

From 'big' to 'much' – On the grammaticalization of two gradable adjectives in Swedish¹

Lars-Olof Delsing

Abstract: In this paper, I give a short description of a language change that can be viewed as an instance of grammaticalization, namely the transition of the two adjectives *mycken/t* and *liten/t* into quantifiers. Data from the corpus of Swedish drama dialogue reveal that *liten/t* becomes a quantifier already in the 1700's, whereas *mycken/t* seems to go through the same change roughly 150 years later. Inherent plurals (such as *pengar*, 'money') appear to be a promising context for the starting point of the transition. I further illustrate how both quantifiers have weak and strong versions in present-day Swedish, and I argue that weak *mycket* (*myke*) has turned into a negative polarity item that is found in negated clauses (but not for example in questions and conditionals), whereas weak *lite(t)* has turned into a positive polarity item and is found elsewhere. If we assume that weak versions of quantifiers are more frequent than strong ones, and that positive polarity contexts are more frequent than negative ones, we expect the frequency of *mycken/t* to drop, whereas the frequency of *liten/t* should rise over time. A preliminary study that seems to confirm this prediction is presented here.

Key words: grammaticalization, quantifiers, adjectives, negative polarity, positive polarity, language change, Swedish

1. Introduction

The quantifier *mycket* ('much') in present-day Swedish is foremost used to quantify over mass nouns and plurals, roughly like *much* in Modern English:²

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² With countable nouns in plural, *många* 'many' is normally used (see (i)), but *mycket* may also be used (cf. (ii)), and then the plurality is seen more collectively.

- (1) *mycket mjölk/socker/pengar* (present-day Swedish)
much milk.C.SG/sugar.N.SG/money.PL
‘much milk/sugar/money’

As can be seen from (1), the quantifier is uninflected for number and gender, and the form is the same, whether the noun is common gender (glossed C) or neuter (N), or whether it is singular or plural. As in English it is also used with comparative adjectives:³

- (2) *mycket längre* (present-day Swedish)
much longer

In older Swedish, the adjective *mycken* (‘big’) agreed with its noun in gender and number, as in (3). Around 1600, it consistently agreed with the head noun in gender and number.

- (3) a. *mycken glädje* (Early Modern Swedish)
much.C.SG joy
b. *mycket oljud*
much.N.SG noise
c. *myckna tårar*
much.PL tears

Comparing the examples in (1) and (3), we note that the agreement pattern has changed. The former neuter singular form *mycket* (as in (3b)) has spread, and is now used with all nouns (common gender singular as well as plural, as shown in (1)).

A very similar development has happened to the adjective *liten/t* ‘little’ which has been replaced by the uninflected *lite(t)*, based on the former neuter form of the adjective. Older phrases with the agreeing adjective (like in (4a)) are expressed with the non-agreeing quantifier *lite* in present-day Swedish; cf. (4b)). *Liten/t* is however slightly different from *mycken/t* (see section 2).

- (4) a. *Hon fick liten hjälp av sina grannar* (EMS system)
she got little.C.SG help of POSS.REFL neighbours
‘She got a little help from her neighbours’

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- (i) *Många böcker* (ii) *mycket böcker*
many books much books
‘many books’ ‘lots of books’

³ In Swedish *mycket* is also used in the meaning ‘very’ to denote degree of positive adjectives. The Old Swedish distinction between *miok* ‘very’ and *mykit* ‘much’ is levelled in the 15th century. This development is however beyond the scope of this paper.

