WRITING CENTER TUTOR PERCEPTIONS OF ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIER USAGE IN

MULTILINGUAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT WRITING

by

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(Under the Direction of Lewis C. Howe)

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I examined the usage of adjective intensifiers in the academic writing of multilingual undergraduate university students in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context in the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) and then interviewed writing center tutors about their perceptions of the social meaning and appropriateness of using adjective intensifiers in academic writing. Adjective intensifiers are lexical items in English with a great deal of variation. These forms carry social meaning that can be used rhetorically by writers to portray an identity to the reader. I examined the usages of *very*, *totally*, *absolutely*, *pretty*, *so*, *quite*, *really*, and *extremely* and found that *very* is used far more than any other adjective intensifier in the academic writing of multilingual undergraduate university students. The findings also indicated that writing center tutors recommend against using adjective intensification in academic writing in general due to its vagueness while accepting only adjective intensifiers that indicate more completeness, like *extremely*, for usage in academic writing.

INDEX WORDS: Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, Variationist Sociolinguistics, Applied

Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition, Multilingual Writers, Writing

Centers Tutors, Rhetorical Tools, Academic Writing, Adjective

Intensifiers, Degree Adverbs

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2025

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August 2025

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my family, including my parents, Carl and

Carla Fackler, and my nuclear family, Ayça and Ege Fackler. Thank you for supporting me

during this years-long endeavor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this research is to examine the usage of adjective intensifiers in written academic English produced by multilingual undergraduate university students. The research focused on examining readers' perceptions of the social meaning associated with use of adjective intensifiers in academic writing at the university level and understanding the appropriateness of using adjective intensifiers in an academic writing context. For this purpose, the usage of adjective intensifiers was first examined in a corpus of English as a foreign language (EFL) undergraduate student writing, the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE). Then an interview was created with examples of adjective intensifier usage from the ICLE corpus and conducted with writing center tutor participants to gather their perceptions about the usage of adjective intensifiers in academic writing.

1.2 THE VARIABLE: ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIERS

The linguistic variable selected for this research is the adjective intensifier. In the English language, an adjective intensifier is a lexical item that has a lot of variation in form. It is an adverb that modifies an adjective by amplifying, boosting, or maximizing its meaning (Stoffel, 1901; Mustanoja, 1960; Bolinger, 1972; Quirk et al., 1985; Peters, 1994; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003). The adverbs used to intensify adjectives in the English language exhibit a great deal of variation and have exhibited variation since the earliest records of written English (Stoffel, 1901; Mustanoja, 1960; Bolinger, 1972; Quirk et al., 1985; Peters, 1994; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003). Adjective intensifier forms can carry social meaning (Beltrama & Staum Casasanto, 2017) that

can be perceived by the listener (Campbell-Kibler, 2007, 2009) or reader to construct the identity of the writer.

The usage of adjective intensifiers has gained the interest of variationist sociolinguists due to the amount of variation resulting from a multitude of recycled and novel forms to select from (Stoffel, 1901; Mustanoja, 1960; Bolinger, 1972; Peters, 1994; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008). They are subject to constant renewal, recycling, and replacement (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte, 2008; Stratton 2020a). The intensifiers *very* and *really* have been in usage for hundreds of years (Mustanoja, 1960) while other forms, like *totally* and *so*, have been adopted as intensifiers relatively recently (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005). They can even be improvised to create novel forms (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005). Some work has looked at the adjectives that intensifiers are paired with in bigrams (Wagner, 2017). A more detailed literature review of variationist sociolinguistic research on adjective intensifiers will be covered in Chapter 4.

1.3 THE CORPUS

The International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) is a corpus of writing by higher intermediate to advanced learners of English as a foreign language compiled by the Centre for English Corpus Linguistics at the University of Louvain starting in 2002 (Granger et al., 2020). The ICLE corpus is now on its third version with over five million words from writers of many mother tongue backgrounds. This corpus is a collection of undergraduate university level essays written for English language classes and examinations by students from universities around the globe. These essays have been compiled into a corpus that contains metadata about the authors with information about their age, gender, and language background.

The text also contains metadata which flags the parts of speech of individual lexical items in each sentence. Since this corpus is available in an online format, concordances may be queried to find adjective intensifiers by searching for instances where a particular intensifier directly precedes an adjective within a sentence. The concordances are presented with the original context before and after each bigram and include the metadata about each author. This makes the ICLE corpus a very useful tool for conducting variationist sociolinguistic research on student writing.

The ICLE is a corpus of written language. The field of historical sociolinguistics has relied on written records for the study of language use that predates any other medium for recording human language practices. Most recent variationist sociolinguistic studies have focused on the spoken language; however, some research in the last 20 years has been using online written language and treating it as an object of variationist sociolinguistic interest equivalent to spoken language (Schlobinski, 2005; Androutsoplous, 2006; Vandekerckhove & Nobels, 2010) and sociolinguistic researchers have used corpora created from websites (Wagner, 2017) and social media platforms (Lívio & Howe, 2024). More details about using written language as a sociolinguistic object will be discussed in Chapter 3.

1.4 MULTILINGUAL WRITERS

The authors in the ICLE corpus are university student EFL learners with a higher intermediate or advanced level of English language (Granger et al., 2020). This research positions these contributors to the ICLE corpus as competent multilingual writers of academic English at the undergraduate level. They are not viewed as having a deficit of language skills because they are English language learners (See Chapter 3). They are viewed as multilingual writers who bring their complete sets of translingual writing repertoires to their written English

(Flores & Rosa, 2015; Wei & García, 2022). As multilingual writers, they draw from their linguistic repertoires and use rhetorical tools from multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds when writing in English. Multilingual writers draw from their translingual repertoires of syntactic structures and lexical knowledge from multiple linguistic backgrounds in addition to those commonly used in academic English.

Multilingual writers living and learning English in areas where English is not the language the community may also have more limited exposure to the English used by native speakers. Their exposure to the English language may be limited to the language classroom and online sources such as social media and streaming movies and television programs (Shafirova & Araújo e Sá, 2023). Some research has focused on the role that television shows and movies play in influencing language use and diffusing language practices (Berman, 1987; Holly, 2001; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Stuart-Smith, 2007; Lívio & Howe, 2024). Therefore, I pay particular attention to research done on the usage of adjective intensifiers in television shows and in social media in Chapter 4.

1.5 WRITING CENTER TUTORS

Writing center tutors are trained in reading the texts of peers from the perspective of the reader and giving feedback to the authors about this experience (Lerner & Gillespie, 2024). They are employed by writing centers on university campuses that are often closely associated with or part of the English department rhetoric and composition and first-year writing programs, so many writing center tutors also have training in rhetoric and composition and some experience teaching in first-year writing programs at the university level (Reiff et al., 2015). As such, writing center tutors are ideal participants for variationist sociolinguistic research on reader perceptions of social meaning and genre appropriateness in university student writing. Writing

center tutors have training in looking at the rhetorical choices that writers use in texts and providing feedback based on their perceptions as readers. As peer tutors who are university students themselves, they are aware of the lexical items and syntactic structures in current usage today by North American English-speaking university students and the subtle social meanings that may be conveyed by these usages. In writing center meetings, tutors often spontaneously engage in detailed discussions about the social meaning of lexical items that they have recently encountered in a student writing appointment. Participants who are trained in analyzing the writing of their peers and actively engaged in analyzing the social meanings of the rhetorics of lexical choice are ideal participants in a variationist sociolinguistic research using academic writing as a sociolinguistic object.

1.6 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the purposes of this dissertation, writing is seen as a linguistic verbal performance equivalent to spoken language (Schlobinski, 2005; Androutsoplous, 2006). Identity is defined as the image a writer or speaker projects to the audience through the selection of linguistic variants that have social meaning (Nguyễn et al., 2016). Drawing from Bell's (1984) Audience Design and Bell's (2001) Referee Design, I see writing as a linguistic performance where a language user has the agency to utilize their linguistic repertoire (Gumperz, 1965; Bush, 2012) and rhetorical knowledge to select lexical items and syntactic structures that carry social meaning in order to portray an identity to the reader through written language. Adjective intensifier forms are known to convey social meanings (Beltrama & Staum Casasanto, 2017) and these social meanings can be investigated through examining the perceptions of the audience (Campbell-Kibler, 2007, 2009). This research focuses on how the audience (the reader in this case)

perceives the identity of the writer as portrayed through the social meanings projected in their selection of adjective intensifiers in academic writing.

1.7 GAPS IN THE RESEARCH

While research has been done using a global corpus of English from English-speaking countries (Wagner, 2017), this research examines a corpus of the writing of EFL multilingual university students from countries where English is not the national language. The findings of this research could be applied to ESL multilingual writers in universities in English speaking countries, like the United States, and at English medium universities globally. In the 2023-2024 school year, there were 1,126,690 international students enrolled at universities in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2024a). This research could benefit those students as they learn how to write in academic written English at the university level.

This research would also contribute to the fields of research that overlap with second language writing such as linguistics, TESOL/applied linguistics, and English department rhetoric and composition and writing center studies. To my knowledge, there are no other variationist sociolinguistic studies that have recruited writing center tutor participants to examine their perceptions on language variation in writing. The writing center tutor interview participants in this study provided detailed insights into the social meanings associated with adjective intensifiers, and I believe that writing center tutors could provide valuable contributions to any variationist sociolinguistic research on university level writing. While this is a much more specific application, this could benefit computational sociolinguistics, particularly in examining what makes a voice in writing and how to make artificial intelligence (AI) sound more native speaker, natural, and human.

1.8 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions are examined in this dissertation:

1. What adjective intensifiers are frequently used in multilingual university student academic writing in the ICLE corpus of written learner English?

2. What are the readers' perceptions of social meaning and the writer's identity based on their usage of adjective intensifiers in their writing?

3. What adjective intensifiers do writing tutors consider appropriate for academic writing and what kinds of feedback might writing tutors give about this?

1.9 OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

This paper is organized into nine chapters. Chapter 2 is a literature review on identity in variationist sociolinguistic research. Chapter 3 is a literature review on variationist sociolinguistic research on writing. Chapter 4 is a literature review on adjective intensifiers in variationist sociolinguistic research. Chapter 5 is the methodology used for this research. Chapter 6 is an examination of the corpus results on adjective intensifiers and how the research survey items were chosen. Chapter 7 presents the pilot survey and interview results. Chapter 8 is the discussion of how the results contribute to research. Finally, Chapter 9 is the conclusion including limitations of this study and future implications for research on adjective intensifiers in writing.

CHAPTER 2

IDENTITY IN VARIATIONIST SOCIOLINGUISTICS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Variationist sociolinguistics focuses on language variation and change and investigates how language-internal and -external factors affect the use of variable linguistic features. This variation is systematic and structured such that patterns can be found which determine how these variations can be acquired and used (Weinreich et al., 1968). In this dissertation, I examine how an author's choice of variants of adjective intensifiers can portray an identity to the reader. For example, an author who writes *extremely good* might be perceived as having a different identity from an author who writes *totally good*. These sorts of lexical choices can be used as a rhetorical tool to portray the identity of an author or character in a written text.

