adjective phrases means something similar to *very*. This I agree with. Should one choose to substitute *ass* with *very* in (3a), the acceptable sentence would not, however, be (3h), but (3i).

- (3) h. \*A drunk very cubic zirconia ...  
 i. A very drunk cubic zirconia ...

This points to a characteristic trait of the intensifier. Although similar to *very*, its place in the syntactic structure is different. It is post-intensifying. This is also interesting considering the flow of information. In (3a), the adjective is presented before the information that the adjective is to be intensified. In (3i), the fact that intensification is taking place is presented before the adjective that is then intensified. The adjective → intensifier-flow of order necessitates a small reanalysis of the provided information in the recipient. For instance, from thinking that the following noun is *drunk* to *very drunk*. The recipient will need to reconfigure the degree to which the adjective in question is to be understood. In this regard, the *ass*-intensifier is comparable to suffixal degree inflection, e.g., the case of (3j).

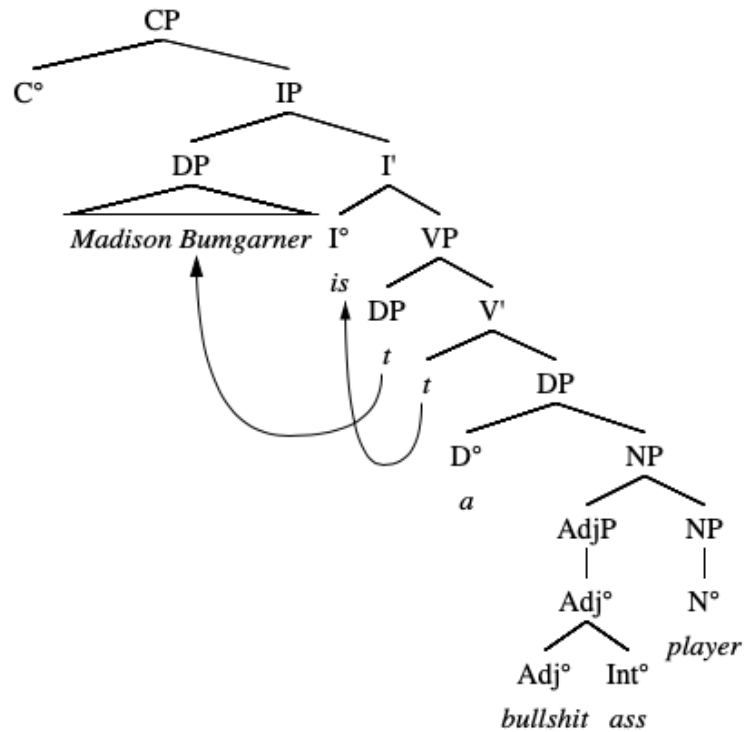
- (3) j. The *loveliest* flower

The fact that the flower is to be understood as not just a lovely flower, but the loveliest flower, is also here presented after, that is, post the adjective. This renders visible an interesting kinship between these elements of the English language that 1) are not words in themselves and 2) have an ability to do something to a word in the end of said word.

### 3.2 Noun intensification

Elgersma and Siddiqi both argue that the *ass*-intensifier attaches to adjectives only, while Miller argues that it can also attach to and intensify nouns. If you look at the examples (Miller 2017, 36), you see what he believes to be noun intensification. The words he points to are typically characterized as nouns, however, they appear to be used adjectivally in his examples. For instance, his example 42 is the sentence: “I think Madison Bumgarner is a bullshit-*ass* player” (36). In (4a) I have analyzed the embedded clause as I think it should be interpreted.

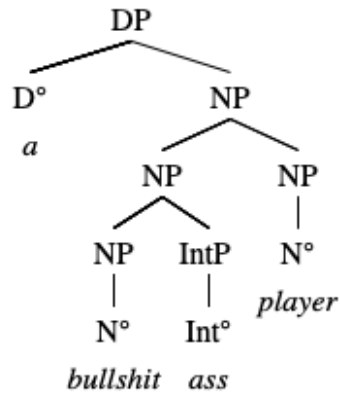
(4) a.