- b. *Hon fick lite hjälp av sina grannar* (present-day Swedish)
 she got little.N.SG help of POSS.REFL neighbours
 'She got little/some help from her neighbours'⁴

In this paper, I make two claims. First, I claim that the adjectives *mycken* 'big' and *liten* 'little' have turned into quantifiers during the last three hundred years. The shift is most clearly noticeable in the increasing lack of agreement, i.e. in the use of the old neuter singular form also with common gender singular and plural nouns. The development is studied in the corpus of the Swedish drama dialogue (Melander Marttala & Strömquist 2001), covering the years 1725–2000. The corpus is presented in section 3. I will show that *lite* is grammaticalized as a quantifier a little earlier than *mycket*. Second, I propose that the weak forms of the quantifiers *mycket* and *lite(t)* have turned into polarity items in present-day Swedish (section 5). This leads to a prediction about the frequency of these words, namely that the positive polarity item *lite* should become more frequent and the negative polarity item *mycket* should become less frequent. In section 6, this prediction is tested in the drama-corpus.

2. Agreement in gender/number

In Old Swedish, there are basically two adjectives meaning 'big', *stor* and *mykil* (with the masculine accusative form *mykin*).⁵ The first one is mostly used with countable nouns, whereas the second is mostly restricted to mass nouns, and occasionally to plurals. The adjective *litil* (with the masculine accusative form *litin*) 'little, small' is used both with count and mass nouns, but in the plural the suppletive form, *smar* 'little, small', is normally used.

Adjectives used in Swedish definite noun phrases have a different inflection from adjectives used in indefinite noun phrases or as predicatives. The definite form is normally seen as a true sign of adjectivehood.⁶ The forms (in nominative singular) are given in figure 1 below.

Adjectival inflection	Old Swedish	Early Modern Swedish
Indefinite/predicative	mykil /litil	mycken / liten

⁴ The reading 'some help' in (4)b is only available with unstressed *lite*.

⁵ The word *diger* 'big' is also used, but that is nowadays almost obsolete, and has not interfered with the change studied in this paper. The word *stor* is less frequent in the oldest Swedish sources and is not e.g. attested in Runic Swedish (800–1225 A.D.), whereas *mykil* is found at least 8 times in Runic Swedish (Peterson 2006).

⁶ The form used in definite noun phrases is traditionally called *weak inflection*, and the other, used in indefinites is called *strong inflection*. This distinction is a traditional morphological distinction, which refers to more regular forms (weak), and more irregular forms (strong). To avoid confusion with *strong* and *weak* referring to stress, I only discuss *definiteness* here (although this is historically less adequate).

Definite	mykli /litli	myckna / lilla
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Figure 1. Inflection of the adjectives *mykil/litil* ‘big/little’ in Old and Early Modern Swedish

We can note that the final *-l* of the nominative, is replaced with final *-n* (from the accusative forms) in the history of Old Swedish. As for the definite forms, the Old Swedish masculine nominative singular, ending in *-i*, is often exchanged for the masculine oblique/feminine nominative. form, ending in *-a*.

In the second half of the 17th century, we find the first occurrence of uninflected *mycket* (originally the neuter form) with plural or common gender singular nouns, according to the Swedish Academy dictionary (SAOB, the entry *mycken*).

- (5) *Mycket Lieutenanter och andra Officerare* (EMS)
much.N.SG lieutenant.C.PL and other officers
‘lots of lieutenants and other (commissioned) officers’ (SAOB, example from 1676)

As we will see, the word *liten/litet* seems to have turned into a quantifier slightly earlier than *mycken/mycket*, and, probably because of this, they differ in spelling today. Both are pronounced without the final *-t*, but the quantifier *mycket* is always spelled with a final *-t* in present-day Swedish, just like the old neuter form, whereas the quantifier *lite(t)* normally lacks the final *-t* in the spelling.⁷

In the next section, I present a study of the non-agreeing uses of *mycket* and *lite(t)* in the drama-corpus.

3. Investigation of the drama-corpus (1725-2000)

The corpus of Swedish drama dialogue consists of 45 original Swedish dramas written between 1725 and 2000. They are partitioned into six periods of 25 years (with 25 years apart), two in each century, where the three earliest periods contain five dramas each, whereas the three latter contain ten dramas each. The periods, the number of dramas and the number of words of the corpus are given in table 1. For details on individual dramas, see Melander Marttala & Strömqvist 2001 or Stroh-Wollin (2008, p. 38f and appendix 1).

