

## Chapter 8

# From ‘big’ to ‘much’: On the grammaticalization of two gradable adjectives in Swedish

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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* became a quantifier as early as the 1700s, whereas *mycken/t* seems to have gone 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.

**Keywords:** grammaticalization, quantifiers, adjectives, negative polarity, positive polarity, language change, Swedish



## 1 Introduction

The quantifier *mycket* ('much') in present-day Swedish is primarily used to quantify mass nouns and plurals, roughly like *much* in Modern English:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) (present-day Swedish)  
mycket mjölk/socker/pengar  
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:<sup>2</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup>With countable nouns in the plural, *många* 'many' is normally used (see i), but *mycket* may also be used (see i.b), and then the plurality is seen more collectively.

- (i) a. *många böcker*  
many books  
'many books'  
b. *mycket böcker*  
much books  
'lots of books'

<sup>2</sup>In Swedish, *mycket* is also used with the meaning 'very' to denote degrees of positive adjectives. The Old Swedish distinction between *miok* 'very' and *mykit* 'much' was levelled in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This development, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

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 of uncountable nouns as well as plural of countable nouns, as shown in 1).

A very similar development has happened with 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*, however, is slightly different from *mycken/t* (see §2).

- (4) a. (EMS system)  
 Hon fick liten hjälp av sina grannar  
 she got little.C.SG help of POSS.REFL neighbours  
 'She got a little help from her neighbours'
- b. (present-day Swedish)  
 Hon fick lite hjälp av sina grannar  
 she got little.N.SG help of POSS.REFL neighbours  
 'She got little/some help from her neighbours'<sup>3</sup>

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 even with common gender singular and plural nouns. The development is studied in the corpus of Swedish drama dialogue (Melander Marttala & Strömquist 2001), covering the years 1725–2000. The corpus is presented in §3. I will show that *lite* was grammaticalized as a quantifier a little earlier than *mycket*. Second, I will propose that the weak forms of the quantifiers *mycket* and *lite(t)* have turned into polarity items in present-day Swedish (§4). 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 §5, 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*).<sup>4</sup> The first one is mainly used with

<sup>3</sup>The reading 'some help' in (4b) is only available with unstressed *lite*.

<sup>4</sup>The word *diger* 'big' is also used, but 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 attested in Runic Swedish (800–1225 CE), whereas *mykil* is found at least eight times in Runic Swedish (Peterson 2006).

countable nouns, whereas the second is mainly restricted to mass nouns, and occasionally occurs with 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.<sup>5</sup> The forms (in the nominative singular) are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Inflection of the adjectives *mykil* ‘big’ and *litil* ‘little’ in Old and Early Modern Swedish

Adjectival inflection	Old Swedish	Early Modern Swedish
Indefinite/predicative	mykil/litil	mycken/liten
Definite	mykli/litli	myckna/lilla

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 17<sup>th</sup> 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*), as illustrated in (5).

(5) (SAOB, example from 1676)

Mycket Lieutenanter och andra Officerare  
 much.N.SG lieutenant.C.PL and other officers  
 ‘lots of lieutenants and other (commissioned) officers’

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

<sup>5</sup>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).

old neuter form, whereas the quantifier *lite(t)* normally lacks the final *-t* in the spelling.<sup>6</sup>

In the next section, I present a small study of the non-agreeing uses of *mycket* and *lite(t)* in the drama corpus.<sup>7</sup>

### 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 between each period), two in each century, where the three earliest periods contain five dramas each, while 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 2. For details on the individual dramas, see Melander Marttala & Strömquist (2001) or Stroh-Wollin (2008: 38–39 and Appendix 1).

Table 2: The bulk of the drama corpus

Corpus section	Period	No. of dramas	No. of words (tokens)
Period 1	1725–1750	5	92,000
Period 2	1775–1800	5	73,000
Period 3	1825–1850	5	99,000
Period 4	1875–1900	10	178,000
Period 5	1925–1950	10	205,000
Period 6	1975–2000	10	166,000

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. Reference to the specific drama is made with the corpus period number followed by a letter indicating the specific drama. The reference (5B) thus indicates drama B (the second) in the fifth period of the corpus (from 1925–1950).

<sup>6</sup>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 the 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*.

<sup>7</sup>This study is limited both with regard to the number of elements studied and to the size of my corpus, but as far as I know it is new for Swedish. For other languages there are of course more extensive studies in these respects, e.g. Roehrs & Sapp (2016) is a diachronic study of quantifying elements in the history of German.

