

Got Me a *Plumb*, Gonna Get Me a Scale

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1 Introduction

In their study of Appalachian English, Wolfram and Christian (1976) describe the modifier *plumb* (1) as an ‘intensifying adverb’ and equate its adverbial contribution to that of *completely* in standard English. As evidenced by the translation in (2), however, *plumb* cannot simply be equated with the standard English *completely*, as *completely* is unacceptable in place of *plumb* in this context.

- (1) I’m **plumb** clean—yis’dy wuz Sat’dy. Cou’s’e, mebb’y not as clean as an Apostolic man; but purty clean fur a Prisbyterian.
(\approx *pretty clean*, The Atlantic Monthly Vol. 144 1929)¹
- (2) I’m (***completely**) clean—yesterday was Saturday. Of course, maybe I’m not as clean as an Apostolic man, but I’m pretty clean for a Presbyterian.

Moreover, judging by the array of standard English paraphrases possible for utterances modified by *plumb* (3), it is not clear that the adverbial behavior of *plumb* fully parallels that of any one previously-analyzed standard English modifier.

- (3) a. I s’pose I seem **plumb** old fer sech foolishness to a boy like you be, but some hearts keep young till they stop. (\approx *too old*, Baily 1915)
b. Them dogs stays down at the neighbors, but I feed ‘am at the old house so they don’t **plumb** forget where they’re supposed to be.
(\approx *totally forget*)
c. Sist’ Humphreys be’n an edicated lady; an’ she is a **plumb** good cook.
(\approx *very good*, The Century Vol. 68)

The goal of the present paper is, thus, to provide an adequate description of the behavior of *plumb* and an analysis of how this behavior can be semantically encoded. The argumentation is developed as follows. In Section 2, I show that *plumb* obligatorily modifies a degree argument and is unique among degree expressions in its compatibility with a wide range of phrasal categories. Moreover, the data presented in this section show that *plumb* exhibits behaviors that distinguish it from

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¹Unless a citation is provided, data is drawn from work with speakers of the pertinent dialect and, to a lesser extent, my own judgements. The spellings *plumb* and *plum* are both used in the written sources, though I use the *plumb* spelling here to be faithful to the etymological source. Cited data sources are not included in the references at the end of the paper but are readily accessible through either Google Books or Project Gutenberg.

other degree modifiers. Section 3 goes on to show that the apparent variability in the interpretation of *plumb* can be reduced to the scalar properties of the expressions *plumb* modifies. The analysis, formulated in Section 4, defines *plumb* as a degree modifier that requires its degree argument to exceed a standard that *plumb* itself helps set.

2 *Plumb* Distribution

2.1 Categorical Distribution

Degree expressions, such as the gradable adjective *cute*, measure the degree to which a certain associated property (*cuteness*) holds of an individual (*Bruno/the monkey*). In their simply predicative use (4), the truth of such expressions depends on how this degree compares to the contextual standards for the given property (Cresswell 1977).

- (4) Bruno/the monkey is *cute*.

Part of the analytic appeal of degree-based analyses is the apparent existence of gradability across syntactic and semantic domains (Bolinger 1972; Cresswell 1977; Bach 1986; Krifka 1992; Doetjes 1997; Nakanishi 2007; Morzycki 2009), as evidenced, for example, by the cross-categorical distribution of degree modifiers. Thus, just as *quite* in (5) can modify the degree of cuteness associated with an adjective so too can it modify degrees associated with verbal and adverbial expressions (6).

- (5) The monkey is **quite** cute.
 (6) a. Eva **quite** despairs of Bruno becoming handsome.
 b. Bruno plays the bagpipes **quite** well.

This property of degrees is particularly well supported by the modificational distribution of *plumb*. As the data below illustrates, *plumb* functions as a degree modifier of adjectives (7), adverbs (8), nouns (9), verbs (10) as well as prepositional phrases and verb particle constructions (11).