⁷ A relevant fact may also be that *mycken/t* as an adjective is no longer in use, whereas *liten/t* functions as a regular adjective with countable nouns (in singular) today. In other words, it makes sense to distinguish the adjective *litet* from the quantifier/degree element *lite*, whereas this is not necessary for *mycket*.

Corpus part	Period	No. of dramas	Number of words (tokens)
Drama 1	1725-1750	5	92000
Drama 2	1775-1800	5	73000
Drama 3	1825-1850	5	99000
Drama 4	1875-1900	10	178000
Drama 5	1925-1950	10	205000
Drama 6	1975-2000	10	166000

Table 1. The bulk of the drama-corpus

I have studied all occurrences of the adjectives/quantifiers *mycken/ mycket* and *liten/litet* with mass nouns and plurals in the drama-corpus, noting the agreement pattern. Typical excerpted phrases are illustrated in (6) below.⁸ Reference to the specific dramas is made to corpus part followed by a letter indicating the specific drama. The reference (5B) thus indicates the B-drama (the second) of the fifth corpus part (from 1925-1950).

- (6) a. *Jag önskar Er lycka, Cousin, mycken lycka!*
I wish you.OBL happiness, cousin, much.C.SG happiness.C.sg
‘I wish you happiness, (my) cousin, much happiness’ (1B)
- b. *Nå, nu lär Ni väl föra mycket varor*
well now AUX you DP bring much.N.SG merchandise.PL
med Er?
with you.OBL
‘Well, now you will bring much merchandise with you’ (2C)
- c. *Lite sill har jag gudskelov*
little herring have I god.be.praised
‘Little/some herring, I have, thank god’ (5B)

Only cases where there is a head noun and where there are no other determiners are counted. Some determiners are incompatible with mass nouns and plurals, and others may only occur in front of adjectives, but not quantifiers. Examples of excluded noun phrases are given in (7).⁹

- (7) a. *så skulle mycket ondt kunna undvikas* (head noun missing)
so should much.N.SG evil N.SG be.able.to be.avoided
‘In that way, a lot of evil should possibly be avoided’ (4B)
- b. *dessutan hade jag lärt så mycket* (head noun missing)
additionally had I learned so much N.SG
af Fransyskan
of French

⁸ The discourse particle *väl* is glossed DP below, and the evidential auxiliary *lär* only AUX

⁹ The few cases with definite inflection are always adjectival and may co-occur with determiners. Compare Figure 1 above.

- ‘Additionally, I had lerned enough French’ (1B)
- c. *en liten förtrolig bekantskap* (other determiner)
 a.C.SG little.C.SG intimate.C.SG relationship.C.SG
 ‘a small intimate relationship’ (2C)

I have also excluded some other examples. Since *mycket/lite(t)* may be used either to quantify over nouns or to signal degree of adjectives (see footnote 3), some examples are ambiguous between quantifier and degree adverbial, as in (8). If the word after *mycket/lite(t)* is ambiguous between adjective and noun, the status of the *mycket/lite(t)* cannot be determined, which is the case in (9). Consequently, examples like (8) and (9) are also excluded from the investigation.

- (8) *även detta ett rum med mycket konservativ möblering*
 also this a room with much/very conservative furnishing
 ‘Also this being a room with {much of/ very} conservative furnishing’ (5E)
- (9) *Var det för lite salt?*
 was there/it to little salt/salty
 ‘Was there too little salt / Was it too little salty’ (6E)

The remaining examples are classified into three groups: unambiguous adjectives (which include clearly agreeing *mycken/liten* and the rare cases with definite inflection, cf. figure 1 above and (10c) below), unambiguous quantifiers, and ambiguous cases, illustrated in (10) – (11) respectively.