This interpretation is equivalent to that in (3b). In (4a), the word *bullshit* is clearly used descriptively about the kind of player Madison Bumgarner is, here meaning that he is a player of the very bullshit-kind, i.e., a very bad player. Miller interprets the *ass*-intensifier as intensifying a noun in this case and does not specify what noun intensification means to him. Therefore, one would have to assume that he interprets *ass* to be used in the same way as in his examples of the intensifier in adjective phrases. This would mean that the intensifier has an equivalent meaning to *very* (Miller 2017, 27). From that follows that what Miller is suggesting is the analysis in (4b) below where *ass* intensifies the noun *bullshit*. For simplicity purposes, I only show the final determiner phrase.



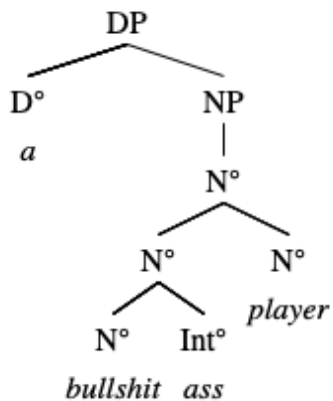
(4) b.



That the *ass*-intensifier in instances of noun intensification is taken to have an equivalent meaning to *very* means that the noun *bullshit* is intensified to have a large degree of noun qualities; that is, it is very much the noun *bullshit*. The picture becomes clearer when substituting *bullshit* for a noun that is usually not used adjectivally, for instance *house*. *House-ass* is then to be understood as *very house*, which is something I struggle to find meaning in.

If we are to make sense of the interpretation where *bullshit* is a noun, we need to read *bullshit player* as a compound (i.e., a player of bullshit) with *ass* on a morphological level attaching itself to the first part of the compound, *bullshit*. That is what I show in (4c).

(4) c.



That, however, is not the interpretation Miller suggests. Or what I suggest in this example, since I do not take Madison Bumgarner to be a player of bullshit. The analysis in (4a) is also applicable to Miller's other, related examples and therefore I do not believe that he has shown that the *ass*-intensifier has the

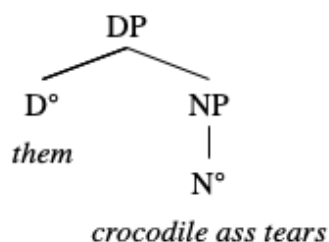
ability to intensify nouns. What I believe he has found are instances of nouns being used adjectivally in combination with the *ass*-intensifier.

In Miller's defense, he is however not completely in the wrong. Searching COCA I have come across examples of what I believe to be the *ass*-intensifier placed between two nouns, or rather: placed between two parts of a compound. See (4d).

- (4) d. You can dry up them crocodile ass tears, too! (COCA, n.d.)

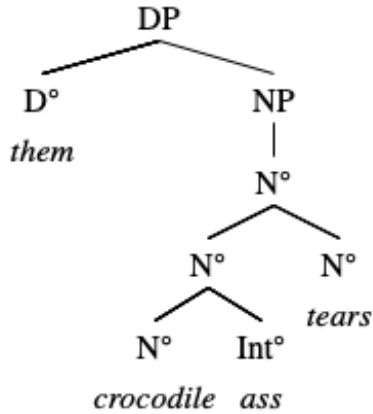
Both *crocodile* and *tears* are clearly nouns and used as nouns in this instance. Put together they form the compound *crocodile tears* meaning some sort of fake crying or insincere display of emotion. How to then account for the intensifier's placement in the syntactic structure is interesting. There seem to be two possibilities with one of them being my preferred interpretation. The first has *ass* placed in the middle of the compound (i.e., truly infixal, on the same level as the other parts). In that interpretation, the analysis of the determiner phrase *them crocodile ass tears* looks like (4e).

- (4) e.



The other possibility is that *ass* on a morphological level attaches to the first part of the compound. This is the analysis I briefly touched upon in relation to *bullshit-ass player* in (4c), and again here in (4f).

(4) f.



In (4f), *ass* is analyzed as part of the core of the noun head *crocodile ass*. This is the analysis I take to be most likely as it is more economical. To analyze the intensifier as part of the core of the noun head is equivalent to analyzing the intensifier as part of the core of the adjective head in (3b), and therefore only one interpretation of the placement of *ass* is needed. Instead of assuming two different placements in the syntactic structure in adjective phrases and compounds, the exclusively post-x (x being an adjective or noun) placement is the simplest explanation and thereby abiding the principle of Occam's razor.