Identity has been an important element in the analysis of patterns of language variation and change since the founding of variationist sociolinguistics as a discipline in the early 1960s when Labov (1963) first used the word *identity* to refer to refer to how variation in the pronunciation of a diphthong could indicate a local identity. In more recent studies, identity is seen as a performance involving the speaker's agency to select from a repertoire of variants (Gumperz, 1965; Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010; Canagarajah, 2011; Bush, 2012; Wei & García, 2022).). In this dissertation, identity is defined as the image of a writer or speaker projected to their audience through the selection of linguistic variants that have social meaning.

The ways in which identity plays a role in variationist sociolinguistics has evolved over time. Research in variationist sociolinguistics can be broken down into three overlapping

"waves" of analytical practice, proposed by Eckert (2012), with each wave assuming a different approach to identity. In this chapter, I will discuss how each wave of variationist sociolinguistic research exemplifies a different concept of identity and how this concept of identity has evolved over time. Next, I will go over some important concepts related to identity in variationist sociolinguistic theory, applied linguistics, cognitive sociolinguistics, and computational sociolinguistics. Finally, I present some gaps in the literature and how this research might address some of those gaps.

2.2 FIRST WAVE

In the first wave of variationist sociolinguistic research, individuals are seen as static members of speech communities that are based on class membership, gender, age, and ethnicity (Wolfram, 1969; Trudgill, 1974; Macauley, 1977; Horvath, 1985; Thibault & Sankoff, 1993; Tagliamonte, 1999). Gumperz (1972) defined a speech community as a group of speakers who share rules and norms for the use of a language. Individuals' identities are defined by their use of linguistic variants that identify them as members of a speech community. Labov's (1966) publication on The Social Stratification of English in New York City includes what is perhaps the most well-known first wave research study, The Social Stratification of (r) in New York City Department Stores. This study was based on the idea that the realization of /r/ in a syllable coda in New York English was indicative of membership in a higher socioeconomic class while the omission of /r/ in a syllable coda was indicative of membership in a lower socioeconomic class. In this study, he used rapid and anonymous surveys to elicit words with rhotic codas from salespeople in department stores that were ranked in three levels of economic status and found that the salespeople in the highest-ranking store had the highest value of (r) while the salespeople in the lowest ranking store had the lowest value of (r). This study showed that human language

behavior is dictated by identification with a social environment that can be determined by social factors. If people want to identify with a particular social environment, they have to speak in a way that reflects that they identify with that social environment.

Identity in first wave studies places individuals as being static members of a speech community. These macro-sociological labels are static reflections of language use based on the stable membership of individuals in specific social categories (Drummond & Schleef, 2016). This view places individuals passively into a social structure where their language use is determined by social class membership, gender, age, and ethnicity. Individuals are seen as acquiring a single vernacular that serves as their unaffected or default way of speaking (Labov, 1972b). For example, while multiple first wave studies have shown that women's speech is consistently more standard than men's (Wolfram, 1969; Trudgill, 1974; Macaulay, 1977), we cannot determine the motivations behind why women speak this way. While this reduces the linguistic agency of an individual to a set of static, unchanging variables based on social factors, it is also the realization through empirical evidence and statistical analysis that an individual's class membership, gender, age, and ethnicity consciously or unconsciously affects the way they use language.

Overall, first wave studies were focused on discovering how social factors like class membership, gender, age, and ethnicity affect linguistic behavior, which was a breakthrough at the time. Individuals were seen as static members of a speech community, and their linguistic behaviors were seen as being indicators of being members of that group. In the second wave, researchers began ethnographic investigations of linguistic variants that indicate individuals' local and community identities, adding another dimension to individuals' linguistic expression of identity.

2.3 SECOND WAVE

Whereas first wave studies examine vernacular features that indicate identification with a speech community based on socially stratified factors, the second wave of variationist sociolinguistics shows a shift towards ethnographic methods that view the use of vernacular features as an expression of identity based on local, regional, or shared interests. Second wave research was also influenced by Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1978) from social psychology, which sees any social group as having social identity. While second wave studies still see individuals as having identity based on group membership, the groups they belong to are no longer limited to are not limited to class membership, gender, age, and ethnicity. The addition of identity based on membership in local, regional, or shared interest groups brings a new dimension to the concept of identity in the second wave.

A classic second wave study is Labov's (1963) ethnographic study on Martha's Vineyard. In this study, he looked at the variability in the pronunciation of the diphthongs /ay/ and /aw/. The centralization of the diphthongs /ay/ and /aw/ expresses the social meaning of being a native islander who belongs to the local community on Martha's Vineyard. This is presented in contrast to the non-centralized pronunciations of the same diphthongs by the thousands of tourists who flood the island each summer. In this study, Labov (1963) uses the word *identity* to refer to identifying as an islander to claim authenticity as a native of Martha's Vineyard. Identity is seen as belonging to the speech community of native islanders on Martha's Vineyard.

Second wave variationist sociolinguistic studies attribute social agency to the choice of use of vernacular or standard features where the use of the vernacular is a marker of local or class identity. Milroy (1980) analyzed the social networks in Belfast and found that the denser multiplex social networks of the working class had a strong power on enforcing the local norm.

Cheshire (1982) examined working class adolescents in Reading who had speech variables that correlated with anti-mainstream "vernacular culture". Additionally, Rickford's (1986) work in Guyana showed that, even when a vernacular is stigmatized universally, it can still have positive social value at the local level.

2.3.1 COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

In addition to focusing on speech communities based on local identity, second wave studies also focused on the linguistic relationship between people based on shared interest, passion, or concern. Lave and Wenger (1991) investigated several speech communities that were based on more than just local identity and defined them as communities of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) studied the apprenticeship of Yucatec midwives, Vai and Gola tailors, naval quartermasters, meat cutters, and nondrinking alcoholics as examples of communities of practice, social networks where people learn through participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The concept of community of practice was adopted and further developed to address sociolinguistic questions by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992). They were dissatisfied with Gumperz's (1972) definition of a speech community as a group of speakers who share rules and norms for the use of a language because this definition did not address social relations and difference in usage between members of a community. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) redefined community of practice as "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations - in short, practices - emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor" (p. 464). This concept of community of practice allows for multiple individual identities as individuals can simultaneously be members of multiple communities of practice. Instead of statically belonging to one speech community, an individual's linguistic identity can be made up of multiple

communities of practice including family, work, school, sports, hobbies, etc. in which an individual can function socially and linguistically.

2.3.2 INDEXICALITY

In sociolinguistic terms, indexicality describes how social meaning and variable features are linked (Ochs, 1992; Silverstein, 2003). Indexicality is an analytical tool that can be used by researchers to explain the relationship between variable features and their social meaning. Direct indexical links are observed between language variants and stances or social acts and activities (Ochs, 1992) and an ideological extension of this effect to an identity category constitutes indirect indexicality. For example, a centralized pronunciation of the /ai/ diphthong in Martha's Vineyard would index an identity of being native to the island.

Indexicality is both culturally bound and culturally specific as both speaker and audience must share the belief system to recognize that a certain variation is significant and what it indexes. Podesva's (2007, 2011) research explored how certain intonation patterns come to be associated with indexing gay male identity. Agha's (2005) notion of enregisterment explains that a particular linguistic variable is considered enregistered once it becomes indexical with a particular style or population of language users. Eckert (2012) argues that indexical order progresses in multiple directions simultaneously, and these form an indexical field of ideologically linked meanings. For example, there are many linguistic features involved in making someone sound Southern in American English. People can sound Southern by using several features that have been enregistered as indexing Southern-ness in American culture. These features also index a whole field of ideas about what it means to be Southern in American culture; some are positive while some are discriminatory. In short, indexicality explains how an individual can use a linguistic variable or a group of them to create an identity.

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Through the lenses of communities of practice and indexicality, researchers can focus on how people use language to construct different identities in different contexts. Eckert's 1989 study (Eckert, 1989, 2000, 2012) on the language of students in a suburban Detroit high schools focused on two distinct groups of students whose identities were based on completely different communities of practice. The "jocks" were from middle class backgrounds who derived their identities and social lives on school and extracurricular activities that would lead to college, and, therefore, frequently engaged in linguistic and even fashion behavior that indexed this identity in their lives. On the other hand, the "burnouts" were from working class backgrounds who based their identities and social lives on the local community and urban area of Detroit. The language and fashion choices of the burnouts also indexed how they viewed their identity.

The second wave of variationist sociolinguistics moved away from seeing individuals as static members of one speech community based on social factors and moved towards investigating how their speech patterns embraced local identities and membership in communities of practice. Individual identities become associated with communities of practice through the variants that they use while speaking. This leads to the idea that linguistic forms and social meanings are semiotically linked through indexicality (Ochs, 1992). Individuals were no longer seen as limited to one speech community that defines how they speak all the time. Individuals could index their involvement in more than one community of practice. This opened the doors to the third wave in variationist sociolinguistic research where individuals can linguistically index membership in different groups and communities of practice in different social contexts.

2.4 THIRD WAVE

In the third wave of variationist sociolinguistics, the attention shifts to how a speaker uses variation to index different social meanings to create and perform an identity. Researchers investigate the social meaning of variation instead of looking for correlations between linguistic patterns and demographic characteristics of speakers. Social meaning is defined by Moore and Podesva (2009) as "the stances and personal characteristics indexed through the deployment of linguistic forms in interaction" (p. 448). In this sense, every utterance is a declaration of identity in relation to the social context in which it is uttered where speakers place themselves in the social landscape and constituting them through stylistic practice (Bukholtz, 2010; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Eckert, 2012; Irvine, 2001). Identities are not just reflected but are constituted through stylistic practice (Eckert, 2012). This puts the focus on the social meanings of variable features (Agha, 2005; Eckert, 2008; Kiesling, 2009; Kiesling, 2013; Podesva, 2007; Podesva, 2011).

Identity, thus, is redefined in third wave variationist sociolinguistics and is viewed as dynamic and changeable. In each social interaction, and even each utterance, identity is constructed and reconstructed. Language and identity cannot be separated or correlated as they are co-constitutive (Drummond & Schleef, 2016). According to Bucholtz and Hall (2010) agency continues to matter, and identity emerges in a variety of ways. First, identity emerges through discourse as speakers use their agency to select variants with different social meanings. It also includes positioning in both macro-sociological categories and local interactional positionings. It is further constituted through a variety of indexical processes that will be described in detail below. In this new viewpoint, identity is constructed by speakers inter-subjectively while communicating and shifts continually within interactions and across contexts.

Identities are constituted through a variety of social practices that include language choices. In addition to employing a variety of linguistic features, Eckert (2012) points out that the resources employed by jock and burnout teenagers when constructing identity include affectation, clothing style and color, and makeup style and color. A linguistic variable is one of many choices that a person makes when styling identity. The meaning of a linguistic variable can only be understood by investigating how it is used in identity construction, and, therefore, a linguistic variable does not always have the same meaning (Drummond & Schleef, 2016).