- | | | |
|------|---|--------------------------------------|
| (10) | a. <i>mycken oro</i>
much.C.SG unrest.C.SG.
‘much unrest’ | agreement in C singular |
| | b. <i>myckna tårar</i>
much.PL tears.PL.
‘much tears’ | agreement in plural |
| | c. <i>det myckna skrivandet</i>
the much.DEF writing.N.SG.
‘the abundant writing’ | definite inflection (i.e. adjective) |
| (11) | a. <i>mycket mjölk</i>
much.N.SG milk.C.SG
‘much milk’ | lack of agreement |
| | b. <i>mycket pengar</i>
much.N.SG money.PL.
‘much money’ | lack of agreement |
| (12) | a. <i>mycket kött</i>
much.N.SG meat.N.SG.
‘much meat’ | agreement in neuter singular |
| | b. <i>mycket folk</i> | |

much.N.SG people.N.SG/PL.
‘much people’

ambiguous in number

Note that phrases may be referred to the ambiguous group (as in (12)) for two reasons: either because there seems to be agreement in neuter (which was found both before and after the change, as in 12a), or because the head noun is ambiguous between singular and plural (which is the case with most neuter nouns), and therefore might be an instance of neuter agreement in singular (as in 12b).

We are now in a position to present the data from the investigation of the drama-corpus. In tables 2–3, the number of unambiguous examples of adjectives and quantifiers are given as well as the number of ambiguous examples. The Q-quote is a percentage of unambiguous quantifiers out of all unambiguous examples. The numbers are quite small, so the percentages should be taken approximately, but in both cases the development is quite clear. We start out with *liten/lite(t)* in table 2, and continue with *mycken/mycket* in table 3.

Period	Adjectives	Ambiguous	Quantifiers	Q-quote
1.1725-1750	3	6	4	57 %
2.1775-1800	2	6	8	80 %
3.1825-1850	1	3	7	88 %
4.1875-1900	0	7	19	100 %
5.1925-1950	1	11	25	96 %
6.1975-2000	0	12	50	100 %

Table 2. Agreement and Q-quote of *liten/lite(t)* 1725-2000

The development for *liten/t*, illustrated in table 2, seems quite clear. The Q-quote has risen to 80 % already by the end of the 1700s, and since the end of the 1800s, *liten* is hardly ever used as an adjective with mass nouns/plurals.¹⁰ As we will see, this is earlier than the development for *mycken/mycket*. Consider table 3.

Period	Adjectives	Ambiguous	Quantifiers	Q-quote
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¹⁰ The only example from the last 150 years in the corpus is the following:

(i) Men en sten har man mycket **liten** **användning** för
 but a stone has one very little.C.SG use.C.SG for
 ‘You only have very little use for a stone’ (5H)

1.1725-1750	16	12	2	11 %
2.1775-1800	18	11	4	18 %
3.1825-1850	11	12	9	45 %
4.1875-1900	9	12	11	55 %
5.1925-1950	3	17	22	88 %
6.1975-2000	0	10	36	100 %

Table 3. Agreement and Q-quote of *mycken/mycket* 1725-2000

The development for *mycket*, illustrated in table 3, shows that the Q-quote reaches 80 % in the 1900s, and the development seems to be clearly slower than that for *lite(t)*. One reason that the Q-quote is higher for *liten/lite(t)* might be that this adjective does not have a plural form (but the suppletive forms *små* or sometimes *få/fåtaliga* ‘few/few-numberly’ are used instead). By contrast, the new quantifier *lite(t)* may indeed be used with plurals. Two examples from the corpus (with *lite(t)* followed by plurals) are given in (13).

- (13) a. *Junkaren Tusenskön, som har litet pengar*
young.man.DEF T. who has little.N.SG money.PL
‘Young T., who has little money’ (2C)
b. *Nu får du lite böcker*
Now get you.SG little.N.SG. book.PL.
‘Now, you will get some books’ (6C)

In other words, if the development starts out in the singular, *liten/t* would be earlier than *mycken/t*. The plural cases with *lite(t)* (like in 13) are, however, quite few in the older dramas, only 5 in the three oldest periods. With *mycken/mycket*, on the other hand, plurals are more frequent: there are 13 instances in the three older periods. If we calculate only singulars in the three oldest periods, we arrive at the figures in table 4.