One thing is the syntactic placement, another is the function the intensifier in compounds serves. Firstly, a difference between *crocodile tears* and *crocodile ass tears* is assumed, otherwise the *ass*-intensifier would be useless and an unnecessary puff of pulmonic air. The reason for engaging with it in an article about the *ass*-intensifier is that I believe it to be belonging to this category. However, I also believe that we in some ways need to distinguish between the intensifier described in 3.1 and the one described here. In the case of the *ass*-intensifier in adjective phrases, it makes sense to take the intensifier to mean something similar to *very*, as argued in 3.1. On the other hand, it does not make great sense to take the intensifier in the cases of noun intensification to mean something similar to *very*. In that case one would have to read (4d) as *crocodile very tears*, or, perhaps more likely, *very crocodile tears*. As stated in the case of *bullshit-ass player*, I struggle to find meaning in this reading. Therefore, this use of the intensifier should not be labeled as a booster, as was the case with the intensifier in 3.1. Let me instead propose a different reading where the intensifier is not taken to mean *very* but is rather taken as what I would like to call an emotive intensifier. The function of the emotive intensifier is twofold. On the one hand, it emphasizes, i.e., intensifies, parts of the utterance (or the whole utterance). It can be used as a tool to inform the listener of what should be of particular importance in the utterance. On the other hand, it

conveys a certain emotive investment on the part of the speaker, elevating the utterance from a base level of engagement.

Let us consider two other instances of noun intensification to substantiate these claims.

- (4) g. But our coaches man are making some bonehead ass decisions (COCA, n.d).  
 h. Can't believe you bought that same bucket ass car (COCA, n.d).

The important part of the utterance for the speaker in (4g) is the decisions the coaches are making. Plausibly it was not enough for the speaker to describe the decisions by use of the compound *bonehead decisions*. An increase in emphasis and emotion was needed, which is then applied to the sentence by use of the *ass*-intensifier. An interpretation where *bonehead* is read as an adjective and *bonehead ass* then as an adjective phrase is not implausible either, if you read *bonehead* as the equivalent to, say, *bad*. I prefer to read *bonehead decisions* as a compound that the speaker constitutes as the emphatic and emotive center of the utterance by adding the intensifier, because I find it less than perfect to say (4i).

- (4) i. The decisions our coaches make are bonehead.

This is opposed to the case in (4a) where I argue that *bullshit* should be read as a noun used adjectivally. This is argued in part because the compound *bullshit player* makes little sense and in part because, in the case of *bullshit*, you can use it predicatively as can be seen from (4j).

- (4) j. Number one, school is bullshit! (COCA, n.d.)

The noun intensification analysis for (4g) also goes for (4h). *Bucket car* is in and of itself a compound meaning a car in a poor condition, and it would make no sense to read *bucket* as an adjective in this case; stating that something “is bucket” will most likely produce an error of understanding.

Together, (4d), (4g), and (4h) show that the *ass*-intensifier can be used as an emotive intensifier when a speaker feels a need to direct attention and convey emotive investment to certain parts of an utterance or the utterance as a whole. It is different from the *ass*-intensifier of the adjective phrase in that it does not share the equivalence meaning of *very*. This is important because it suggests more than one usage of the intensifier. The usage described here is a minority. It is more common to find examples of the usage from 3.1 or with nouns being used adjectivally. Since there is no clear-cut way

of deciding whether something is purely anomalous, such a decision can become a matter of conviction. However, I claim that the usage described in 3.2 is not anomalous since multiple independent examples can be found, and that it is indeed another way of using the *ass*-intensifier, which could perhaps suggest a widening of the intensifier's distribution; something that will be discussed in 4.1.

### 3.3 The Danish counterpart

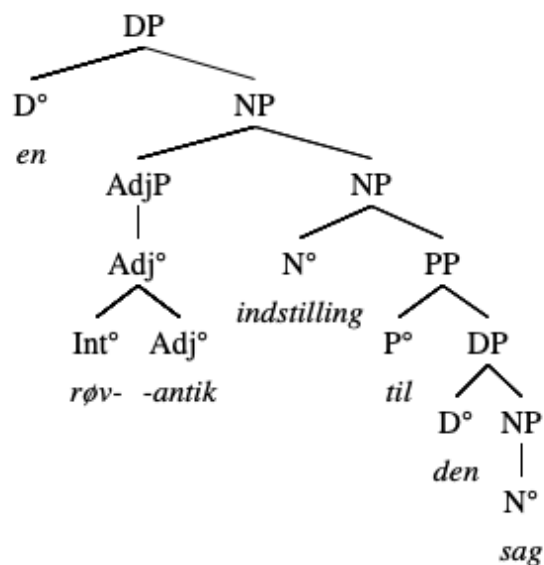
The Danish counterpart to the English *ass*-intensifier is interesting for more than one reason. For one thing, it shows that intensification by a grammaticalized version of a lexical item for posterior is not exclusively an English phenomenon. Another interesting aspect is the syntactic distribution, especially compared to the English *ass*-intensifier.