2.5 CORE CONCEPTS RELATED TO IDENTITY

2.5.1 STYLE AND STANCE

Stance is defined by Bucholtz and Hall (2010) as orientations in discourse that are evaluative, affective, and epistemic while style is related to the use of phonological, syntactic, or lexical features below the discourse level (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010). In other words, stance is choosing a position on an issue while style is based on the linguistic variation that a speaker employs that can index different identities.

Style was introduced as distinction by Bourdieu (1984), and Irvine (2001) went on to focus on linguistic distinction. Rampton (2006) studied the relationality of style and how contrast plays a central role in style. Style draws on many semiotic resources like language, fashion, music, and posture to make groups more distinct by contrasting them against other groups styles. This is evident in Eckert's (2000) Detroit study where jocks and burnouts style themselves as opposites in every way, in Mendoza-Denton's (2008) study on Latina gang members who use eye liner to display their level of propensity for physical violence, and Eckert's (2010) Vowels and Nail Polish where she looks at how style emerges in elementary school girls' language and fashion choices. Seeing style as a cluster of socially meaningful features within and across

linguistic levels and modalities (Campbell-Kibler et al., 2006) is similar to seeing identity as a cluster of features in an individual.

2.5.2 AUDIENCE

Bell's (1984) Audience Design introduces the idea that speakers design their identities in different ways primarily for and in response to their audience. In this way the speaker or writer is understood to be styling a different identity through language to fit the perceived audience. Another parallel approach is accommodation theory developed by Giles and Powesland in 1975, also known as Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT) or Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). Key concepts in accommodation are convergence, where the speaker changes style to be more similar to an audience, and divergence, where the speaker differentiates themselves from others. Both these models illustrate how a speaker changes their style to adjust to their audience. In this way, a speaker or writer styles an identity that fits the social relationship they have with their audience. Writing to an audience is central to rhetoric and composition studies where first year university students are all taught to write to an audience and adjust their rhetorical tools to fit the audience.

2.5.3 PERFORMANCE

Referee Design (Bell, 1984, 2001) takes Audience Design from the responsive dimension of style to the initiative dimension of style where the style shift itself initiates the change. Through Referee Design, speakers utilize the linguistic features of a group to express affiliation with particular groups or identities. Stylization in Referee Design involves performing sociolinguistic identities in everyday speech. Podesva's 2007 and 2011 research on the speech patterns of gay men examined variation in segmental phonology, voice and vowel quality, intonation, and discourse situations to shed light on how gay young professionals perform their

identities, examining those situations in which they perform a gay identity and those in which they do not.

2.5.4 LINGUISTIC REPERTOIRE

The concept of linguistic repertoire originated with Gumperz (1965). This is the concept that a speaker has a range of linguistic resources on hand that can be deployed depending on the discourse context. These linguistic resources can derive from different languages or different varieties of the same language. Busch (2012) applies the idea of linguistic repertoire to ethnically diverse multilingual urban situations like New York City where multilingual speakers of various languages can draw from a large range of linguistic resources to style their identities and make stances. This is also known as translanguaging and metrolingualism in the applied linguistics context (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010; Canagarajah, 2011; Wei & García, 2022). In this way, speakers can linguistically style their identities as ethnically diverse, multilingual, cosmopolitan urbanites.

2.5.5 COGNITIVE SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Current research in cognitive linguistics corroborates with what we know about linguistic identity construction from the research on indexicality, style, audience, performance, and linguistic repertoire. Croft (2009) describes four principles in cognitive linguistics which include the ideas that everything a person knows about a word or construction plays a part in its meaning, even grammatical constructions themselves have meanings, and linguistic meaning includes a perspective on some state of affairs (p. 2). People draw on their encyclopedic language knowledge to choose a form that portrays the perspective they want to project to others, the choice of word forms and the grammatical forms themselves have social meaning, and

people can use those social meanings to convey their perspectives. This means that every variant is intentionally chosen by the speaker to project an intended social meaning.

Backus and Spotti (2012) argue that linguistic usage is subject to the same normative pressures and regulations as discourse patterns where common practice is normalized internally while external norms become ideologies about how something should be done. Speakers use their own agency to decide whether to follow the norms or violate them to create social meaning. In this way, language users are manipulating, consciously or unconsciously, their use of the language itself to create social meaning and create an impression on their audience about their identity.

In one of the few research studies focusing on perception, Labov et al. (2011) examined the existence of a *sociolinguistic monitor,* a hypothesized cognitive mechanism that governs frequency-linked perceptual awareness, through research on the linguistic variable [ING] and its variant /ɪn/. Using a news broadcast containing both the standard and non-standard variants and examining the perceptions of listeners, they found that the Southern participants in Columbia, South Carolina were more receptive to the /ɪn/ variant in a news broadcast than the Northern participants in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania or Durham, New Hampshire.

Levon and Buchstaller (2015) investigated the cognitive sociolinguistic monitor further with research involving by including syntactic variables. They examined subject-verb agreement, known as the Northern subject rule (NSR) among British authors, using recordings of newscasts to examine the perceptions of listeners. Their findings demonstrate that the sociolinguistic monitor model of sociolinguistic cognition should include patterns of syntactic variation in addition to phonetic variation.

2.5.6 COMPUTATIONAL SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Some of the most recent research related to identity and agency has, interestingly, been coming out of the relatively new field of computational sociolinguistics. Agency involves the selection of variants from a choice of lexical elements, phonological variants, semantic alternatives, and grammatical patterns in a socially meaningful way. Interest in natural language processing (NLP) for making computer AI sound more human has been examining how agency is involved in the choice of variants, especially how "agency also enables creative violations of conventional language patterns" (Nguyễn et al., 2016) to create social meaning. This research into making computer generated AI sound more human may lead to further insight into how we make ourselves sound more human and portray our human identity.

2.6 GAPS IN THE RESEARCH

Traditionally, research in variationist sociolinguistics has been purely quantitative. Variationist sociolinguistic research on identity should go beyond quantitative research and incorporate a qualitative element. Multimodal research that incorporates qualitative research with the traditional quantitative research could explore a much richer and more nuanced understanding of agency and the motivations behind why a person chooses a particular variant. Research design could include the combination of language production and follow up interviews where researchers could investigate the motivations behind why a particular variation was chosen.

Additionally, the sociolinguistic research and the theories presented in this chapter have focused on spoken language. These ideas should also be applied to written language. Spoken language exists in the moment and, as such, an utterance is a performance that is fleeting and unchangeable. Written language, on the other hand, allows writers more time to process and

think about the words and syntactic constructions that they will employ. Therefore, research into agency and the motivations behind why a variant is chosen would benefit from studies involving research on writing. For example, creative writing could be used as a way of simulating conversational contexts that could be followed up with interviews designed to ascertain why a particular variant was chosen by the writer.

Furthermore, production has been the focus of most of the research on identity with much less research focusing on perception of linguistic performances. If speakers and writers are hoping to perform identities through their language, we have to measure how successful they are. Research methodologies that combine production and perception would be very beneficial for getting directly at the relationship between the motivations behind why a specific variant was chosen and how that that variant was perceived by the audience.

Finally, research on perception would also benefit from more research that examines writing. This research would benefit variationist sociolinguistics through exploring how variants affect audience perception of the identity of the writer. This could also have an impact on writing related fields like rhetoric and composition when examining the usage of variants as a rhetorical device and second language acquisition when examining the writing of language learners.

This research addresses some of these gaps. Since it focuses on the readers' perceptions of the author's identity based on their usage of adjective intensifiers in writing, it focuses on both the performance of identity in writing and an audience's perception of that identity. As a variationist sociolinguistic study that focuses on reader perceptions involving a specific linguistic variable, the findings will hopefully shed some light on the ways that readers perceive the identities of writers based on their usage of adjective intensifiers.

CHAPTER 3

SOCIOLINGUISTIC RESEARCH ON WRITING

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter contains a literature review of variationist sociolinguistic research using written language as the medium of inquiry. It begins with a brief explanation of why writing has been largely ignored in variationist sociolinguistic research, with the exception of historical sociolinguistics where it is used by necessity. This is followed by a literature review on several contemporary areas of research that have used written language as a variationist sociolinguistic object. Finally, I will discuss some possible future directions where writing should be used as a variationist sociolinguistic object of research.

Most sociolinguistic research on variation has focused on spoken and signed language while writing has been largely ignored as an object in sociolinguistic research. This is due to a general assumption that speech should be the main concern of sociolinguists because writing is merely a recorded derivative of real spoken language (Basso, 1974; Hymes, 1996). The idea that writing is just a recording of spoken language goes back at least to the early 20th Century. In his 1933 book, *Language*, Bloomfield writes that "writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks" (p. 21). Lillis and McKinney (2013) argue that this is because writing has been generally viewed as too heavily influenced by prescriptivist and standard language perspectives which has caused written language to be seen as inauthentic language usage that is unfit for research on linguistic variation.

Historical sociolinguistics is the one area in linguistics that has been dependent on written language for the study of historical language variation. This is because the only existing records of language use from before the invention of sound recording are written records. The corpora of these written records have been used in variationist sociolinguistics to analyze the variation of adjective intensifiers (Mustanoja, 1960). However, due to the fact that we are unable to employ standard methodologies used in variationist sociolinguistic research such as sociolinguistic interviews, voice recordings of data, and large and diverse sampling, the results of research relying on surviving texts will always be suspect due to lack of data and access to native speakers in real-world situations. This compounded with the existing attitudes of written language not being authentic language mentioned in the preceding paragraph have conspired to make some researchers question the validity of historical sociolinguistics.

3.2 CONTEMPORARY VARIATIONIST RESEARCH ON WRITING

Research on writing in sociolinguistics outside of historical sociolinguistics can be grouped into three categories: ethnography and linguistic landscapes, literacy education, and digital communication (Blommaert, 2013; Lillis & McKinney, 2013). These categories are not mutually exclusive as there are many that are two or more of these categories combined. There has been a shift from ethnography to identity construction that parallels the shift from second wave to third wave variationist sociolinguistic research (see Chapter 2). Sociolinguistic research studies focusing on writing started with ethnographic studies on everyday literacy practices and educational literacy practices in geographically and racially defined linguistic communities and have progressed towards addressing topics such as portrayal of identities on social media platforms, language mobility, and diversity in spaciotemporal conjunction. Areas of particular

interest for this dissertation are research studies that cover multilingual language learners, university level writing, and online corpora.

