This paper was written to ascertain whether adjectives that were considered to be non gradable by some grammarians were now being used with quantifiers, i.e., were now accepted as gradable. In *Analyzing English grammar*, it is noted that certain changes might be occurring making it acceptable to use quantifiers such as *rather, very, more, and most* with adjectives such as *‘honest, sincere, and single* (Della Volpe, Klammer, Schulz, Kl2010, p. 80). Indeed, some people claim that those adjectives already contain “superlative or absolute meanings” (Biber, 1999, p. 526). For instance, they contend that one is *sincere* or not and, therefore, *sincere* is non gradable and *more sincere* or *very sincere* is incorrect. In the same vein, others insist that something is *round* or not and that *a little round* or *rather round* is inappropriate. For prescriptivists, certain qualifications do not apply to certain adjectives.

One of the most famous prescriptivists was Lindsay Murray whose *English Grammar* first published in 1785 had a lasting influence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Crystal, 1997). In the 1824 edition of the his grammar, Murray states, “The phrases ‘more perfect’ and ‘most perfect,’ are improper; because perfection admits of no degrees of comparison. We may say nearer or nearest to perfection or more or less imperfect.” (Murray, 1824, p. 149). However, other grammarians proposed an approach that was based on observations and evaluation of language usage, and not on arbitrary rules. From the time he published his grammar, Murray’s views were attacked; in one instance, a writer in the *American Journal of Education* (1826) equates Murray’s grammar to a “foreign rack on which our simple language has been stretched”. (Crystal, 1997, p.3), and another promoted a discovery approach to grammar rather than the invention of rules (Crystal, 1997, p. 3). In 2006, in their *Cambridge Grammar of English*, Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy note that “although adjectives are usually classified as gradable and non gradable they
can be used with a shift in meaning as if they were member of the opposite class.” (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p.443).

Based on these observations, we hypothesized that we would find a trend which would indicate that those adjectives previously not used with qualifiers (non gradable) were changing and were becoming gradable. To test this hypothesis, we researched grammatical usages of these adjectives over time and conducted a survey of contemporary usage.

I. Research Design

Our research was designed around a group of specific adjectives that, according to recent grammar books such as Analyzing English grammar (2010), seem to be changing from non gradable to gradable. These adjectives are: Correct, Empty, Honest, Perfect, Pregnant, Round, Sincere, Unique, Universal. It was decided to trace these adjectives usage with qualifiers such as a little, more, most, rather, and very from Middle English literature through contemporary usage in a variety of written sources. Contemporary usage consisted of research using a written survey.

A. Historical Grammatical Usage

Historical grammatical usage examples were obtained from a variety of sources in literature, fiction and non-fiction texts and magazines, from 1387 to 2010. The following table provides a synopsis of the research which is detailed in Appendix I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middle English</th>
<th>Non-fiction</th>
<th>Fiction</th>
<th>Magazines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chaucer (1387)</td>
<td>The Constitution (1787)</td>
<td>Shakespeare (1589-1613)</td>
<td>Harper’s (1885)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lincoln’s eulogy of Henry Clay (1852)</td>
<td>Tennyson (1859)</td>
<td>Country Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G. Hugh (1818) King James Bible concordance</td>
<td></td>
<td>(1939)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. Survey of Contemporary Usage
A survey (Appendix II) was developed to test the hypothesis that non gradable adjectives were becoming gradable in contemporary usage. The first question requested that the respondents answer with yes or no, that is, the survey designers controlled the way those adjectives were paired with qualifiers. The second question was semi-controlled, that is, the survey takers had to fill in blanks with their own choice of attribute and qualifier with no limit as to how many times they could use any one of them; the third question was open-ended and offered the respondents the opportunity to indicate how many of the qualifiers they would use with five of the non gradable adjectives. These five adjectives were chosen because they were singled out in Analyzing English grammar (Della Volpe et al., 2010) as the ones that may be undergoing a change from non gradable to gradable. The fourth question provided an opportunity for survey takers to make comments or suggestions.

The survey was conducted within a sample of 45 survey takers consisting of an equal number of males and females from 16 to 90 years-old. The age groups were approximately equally distributed in three groups; the first included ages 16 to 25, the second included subjects 26 to 40, and the third group included everyone else. There were about 15 people in each group.