- (7) a. If I had a woman as **plumb** ugly as her, I'd never stick my face outen my shirt. (Fisher 1928)
 b. Now thats how everybody should raise their kids, he was just as **plumb** sweet as sugar.
 (8) a. Stranger, them two fellers slept together **plum** frien'ly, an' they et together **plum** frien'ly next mornin', an' they sa'ntered down to the grocery **plum** frien'ly. (Fox Jr. 1895/7)
 b. ... those berries tasted so good that we **plumb** soon forgot all about the war and the solders when all of a sudden—BAM! (Williams 1990)
 (9) a. I hain't goin' to hurt him, Uncl' Gabe, but he must be a **plumb** idgit, a-talkin' 'bout folks to thar face 'n' him so puny an' spinlin'! (Fox Jr. 1895/7)

- b. He is generally considered an idiot or a very foolish person ; he has not got capacity sufficient to vote ; they have to give him a ticket ; I could not call him a **plumb** idiot ; his capacity is only moderate ; he works some, and always has some one to manage him.
(Miscellaneous Documents of the House of Representatives,
Kentucky Contested Election, 1860)
- (10) a. He gives it out emphatic, after bein' with the Pine Knot Cavaliers over a year, that he **plumb** despairs of us becomin' christians.
(Grey 1921)
- b. The tornado **plumb** flattened the motel.
- (11) a. Dan Hodges has done sot b'ar-traps to kotch you-all. An' anybody might walk **plumb** into 'em, but not if I kin he'p hit. (Baily 1915)
- b. What are you gonna do when you get **plumb** through with school?
- c. She filled **plumb** out since high school

In the following section, I defend the assumption that it is indeed the degree argument of the expression that *plumb* modifies in all of the above uses. These observations not only contribute to our understanding of the semantic behavior of *plumb* but provide additional support for the theoretical claim that degrees are instantiated across phrasal categories.

2.2 Gradability Restrictions

The present section establishes that *plumb* does exactly what is expected of a degree modifier: it contributes to the interpretation of some gradable aspect of the utterance. Moreover, I show that this is not the result of *plumb* being an all-purpose scalar modifier, as it is unacceptable as a modifier of the scalar structures generated from expressions of quantity.

First, observe that in all of the data presented thus far, the aspect of meaning modulated by *plumb* is always one associated with some gradable property.

- (12) *plumb clean* \rightsquigarrow degree of cleanness
- plumb old* \rightsquigarrow degree of oldness/age
- plumb forget* \rightsquigarrow degree forgotten
- plumb good* \rightsquigarrow degree of goodness

Furthermore, when modifying adjectives that are interpretively ambiguous, such as *old*, *plumb* forces the gradable interpretation.

- (13) That **plumb** old preacher from up in the holler come in here yesterday talkin' some business about fire and brimstone
✓ aged preacher
former preacher

Second, *plumb*, like other degree modifiers, is generally unacceptable with non-gradable expressions.

- (14) *He got him a **very** / **plumb** indoor swimming pool.

Third, in those cases where we find *plumb* as a modifier of non-gradable expressions, it is only because *plumb* has coerced some related, gradable meaning from the expression itself. Thus, in (15-a), *plumb* modifies not whether or not the individual is dead, but how long they have been dead or how far the decomposition process has proceeded. Likewise, in (15-b), *plumb* does not modify whether or not the individual is pregnant, but how far along in the pregnancy the individual is.

- (15) a. George said he was **plumb** dead. Dead fer some time, looked like.
(Jourdan 2011)
b. Eva's **plumb** pregnant, she can't be standin' on her feet all day.

Finally, we can confirm that this distributional pattern is contingent on gradability by contrasting the behavior of *plumb* with that of other degree expressions, such as *almost* or *too*, which can also acceptably be used as modifiers of degrees of quantity.

- (16) a. The gas tank is **almost** full.
b. I've got **almost** a dozen eggs.
(17) a. Eva is **too** tall.
b. Eva has **too** many shoes.