The Danish intensifier *røv* and the English *ass*-intensifier in adjective phrases share meaning. Both mean something very similar to *very* and are used as a way of intensifying the adjective to which they attach. Let us consider a Danish example.

- (5) a. Du har en røvantik indstilling til den sag (KorpusDK, n.d.)  
*You have an ass-antique attitude to that issue*  
 (= 'You have a very antiquated attitude towards that issue')

What we see in (5a) and in the syntactic analysis of the determiner phrase “en røvantik indstilling til den sag” in (5b) is primarily the most characteristic difference between the *ass*-intensifier in English and in Danish. In Danish, the intensifier attaches in the front of the adjective head of which it is a part, it is pre-intensifying, as opposed to the post-intensifying, English intensifier.

(5) b.



Similar to the syntactic analysis of the English intensifier, I take the Danish intensifier to be a part of the core of the adjective head, except for in the example shown in (5i). By pre-intensifying the adjective, the Danish intensifier shares a characteristic property with other, related intensifiers, namely its syntactic distribution in relation to the adjective, cf. (5c) and (5d).

(5) c. A *very* lazy slothd. A *really* tumultuous day

The words of particular interest in the two examples are the words in italics, both of them sharing certain properties with the Danish *ass*-intensifier, namely the category of intensifier and the fact that they are pre-intensifying. The same goes for the translated Danish sentences in (5e) and (5f).

(5) e. Et *meget* dovent doventyrf. En *virkelig* tumultarisk dag

It would appear that the English *ass*-intensifier is the odd one out. That is, the odd intensifier out. As mentioned in 3.1, the case of the English *ass*-intensifier is comparable to degree inflection.

A reason for the English intensifier's syntactic distribution is perhaps to be found in its development. Miller (2017, 13) reckons that the oldest compound containing *ass* is *jackass* (c. 1727).

The important thing here being the placement of *ass* in *jackass* as the final part of the compound. Siddiqi (2011, 16) argues that *ass* can only appear phrase-finally when attached to the end of *bad* (*badass*), and he sees this not as an exception but rather as the source of the intensifier. The important thing here being the placement of *ass* as the final part of the source material. That would then mean that *ass* has regained its placement in other connections whilst the first part of either a compound (*bucket ass car*) or an adjective phrase (*drunk ass*) is then replaced. The origin of the placement of *ass* is a valid assumption as to why the intensifier occupies the place it does in the syntactic structure.

When trying to apply the same assumption to the placement of the Danish *ass*-intensifier something does not fit. Looking in the Danish dictionary *Ordbog over det danske Sprog*, under subsection 3 of the entry for *røv*, we can see that it is also used as the final part of compounds. An example of this is shown in (5g), this entry being dated c. 1860 (ODS, n.d.).

- (5) g. Drengerøv (ODS, n.d.)  
*Boy-ass*  
 (= ‘Man child’)

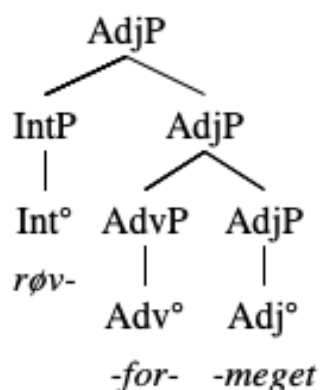
Both Danish and English share the use of the colloquial *ass* as the final part of compounds, yet somehow the Danish intensifier has moved to the front of adjective phrases. This is not an article about the diachronic development of the Danish intensifier, and therefore no more attention will be paid to it, but it is interesting that there is a mirroring of the placement of the *ass*-intensifiers and that the valid assumption of the placement of the intensifier in English is not also applicable to the Danish counterpart.

Another way in which the English and Danish *ass*-intensifiers are distinct is the case of predicative use. While the English intensifier is widely believed to only work with attributive adjectives, that is not the case for the Danish intensifier, which can also be used predicatively, see (5h) from (KorpusDK, n.d.).

