He grows quite a rake: The development of quite + NP
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Quite has been used as a maximizer meaning ‘completely, entirely’ from the fourteenth century on. By the seventeenth century a weaker amplifier use developed ranging from ‘very much’ to ‘rather, moderately’ in the context of gradable complements and of negation (Paradis 2008, OED3 entry 2010). Quite was extended from verb and adjective complements (quite believe, quite destitute) to nominals in the seventeenth century, cf. quite a/the gentleman. Here it is used as a predicative. Some comments on uses of quite + NP in the nineteenth century appear in Stoffel (1901) but there is no detailed account of this development or of its function in contemporary English. Payne and Huddleston (2002) discuss uses of quite + NP only with quantifiers, e.g. Quite a few mistakes; and Palacios Martínez (2009) mentions the construction only briefly. Using several corpora including CLEMETEV, Proceedings of Old Bailey, and COHA I investigate the rise of quite as a predicative.

Both the indefinite and definite constructions appear at the end of the seventeenth century in contrastive contexts (1679 quite another thing; 1718 quite the reverse of it). The favored context for use of quite with indefinite NPs without attributive adjectives is with animate predications (1740 He grows quite a rake, 1748 the other is quite a stranger); it occasionally appears from the later eighteenth century on with inanimates (1770 quite a vicid). By contrast the definite construction appears first with inanimates (1782 have you told us quite the truth?) and is only rarely used before the mid nineteenth century with animate predications (1830 she was very handsome, quite the lady).

The quite + NP construction is non-referring and characterizing. It is typically used to invoke traits/behaviors of human or inanimate predicate Ns (Gundel, Hedberg, and Zacharski 1993). If N is human, the characteristics are often presented as subject to change or interrogation. Quite + the + N picks out i) properties of entities, mainly formal qualia (e.g. gentleman in terms of behavior and looks: 1845 It is not him; he is quite the gentleman; he has a beautiful white hand; and his dress is that of one), rarely constitutive, internal ones (e.g. 1910 quite the ingénue. Very charming--wonderfully well read for my age, but incapable) (cf. Pustejovsky 1995), ii) degree of fit to characteristics in the mutual cognitive environment (P-sets that are general knowledge-based inferences and stereotypic “frames”, Hawkins 1991). The indefinite construction a relatively high degree of match to a type, while the definite construction evokes a maximal set of prototype characteristics associated with that type.

The corpora point to expansion of NP collocates in the indefinite construction and rapid increase in frequency, while the definite construction remained relatively stable. These changes are considered within the larger history of English, especially a) the expansion of predeterminers/peripheral modifiers at left margin of NP from Early Modern English on (Van de Velde 2011), ii) the development of new qualitative Adverbs as boosters characteristic of Early Modern English (Peters 1994).
Corpora


References