Word	Adjectives	Ambiguous	Quantifiers	Q-quote
<i>liten/lite(t)</i>	6	15	14	70 %
<i>mycken/mycket</i>	46	38	3	6 %

Table 4. Agreement and Q-quotes for singulars 1725–1850

Thus, the difference between the Q-quote of the two pronouns is even stronger if we exclude the plurals, which means that we can say (even if the numbers are small), that *lite(t)* is certainly earlier as a quantifier than *mycket*.

We should also examine which kinds of nouns are the first to occur in the quantifier cases. Initially, it seems as if inherent plurals, i.e. plurals that lack a singular form with the relevant meaning, are frequent; the word *pengar* ‘money’¹¹ especially is overrepresented as a quantified noun in the earlier periods. I have counted the nouns used with non-agreeing *mycket* and *lite(t)* during the four oldest periods, and the results are given in table 5.

Quantified noun	Mycket	Lite(t)
inherent plurals	14	4
mass nouns	2	14
other plurals	6	1

Table 5. Nouns with quantifying *mycket/lite(t)* 1725-1800.

Out of the 54 quantifiers in the first four periods (numbers given in table 5), 18 take inherent plurals (17 are *pengar* ‘money’ and one is *förfriskningar* ‘refreshments’). In the last two periods only 9 out of 102 nouns are inherent plurals (5 are *pengar* and, one is *stålar*, also meaning ‘money’). I think that this is significant; it seems as if *pengar* is the noun that introduces the possibility to use non-agreeing *mycket/lite(t)* with mass nouns. Ordinary plurals seem to come later. The majority of the 7 ordinary plural examples in table 5 are from period 4, and they become abundant in period 5 and 6.

We have seen that in an initial stage of the change, the inherent plural *pengar* ‘money’ is overrepresented as a quantified noun. With respect to *mycket*, we find 22 instances with a common gender singular or plural noun during the first four periods (1725–1800). Out of these, no less than 13 have the word *pengar* in the plural. Out of the other nine instances, six are other plurals, one word, *djur* ‘animal(s)’, is ambiguous between singular and plural, and only two are common gender singular, namely *kärlek* ‘love’ and *respekt* ‘respect’.

To summarise, the adjective *liten/t* seems to grammaticalize into a quantifier already in the 1700s, whereas *mycken/t* grammaticalizes later, in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The corpus used is admittedly small, but the texts normally come close to the spoken language, and the

¹¹ The word *pengar* ‘money’ is always plural (in the sense of ‘money’). Occasionally it may be used in singular, *peng*, but then the meaning is ‘coin’.

tendencies are quite clear. There is thus good reason to conclude that *liten/t* is earlier than *mycken/t* in the grammaticalization process.

The grammaticalization process from adjective to quantifier can be described as climbing higher in the syntactic tree, as has been suggested by Roberts/Roussou (1999, 2003).¹² In this way lexical adjectives are changed into functional elements in a Q- or NumPhrase inside the extended DP.

5. Weak and strong quantifiers

In present-day Swedish, our two quantifiers, *mycket* and *lite(t)*, have one weak and one strong form, i.e. one stressed and one unstressed form. We find both weak and strong quantifiers with nouns as well as when they quantify comparative adjectives.¹³ In the examples below, I mark the strong variants with *'MYke/'Lite* (to indicate the stress) and the weak ones with *,myke/, lite*, in the latter case signifying that both syllables are deaccentuated (i.e. it is not a prosodic word).¹⁴

In this section, I try to show that the weak forms of the two quantifiers are polarity items. Israel (1996) mentions two problems with the research on polarity items:

[A]s the theorist strives for intimations of universality, the complexity and the subtle variability of the data are easily underestimated or ignored. On the other hand, when one considers the phenomenon in all its glorious messiness, one may quickly despair of ever finding any general explanation. (Israel 1996:619)

In the literature, it has been mentioned that the English corresponding *much* and *a little bit* are polarity sensitive. Israel (1996) gives several examples with *much* (and *a little bit*) to discuss polarity sensitivity, but his focus is to explain the system of polarity sensitive elements, rather than to discuss the properties of the specific lexical items.