3.2.1 ETHNOGRAPHY

The earliest contemporary usage of writing as an object of variationist sociolinguistic inquiry goes back to the ethnographic approach employed in the second wave of variationist sociolinguistic research. It has its roots in Gumperz and Hymes (1972) 'the ethnography of communication' and led to the development of New Literacy Studies (NLS) which has an ethnographic focus on everyday literacy practices in specific communities and domains of practice (Collins & Blot, 2003; Lillis & McKinney, 2013). These studies employed ethnographic methods to examine how writing played a role in the everyday lives of members of communities of practice from around the globe (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Research then shifted to literacy within specific domains of practice (Lea & Street, 1998; Kalman, 1999; Jones, 2000; Wilson, 2000, 2003; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Denis & Pontille, 2009; Kell, 2010; Lillis & Curry, 2010; Mbodj-Pouye, 2010; Papen, 2010; Berkenkotter & Hanganu-Bresch, 2011).

Studies on linguistic landscapes are in the ethnographic tradition. They interpret written road signs, posted notices, and brand logos as communicative objects by considering the social and physical world that surrounds them as an interface between semiotics and the physical world (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Research on linguistic landscapes have come to focus on mobility as opposed to sedentary understandings of language and place (Blommaert & Dong, 2010) and focus on movement, change, and how language and place have become intertwined. Pietikäinen (2014) focused on the temporal and spatial dimensions of the signs in a Sami village and examined them with regard to language change, mobility and multilingualism in public

spaces. Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) examined metrolingualism in Sydney and Tokyo where their urban linguistic landscapes and the languages spoken in them are in constant change as new speakers with new repertoires come into contact as a result of globalization and the increased mobility of people and languages. Stroud and Mpendukana (2009) focused their analysis of the linguistic landscape of South Africa on social transformation, multilingualism, and mobility. Papen's (2012) case study of the linguistic landscape of Prenzlauer Berg, a neighborhood in Berlin, shows that, as the neighborhood has continued to change since reunification, the public space has become an area of contestation between civil society, private businesses, and the state. Based on studies of ceramic street signs in Jerusalem, Malinowski (2020) claims that the field of linguistic landscapes needs to provide a theory of public signage, arguing that this could be derived from the field of semiotics.

3.2.2 LITERACY EDUCATION

The focus on writing as a variationist sociolinguistic object in the field of language and literacy education also began in tandem with the NLS movement in the 1980s further identifying writing as an area of sociolinguistic inquiry (Collins & Blot, 2003; Heath, 1983; Lillis & McKinney, 2013; Street, 1995). Since the beginning of sociolinguistic studies on variation in writing in the educational setting, research has often been focused on how this variability affects educational experience and outcomes. Since literacy and standard language use are the goals of national education systems, studies have focused on why certain groups are not as successful as other groups in language and literacy practices (Hymes,1971; Labov, 1972; Michaels, 1981; Heath, 1983).

Research has been focused on the differences between language and literacy practices in the home or community and the language and literacy practices in education which cause

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students from marginalized and underrepresented communities to perform lower than they should in academics. Hymes (1971) argued that the notions of competence and performance in language acquisition do not provide a satisfactory basis for approaching problems where the social-cultural factors are salient. Labov (1972) argued that the language, culture, social organization, and political situation of Black youth in the inner cities of the United States left them at a disadvantage for learning how to write in standard English. Michaels (1981) integrated ethnographic observation and discourse analysis and found that elementary school children whose literacy style matched the teachers were considered more successful and literate than the children whose literacy style was at variance with the teacher's expectations. Heath (1983) conducted an ethnographic study comparing the cultures and literacy of two neighboring White and Black communities in the rural South and found that the literacy cultures in the two communities were different in ways that favored the White community in the educational setting. Gregory and Williams (2003) conducted ethnographies of the literacy skills of school children in the East End in London and found that they had a rich literacy tradition at home that contrasted with their academic performance in school. Cook-Gumperz (2006) portrayed literacy as a socially constructed skill whereby children must acquire discourse strategies that are socially approved within a community. Ronkin and Karn's 1999 article looked at mock Ebonics as portrayed in writing on the internet following the December 18, 1996, resolution of the Board of Education of the Oakland, California School District on improving the English-language skills of African American students. They found that the creators of mock Ebonics on the internet employed a system of writing that used phonetic, grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic strategies to parody Ebonics as an inferior language and shift the blame for the poor academic

performance of African Americans from viewing these issues as a product of systemic racism to attributing them to the learners and their communities.

In the area of research which examines the writing of multilingual learners, there was a shift from seeing differences in culture and literacy as causing a deficit for students from multilingual communities towards embracing the richness of literacy backgrounds, recognizing the growing diversity of backgrounds students brought to their education. Gutierrez et al. (1999) compiled an ethnography of the linguistic hybridity in a dual immersion Spanish and English language elementary classroom in California through discourse analysis and found students to possess a variety of language and cultural backgrounds that they brought to the classroom. In higher education, research has acknowledged that the educational system and the universities themselves in English speaking countries are limiting multilingual university students from acquiring the literacy skills they need to succeed as writers at the university level. Lillis (2001) conducted on-on-one interviews with university students in the United Kingdom about their writing and found that the literacy needs of the increasingly diverse university student body in the UK were not being met because institutional practices were limiting their participation. She, however, did not feel that the United Kingdom should adopt writing center tutoring like has been done in the United States. Ivanič et al. (2009) examined writing in university education and found that multilingual university students bring funds of knowledge from diverse and vibrant cultural roots and that these have been misguidedly disqualified by the education system. They suggested that university instruction must be modified to enable students to draw upon their full potential. Richardson (2003) provides a first-hand account of the language and literacy issues faced by African-American student writers in mainstream American higher education and offers

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African American centered theories and pedagogical methods of rhetoric and composition for addressing these problems.

3.2.3 DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Over the last 20 years, most of the variationist sociolinguistic studies that use writing as a sociolinguistic object have been examining written communications in digital technologies. Online communication is an area of particular interest for sociolinguistic research on writing since it is dominated by written communication, among other semiotic modalities (e.g., emoji and memes). In the introduction to the special issue in the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* in 2006 on computer-mediated communication (CMC), Androutsoplous (2006) describes CMC as a socially situated computer-mediated discourse grounded in the notion of online community that is fit for sociolinguistic study because sociolinguistics can contribute to CMC by demonstrating the role of language use and linguistic variability in the construction of interpersonal relationships and social identities on the internet.

The written communication in social media platforms and in chat rooms has been treated as equivalent to spoken verbal communication (Androutsoplous, 2006). In fact, Schlobinski (2005) states that the synchronous interactivity and interaction of online written chat and text communication parallels face-to-face communication and that, for this very reason, many language prescriptivists are claiming that CMC is leading to the degradation of written language. The fact that language prescriptivists are complaining about it makes it clear that CMC forms of written language do not belong to traditional concepts of what written language is or how it behaves. CMC written language has more similarities with face-to-face informal spoken conversation than formal academic writing. Therefore, even though chat communication is

written text, at least in form, it is conceptually characterized as oral (Vandekerckhove & Nobels, 2010).

In the early years of CMC, studies predominantly focused on language use in chat and discussion sites. Richardson (2001) examined text-based news group communications about the Mad Cow Disease (BSE) crisis of 1996 and engage in the interpersonal social construction of risk. Paolillo (2001) examined an Internet Relay Chat channel with respect to Milroy and Milroy's (1992) hypothesis that standard variants tend to be associated with weak social network ties while vernacular variants are associated with strong network ties; however, variants associated with social position interfered with a direct correlation to tie strength. Some of these studies focused on regional variation in language use in online chats. Siebenhaar (2006) examined code switching between regional and standard German variants in Swiss Internet Relay Chat (IRC) rooms and found that as much as 90 percent of the written discussions were in the regional Swiss variety. Vandekerckhove and Nobels (2010) examined the written chat language of Flemish teenagers using a variationist approach and found that they do not focus on faithful reproduction of local language varieties but instead blend several varieties of Dutch creating an eclectic mixture.

There have been some analytic studies on code-switching and multilingual discourse in online chat and newsgroups serving diaspora and global communities. Androutsopolous (2006b) examined the language choices made by users of several diaspora websites in Germany with the Turkish German website vaybe.de having the most registered users. Sergeant et al. (2012) looked at Thai to English code-switching on a Thai social networking site where Thais would switch to writing in English when they wanted to avoid the complexities of choosing appropriate forms of address in Thai language with people they did not know outside of a virtual online context.

Androutsopolous and Lexander (2021) collected ethnographic data from Senegalese families living in Norway and explored how family members use digital media to engage with diaspora concerns and projects and how this engagement shapes their multilingual practices online. In the last fifteen years, as the focus has shifted from second wave ethnographic research to third wave identity research, there has also been increasingly more research produced about how people portray their identities on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter/X. Some of these studies have focused on university students portraying their identities as global citizens. Sharma (2012) examined how three economically and educationally privileged undergraduate students in Nepal innovatively mixing English and Nepali in order to construct their cosmopolitan, bilingual identities on social media. Shin (2012) studied *yuhakseng,* Korean international students in Toronto and how they constructed new identities as being simultaneously Korean, global, wealthy, modern, and cosmopolitan. Dovchin (2015) studied the online mixed language practices of university students in contemporary post-socialist Mongolia and how they construct global identities on Facebook.

The research on linguistic landscapes has also been applied to digital communication and social media. Shohamy (2018) proposed that further exploration of digital linguistic landscapes should focus on the role of technology in shaping public language use and incorporating more nuanced understandings of power dynamics within linguistic landscapes. Since then, research in linguistic landscapes has already moved into the digital realm looking at the linguistic landscapes of geographical areas as presented on social media. Pienimäki et al. (2024) looked at the linguistic diversity in the linguistic landscapes of three communities in Helsinki, Finland on social media, exploring their spaciotemporal and effective qualities through references to other spaces and times and the distinct affective atmosphere that is created in each.

In more recent years, some studies have used social media platforms as corpora. Ilbury (2022) used a corpus of Instagram memes to examine the prevalence of non-standard spellings of words, discourse features, and characterological tropes as indexical representations of a particular type of classed, gendered, and ethnic identity. Lívio and Howe (2024) used tweets on the social media platform Twitter/X as a corpus to examine the social meaning of the Portuguese language intensifier *bué*.

There are numerous online corpora of written language that have been used in variationist sociolinguistic analysis. Wagner (2017) used the Corpus of Global Web-Based (GloWbE) which is based on websites and blogs from 20 different English-speaking countries (Davies, 2013). This study makes use of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), an online corpus of written language that has been compiled from university student essays in English from around the world. It is available online for researchers to access this written data from anywhere in the world with an internet connection. The ICLE corpus will be discussed in detail in the corpus Results chapter (See Chapter 6).

3.3 FUTURE APPLICATIONS

Instead of gaps in this research, I see future potential. While written language in chat rooms and on social media platforms has been accepted as an object of variationist sociolinguistic study because it resembles spoken communication (Schlobinski, 2005; Androutsoplous, 2006; Vandekerckhove & Nobels, 2010), it would be an advantage to apply variationist sociolinguistic research to other forms of writing as well.