In the verbal domain, incremental theme predicates illustrate that quantities play an integral role in measuring out the progression of the event (Krifka 1992; Caudal & Nicolas 2005; Piñón 2008). Here, too, parallels between the scalarity of degrees of gradability and degrees of quantity can be found.

- (18) a. The gas tank is **completely** full.
b. Eva **completely** ate the cake.

Despite these parallels, however, *plumb* provides crucial evidence that the scalarity associated with quantities and the scalarity associated with degrees must be kept separate, as *plumb* cannot grammatically modify quantity scales.

- (19) *She's got **plumb** many shoes.
Intended Meaning: She's got very many shoes.²
(20) *He **plumb** ate the cake.
Intended Meaning: He ate a lot of cake.

Thus, though *plumb* is always interpreted with respect to a degree argument, it is distinct in its compatibility only with degrees of gradability. An explicit comparison between *plumb* and other degree modifiers is presented in the next section.

2.3 Comparison to Other Degree Modifiers

As illustrated by translations given for the data above, *plumb* bears some semantic similarity to a number of familiar English modifiers, a fact which makes such inter-translatability possible. However, as the present section will show, none of these

²The speakers consulted do, however, find the excessive *plumb too many shoes* acceptable.

other modifiers exhibits the full range of properties exhibited by *plumb*.³

Notably, the categorial flexibility exhibited by *plumb* is not characteristic of other degree modifiers. *Quite*, for example, is, as shown above, acceptable as a modifier of adjectives, verbs, and adverbs, but cannot modify the degree associated with nominal expressions (21).

- (21) *Bruno is a **quite** idiot.

Likewise, the degree modifier *very* is compatible with adjectives (22-a), but not with verbs (22-b), though the introduction of additional degree morphology does facilitate its appearance in the verbal domain (22-c) (Doetjes 1997).

- (22) a. The monkey is **very** cute.
 b. *Eva **very** despairs of Bruno becoming handsome.
 c. Eva **very** much despairs of Bruno becoming handsome.

To make fully explicit how the wide categorial distribution of *plumb* distinguishes it from other degree expressions, a summary of the distributional restrictions on various modifiers is presented in the table below, where I include *real(ly)* and *crazy* for purposes of comparing *plumb* to other modifiers that have a slightly non-standard flavor.

- (23) a. Scheitz is **crazy** old.
 b. Bruno is a **real** idiot.

(24)

	Noun	Indef-DP	Adj	Adv	Verb	Prep
plumb	✓	*	✓	✓	✓	✓
quite	*	✓	✓	✓	✓	*
very	*	*	✓	✓	*	*
complete(ly)	✓	*	✓	*	✓	✓
real(ly)	✓	*	✓	✓	✓	*
crazy	*	*	✓	✓	*	*

As observed in the table, the only distributional restriction exhibited by *plumb* is its incompatibility with the gradable predicates denoted by indefinite DPs (cf., (*quite*) *an idiot*), though this possibility in general appears rare among degree modifiers.

Moreover, within a given phrasal category, *plumb* exhibits behaviors that distinguish it from other degree modifiers. *Completely*, for example, cannot modify open-scale adjectives (Kennedy & McNally 2005), though *plumb* can.

- (25) Eva is ***completely** / **plumb** tall.

Conversely, unlike *very*, *plumb* is acceptable as a modifier of absolute adjectives.

- (26) That door was left ***very** / **plumb** open.

Finally, *plumb* interacts with the degree argument in ways that distinguish it from

³The present comparison limits itself to a few select modifiers. Similar arguments can be presented to show that *plumb* is distinct from other modifiers (e.g., *super*, *really*, *straight*, *crazy*, *quite*, *pretty*).

other degree modifiers. For example, unlike both *quite* and *very*, expressions modified by *plumb* can be further modified by other degree morphology.

- (27) a. Eva is as ***quite** / **plumb** tall as Scheitz.
 b. Eva is ***very** / **plumb** taller than Bruno.

These distributional properties are discussed further in the sections that follow.