¹² Related analyses of grammaticalization of adjectives that are described as climbing higher in the syntactic tree can be found in Oxford (2017); see also Petzell (this volume).

¹³ Quantifying *mycket/litet* may also be used with verb phrases: *Han simmar inte mycket nuförtiden* ('He doesn't swim much nowadays'), and this use seems similar to other quantifier uses, but I will leave them aside in this paper.

¹⁴ Weak and strong forms of *lite* are present also in present-day Norwegian, where they are distinguished in both the spoken and the written language: stressed *lite* and unstressed *litt*. Since they are separate entries in the dictionary, the meaning is well described (see e.g. Norsk ordbok, webversion). Stressed *lite* means 'a limited amount', and the opposite is 'much', whereas unstressed *litt* means 'a small amount,' and the opposite is 'nothing', I find this to be a good description of the difference between the stressed and unstressed *lite* in Swedish, too.

Israel's (1996) claim is that most (or all) lexical elements that show polarity sensitivity can be classified by two features. The first feature is quantitative value, which describes whether the item is high-scalar or low-scalar, i.e. whether they denote a high degree (like *much* and *as hell*) or a low degree (like *a little bit* and *at all*). The second feature is informative value, which describes whether the item is emphatic (like *as hell* and *at all*) or understating (like *much* and *a little bit*). The Negative polarity items (NPIs) that are high-scalar (like *much*) are understating, whereas the Positive polarity items (PPIs) that are high scalar (like *as hell*) are emphatic. See figure 2, adapted from Israel (1996:628), with some of his examples.

		High scalar	
NPIs	Understating		Emphatic
	<i>much, long</i>		<i>totally, as hell</i>
	Emphatic		Understating
	<i>a drop, at all</i>		<i>a little bit, sorta</i>
		Low-scalar	
		PPIs	

Figure 2. Israel's (1996) model for polarity items

I propose that both weak *mycket* and weak *lite(t)* are understating, i.e. they only express a small step on a scale, but that weak *mycket* is an NPI, whereas weak *lite(t)* is a PPI.

Let us now turn to some properties of these alleged polarity items. Consider first the examples below for the strong version of *mycket*; i.e. 'MYke.

- (14) *Han har fått 'MYke pengar*
He has received much money
- (15) *Hon har blivit 'MYke klokare*
She has become much wiser
- (16) *Han har inte fått 'MYke pengar (men han har fått Lite)*
He has not received much money (but he has received little)
- (17) *Hon har inte blivit 'MYke klokare (bara 'Lite)*
She has not become much wiser (only little)

As can be seen, the strong variant of *mycket* is felicitous both in affirmative and negative clauses. The same is true for the strong variant of *lite(t)*. All the examples above are focused or contrastive in one way or another, but we cannot detect any polarity effects. When we start

looking at the weak variants, on the other hand, we do find polarity effects. Now, consider the different behaviour of weak *,myke* in affirmative and negated clauses. I include a stressed verb to make sure that the quantifier is weak.

- (18) #*Han har FÅTT ,myke pengar*
He has received much money
- (19) #*Hon har BLivit ,myke klokare*
He has become much wiser
- (20) *Han har inte FÅTT ,myke pengar*
He has not received much money
'He has not received very much money'
- (21) *Hon har inte BLivit ,myke klokare*
She has not become much wiser
'She hasn't become very much wiser'

As can be seen in (20)–(21) above, weak *,myke* is infelicitous in affirmative clauses. The '#' denotes that the clauses are possibly not ungrammatical, but to my mind they do not really mean anything.¹⁵

With *lite(t)*, the strong version, '*Lite*', also seems to be allowed in all contexts, whereas the weak version, *,lite*, seems to behave in the opposite way to *,myke*, like a positive polarity item, avoiding negative sentences. This is illustrated in (24) – (27), below.