In addition to the differences between the modality of spoken versus written, the genre of the text also plays a role in how the language should be constructed. The case of academic writing is of particular interest to this researcher and this research project. Variationist

sociolinguistic analysis of the variation in academic writing can contribute to the fields of language education and rhetoric and composition. Variationist methodologies can be used to describe academic writing using corpora to discover what syntactic and lexical choices come together to make a text sound academic. This can be used to inform educational practices in English language classrooms and rhetoric and composition classrooms to replace the prescriptive rules that are traditionally taught in writing classes.

Variationist methodologies can also be applied to examine how authors create a voice. For example, a variationist study of Hemingway's novels and short stories could shed light on the syntactic structures and lexical choices he employed to create his voice as a writer. After all, an author's voice is the way a writer employs style to perform an identity in writing.

CHAPTER 4

ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIER VARIATION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is a literature review that examines the work on adjective intensifiers in

variationist sociolinguistics. It has been divided into two sections. The first section in this chapter

reviews variationist sociolinguistic research on adjective intensifiers starting with the early

literature and continuing up until the present. The second section focuses on the social meaning

that is associated with the usage adjective intensifiers. Apart from the research in historical

sociolinguistics, which by necessity uses written language as the source for language usage, most

of the contemporary research focuses on spoken language. Since this dissertation is focusing on

adjective intensifier usage in academic writing, the research involving written language or

insights into the differences between spoken and written language receives special attention.

4.2 ADJECTIVE INTENSIFICATION

Adjective intensifiers, referred to here in this dissertation as intensifiers, are realized

lexically in English as adverbs that boost or maximize the meaning of an adjective (Stoffel,

1901; Mustanoja, 1960; Bolinger, 1972; Quirk et al., 1985; Peters, 1994; Ito & Tagliamonte,

2003). The intensifiers in the English language exhibit a great deal of variation and have

exhibited variation since the earliest records of written English (Stoffel, 1901; Mustanoja, 1960;

Bolinger, 1972; Quirk et al., 1985; Peters, 1994; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003). The usage of

intensifiers has gained the interest of variationist sociolinguists due to the amount of variation

resulting from a multitude of recycled and novel forms to select from (Stoffel, 1901; Mustanoja,

1960; Bolinger, 1972; Peters, 1994; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008). The intensifiers *very* and *really* have been in usage for hundreds of years (Mustanoja, 1960) while other forms, like *totally* and *so*, have been adopted as intensifiers relatively recently (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005). Intensifiers carry social meaning (Beltrama & Staum Casasanto, 2017) that can be perceived by the listener (Campbell-Kibler, 2007, 2009) or reader to construct the identity of the writer. The development of novel forms as intensifiers, such as *so*, has been attributed to women and young people and these novel forms are often associated with femininity and youth (Stoffel, 1901; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008).

The terminology used to refer to intensifiers has shifted over the decades. Early work on intensification adverbs in English has noted that there are two types of intensifying adverbs used: *amplifiers* and *down-toners* (Stoffel, 1901; Mustanoja, 1960; Quirk et al., 1985). Bolinger (1972) referred to both types as *degree words* and used the word *intensifier* for "any device that scales a quantity, whether up or down or somewhere between the two" (p. 17). The amplifier type is more frequent (Mustanoja, 1960) and shows more variation (Stoffel, 1901; Quirk et al., 1985). Stoffel called them *intensives* (1901), though they have also been referred to as *amplifiers*, *maximisers*, and *boosters* (Peters, 1994; Quirk et al., 1985, Biber et al., 1999). Boosters indicate a higher point on a scale of degree while maximizers indicate the extreme upper point of that scale (Quirk et al., 1985). Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) called the amplifier type *intensifiers*, a term that has since been used consistently in variationist sociolinguistic research.

4.3 EARLY SOCIOLINGUISTIC RESEARCH ON ADJECTIVE INTENSIFICATION

Early work on adjective intensification has included historical sociolinguistic analysis of older written texts (Stoffel, 1901; Mustanoja, 1960) as well as social commentary on its

contemporaneous usages (Stoffel, 1901; Fries, 1940). Research on the variation of intensifier

usage goes back to the work of Cornelis Stoffel (1901) who wrote a book about English language

adverbs that act as what he refers to as intensives and down-toners. This work examines the use

of what he refers to as *intensives* (intensifiers) in written English language from the time of

Chaucer to the time of publication. Many of the themes found in contemporary research on

intensification are found in this seminal work: systematic adoption of novel forms,

delexicalization and grammaticalization, varying degrees of intensification, women leading

change, and the connection of social meaning of some forms to feminine, youthful, and even

vulgar identities.

This variation includes the adoption of new forms as intensifiers that replace older ones.

For example, Stoffel writes that in the 14th century Chaucer used the intensifier *ful* most

frequently which was then replaced by *very* in the 15th century. Older forms are replaced by

newer forms that have a stronger meaning and are more fashionable. Lord Chesterfield

mentioned the intensifier *vastly* as being the most fashionable intensifier among country women

in 1754 which had been replaced by *awfully* in Stoffel's time (Stoffel, 1901, pp. 119-121).

In order to explain why novel forms are constantly being adopted as intensifiers to

replace older ones, Stoffel (1901) mentions that as adverbs are brought into usage as intensifiers,

they change from their "etymological" (p. 2) meaning to a reduced degree of meaning as they

become commonly used as adverbial intensifiers. He describes this as a constant process where

"new words are in constant requisition, because the old ones are felt to be inadequate" (p. 2).

New words are being brought in to replace the older words which have lost their strength. This is

the beginning of the concept of grammaticalization where a word that has been used as an

intensifier for too long becomes "a purely grammatical function" (p. 32). As an example of this

process, Stoffel writes that the intensifier *very* originally meant "completely, absolutely, quite" (p. 33) when it was first used as an intensifier, "but it very soon came to be used in the weakened sense of 'to a high degree'" (p. 33).

Similarly, Stoffel (1901) writes that the intensifier *quite* had a strong form meaning "completely" (p.40) when it was first introduced in the time of Shakespeare, and he notes that *quite* took on a more weakened sense of intensification during the course of the 18th century. However, in the case of *quite*, Stoffel notes that the strong and the weak versions coexist contemporaneously. Stoffel gives the example of "the ink is *quite* dry" (p. 42) as an example of the strong version meaning "completely" (p. 42) and "You are *quite* wet, I declare: I didn't even know it was raining" (p. 42) as an example of the weak version meaning *"noticeably"* (p. 43). He attributes the weaker meaning to a colloquial and American influence that crept up in the 19th century.

Stoffel (1901) also mentions the adverb *so* as a type of degree intensifier. He provides examples of *so* used before an adjective to strengthen it, but only in the context of being paired with a correlative word in a subordinate clause. For example, *so* is used with *that* in the sentence "He was *so* poor *that* he hardly knew how to keep body and soul together" (p. 73). *So* is also paired with *as* in the sentence "*so* full of temptation *as* this" (p. 74). However, this usage of *so* is not a direct intensifier of the adjective since the degree of intensification is a result of what occurs after the "corellative" word *that* or *as*. In the first example above, the degree to which he is *poor* is determined by what is in the *that* clause, and, in the second example, the degree to which something is *full* is determined by *this*.

The usage of *so* as an intensifier used without *that* or *as* is attested by Stoffel (1901) as an innovation that was brought about by women towards the end of the 1800s. He writes that this

new usage of *so* has been used by "ladies … given to hyperbolical forms of expression" (p. 101) as a strong intensifier to mean "inexpressibly" (p. 101). He provides an example of this usage from 1896, "He is *so* charming!" (p. 101) and states that it is "a purely feminine expression" (p. 101). He provides a list of other examples of "strongly intensive *so* [that] are highly characteristic of ladies' usage: 'Thank you *so* much!'… 'That's *so* like you!'…'The bonnet is *so* lovely!'" (p.102). Stoffel consistently credits women with introducing this novel form.

Stoffel's (1901) description of these new forms indicates that they carried more social meaning than just gender. In addition to women leading this new usage, Stoffel also mentions that children were using this novel intensifier, *so*, at this time. Therefore, these new forms could also carry a meaning that the speaker is a younger person.

Stoffel also refers to these new forms as vulgar and slang (p. 120) which indicates that they can be considered to be low register spoken language of the lower socioeconomic class. This idea is repeated by Fries (1940), who creates a list of intensifiers that are considered vulgar during his time. Issues of register and social class become critically important when examining the usage of intensifiers in written academic language. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

4.3.1 GRAMMATICALIZATION, DELEXICALIZATION, AND SEMANTIC BLEACHING

When a content word becomes an intensifier, its meaning changes in a process known as grammaticalization, delexicalization, and semantic bleaching (Luo et al., 2019). Stoffel (1901) stated that "intensives…that etymologically express completeness, have had their meaning weakened to the notion of a high or considerable degree" (p. 2). These words start out with a strong meaning when they are originally employed as intensifiers, but this meaning can eventually weaken over time. A very similar idea was expressed by Ito and Tagliamonte (2003)

over 100 years later, "[i]n the case of intensifiers, a given word starts out as a lexical item with

semantic context; often it is a word that comments on speakers' assessments of truth conditions

or vouches for the sincerity of their words" (p. 261). When a word becomes an intensifier, it goes

through a process in which its original meaning is weakened or bleached. This process of

delexicalization involves the bleaching of content words to a reduced meaning (Sinclair, 1992;

Partington, 1993). For example, the word *very* started out (in various alternative spellings) as an

adjective with the meaning of *true*, *genuine*, or *real* (Stoffel, 1901; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003); the

Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) currently defines the meaning of *very* to be "(used to add

emphasis to an adjective or adverb) to a great degree".

By definition, delexicalization involves the reduction in meaning of content words when

they become grammaticalized as function words (Sinclair, 1992; Partington, 1993). While the

word *very* was formerly mainly used to mean 'true' or 'real', in its current meaning as an

intensifier, that meaning has been mostly lost (Mustanoja, 1960; Partington, 1993). A word can

be delexicalized when used as an intensifier but retain its original meaning in other contexts

(Partington, 1993). A prime example of this is the word *really* that has a meaning similar to *very*

as an intensifier but can still carry the meaning of 'true' or 'real' as a content word.

4.3.2 RAPID CHANGE IN ADJECTIVE INTENSIFICATION

Intensifier usage has long been considered a rapidly changing linguistic variable (Stoffel,

1901; Mustanoja, 1960; Bolinger, 1972; Quirk et al., 1985; Peters, 1994; Ito & Tagliamonte,

2003). This constant change of forms in intensifiers was noted by Stoffel (1901), who

commented that "[t]he process [of acquiring new adverbs as intensifiers] is constantly going on,

so that new words are in constant requisition, because the old ones are felt to be inadequate" (p.