3 Capturing Polysemy

Having thus defended the claim that *plumb* acts as a degree modifier, I now focus on identifying the nature of the semantic contribution that *plumb* makes. I begin with the observation that, judging from salient standard English paraphrases, *plumb* appears to alternate between different degree interpretations. That this alternation is, in fact, only apparent is established using evidence from the adjectival domain, where I show that distinct interpretations of *plumb* correlate with the structural properties of the scale associated with the adjective. I then discuss briefly how this explanation extends straightforwardly to the scalar structures found in other degree domains. These facts pave the way for the uniform semantic definition developed for *plumb* in the next section.

3.1 Apparently Flexible Semantic Contribution

As noted in the introduction, Wolfram and Christian (1976) equate the behavior of *plumb* with that of *completely* in standard English. Indeed, certain uses of *plumb* do seem best paraphrased as *completely* in standard English (28).

- (28) a. You make sure to get that fence **completely** / **plumb** straight.⁴
 b. My bank account's **completely** / **plumb** empty, ain't got no money at all.

However, other instances of *plumb* seem best paraphrased with standard English modifiers such as *really* or *very* (29).

- (29) a. That mountain's **very** / **really** / **plumb** high, it'll take you til sundown to get to the top.
 b. Eva ain't just a good cook, she's a **very** / **really** / **plumb** good cook.

Moreover, complex degree constructions (30) and constructions involving path-denoting prepositional phrases (31) call for paraphrases including modifiers like *too* or *right*, respectively.

- (30) I s'pose I seem **too** / **plumb** old for sech foolishness. (cf. Baily 1915)

- (31) He was a wonderful man! Kept his senses **right** / **plumb** to the end.
 (cf. Hegan 1903)

⁴It is worthwhile to note that this and other data used here refute Wolfram's (2004) claim that *plumb* is compatible only with adjectives that denote negative attributes.

While the above data could be taken to suggest rampant polysemy on the part of *plumb*, the discussion below shows that the apparent interpretation of a particular instance of *plumb* is largely predictable from the properties of the scale associated with the expression *plumb* modifies.

3.2 Adjectival Interpretations: The Role of Scale Structure

Gradable adjectives denote relations between individuals and degrees. The structural properties of the scales associated with gradable expressions are linguistically relevant because they determine, in part, the environments in which a given adjective can appear. Relevant for the present discussion is the distinction between adjectives associated with open scales and those associated with closed scales (Kennedy & McNally 2005). Adjectives associated with open scales cannot combine with modifiers of completion, as their associated scales lack the upper or lower bound that such modifiers require.

- (32) a. *Bruno is **completely** clever.
 b. *She is a **completely** good cook.
 c. *The ceiling of this here cavern is **completely** low.⁵

Closed scale adjectives, however, do have the scalar bounds that allow for modification by modifiers of completion. In the case of a partially closed scale, wherein only one end of the scale is bounded, the adjective associated with the bounded end can be acceptably modified by a modifier of completion.

- (33) a. The radio got **completely** quiet/*loud.
 b. I was **completely** certain/*uncertain it was me.

In the case of fully closed scales, adjectives associated with both ends of the scale can be modified by modifiers of completion.

- (34) That is **completely** full/empty.

Reflecting on this pattern with respect to the *plumb* data presented thus far, an empirical generalization makes itself clear. The *very*-like interpretation of *plumb* arises with open scale adjectives (35), while the *completely*-like interpretation arises with closed scale adjectives (36).

- (35) 'Very'-Like
 a. Quiet-like, an not much spoke-out, but **plumb** clever. Knows how ter respect gray ha'rs too. Perlite as ever you see. Treats me like I was his pa, I vow. (Ham 1952)
 b. Sist' Humphreys be'n an edicated lady; an' she is a **plumb** good cook. (The Century, Vol. 68)
 c. The ceilin' of this yere cavern is so **plumb** low, he has to lower his head a lot. (Cosmopolitan 1913)

⁵Here and elsewhere I set aside the proportional reading of cases like *completely low*, where the modifier expresses how much of the cavern is low, not how low the cavern is.