- (5) h. Hun er røv-irriterende, røv-dominerende og røv-for-meget  
*She is ass-irritating, ass-dominating and ass-too-much*  
 (= ‘She is really irritating, really dominating, and way too much’)

It is also worth noting how productively the Danish intensifier is used in this trilogy of bad mouthing. Especially the ending of the sentence is interesting, where the intensifier does not attach itself directly to an adjective head, but rather to an adjective phrase that consists of both an adverb and an adjective, see (5i).

(5) i.



This is particularly interesting because this is the only example to be found in KorpusDK where the intensifier is not attaching itself directly to an adjective head. The question of whether this is an anomaly; an attempt of innovative use of language then deemed unsuccessful, or whether this is in fact a productive use of the intensifier is not something to be answered clearly. In (Olling 2020), the phrase in (5j) is uttered, showing a least one other use of the “*røv-for*”-construction.

(5) j. Røv for dårligt  
*Ass too bad*  
 (= ‘Way too bad’)

Since my findings of this construction are limited to the two mentioned examples, it does not suggest a widespread use. It does, however, suggest that the Danish intensifier has fewer syntactic constraints than the English and, by extension, that it can be used in a wider variety of ways. The comparison of the intensifiers shows them to be similar, yet dissimilar.

There are no examples of noun intensification by the *ass*-intensifier in Danish as of yet. Whether there can be at some point in the future is an interesting discussion. If indeed the intensifier has fewer syntactic constraints in Danish, then there should not theoretically be anything to hinder it in being



used for noun intensification the way it is seen in English in compounds. One could imagine the following outcome in Danish where the *ass*-intensifier is attached to the first part of the compound on a morphological level.

- (5) k. En røv-borddekoration  
*An ass-table decoration*  
 (= ‘A table-ass decoration’)

This outcome entails a possible complication. In Danish, you can have compounds with *ass* as the first part, for instance *røvtur* (*ass-trip*) or *røvbanan* (*ass-banan*), where *ass* is used to denote negative meaning to the compound. The same reading could be done in the instance of (5k) whereby a *røv-borddekoration* becomes a bad or inferior table decoration instead of an instance of intensification by *ass*. This is a practical complication that could hinder the spreading of the *ass*-intensifier to noun intensification in Danish, yet the theoretical possibility of spreading should not be ruled out.

The point of a section comparing the English and Danish *ass*-intensifier is twofold. Firstly, it shows the interesting phenomenon of a mirroring of the placement of the intensifier. In English, it is post-intensifying. In Danish the intensifier is pre-intensifying the adjective, similarly to a wide array of other intensifiers. Secondly, the examples across languages show that intensification by a grammaticalized version of a lexical item for posterior is not exclusively bound to English and thereby a cross-linguistic link. Interestingly, across the two languages we see a decrease of lexical meaning and an increase of grammatical character in the case of *ass* (cf. Meillet’s definition of grammaticalization).

Section 4 is concerned with what lies ahead. In 4.1, I discuss the assumed difference between the *ass*-intensifier in adjective phrases and in instances of noun intensification in English. In 4.2, I discuss a possible trajectory leading forward.

## 4. Where do we go from here?

### 4.1 What to make of the two meanings of the *ass*-intensifier

In 3.1 and 3.2, I have shown what I take to be different meanings of the *ass*-intensifier. Both are instances of intensification but in two different ways. In this section, I discuss what to make of those two meanings. Lucille Bordet (2017, 1-2) argues that intensifiers over time lose their intensifying force but that they remain in use with new functions and in new, different contexts. This seems a possible explanation for the different uses of the *ass*-intensifier. In his diachronic analysis of the intensifier,

Miller (2017, 14-15) points to *big-ass nightstick* from 1945 as the first documented use of the word *ass* as an intensifier. This means that the first use of the intensifier was in an adjective phrase as those analyzed in 3.1. Therefore, it is plausible that the noun intensification use has developed later from the use in adjective phrases. Assuming this to be true, the *ass*-intensifier can be seen to follow the path laid out by Bordet where an intensifier over time comes to be used in different contexts, that is, its use expands from being exclusively in adjective phrases to also include noun intensification.