2). Bolinger (1972) likens the use of intensifiers to a battle ground where intensifiers "afford a

picture of fevered invention and competition that would be hard to come by elsewhere, for in their nature they are unsettled" (p. 18). New forms replace the ones that have lost favor, "as each newcomer has appeared on the scene it has elbowed the other aside" (Bolinger, 1972, p. 18). However, some older forms remain in usage over long periods of time. Bolinger adds that "[t]he old favorites do not vanish but retreat to islands bound by restrictions…and the newcomer is never fully successful and extends its territory only so far" (p. 18). In other words, the newer forms that come in and out of fashion do not completely replace the old forms.

Many of these older forms have been used for centuries while some were once quite popular but have since completely disappeared from usage. The most popular intensifier in Old and Early Middle English, *swithe*, had been completely replaced by *well*, *full*, and *right* by the mid-13th century to the mid-14th century in England (Mustanoja, 1960). Meanwhile, *well*, *full*, and *right* are forms that are still used as intensifiers in contemporary English. *Very* came into usage by the 16th century followed by *really* in the 18th century (Mustanoja, 1960). This pattern of some intensifiers being popular but short lived while others stay in use for centuries continues into the modern language.

4.4 SECOND WAVE RESEARCH ON ADJECTIVE INTENSIFICATION

More recent research in intensification in variationist sociolinguistics has concentrated on patterns of variation and change in the intensifier system in speech. Most of these studies can be grouped into second wave variationist sociolinguistic research employing ethnography while some can be grouped as third wave studies that focus on social meaning (Eckert, 2012). Of particular interest for a focus on written language is research on adjective intensification in the written genre of television. While a majority of the research has generally focused on spoken language usage, the language in television series is scripted by writers for fictional characters.

Variationist sociolinguistic research on adjective intensifiers has employed ethnographic methods of collecting empirical data on the usage of intensifier variants within communities generally focusing on usage differences based on social factors like age and binary gender. Vernacular linguistic features are seen as defining local varieties and marking social groups often described at stratified levels (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003). These studies have employed both apparent time (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Mccauley, 2006; Tagliamonte, 2008) and longitudinal (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; D'Arcy, 2015) approaches that focus on changes in intensifier usage over time seeking patterns in the recycling of existing forms and the additions of new forms. There is also a focus on the grammaticalization and delexification processes involved in these changes.

4.4.1 APPARENT TIME

Many studies have been conducted using an apparent time approach to understanding intensifier usage. They look at the usage at one point in time in a community across different age groups and examine how different age groups use intensifiers at that point in time. Looking at stratification in apparent time based on social class and age, Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) examined the shifting norms and practices in the variation of intensifier forms in a community in York, England. Differences in usage across age groups were interpreted as language change and shifting practices within the community, with *very* being used most frequently by older speakers and *really* being the preferred variant for the youngest generation.

One of the limitations of using apparent time is that it does not allow for older generations to also change and follow trends in usage that they see are appropriate for their age. The fundamental assumption of apparent time is that "[t]he speech of each generation is assumed to reflect the language as it existed at the time when that generation learned the language"

(Bailey et al., 1991, p. 242). Instead of believing that people learn to speak one way and stay that way for life, it seems more reasonable to assume that people change the way they speak as they get older. As people get older, their social context changes as they and take on different social roles, develop careers, and become parents and grandparents. The way people speak should reflect these life changes.

Another apparent time study on adjective intensifier usage conducted by Tagliamonte (2008) in Toronto looked at the effect of adjective type and how it intersected with age and binary gender. She examined the intensifiers *very*, *really*, *so* and *pretty* and found that there is a lexical preference by speaker age where *very* is preferred by people over 50 and *really* is preferred by people under 50. She also found that young women are leading in the usage of *so* while young men are leading in the usage of *pretty*. Therefore, *so* appears to be associated with femininity while *pretty* is associated with masculinity. As mentioned above, the issue of interpretation of the age data in this apparent time study is whether the discrepancies in speech between these age groups is attributable to the progress of a linguistic innovation that occurred in the years that separate the two age groups (Bailey et al., 1991). We do not know if the people over 50 have always use *very* since they were younger or if they started using this variant as they got older. Since *very*, *really*, *so*, and *pretty* have been in usage for years, they may have used *so* and *pretty* in their youth and then switched to using *really* and then *very* as they got older. Yet another question is how do forms that have been around for centuries seem new and fresh with new generations of users.

4.4.2 RECYCLING OF INTENSIFIERS

Tagliamonte (2008) observed that many of the variants used for intensification in English have been around a long time and that they seem to go through cycles of popularity, disuse, and

renewal (Stoffel 1901; Bolinger 1972; Peters 1994; Lorenz, 2002; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte, 2008; Stratton, 2020a). For example, Stoffel (1901) pointed out that *so* was very popular with young women in England, and over one hundred later, Tagliamonte (2008) found that *so* was again popular with young women in Toronto, Canada. As Tagliamonte (2008) points out that, "[a]lthough [*so*] is undergoing new developments, the origins of these processes may be deeper-rooted in the past than we realize" (p. 391). *So* was used as an intensifier in the English language by young British women in the late 19th century, then again by young American GenX women in the mid-late 20th century, and then again by young Canadian women in Toronto in the early 21st century (Tagliamonte, 2008; Zwicky, 2006). Tagliamonte's (2008) also points out that the developmental trends in the system of intensification are not generalizable across varieties; the varieties found in different regions can have different usage patterns for forms of intensifiers that develop locally. Each time *so* is recycled in a different time and place, it takes on novel usages; this is part of the renewal process that can make an intensifier variant that has been around for two hundred years seem fresh and new to a new group of users.

Barnsfield and Buchstaller (2010) found three types of trends in the longitudinal development of intensifiers exemplified by the usage of the intensifiers *really*, *so*, and *dead* in Tyneside, England. Their longitudinal data was able to move beyond the limits of apparent time data and showed that *really* expanded in a two-step process of horizontal expansion followed by niche specialization. The *so* type expanded in more adjectival categories while increasing in frequency of usage over the same period. The third type, exemplified by *dead*, shows and explosive increase in usage frequency across all adjective types that is relatively short lived. *Dead* was still used across most adjectival types; however, it became very low frequency after its initial burst in popularity.

The historical evidence shows that many intensifier forms have been recycled in English for centuries (Mustanoja, 1960); however, this seems to go against Bolinger's (1972) observation that intensifiers are only strong in their novelty. Recycled intensifier forms can drop out of frequent usage and become rediscovered by later generations with a new breath of novelty associated with them. This recycling is also simultaneously paralleled with newer forms, like *pure*, being adopted and grammaticized as intensifiers in local communities by the working class (Macauley, 2006).

D'Arcy (2015) examined longitudinal change in intensifier usage over a 130-year period in a corpus of vernacular speech from New Zealand. Focusing on the intensifiers *very* and *really* that have been in use for centuries, D'Arcy found that while the recycling patterns of intensifiers are sometimes characterized by "periods of fevered change" (p. 449), there are also long periods of stability. Of note for the local variation in intensifier usage is that the usage of *so* did not take off in New Zealand as much as it did in North American and British contexts.

4.4.3 INTENSIFIERS COLLOCATED WITH ADJECTIVE TYPES

Biber et al. (1999) noted that the conversational intensifiers, "*bloody* (in BrE conversation), *damn, incredibly, terribly, real* (especially in AmE conversation), and *really*" (p. 564), are used with adjectives related to positive and negative value judgements. For example, "He'll look *really* sweet" and "It's incredibly annoying" are both used by the speaker to make value judgements about the subject of the sentence. In contrast, academic writing makes more frequent use of the intensifiers "*entirely, extremely, fully, highly,* and *strongly*" (p. 565) with adjectives to express the degree of intensity of a specific characteristic. For example, in the sentence "It is *extremely difficult* to establish any truly satisfactory system of defining the limits

of these functions" (p. 565), *extremely difficult,* expresses the highest degree of difficulty and does not make a value judgement.

In syntax, adjective intensifiers are used more frequently in predicative position over attributive position (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008; Stratton, 2020a). Predicative adjectives occur after a linking verb like *be*, *look*, or *seem* and modify the subject of a sentence like, "it was really interesting" (Stratton, 2020a, p. 42), while attributive adjectives modify nouns directly without being separated by a linking verb, like "a really interesting book" (Stratton, 2020a, p. 42). Additionally, each of the examples in the paragraph above from conversation and academic writing is predicative.

The most frequently used intensifiers can be collocated with the most semantic classes of adjectives while less frequently used variants collocate with a fewer number of semantic classes and occur with a limited number of unique heads (Partington, 1993; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003). For example, Susanne Wagner (2017) looked at intensifier bigrams, intensifier and adjective collocated pairs like *very different*, in the Corpus of Global Web-based English (GloWbE). According to the data in GloWbE, Wagner (2017) found that *very* may be losing the position of the most frequently used form of intensifier in a change that is being led by speakers in English speaking countries while *pretty* has spread from its origins in North America to more frequent usage across the globe. The findings indicated that different intensifier and adjective pairs behave very differently based on statistical collocational tendencies and, therefore, that intensifiers should not be examined in isolation from the adjectives that they are paired with. For example, the pair *very different* has a high collexeme status; in this new data from GloWbE, the pairs *totally different*, *completely different*, and *entirely different* now have equally high collexeme status across all L1 English speaking regions.

The global homogeneity of the usage of intensifier adjective pairs in the data suggests that there may be more to the mechanisms of change in intensifier forms than local variation, invention, and dissemination. At the end of the paper, Wagner (2017) mentions that there may be a cognitive element involved in the selection of intensifier forms that is causing this global homogeneity.

> The overall homogeneity of the global data investigated here suggests that -- at least for relatively high-frequency, established amplifier--adjective bigrams -- there are more general mechanisms at work than varietal or individual speaker preferences: what role does cognition play? Are more far-reaching principles to do with human thinking and processing at work here? (p. 80)

This is a call for future research in adjective intensifiers that examines cognitive linguistics (Croft, 2009) and how speakers negotiate and violate norms to create social meaning (Backus & Spotti, 2012). Interestingly, computational sociolinguistics (Nguyễn, 2016) may be the field where this future research is carried out.

4.5 THIRD WAVE RESEARCH ON ADJECTIVE INTENSIFICATION

Third wave variationist sociolinguistic research shifts the focus to how language users construct their social identity (Bucholtz, 2010; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Bucholtz & Hall, 2010). This involves the conscious or unconscious choices that an individual makes when selecting a particular form of intensifier from among the linguistic repertoire of forms available that could be employed. These choices may be unconsciously based on statistical collocational tendencies (Wagner, 2017), or these may be conscious rhetorical choices that are made with the agency to choose a form from their linguistic repertoire that has social meaning that portrays their identity to the speaker (Gumperz, 1965; Bush, 2012).

In a third wave variationist sociolinguistic research study on adjective intensification, Beltrama and Staum Casasanto (2017) performed two experiments to examine the social meaning of the intensifier *totally* in American English. One experiment showed that *totally* indexes the social categories of age, solidarity, and status in the perceptions of participants. A second experiment found that this indexicality is more salient when it is used to pragmatically create "interactional alignment/convergence between the interlocutors" (p. 177). For example, when a speaker says, "I totally agree", they are pragmatically aligning themselves with and indexing solidarity with their audience through showing a similarity in age and status by choosing this intensifier. These experiments focused on how the semantic, pragmatic, and socially based meanings of *totally* combine to create what *totally* means in any given interaction.