- (36) ‘Completely’-Like
- a. A few expressions complete the distension: “so full he’s about to bust,” “so full he can’t bend,” “She’s so full she’s runnin’ out both ends,” and the especially slick, full-blooded image, “full as a tick.” That is **plumb** full. (Olson & Cavender 2009)
 - b. “My belly’s **plumb** empty,” he said and sat down on a chair, because he was weak. (Lumpkin 1932)

It should be noted, however, that scalar boundedness makes a *completely* interpretation possible, not obligatory, as evidenced by the example given in the introduction, repeated here as (37).

- (37) I’m **plumb** clean—yis’dy wuz Sat’dy. Cou’s’e, mebb’y not as clean as an Apostolic man; but purty clean fur a Prisbyterian.

Because something can be described as being *completely clean*, we know that the scalar structure associated with *clean* is bounded—specifically, it is a partially closed scale bounded on the *clean* end (cf. **completely dirty*). However, contextual information in this case makes it clear that the speaker intends *very clean* in his use of *plumb*.

Examining adjectives whose associated scale is closed only on the upper or lower end, such as *clean*, confirms that this is an effect of scalar boundedness and not, as one could hypothesize, the scalar property itself. With these adjectives, we see that *plumb* carries its *very*-like interpretation when modifying the open end of the scale.

- (38) ...his snoring was **plumb** / **very** loud up here ... (Branscum 1978)

When modifying the adjective associated with the closed end of the scale, however, the ‘default’ *completely* interpretation arises (39).

- (39) The radio got **plumb** / **completely** quiet.
(Internet source, “Cowboy Toothpicks”)

Given that scalar structure and its linguistic relevance is independently motivated and that, by parsimony, a single lexical entry for *plumb* should be preferred over two (or more) lexical entries, the most appropriate analysis is one that assigns *plumb* a uniform meaning, deriving its flexibility from interaction with scalar structure. Such will be the analysis proposed in Section 4, though first I make a brief excursion to discuss the interaction of *plumb* with the scalar structure associated with other phrasal categories.

3.3 Behavior with Other Categories

The discussion above recapitulated the role of scalar structure in determining the behavior of gradable adjectives and showed that scalar structure also reliably predicts the modificational interpretations of *plumb*. Integrating this with the earlier observation that degrees are instantiated across phrasal categories, I now show that this phenomenon is paralleled with the scalar structure of the other phrasal cate-

gories with which *plumb* is compatible.

3.3.1 Degree Achievements: More *Plumb* Variability

Given that they take gradable adjectives as their derivational source, degree achievement predicates are an obvious place to begin an examination of the interpretation of *plumb* with other phrasal categories. Abstracting away from the details of the individual analyses, I follow Hay *et al.* (1999), Kearns (2007) and Kennedy and Levin (2008) in analyzing degree achievement predicates as being systematically ambiguous between a *become Adj-er* and a *become Adj* interpretation, where the availability of these two interpretations is dependent on the scalar structure of the base adjective.⁶ The data in (40) illustrate this variability, where the degree achievement formed from the open scale adjective *wide* has only the *become Adj-er* interpretational, while that formed from the closed scale adjective *dry* has both interpretations.

- (40) a. The river widened.
 ✓ The river became wider.
 # The river became wide.
 b. The clothes dried.
 ✓ The clothes became dryer.
 ✓ The clothes became dry.

The availability of these two readings of degree achievement predicates correlates with the interpretation of *plumb* when it modifies the derived predicate. When the *become Adj-er* interpretation is modified by *plumb*, it yields the interpretation that something *became a lot Adj-er* (41), while with the *become Adj* interpretation, modification by *plumb* means *become completely Adj*.

- (41) a. The river **plumb** widened during the rainstorm. (*became a lot wider*)
 b. Them shuck beans has **plumb** dried, but they ain't ready yet so give them a couple more days. (*became a lot dryer*)
- (42) a. Them shuck beans has **plumb** dried, they're ready to be put up for winter. (*became completely dry*)
 b. The tornado come through and **plumb** flattened that motel. (*became completely flat, cf. Bell 2002*)

The previously cited analyses of degree achievement predicates also draw links between scalar structure of the base adjective and the variable telicity exhibited by degree achievements.