This is also a possible explanation for the small difference in meaning between the two instances of the intensifier, cf. Bordet about intensifiers remaining in use with new functions. I argue that the intensifying force in instances of noun intensification is a different intensifying force. As mentioned in 3.1, I agree with Siddiqi that the intensifier in adjective phrases means something equivalent to *very* or *really*, while I do not find that to be the case in noun intensification. This I, in 3.2, argue to be an emotive intensification. Following the trajectory laid out by Bordet, you can see the intensifying force of the *ass*-intensifier going from a specific type of intensification, in the meaning that a certain adjective is to be connected with a higher degree of that said adjective, to another type of intensification, another function; one placing emphasis and emotive investment on a part of speech or on a certain element without meaning that said element is to be understood as to be *very* or *really* said element.

#### 4.2 Is this the final state?

This part of the article is more speculative as it is concerned with a not yet empirical reality. There is a reason for this. I am interested in whether we can use past examples to also account for the future of the *ass*-intensifier. In other words: Does it behave as other intensifiers before it? In a very certain and characteristic way it does not by having a distinct syntactic distribution and by being post-intensifying. There are two things to consider concerning the future use of the *ass*-intensifier, one is the syntax, and another is the semantics of the intensifier.

The grammaticalization framework and the cline from 2.2 propose a trajectory for the syntactic properties of the intensifier. The prototypical grammaticalization cline has “inflectional affix” as the final state, a state the *ass*-intensifier has not reached as of yet. Whether it will reach it is unclear. While based on many empirical cases, the cline in itself does not predict an outcome (Smith 2011, 369). If the intensifier were to follow the lines of other grammaticalization processes, it could develop into an inflectional affix, but the possibility exists that the intensifier will see no further rise in grammatical character and therefore continue to be a clitic.

Like Bordet, Gunter Lorenz (2002, 143) also paints a plausible trajectory for intensifiers, one concerned more with semantics than syntax. He says that an intensifier's biggest asset is novelty. Over time, it loses part of its expressive force and then either disappears or becomes integrated in mainstream use. At present, the *ass*-intensifier has shown itself to be widespread enough to be considered material for scholarly research, in this article by means of corpus data. If that is to be considered mainstream use is difficult to say.

The different meanings of the intensifier as laid out above in 4.1 could point to a spreading of the syntactic distribution (not placement), and an alteration in meaning. Similarly, Miller found examples of adjective phrases with the *ass*-intensifier being used predicatively, something previously deemed unacceptable in the (very limited) literature. This suggests that something is happening, cf. the point about language being a "moving target". It could be a topic for further, future research to examine whether the intensifier has followed the prototypical cline of grammaticalization and whether the trajectory laid out by Bordet and Lorenz proves to be applicable beyond this speculation. That would involve the intensifier over time losing its intensifying or expressive force and becoming truly mainstream (something I find not that feasible given its status as a profane word and its scatological connotations. Plausibly, it would take a more severe delexicalization for it to spread into standard use also) or simply becoming obsolete and disappear when deemed no longer sufficient to express intensity. It shall be interesting to follow.

## 5. Conclusion

This article has examined the present-day use of the colloquial *ass*-intensifier in American English. It is argued that the *ass*-intensifier is post-intensifying, attaching itself to either an adjective, e.g., *A drunk ass cubic zirconia*, or to a noun in compounds, e.g., *Them crocodile ass tears*. I argue that one should distinguish between the meaning of these two instances of the *ass*-intensifier; the one in adjective phrases meaning something equivalent to *very* or *really*, and the one in compounds being used as an emotive intensifier to direct attention to and convey emotive investment in part of the utterance or the utterance as a whole.

Furthermore, I have examined and compared the similarity and dissimilarity between the *ass*-intensifier and its Danish counterpart *rov*, showing the main difference to be a mirroring of the syntactic distribution of the intensifier. It is post-intensifying in English while pre-intensifying in Danish, similar to other, perhaps more common intensifiers. Another difference between the two is the case of predicative use. In Danish, predicative use of the *ass*-intensifier is unproblematic and productive, in

one example it is even attached to an entire adjective phrase; in English, predicative use is a fairly rare phenomenon and its status as acceptable or unacceptable is undecided.

Finally, I have attempted to look forward and illuminate the path ahead. Bordet and Lorenz lay out a path typical of intensifiers concerning semantics and, concerning syntax, grammaticalization framework presents a prototypical cline, that is, a trajectory. I argue it plausible that the *ass*-intensifier will follow a path similar to that laid out by Bordet and Lorenz based on the assumed difference between the instances of the intensifier which is seen as a widening of its distribution, not syntactic placement, and use. The target has moved in the case of the *ass*-intensifier and will perhaps continue moving.

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