Sociolinguistic theories that support the construction of social identity through communicative events are Accommodation Theory (Giles & Powesland, 1975), Audience Design (Bell, 1984), and Referee Design (Bell, 2001). Accommodation Theory and Audience Design focus on how a speaker adjusts the way they speak to fit their audience. For instance, a speaker may adjust the way they speak to a friend differently from an authority figure. On the other hand, Referee Design focuses on how the speaker preemptively adjusts the way they speak to portray an identity to an audience. Referee Design examines how the speaker uses language to portray a self-image to create an identity. As such, Referee Design lends itself more to examining writing where the communication is constructed using linguistic and rhetorical tools to create an impression on the audience. Referee Design is an effective framework for analyzing the data in this study about how the authors' lexical choices of adjective intensifiers affect the perceptions of the reader, the audience, in academic texts.

4.6 ADJECTIVE INTENSIFICATION IN TELEVISION SERIES

While television shows are a scripted and therefore written, they are not academic writing and nor are they intended to be. Television shows contain planned discourse (Ochs, 1979) that is scripted so that the characters use realistic conversational dialogue that reflects the usage of the language variety portrayed (Baños, 2013; Stratton, 2018). Shows without realistic dialogue that the audience can relate to may never become successful or popular with audiences (Quaglio, 2009). Quaglio (2009) compared the corpus of all nine seasons of Friends to a corpus of spoken American English and found that the scripted show grammatically resembled spoken face-to-face interaction from real life. Bednarek (2012) compiled a corpus of seven television shows from five different genres and compared it with the spoken part of the American National Corpus and found that television language was close to natural conversation. Both of these studies found that scripted speech is more emotional than natural speech, which may be a fundamental difference between language that is scripted using rhetorical devices to tell a story and language that happens real life.

Since scripted television shows has been shown to parallel natural speech, several studies have used television shows as corpora for examining the usage of intensifiers (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Reichelt & Durham, 2016; Stratton, 2018; Stratton, 2020b). Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) used the script of a popular television show from the 1990s in North America, Friends, as a "surrogate to real world data" (p. 280) and found that the usage in the television show did parallel the contemporary usage at the time in that the data showed that the intensifier *so* was becoming more popular than *really* among young female users. Reichelt & Durham (2016) examined the intensifier usage in Buffy the Vampire Slayer and found that changes in the intensifier usage indicated changes in social networks of characters and indicated whether certain

characters were British or American. For example, the intensifier *bloody* was used exclusively by British characters. Stratton (2018) looked at the usage of the canonical intensifier *well* in the British television show, The Inbetweeners, and found that the show was paralleling its conversational usage in Britain at the time. Stratton (2020b) also used the British show Misfits to examine intensifier usage and found that it was consistent with vernacular speech.

As models of current changes in language use that are available globally, television series can serve as sources of language change for language speakers in an international context and for language learners acquiring language (Stuart-Smith, 2007; Lívio & Howe, 2024). Television shows are used as models of authentic language in English language classrooms (Berman, 1987). English language speakers and learners around the globe often watch popular television series as an entertaining way to pick up current language usage practices, including adjective intensifiers. For example, *Friends* is credited with contributing to the acceleration and popularization of the usage of the intensifier *so* (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005). Some German researchers have been looking into the ways that speakers imitate linguistic features from television programs into their own discourse, a method they call *kommunikativer Aneigung*, or 'communicative appropriation' (Holly, 2001). Popular television shows realistically model contemporary linguistic behaviors and disseminate them around the globe where language users and learners can incorporate these usages into their own idiolect. Wagner (2017)'s observations about the global homogeneity in intensifier usage may be in part a result of people around the world watching the same popular television shows.

4.7 SOCIAL MEANING AND IDENTITY IN ADJECTIVE INTENSIFICATION

Intensifier usage has long been considered to be associated with eternal social factors. These factors include gender (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008; D'Arcy 2015;

Fuchs, 2017), age (Tagliamonte, 2008; Palacios-Martínez & Núñez-Pertejo, 2012; Núñez-Pertejo & Palacios-Martínez 2018), ethnicity/nationality/geography (Macauley, 2006; Bucholtz et al. 2007; Stratton, 2021), and socioeconomic status (Macaulay, 1995, 2002). This section examines some social factors that have been associated with intensifier usage and the social meanings that may be communicated through these usages.

4.7.1 GENDER

New developments in intensifier usage have long been associated with women and femininity (Stoffel, 1901; Tagliamonte, 2008). Lord Chesterfield reportedly commented on the popularity of *vastly* as an intensifier used by "fair countrywomen" in 18th century England (Jespersen,1922, p. 249) collocated with adjectives to describe a snuff box as "*vastly* pretty, because it was so *vastly* little" (Jespersen,1922, p. 250). Stoffel (1901) mentioned that the collocations of the intensifier *so* with adjectives like *so charming* and *so lovely* were "purely feminine" expressions (p. 101). Stoffel even attributes the development of *so* as an intensifier to women's linguistic innovation, "I suspect that it is especially to the fair sex that we owe the strongly intensive sense of *so* … before an adjective" (p. 101). Like Stoffel, Jesperson (1922) also credits women with a "fondness … for hyperbole [that] will often lead the fashion with regard to adverbs of intensity" (p. 250). Both credit women with being the leaders in language change through the adoption of novel intensifiers. This innovation based on a preference for hyperbole is also credited to "ladies' men" by Stoffel (1901, p. 102), so, instead of being associated with the female sex, the social meaning so the social meaning should be considered to sit on the feminine side of a continuum between masculine and feminine gender identities.

In North America in the 2000s, Tagliamonte (2008) found that the usage of the intensifier *so* was still dominated by young females. In the same study, she also found that the intensifier

pretty was being used more frequently by young men. Certain intensifier forms can be preferred for use by males; however, it is unclear if any association of social meaning with masculinity is just a default where usage is either marked as feminine or not. 'GenX so' (Zwicky, 2006; Tagliamonte, 2008) is an example of an extended usage of *so* that was tied to adolescent females in the 1980s. It is clear that, in addition to gender, these forms also carry social meaning for age.

4.7.2 AGE

Like women, children often embrace the usage of novel intensifier forms. Stoffel (1901) points out that in contemporary usage children frequently use the same intensifiers as women (p. 102). Some intensifiers are solely associated with the usage of the young. Stoffel (1901) gives the example of *jolly*, which he considers a "schoolboy intensive" (p. 122).

A more recent study on the use of intensifiers by teenagers in Glasgow Scotland found that a new intensifier, *pure*, was being used by working class teenagers (Macauley, 2006). The intensifier is used in its adjective form dropping the *-ly* adverb morpheme as is common in the British working class (Macauley, 2002). Glasgow adolescents developed a range of uses for *pure* as an intensifier which became a characteristic intensifier for the age group.

4.7.3 NOVELTY

Bolinger (1972) stated that intensifiers are only strong in their novelty. In an article on degree adverb boosters (intensifiers) in Early Modern English, Peters (1994) attributed variation in intensifiers to the "speaker's desire to be original" (p. 271). It is this very desire to express originality that seems to drive the rapidly changing variation in forms that are employed as intensifiers in English. By choosing the newest and latest forms of intensifiers, language users can portray group membership that is in tune with the newest developments in language usage

within a community. Since the use of intensifiers can signal group membership, these intensifiers need to be continually renewed in novel forms.

> When the use of a particular booster spreads to other groups in the speech community, the word loses its function of group identification, and the linguistic "trendsetters" will then normally put a new group-symbol into circulation. Such shibboleths thus tend to change rapidly; they are subject to fashion. (Peters, 1994, p. 271)

Intensifiers that have moved on to common usage no longer signal group membership and must be replaced by new or recycled forms that are not used out of group. This continuing cycle of replacement, recycling, and renewal is also observed by Bolinger (1972) and Partington (1993). Novel forms of intensifiers that signal group membership are more likely to be replaced by the next new fashionable form. Once a form becomes common usage, it loses its originality and can no longer function as a shibboleth.

4.7.4 EMOTION

Intensification is a linguistic feature that conveys emotion and is highly linked to the speaker's relationship to the topic, or proposition. Labov (1984) referred to the intensifier as "the heart of social and emotional expression" (p. 43). Intensifiers function within the grammatical system to convey affective meaning, where "'[i]ntensity' is defined…as the emotional expression of social orientation toward the linguistic proposition: the commitment of the self to the proposition" (Labov, 1984, pp. 43-44). In the introduction to her corpus study of English intensifiers, Partington (1993) explains that intensifiers impart the speaker's point of view about the message being conveyed. Intensification is a direct indication of a speaker's desire to express how they feel about what is being said. She comments that "[t]he importance of intensification in the communicative process is that it is a vehicle for impressing, praising, persuading, insulting,

and generally influencing the listener's reception of the message" (p.178). Intensifiers are used to add information about how the speaker relates to a message. Intensifiers are used by language users to express degree modification that involves a framing of their own perspective in relation to the world. Even when someone says something with hardly any emotional information like "This person is very tall.", they are relating this height to their own perspective on height. When using a more affective expression like "I so agree with you!", they can emphasize an intensely emotional relationship to the other person. This can be used in conversation as a rhetorical device to establish rapport with and influence other people since they are generally thought to be "a vehicle for impressing, praising, persuading, insulting, and generally influencing the listener's reception of the message" (Partington 1993: 178).

4.7.5 NATIONAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

There is variation in intensifier usage among different varieties of English that have made certain forms seem more tied to a particular nationality in different times. Stoffel (1901) pointed out that quite has been used as an intensifier in the English language since the time of Shakespeare and it has had two usages as both an intensifier and a down-toner. However, by the middle of the 19th century, *quite* was only considered an intensifier, meaning "to a great extent or degree; very; considerably" (p. 43), and that this usage had originated in North America. Stoffel adds, "the so-called «new» sense of *quite* … hailed from the United States, and for this reason had better be avoided [by the English]" (p. 43). Stoffel goes on the state that, even though this usage was considered American at that time, British people used it in everyday speech. Stoffel did not consider this American usage appropriate for writing, however. "Such phrases as *quite warm*, *quite extraordinary*, are heard every day, and are sometimes inadvertently employed by writers of otherwise irreproachable English" (Stoffel, 1901, p. 44).

One thing that is a constant is that these associations of certain forms with nationality change over time. In an examination of British and American corpora, Biber et al. (1999) found that *quite* is currently favored more by British speakers, while American speakers prefer *pretty*. Even though *pretty* has been used as an intensifier in the English language since the 16th century (Mustanoja, 1960), *pretty* is now considered "a relative newcomer" (Wagner, 2017, p. 64) that is associated with American English (Biber, 1999; Tagliamonte, 2008). The usage of *pretty* as an American intensifier is currently gaining popularity internationally (Wagner, 2017). Biber et al. (1999) also note that *quite* is currently used as an intensifier in academic writing while *pretty* is not (p. 567).