II. Data

A. Historical Data

For this part of the research, data sources were analyzed to show usage from 1387 to 1795 when Murray’s first English grammar was published. This data was obtained from Chaucer, Shakespeare and King James Bible Concordances as well as from the U.S. Constitution and the Oxford English Dictionary. Data from 1800 to the present included works from Abraham Lincoln, Newsweek Magazine, Time Magazine, and the Oxford English Dictionary. Information for the 1387-1795 period is detailed in the Historical Data Table below. Data was gathered through research in concordance texts, grammars, dictionaries, fiction and non-fiction texts, both in original documents and electronically.
B. Contemporary Data

The survey in Appendix II was created to provide contemporary data. In addition to finding out whether the targeted adjectives were used as *gradable* or *non gradable*, the survey was designed to determine (1) whether certain combinations of adjectives were more acceptable than others; (2) how frequently certain combinations were used, and (3) trends or differences in combination and frequency of usage of certain qualifiers with certain adjectives separately or in pairs.


**QUESTION I.** Which of these phrases would you be likely to use?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Ranks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More Correct</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Empty</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rather Honest</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Normal</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Perfect</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little Pregnant</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rather Single</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little Round</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Universal</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Unique</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contemporary Data: Table 1 – Question I
**QUESTION II.** Pick one from each group to fill in the blanks. There are no right or wrong answers. You can use the same word more than once.

Group 1: very, more, most, rather, a little
Group 2: correct, empty, honest, normal, perfect, pregnant, round, sincere, single, unique, universal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION II.</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>More</th>
<th>Most</th>
<th>Rather</th>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correct</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfect</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnant</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sincere</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contemporary Data: Table 2 – Question II
Cumulative Chart
**QUESTION III.** Please write as many of these – RATHER, VERY, MORE, MOST -- you think could be attribute(s) of the following words: Empty, honest, round, sincere, single.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Empty</th>
<th>Honest</th>
<th>Round</th>
<th>Sincere</th>
<th>Single</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rather</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contemporary Data: Table 3 & Comparative - Chart – Question III
III. Analysis

In this section we present an analysis of the data from the historical and contemporary research as well as our thoughts about what this all means. The research of sources dated after 1800, which included magazines, fiction, non-fiction, did not uncover enough instances to be compared with either pre-1800 data or contemporary data. We could infer that this was a result of the prescriptivists influence but we did not have enough evidence to support this theory.

Although we had a limited number of historical data (1387-1795), compared to contemporary data (survey results), we were able to observe several general patterns of usage.

First, our analysis reveals that when we compare historical data gathered with the results of our contemporary survey, all of the adjectives both superlative and absolute, were graded, that is, all were used with a qualifier since Chaucer’s time. For instance, as shown in the Historical Data Table, and as detailed in Appendix II, we found multiple examples of perfect (parfit), honest, sincere, correct (corect), universal, round (rownde), and empty (emptie) associated with variations of more, sometimes spelled moore, most, and very (verray or verie) as early as the time of Chaucer (1387) and Shakespeare (1589-1613). For example, in General Prologue in The Canterbury Tales, (Necastro, 2007), Chaucer uses “a verray, parfit gentil knight,” and “Moore parfit than weddyng freletee” in The Wife of Bath’s Tale Prologue (Necastro, 2007). Shakespeare uses more, most and very with honest and perfect”. In our survey, we found that very perfect is rarely used (see Contemporary Data -Table 1/Question I), but that perfect is used almost exclusively with most (Table 2-Question II).

Secondly, the analysis shows that the top five adjectives were closely matched with respect to frequency of usage. For instance, the top five adjectives (historical usage) are: perfect, honest, correct, pregnant and sincere and universal (tied), and the top five adjectives (contemporary usage) are: honest, unique, normal, perfect and sincere (Table 2-Question II).
Question III (Table 3) was included in the contemporary usage survey to find out what attributes—rather, very, more, most—survey takers would combine with the non-gradable adjectives: empty, honest, round, sincere, and single. Every possible combination was chosen by at least two people and quite a few people chose all four attributes. It was also interesting to note that two people wrote in a little which was an attribute we did not include. The combinations ranged in number from two for more single to thirty-seven for very sincere. This data seems to indicate that most survey takers were quite comfortable using these non-gradable adjectives in a gradable way.

Question IV (see Appendix II-Survey) was open-ended. The survey takers were invited to make any comments or suggestions they wanted. In addition to the usual ‘good luck’ and ‘very interesting’ comments, some survey takers seemed to agree with the prescriptivists noting that “something is either unique or not” (Survey answer, April 12, 2010), and “empty is empty, period.” “Honest is honest, period” (Survey answer, April 12, 2010). At least five survey takers answered ‘No’ to all pairs proposed in Question 1 (Survey answers April 12 to April 20, 2010). Others suggested that other attributes such as pretty, an example of which is “I think he is pretty honest”, could have been included in the list.