- (22) *Han har FÅTT ,lite pengar*
He has received little money
'He has received some money'
- (23) *Hon har BLivit ,lite klokare*
She has become little wiser
'She has become a little bit wiser'
- (24) #*Han har inte FÅTT ,lite pengar*
He has not received little money
'He hasn't received any money'
- (25) #*Hon har inte BLivit ,lite klokare*
She has not become little wiser
'She hasn't become a little bit wiser'

As indicated in (24)–(25), unstressed *,lite* is infelicitous in negative contexts. It is maybe not ungrammatical, but it is my impression that these sentences may only be used as echo answers, when the concept of 'a little money' or 'a little wiser' have just been mentioned.

¹⁵ Judgements are often a bit uncertain, but I have checked my intuitions with a handful of other native speakers and they clearly agree on the difference between (18)–(19) on one hand and (20)–(21) on the other.

It is well known that many NPIs do occur not only in negated sentences, but also in other “polarity contexts”. Those that only occur in negative sentences are normally called strong NPIs, whereas those that may occur in other contexts too are normally called weak NPIs (see e.g. Brandtler 2010: 12ff). Other contexts include questions, conditionals and comparative clauses/phrases after comparative adjectives. If we test our two PI candidates for these kinds of sentences, we get the following result:

- (26) a. #*Har hon fått ,myke pengar?*
 has she received much money
 b. **Vem kan skala ,myke potatis?*
 who can peel much potatoes
 c. **Om du har fått ,myke pengar, så...*
 if you.SG have received much money, then...
- (27) a. *Har hon fått ,lite pengar?*
 has she received little money
 ‘Has she received some money?’
 b. *Vem kan skala ,lite potatis?*
 who can peel little potatoes
 ‘Who wants to peel some potatoes?’
 c. *Om du har fått ,lite pengar, så...*
 if you.SG have received little money, then...
 ‘If you have received some money, then...’

As indicated in (26) above, weak *,myke* is ungrammatical or strange (as in (26a)), but maybe possible in echo-questions. Weak *,lite* on the other hand works fine in these contexts, as illustrated in (27). The data presented above suggest that *,myke* is a strong negative polarity, i.e. one that requires an overt negation in the clause, whereas *,lite* is used elsewhere.

We may tentatively conclude that weak *,myke* has certain properties of a negative polarity item, and that unstressed *,lite* has certain properties of a positive polarity item. Needless to say, there are lots of questions that have to be resolved before the claim can be substantiated in full. I leave this for future research.

Our two weak quantifiers are easily incorporated into Israel’s model (see Figure 2 above). Weak *,myke* is a high-scalar NPI, whereas *,lite* is a low-scalar PPI. Both are however understating in Israel’s terms. As Traugott (2014: 51) points out, it is a feature of negative polarity that words that are understating in positive contexts (she mentions *a bit (of)* and *a shred of*) are reversed and become emphatic in the sense of Israel (1996) in negative contexts. It seems to work both ways, so a word like *much* is originally emphatic in positive contexts, but when it becomes a NPI it becomes understating. Intuitively, it is not surprising that ‘not much’ and

‘little’ are used for the same function, namely to denote a small step on a scale. In a sense then, they have a similar meaning, albeit with complementary distribution.¹⁶

6. A prediction

In the previous sections, we have seen that the adjectives *mycken*, ‘much’, and *liten*, ‘little’, have successively turned into quantifiers (roughly) during the last 300 years. The former neuter singular forms *mycket* and *lite(t)* are now used also with common gender mass nouns and plurals. The old adjective *mycken/t* is now only used (in its neuter form *mycket*) as a quantifier, whereas the adjective *liten/t* is still used as a regular adjective with countable nouns, but has turned into an uninflected quantifier with mass nouns and plurals. Second, it seems that the new quantifiers have developed a strong-weak distinction, and that the weak forms have turned into polarity items; *myke* has turned into a negative polarity item, whereas *lite* has turned into the opposite, a positive polarity item.