- (43) a. The beans dried in/for an hour.
b. The river widened ???in/for an hour.

This property of degree achievements, however, is demonstrably tangential to the issue of their interaction with *plumb*, as the variable telicity is retained under *plumb* modification.

⁶The paraphrases used here are adopted from Kearns and, as she points out, a more accurate paraphrase of the second interpretation in Hay *et al.*'s analysis is *become maximally Adj.*

- (44) Them shuck beans **plumb** dried ...
 a. in two days, so I brought them in.
 b. for two days, but then some clouds come through and it cooled off a bit.

3.3.2 'Very' Readings

When functioning as a modifier of stative verbs or of adverbs, *plumb* receives its *very*-like interpretation, paraphrased here with *really*, as *very* cannot modify verbs (Doetjes 1997).

- (45) a. She was a-steppin' **plumb** brisk. (*really briskly*, Baily 1915)
 b. ... we **plumb** soon forgot all about the war ...
 (*really soon*, Williams 1990)
- (46) a. ... it **plumb** skeers me (*really scares*, Craddock 1895)
 b. ... from the way he's sawing wood, I'd say he **plumb** enjoyed that skullgrazer. (*really enjoyed*, Boy's Life October 1942)

If we apply the modifier of completion test used with adjectives to probe the scalar structure of these phrasal domains, we see that the scales associated with these expressions are not closed. Thus, *plumb* behaves with adverbs and stative verbs like it does with open scale adjectives.

- (47) a. *completely brisk(ly)
 b. *completely soon
 c. *completely scares
 d. *completely enjoyed

3.3.3 'Completely' Readings

With nominal expressions as well as the class of psych predicate achievements, such as *to lose one's mind* or *to forget*, the modifier of completion test provides evidence for association with a closed scale. Unsurprisingly, then, these categories give rise to the *completely*-like interpretation of *plumb*.

- (48) a. ... but he must be a **plumb** idgit, a-talkin' 'bout folks to thar face, 'n' him so puny an' spindlin'! (✓ complete idiot, Fox Jr. 1895)
 b. When that man there, Bruce Dunlap, had most worried the life and sense out of Uncle Silas till at last he **plumb** lost his mind and hit this other blatherskile, his brother, with a club, I reckon he seen his chance. (✓ completely lost his mind, Twain 1896)

This pattern is also replicated with path-denoting prepositional phrases as well as verb particle constructions.

- (49) a. So named because it runs "**plumb** through town," Plumb Alley allows no Goose Pimple Junction room for passing cars.
 (✓ completely/all the way through the town, Tennis 2004)

- b. “P’r’aps, them women’s got more edication ‘n me,” she mused aloud, complacently, “but I kin fill them silk stockin’s **plumb** up.”
(✓ completely/all the way up, Baily 1915)
- c. He was a wonderful man! Kept his senses **plumb** to the end.”
(✓ right/all the way to the end, Hegan 2002)

With locative prepositional phrases, however, the interpretation of *plumb* is more accurately paraphrased as having an *exactly* reading, though this can intuitively be understood as a straightforward extension of the completely reading. Indeed, the same alternation between *completely* and *exactly* with path and locational prepositional phrases is exhibited by the modifier *right*.

- (50) ... and Dick announced that it had struck the mark **plumb** in the center.
(Ellis 1862)
- (51) a. He kept his senses **right** to the end. (\approx *completely/all the way*)
b. It struck the mark **right** in the center. (\approx *exactly*)

With respect to these remaining phrasal categories that engender a *completely*-like interpretation of *plumb*, there is one additional observation to make. While gradable adjectives associated with closed scales gave rise to what was termed a ‘default’ *completely* reading of *plumb*, allowing also the *very* interpretation, the *completely* interpretations discussed here seem much more resistant to the alternate, *very* interpretation. This can be illustrated by examining the context of utterance of the nominal datum given above, a witness testimony wherein the man in question is being contrasted with those individuals who are truly without any capacity, as the election is being contested due to votes cast by individuals who were incompetent or otherwise not legal voters.