- (6) a. Jag önskar Er lycka, Cousin, mycken lycka!  
I wish you.OBJ 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 med Er?  
well now AUX you DM bring much.N.SG merchandise.PL with you.OBJ  
'Well, now you will bring much merchandise with you' (2C)
- c. Lite sill har jag gudskelov  
little herring.C.SG 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).<sup>8</sup>

- (7) a. (head noun missing)  
så skulle *mycket* *ondt* kunna undvikas  
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. (head noun missing)  
dessutan hade jag lärt så *mycket* af Fransyskan  
additionally had I learned so much.N.SG of French  
'Additionally, I had learned enough French' (1B)
- c. (other determiner)  
*en liten* förtrolig *bekantskap*  
AC.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 nouns or to signal degrees of adjectives (see footnote 2), some examples are ambiguous between quantifiers and degree adverbials, as in (8). If the word after *mycket/lite(t)* is ambiguous between adjective and noun, the status of *mycket/lite(t)* cannot be determined, which is the case in (9). Consequently, examples like (8) and (9) are also excluded from the investigation.

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<sup>8</sup>The few cases with definite inflection are always adjectival and may co-occur with determiners. See Table 1 above.

- (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 too little salt/salty  
 'Was there too little salt?/Was it not salty enough?' (6E)

The remaining examples are classified into three groups: unambiguous adjectives (which include clearly agreeing *mycken/liten* and the rare cases with definite inflection; see Table 2 above and (10c) below), unambiguous quantifiers, and ambiguous cases, illustrated in (10–12) respectively.

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

- b. ambiguous in number  
 mycket folk  
 much.N.SG people.N.SG/PL  
 ‘much people’

Note that phrases may be assigned to the ambiguous group (as in 12) for two reasons: either because there seems to be agreement in the 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 the singular (as in 12b).

We are now in a position to present the data from the investigation of the drama corpus. In Tables 3–4, the numbers of unambiguous examples of adjectives and quantifiers are given as well as the numbers of ambiguous examples. The Q-quote is a percentage of unambiguous quantifiers out of all unambiguous examples (the sum of adjectives and quantifiers in the table). 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 3, and continue with *mycken/mycket* in Table 4.

Table 3: Agreement and Q-quote for *liten/lite(t)* 1725–2000

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%

The development of *liten/t*, illustrated in Table 3, seems quite clear. The Q-quote had already risen to 80% 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.<sup>9</sup> As we will see, this is earlier than the development for *mycken/mycket*. Consider Table 4.

<sup>9</sup>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)

Table 4: Agreement and Q-quote for *mycken/mycket* 1725–2000

Period	Adjectives	Ambiguous	Quantifiers	Q-quote
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%

The development of *mycket*, illustrated in Table 4, shows that the Q-quote reached 80% in the 1900s, and the development seems to be clearly slower than that of *lite(t)*. One reason that the Q-quote is higher for *lite(t)* might be that this adjective does not have a plural form (but the suppletive forms *små* or sometimes *få/fåtaliga* 'few/few-numbered' 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, *lite(t)* would be earlier than *mycken/t*. The plural cases with *lite(t)* (like in 13) are, however, quite rare 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 5.

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 sin-

Table 5: Agreement and Q-quotes for singulars 1725–1850

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

gular form with the relevant meaning, are frequent; the word *pengar* ‘money’<sup>10</sup> especially is over-represented 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 6.

Table 6: Nouns with quantifying *mycket/lite(t)* 1725–1800

Quantified noun	<i>mycket</i>	<i>lite(t)</i>
inherent plurals	14	4
mass nouns	2	14
other plurals	6	1

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

We have seen that in an initial stage of the change, the inherent plural *pengar* ‘money’ is over-represented 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 fewer 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’.

<sup>10</sup>The word *pengar* ‘money’ is always plural (in the sense of ‘money’). Occasionally it may be used in the singular, *peng*, but then the meaning is ‘coin’.

To summarize, the adjective *liten/t* seems to have already grammaticalized into a quantifier in the 1700s, whereas *mycken/t* grammaticalized 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 tendencies are quite clear. There is thus good reason to conclude that *liten/t* was 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).<sup>11</sup> In this way lexical adjectives are changed into functional elements in a Q- or NumPhrase inside the extended DP.

## 4 Weak and strong quantifiers

In present-day Swedish, our two quantifiers, *mycket* and *lite(t)*, have one strong and one weak 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.<sup>12</sup> 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).<sup>13</sup>

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)

<sup>11</sup>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 (2022 [this volume]).

<sup>12</sup>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; however, I will leave such cases aside in this paper.

<sup>13</sup>Weak and strong forms of *lite* are also present 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 ord-bok*). 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.

In the literature, it has been mentioned that the English correspondents *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.

Israel's (1996) claim is that most (or all) lexical elements that show polarity sensitivity can be classified in terms of two features. The first feature is quantitative value, which describes whether the item is high-scalar or low-scalar, i.e. whether it denotes 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 1, adapted from Israel (1996: 628), with some of his examples.