It is to be noted that historically, very perfect was acceptable during the time of Chaucer and today, the forms most used are more perfect and most perfect as shown in the results in question II (Table 2) in which people were given the choice to use combinations they preferred. It is to be noted that research of the same attributes in A scripture account of the faith and practice of Christians, a concordance with King James’ Bible (Hugh, G., 1818), perfect as well as the other adjectives referenced are never graded. This is the only exception that we found.

In addition, when asked about the history of the gradability of the word perfect, Michael Wenthe, professor of literature at American University, answered that “the evidence shows that perfect was gradable at least since the fourteenth century.” When asked whether the word was ever non gradable, he answered that “it was probably only ever the case for those prescriptivists who
bought into the ‘rule’ that more perfect was illogical.” (e-mail dated April 13, 2010). Probably, the most famous graded absolute adjective occurs in the preamble to the Constitution of the United States of America which states, “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union” (1787).

In conclusion, it appears that the hypothesis that this paper set out to evaluate, i.e., whether certain adjectives were undergoing changes to become gradable, was influenced by the prescriptivist approach which might lead one to believe that adjectives that contained superlative or absolute meanings were historically non gradable. However, historical and contemporary research found that adjectives such as perfect, honest, correct, sincere and universal, among others, have been and continue to be used with qualifiers such as rather, very, more, and most. Although our contemporary survey showed instances where people noted that there was a correct and an incorrect form, these rules were not consistently applied. In sum, most of our survey respondents used all the possible combinations of adjectives and qualifiers fairly liberally, just like Chaucer and Shakespeare had done before them.

This short paper did not explore all of the areas which would need to be researched to provide a more definite answer to the question posed and, in fact, raised additional questions. For instance, one could study specific differences of usage among different generations and usage in speech over time. Also, there would need to be additional and more extensive historical research to find out to what extent these adjectives and qualifiers combinations have taken different meanings over time. Additionally, a more in-depth study of the prescriptivists influence might be appropriate.

Another area of research could lead to determine whether there might be a parallel or relation between the advertisers use of superlatives to push consumers to buy over-size products (big-Mac, colossal olives, grande latte, etc.) and what could be perceived as an overuse of superlative adjective and their qualifiers (very sincere, very honest, very unique) in day-to-day
language. Finally, this paper did not research the impact of technology (e-mail, texting, Tweeter and Facebook exchanges) to determine how combinations of superlative/absolute and their qualifiers are being transcribed in *electronic language* most of which require brevity. For instance, what are texters’ *verray parfit* adjectives?
References

Abraham Lincoln’s Eulogy on Henry Clay (1852) retrieved April 2, 2010 from www.topicsites.com/abraham-lincoln/quotes


U. S. Constitution – the Preamble (1787). Retrieved April 1, 2010 from www.constitution.net.const
**Historical Research**

*Chaucer/Perfect (1387)*  
*The Canterbury Tales* 1387 - *General Prologue*  
Line 72: “He was a *verray, parfit* gentil knight.”  
Line 338: “Was *verray felicitee parfit.”*  
Line 422: “He was a *verray, parfit* praktisour.”

*The Wife of Bath’s Tale Prologue* –  
Line 92: *Moore parfit* than weddyng freletee.”  
The Parson’s Tale - Line 107: “Now shaltow understand what is bihovely and necessarie to *verray parfit* Penitence.”

*Empty*: “almost *al empty* is the tonne.”  
*Round*: “His hear was by his erys *ful round* yshorn.” (Chaucer, 1387)

*Shakespeare/Perfect*:  
*King Henry IV Part II* : Westmoreland: “Our battle is more full of names than yours, Our men *more perfect* in the use of arms.”  
*As You Like It* Act 3, Silvius: “So holy and *so perfect* is my love.”  
*Cymbeline*, Act 1, “The credit that they lady hath of thee Deserves thy trust, and thy *most perfect* goodness.”  
*The Tempest*, Act 3, Scene 1, Ferdinand: “but you, O you, *So perfect*, So peerless.”  
*Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, Act 5, Scene 1, Pericles: “Thou hast been *godlike perfect.”*

*Shakespeare/Honest*  
*All’s Well that Ends Well* - Act 4, Scene 3- Parolles: “I protest, was *very honest* in behalf of the maid.”  
*Hamlet* - Act 3, Scene 1 - Hamlet: “I am myself *indifferent honest*.”  
*Othello* - Act 2, Scene 3 - Othello: “Iago is *most honest.”*

**The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)**  
*Round*  
1595: Captain Wyatt R. Dudley  *Voyage to the West Indies* (Hakl. Soc.) 58 “Wee had franklie bestowed upon her *verie rownde* and sownde vollies of shott”.

1683  Temple *Memoir Works* 1720 I. 387 “He wou’d be glad to see .. the Spanish Territories lie closer and *rounder* than they were then left.”