- (52) He is generally considered an idiot or a very foolish person ; he has not got capacity sufficient to vote ; they have to give him a ticket ; I could not call him a **plumb** idiot ; his capacity is only moderate ; he works some, and always has some one to manage him.

4 The *plumb* Line

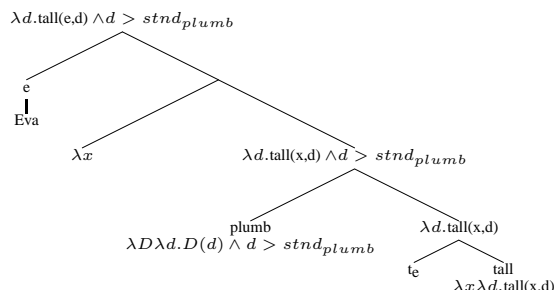
The data above is presented in defense of two broad conclusions regarding the behavior of *plumb*. First, *plumb* functions as a degree modifier with a wide categorial distribution. Second, while *plumb* varies between a *very*-like and a *completely*-like interpretation, this variability is fully predictable from the scalar properties of the constituent that *plumb* modifies. The analysis proposed here to account for this distributional flexibility as well as the observed sensitivity to scalar structure is provided in (53). *Plumb* is here defined as a degree modifier, drawing on the approach to degree modification presented in Rett (2008), that functions to restrict a set of degrees to those degrees that exceed a contextual standard that *plumb* itself constrains.

$$(53) \quad \llbracket plumb \rrbracket = \lambda D \lambda d. D(d) \wedge d > stnd_{plumb-D}$$

The compositional behavior of *plumb* is exemplified in (54) with the open scale adjective *tall*. For truthful assertion that Eva is *plumb tall*, the analysis requires that Eva's degree of tallness exceed the degree required by the *plumb* standard.

- (54) a. Eva is *plumb tall*.

b.



This analysis enforces no requirements other than the degree nature of the constituent modified by *plumb*, thus accounting for the observed breadth of its distribution. A discussion of how the analysis accounts for the other observed properties of *plumb* is provided below.

4.1 Degree Interactions

The definition and derivation above define *plumb* as a function from a set of degrees to a set of degrees, with the crucial aspect of this being that *plumb* leaves the degree variable open for further modification. The fact that *plumb* has as its output a (restricted) set of degrees provides an explanation for why *plumb*-modified constituents can function as input to other degree constructions, such as the equative (55) and the excessive (56), a characteristic that distinguishes it from the superficially similar *very* and *completely*.

- (55) a. Bruno's as **plumb** / ???**very** dumb as Scheitz is.
b. She kept her house as **plumb** / ***completely** clean as you could imagine.
- (56) a. Eva's too **plumb** / ***very** smart to fall for that.
b. That couch is just too **plumb** / ***completely** clean for me to sit on in my dirty work clothes.

4.2 To the Standard and Beyond

The evaluation metric for constituents modified by *plumb* is set by the *plumb* standard, a standard which, like that appealed to for many other degree modifiers, is sensitive to the context of utterance: *plumb tall* may mean quite different things depending on whether or not one is discussing Black Mountain (the tallest mountain in Kentucky) or Eva (the tallest girl in the kindergarten class). The data also suggest that the *plumb* standard is higher, perhaps significantly, than the usual contextual standard and is set in accordance with speaker expectations, but such conclusions are at this point only suggestive and will not be further discussed.⁷ The presence of

⁷In this latter respect, the behavior of *plumb* has the flavor of mirativity (DeLancey 1997), expressive content (Potts 2007), or exclamatives (Rett 2009), though there are problems facing an

the contextual *plumb* standard provides an explanation for why expressions modified by *plumb* are always evaluative. This is exhibited below with both the simple positive construction (57) and the equative (58), the latter of which is particularly interesting given that evaluativity is typically found only with negative polar adjectives in the equative (59).