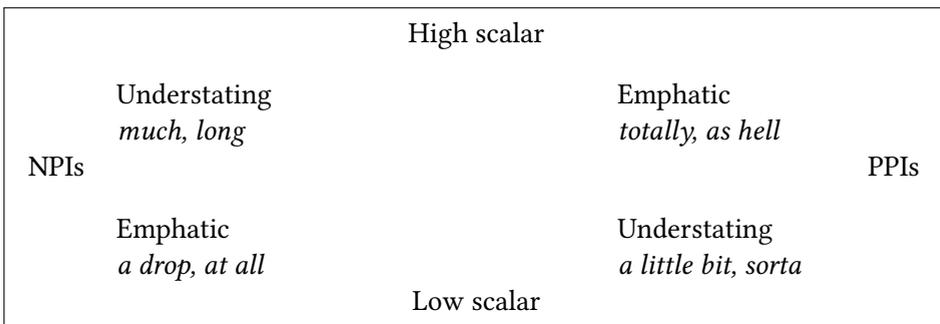


Figure 1: Israel's (1996) model for polarity items

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  
       'He has received lots of money.'
- (15) Hon har blivit    'myke klokare.  
       she has become much wiser  
       '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 of 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 (18–19) 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.<sup>14</sup>

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*, i.e. like a positive polarity item, avoiding negative sentences. This is illustrated in (22–25) below.

- (22) Han har FÅTT     ,lite pengar.  
       he has received little money  
       'He has received some money.'

<sup>14</sup>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.

- (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 may not be 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 (bit) wiser' have just been mentioned.

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: 12–14). 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 results:

- (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 may be 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 item, 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 1 above). Weak *,myke* is a high-scalar NPI, whereas *,lite* is a low-scalar PPI. Both, however, are understating in Israel's terms. As Traugott (2010: 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.<sup>15</sup>

## 5 A prediction

In the previous sections, we have seen that the adjectives *mycken* 'much' and *liten* 'little', have successively turned into quantifiers (roughly) over the last 300 years. The former neuter singular forms *mycket* and *lite(t)* are now also used 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

<sup>15</sup>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.

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 results are found in Table 7, where the periods are given in pairs (period 1 and 2 together, etc.).

Table 7: Frequency per 10,000 words of *mycken/t* and *liten/t* with mass nouns/plurals

Period	No. of words	<i>mycken/t</i>	Frequency	<i>liten/litet</i>	Frequency
1725–1800	165,000	63	3.8	29	1.8
1825–1900	277,000	63	2.3	35	1.3
1925–2000	371,000	87	2.3	99	2.7

Table 7 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. The overall result (small as it is) is fully in accordance with the prediction: there is a clear drop in the (weak form of the) word which turns into a negative polarity item (*mycken/t*), whereas the word (*liten/t*) that (in its weak form) turns into a positive polarity item gains in frequency. We would need a larger corpus to see if the drop in the 1800s for *liten/t* is significant and if so what it means. Thus, more research is clearly needed, but these first results of this preliminary investigation seem to support the prediction.

The data should, of course, be checked further in other and larger corpora. Important questions for future research include whether the quantifiers *mycket* and *lite* used with comparatives behave in the same way, and, further, 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 rise for *liten/t*, although the previous investigation in §3 showed that *liten/t* turned into a quantifier earlier than *mycken/t* did. On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that the weak-strong distinction and polarity status emerged immediately after the transition from adjective to quantifier. More research is needed in this respect as well.

Although many questions remain, I hope to have shown that the adjectives *mycken/liten* turned 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*) has dropped in frequency, whereas the one that has become a positive polarity item (*lite*) has gained in frequency.

## 6 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* 'big' and *liten/t* 'little' into quantifiers. Data from the drama corpus show that *liten/t* was already becoming a quantifier in the 1700s, whereas *mycken/t* seems to have gone 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 rise. In §4, I presented a small preliminary study that seems to confirm this prediction.

## Acknowledgements

I am thankful to the audiences of the Grammar seminar and the Scandinavian seminar in Lund, as well as the participants of the workshop Grammar in Focus in Lund 2019, for comments on empirical and theoretical matters. The paper also gained a lot from discussions with Johan Brandtler, whose insights on polarity items and grammar in general were very valuable.

## Abbreviations

CE	Common Era	NPI	Negative Polarity Item
EMS	Early Modern Swedish	PPI	Positive Polarity Item

## Sources

SAOB: *Ordbok över svenska språket, utg. av Svenska Akademien* [Dictionary of the Swedish language, published by The Swedish Academy]. 1893–. Lund. Available here: <http://www.saob.se>

The corpus of Swedish drama dialogue. 45 original Swedish dramas written between 1725 and 2000. Details of the corpus can be found in Melander Marttala & Strömquist 2001 or Stroh-Wollin 2008.

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