Now, let us make two assumptions: 1) weak quantifiers are less marked (and thus more frequent) than strong ones, and 2) positive polarity environments are less marked (and thus more frequent) than negative ones (this is especially relevant if, as I believe, *myke* is only found in clauses with negation). Clauses with negation are simply less frequent than clauses without negation. If these two assumptions are on the right track, we predict that the introduction of the polarity sensitivity of our two weak quantifiers (*myke* and *lite*) would yield a drop in the frequency of the quantifier *mycket*, whereas the quantifier *lite(t)* would increase in frequency.

I have counted the occurrences of the two words *mycken/t* and *liten/t*, both as adjectives and as quantifiers, with mass nouns and plurals in the drama-corpus (leaving the quantifiers followed by comparatives and other types aside). I have calculated their frequency per 10,000 words. The result is found in table 6, where the periods are given in pairs (period 1 and 2 together etc.).

Period	No. of words	mycken/t	Frequency	liten/litet	Frequency
1725–1800	165000	63	3,8	29	1,8
1825–1900	277000	63	2,3	35	1,3

¹⁶ The fact that weak *lite* has a bleached meaning, only signifying a step on a scale, is mentioned in the Swedish Academy Grammar (Teleman et.al. 1999/2:406). I claim that weak *mycket* has the same property in negated clauses.

1925–2000	371000	87	2,3	99	2,7
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Table 6. Frequency per 10,000 words of *mycken/t* and *liten/t* with mass nouns/plurals.

Table 6 indicates a drop in the frequency of the quantifier *mycken/t* from 3,8 to 2,3, whereas *liten/t* increases from 1,8 to 2,7, where the first value is from the 1700s and the second from the 1900s. This is fully in accordance with the prediction: there is a clear drop in the word that turns into a negative polarity item (*mycken/t*), whereas the word (*liten/t*) that turns into a positive polarity item gains in frequency. The result of this preliminary investigation thus supports the prediction.

The data should, of course, be checked further in other and larger corpora. We would also want to know if the quantifiers *mycket* and *lite* used with comparatives behave in the same way, and, further, we would like to know how degree adverbials *mycket/lite* with positive adjectives/adverbs behave. Further research is clearly needed. An additional complication might be that the drop in frequency for *mycken/t* is earlier than the raise for *liten/t*, although the previous investigation in section 3 showed that *liten/t* turns into a quantifier earlier than *mycken/t* does. On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that the weak-strong distinction and polarity status emerges immediately after the transition from adjective to quantifier. More research is needed also in this respect.

Although many questions remain, I hope to have shown that the adjectives *mycken/liten* turn into quantifiers (roughly) during the last three centuries, and that the weak versions of these quantifiers have turned into polarity items in present-day Swedish. If this is true, they also behave in the predicted way, as the weak quantifier that has become a negative polarity item (*myke*) drops in frequency, whereas the one that has become a positive polarity item (*lite*) gains in frequency.

7. Summary

In this paper I have given a short description of a language change that can be viewed as an instance of grammaticalization, namely the transition of the two adjectives *mycken/t* and *liten/t* into quantifiers. Data from the drama-corpus show that *liten/t* becomes a quantifier already in the 1700s, whereas *mycken/t* seems to go through the same change roughly 150 years later. Inherent plurals (such as *pengar*, ‘money’) appear to be a plausible context for the starting point of the transition.

I have further illustrated how both quantifiers have weak and strong versions in present-day Swedish, and I have argued that weak *mycket* (, *myke*) has turned into a negative polarity item, found in negated clauses, whereas weak *lite(t)* has turned into a positive polarity item, found elsewhere. If we assume that weak versions of quantifiers are more frequent than strong ones, and that positive polarity contexts are more frequent than negative ones, we would expect the frequency of *mycken/t* to drop, whereas the frequency of *liten/t* should increase. In section 5, I presented a preliminary study that seems to confirm this prediction.

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