- (57) a. Bruno is **plumb** tall. \rightarrow Bruno is tall.
 b. Bruno is **plumb** short. \rightarrow Bruno is short.
- (58) Bruno is as **plumb** tall/short as Scheitz is.
 \rightarrow Bruno and Scheitz are tall/short.
- (59) a. Bruno is as tall as Scheitz is. $\neg \rightarrow$ Bruno and Scheitz are tall.
 b. Bruno is as short as Scheitz is. \rightarrow Bruno and Scheitz are short.

A further conclusion that can be securely drawn is that *plumb* interacts in interesting ways with the boundedness of the scale associated with the degree expression it modifies, a pattern highlighted in much of the above discussion. Thus, for open scales, the *plumb* standard will set itself at some degree on the scale according to the context of utterance and *plumb* will behave very much like *very*. For adjectives associated with closed scales, however, I assume that the principle of Interpretive Economy (60) found with other contextual standards is also relevant for the *plumb* standard, forcing it to, by default, align with scalar bounds where possible.

- (60) **Interpretive Economy (Kennedy 2007):** Maximize the contribution of the conventional meanings of the elements of a sentence to the computation of its truth conditions.

The *completely* reading of *plumb* is, then, the consequence of the *plumb* standard aligning with the scalar bound as a result of this scalar bound being a component of the conventional meaning of the degree expression. Given that Interpretive Economy can be violated with appropriate contextual support, however, we also have an explanation for why closed scale degree expressions can, in principle, vacillate between a *very* and *completely* interpretation of *plumb*. The only matter this leaves open is why, then, certain expressions associated with closed scales remain resistant to or incompatible with the *very* interpretation of *plumb*, as was illustrated with prepositional phrases and the nominal *idiot* above. As was done with its apparent polysemy, this stubbornly completive behavior of *plumb* can also be viewed as a consequence of the expression modified, not a property of *plumb* itself. In these cases, *plumb* is obligatorily completive because the *plumb* standard for the relevant scale can only ever be associated with the bound of this scale. This obligatory association with the scalar bound is a rather intuitive property of the relevant degree expressions, given that they involve evaluating whether or not one has reached a specified destination point (path denoting prepositional phrases) or meets a legal criterion (the case of *idiot* above).

attempt to relate *plumb* to any of these similar domains.

5 Plumbing Up

The arguments presented above have shown that the seemingly empirically chaotic distribution and interpretation of *plumb* in fact exhibit a systematicity that is of broad theoretic import. First, *plumb* provides uniform evidence for the existence of scales across phrasal categories, as it functions as a licit degree modifier of any phrasal category wherein degree structure has been posited, except for the gradable structure associated with (DP-level) quantities. Second, *plumb* provides further evidence in support of the idea that the structure of these scales is linguistically relevant, as it was this scalar structure that was appealed to here to account for the alternation between *very*-like and *completely*-like interpretations of *plumb*. In the present approach, this alternation is the consequence of the interaction of scalar boundedness and the setting of the *plumb* standard. The present approach also accounts for why expressions modified by *plumb* can function as input to other degree morphemes, as found in other degree constructions or with the covert degree morphology that gives rise to evaluativity, by leaving the degree variable unbound following *plumb* modification. Indeed, the existence of an expression with behavior like that of *plumb* is virtually anticipated given the ingredients of degree semantics. It is, therefore, unsurprising that colloquial English is rife with non-standard degree modifiers exhibiting intensificatory behaviors similar to those of *plumb*.⁸

- (61) a. That man is **straight** gay. (Radio broadcast)
 b. Bruno is a **crazy** good bagpipe player.
 c. That river **straight up** widened.

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⁸Such a phenomenon is, moreover, not expected to be restricted to English; Thomas Graf (p.c.) suggests that both *foll* ('full') *ur* (\approx 'great') behave similarly in German.

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