*Sincere (OED)*  
1533: Frith, *Answ. More* (1829)344 “Master Wickliff was noted..to be a man .Of a *very sincere* life”.  
1610: Guillum, *Heroldry III ii* (1660) 100 “The motion of the Heavens is the *most sincere* and unlabored of all motions.”

1698: Hearne *Duct. History* I 161 “Things worthy of our knowledge; collected out of the *most sincere* and uncorrupted Monuments of Antiquity.”
Historical Research (Contd)

1722: Wollaston Relig. Nat. ix 217 “His present pleasures (if not so many) are more sincere and natural”.

Unique (OED)
1631 Donne Letters (163) “A mathematique point, which is the most indivisible and unique.”

Universal (OED)
1647 Clarendon Hist. Reb. 1. 32 “The loudest and most universal rejoycing over the whole Kingdom.”
1700 Evelyn Diary 5 March 1673 “This gentleman is a very excellent and universal scholar.”
Ibid. 19 July, 1691. “I never knew a man of a more universal and generous spirit.”
1715 Burnet Own Time II. V. ,1897 I 427 “He was very universal in all other learning.”

Empty (OED) 897: “K. Ælfred Gregory’s Past li 401” in the form ‘æmte’
1600: AY.L. ii. Vii. 93. “In civility thou seem’st so emptie of all good.”
1727: Newton (I.) “The heavens are much emptier of air than any vacuum we can make below.”
1724: “The king [was] quite empty of money.”

Honest (OED) 1325. In the form of ‘honeste.”
1526. Tindale I. Cor. Xii 23. “Apon those members of the body Which we thynke lest honest put we most honestie on.”
1566. Alday Tr. [He] has created the chin …after so honest a forme, and hath enriched it with a bearde.”
1390 Gower Conf. I. 110. “So shulde he be the more honest.”
1585. T. Washington tr. Nicholay’s Voy. I. xxii. 28 Beyng a good Pilot and a very honest man.”
1672. Cave Prim. Chr. I. i. “The honester and severer Romans were ashamed…”
1674. Brevint Saul at Endor 282. “The honestest Monks we know are sometimes tempted to say strange things.”
1712. Swift Let Eng. Tongue, “I would have our language, after it is duly correct, always to last.”
1736 Johnson in Boswell. The best and correctest authouts.”
1820 in Picton L’pool Munic. Rec. (1886) II. 388 “Leaving to…their correcter judgment to decide.”
1831. Macaulay Byron Ess 1854 I. 159/2. “Mr Hunt is, we suspect, quite correct in saying that, etc.” and 153/2 “What are called the most correct plays of the most correct dramatists.”
Modern Times: Post 1800.

Round (OED)
1859 Tennyson Lancelot & Elaine Idyll “Take these jewels and make me happy, making them An armlet for the roundest arm on earth.”(Tennyson, 1859, p 1177)
1865 M. Eyre Lady’s Walks South France “She tells you home truths in the roundest manner.” (Eyre, 1865 V. 55)

Honest (OED)
1848 Thackeray Van. Fair “The very best and honestest feelings of the man.”

OED
1841 Emerson Essential Friendship “Three cannot take part in a conversation of the most sincere and searching sort.”
1885 Harper’s Magazine April 703/1 “when these summer guests found themselves defrauded of their unique recreations”
1908 K. Grahame The wind in the Willows viii 168 “’Toad Hall’ said the Toad proudly. Is an eligible self-contained gentleman’s residence, very unique”.
1939 ‘Countrylife’ (magazine) 11 Feb p. xviii/2 “Almost the most unique residential site along the south coast.”
I. Which of these phrases would you be likely to use?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. More correct</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Most empty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Rather honest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Most normal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Very perfect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. A little pregnant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Rather single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Very unique</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. More universal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. A little round</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

II. Pick one from each group to fill in the blanks. There are no right or wrong answers. You can use the same word more than once.

**Group 1:** very, more, most, rather, a little

**Group 2:** correct, empty, honest, normal, perfect, pregnant, round, sincere, single, unique, universal

1. It is the _______ _________ wedding dress.
2. The service was _______ _________.
3. He is _______ _________ than she.
4. Jamaica is the _______ _________ island in the Caribbean.
5. She is _______ _________.
6. The answers to the exam are _______ _________.
7. My glass is _______ _________.
8. His speech was _______ _________.
9. He is the _______ _________.
10. Sally is _______ _________.

III. Please write as many of these – RATHER, VERY, MORE, MOST -- you think could be attribute(s) of the following words:

- Empty
- Honest
- Round
- Sincere
- Single

IV. Comments or Suggestions

______________________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your help!