This variation can also exist within a country based on ethnic or geographic identity. For example, in Britain there is variation in intensifier usage between different ethnic identities in different regions of the country; *pure* is used as an adjective intensifier by teenagers in Glasgow, Scotland (Macauley, 2006) while *proper* is used by teenagers in England (Stratton, 2021). Similarly, there can be variation in intensifier usage between speakers geographically within a state or city; speakers in Northern California prefer *hella* while teenagers in Southern California prefer *totes* (Bucholtz et al., 2007).

English is not the only language where intensifiers carry social meaning for nationality and ethnic identity. In a paper that focuses on the change in social meaning of an intensifier in Portuguese social media posts, Lívio & Howe (2024) explored the social meaning of *bué* in Portuguese. They used Twitter as an online corpus to trace the social meaning of *bué* as it has been used by Portuguese speakers in Brazil, Portugal, Angola, and Mozambique. Since *bué* was introduced to Portuguese due to language contact with immigrants from Africa, most likely Kimbundu speaking immigrants from Angola, this intensifier carries the social meaning of

Africanness; so, when someone uses *bué* in a tweet, they are indicating that they identify with being African.

4.7.6 SOCIAL CLASS

Some intensifier forms have been considered to have a lower register than others. "The intensives used in vulgar parlance and in the dialects, are exceedingly numerous. Vulgar speech will use almost any … intensive" (Stoffel, 1901, p. 122). This use of the word *vulgar* to refer to intensifier usage should be understood as forms originating in the working class and those belonging to the less educated, lower socioeconomic classes. In mid 20th century America, Fries (1940) divided intensifiers used in American English at that time into *standard* and *vulgar* forms (pp. 204-205). Fries noted that vulgar language included three times the frequency of intensifier usage over standard language and that vulgar language used "a much greater variety of separate words" as adjective intensifiers (p. 205). *Very* and well are included in both the standard and vulgar lists while *pretty*, *real*(*ly*), *right* and *such* are considered solely vulgar.

4.7.7 EDUCATION

These usage differences between social classes have also been shown to directly affect the success of students in academics. Macauley (2002) studied the differences in the usage of the *-ly* morpheme with adverbs between middle-class and working-class participants in Ayr and Glasgow, Scottland. When looking at degree adverbs, intensifiers, he found that the middle-class participants used the *-ly* adverb morpheme twice as frequently as the working class. This dropping of the -ly adverb morpheme in the speech of the working class contributes to working class students scoring lower on tests of verbal intelligence (Macauley, 2002). This usage of intensifiers has a direct effect on their performance in school and academics.

When it comes to the educational context, it is the varieties used by the lower socioeconomic classes and minoritized groups that are discriminated against the most. In a study on a state mandated writing exam, Johnson and VanBrackle (2012) looked at how raters perceive 'error' and how this is reflected in their grading. They found that forms associated with African American English (AAE) were graded very harshly, far more harshly than actual mistakes associated with English language learners or speakers of standard American English (SAE).

4.7.8 REGISTER AND ACADEMIC WRITING

In their analysis of both British and American corpora, Biber et al. (1999) statistically analyzed the distribution of the most common adjective intensifiers in conversation and academic texts. *Very*, *so*, *too*, and *completely* were found in both conversation and academic writing contexts. They also found that some intensifiers were found used only in conversation or academic writing contexts. The intensifiers used only in conversation included *really*, *real*, *absolutely*, *totally*, *damn*, and *bloody* while the intensifiers used only in academic writing were *extremely*, *highly*, *entirely*, and *fully*. Additionally, the frequent use of intensifiers is typically associated with conversation while academic writing uses the form more sparingly (Biber et al., 1999; Méndez-Naya & Pahta, 2010). Within academic writing, different academic genres have also been shown to display variation in the frequency and repertoire of intensifiers (Swales & Burke, 2003).

4.8 CONCLUSION AND GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

The majority of variationist sociolinguistic research on intensifiers has been quantitative studies. While historical sociolinguistics relies on texts by necessity, most studies on contemporary usage have focused on conversational usage in speech. Even scripted television shows are written to resemble spoken language. While some research has compared the usage of

intensifiers in conversation and academic writing (e.g. Biber et al., 1999), more research looking specifically into what intensifiers and what types of intensification are appropriate in academic writing is needed. There have been no research studies that examine the perception and social meaning of intensifier usage in academic writing. Research that takes a qualitative approach through interviewing people involved with assessing academic papers could provide valuable feedback for students learning to write in universities and inform the writing educators who support them.

CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the methodology that was used in this research to answer the

research questions about 1) what adjective intensifiers are frequently used in undergraduate

university student academic writing, 2) what social meaning a reader may perceive based on

these usages, and 3) what kinds of feedback academic writing tutors would provide to the writers

about these usages. To answer these questions, I investigated the usage of adjective intensifiers

in a corpus of international university student academic writing in English, the International

Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) (Granger et al., 2020) to address the first research question.

Then, I employed a quantitative sociolinguistic survey (based on Vaughn et al., 2018) to pilot an

examination of how writing center tutors perceive these usages. Finally, I developed a

sociolinguistic interview protocol and conducted interviews to collect more in-depth qualitative

data from writing center tutor participants to answer the second and third research questions.

Sociolinguistic interviews have long been used in variationist sociolinguistic investigations

(Becker, 2013); however, instead of eliciting variation from the participants, the interviews in

this research were used to collect qualitative data about the readers' perspectives on the variation

in written texts. Both the survey items and the sentences used in the interview protocol were

created from the ICLE corpus. The survey and interviews were conducted with university writing

center tutor participants who have been trained for and have experience with reading and

providing feedback on peer academic writing (Reiff et al., 2015; Lerner & Gillespie, 2024). After

providing more detailed information on the linguistic variable, the corpus, and the participants, I will then describe in more depth how I analyzed intensifier usage in the corpus, created and implemented the survey, and created the interview protocol and conducted the interviews.

5.2 LINGUISTIC VARIABLE

The linguistic variable in this study is the adjective intensifier. These are adverbs that are paired with an adjective that they modify (Wagner, 2017). For example, in the in the adjective intensifier pair *very important*, *very* is an adverb that intensifies the meaning of *important*. The meaning of adjectives can be boosted or amplified to varying degrees through the usage of different adverbs of intensity (Stoffel, 1901; Mustanoja, 1960; Bolinger, 1972; Quirk et al., 1985; Peters, 1994; Ito & Tagliamonte 2003). For instance, *extremely important* can be perceived as having a higher degree of intensification than *very important* due to the adverb used to intensify.

The adjective intensifier can also carry social meaning related to gender, age, social class, and geography including regional and ethnic variation (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Macaulay, 2006; Tagliamonte, 2008; Palacios-Martínez & Núñez-Pertejo, 2012; Núñez-Pertejo & Palacios-Martínez, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2016; Fuchs, 2017; Wagner, 2017; Stratton, 2018, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Livio & Howe, 2024) that can influence the perception of the reader about the identity of the writer. For example, the adjective intensifiers *so* and *totally* are frequently associated with femininity, youth, and being North American (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005) so that when a reader sees this usage, they might perceive the writer as likely to be a young American woman.

In their study of English language corpora representing both British and American English in conversation and academic prose, Biber et al. (1999) found that adjective intensifiers are frequently used conversation while only a few are frequently used in academic writing. They

found that while *very*, *so*, *really*, *too*, *real*, *completely*, *absolutely*, *totally*, *damn*, and *bloody* are used frequently in conversation, only *very*, *so*, *too*, and *completely* are frequently used in academic writing. They found that the most frequently used adjective intensifiers overall in both conversation and academic writing are *very* and *so*. They also found that some adjective intensifiers are used almost exclusively in conversation or academic writing. While *really*, *real*, *absolutely*, *totally*, *damn*, and *bloody* are frequently used in conversation, extremely, entirely, highly, and fully are found more frequently in academic writing.

Adjective intensifiers are found to be collocated more frequently with certain adjectives. Wagner (2017) used a global corpus, the Corpus of Global Web-based English (GloWbE), to explore the idea that certain intensifiers are paired more frequently with certain types of adjectives, a collocational pairing called a *bigram*. Her findings indicated that different intensifier and adjective pairs behave very differently and, therefore, that intensifiers should not be examined in isolation from the adjectives that they are paired with.

5.3 CORPUS

For this research I used the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), a corpus of international university student undergraduate essays in English collected from around the globe (Granger et al., 2020). Many variationist sociolinguistic analyses on adjective intensifiers have been conducted using corpora (Biber et al., 1999; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008; Wagner, 2017; Lívio & Howe, 2024). Many have employed national corpora (e.g. Biber et al., 1999) while some have employed non-traditional corpora such as scripted television shows (e.g. Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005), social media posts (e.g. Lívio & Howe, 2024), and web-based global English language usage on websites and blogs (e.g. Corpus of Global Web-based English (GloWbE) from Wagner, 2017).

The ICLE corpus is a corpus containing 5,766,522 words in 9,529 essays written in English by multilingual undergraduate university students of over 30 first language (L1) backgrounds in 32 countries (Granger et al., 2020). Although the writing in the ICLE corpus is not the product of a community located within one geographical area, by writing in a university level English language academic context, all of the writers can be viewed as members in a global community of practice of university level academic English language writers (community of practice is defined in Chapter 2). The writers in the ICLE are multilingual English language writers from countries around the world actively participating in a global community of practice with a shared endeavor. The endeavor that brings these people from all corners of the world together in a community of practice is the mutual engagement in learning writing at the university level in English. This involves not only learning English but also learning the "cumulative norms [that] are set up for entire speech communities" (Backus & Spotti, 2012, p. 190). For academic writing in English, these cumulative norms would include the rhetorical culture involved in writing university level academic essays in English taught in university level first-year writing programs (Connor, 2002; Kubota & Lehner, 2004) and the beliefs and values associated with the social meaning of language variants within the community of practice. These cumulative norms guide both the production of the writers and the perceptions of the readers within the speech community. As Backus and Spotti (2012) put it, "[t]he cumulative norm located in our minds is the basis for our educated guesses about other people's linguistic competence.…For questions about agency, about why people use language the way they do, this [cumulative norm] is far more important than the contents of the actual individual internal norm of any [language user]" (p. 190). Based on this, members of the same community of practice

would be best at perceiving the social meaning and appropriateness of linguistic usage based on the cumulative norms of the speech community.

5.4 PARTICIPANTS

The participants for this study were recruited from among the students working as writing center tutors in writing centers at two large state universities situated in the Midwest, The University of Missouri (MU), and the Southeastern United States, the University of Georgia (UGA). This study has many similarities with other variationist sociolinguistic studies where participants report perceptions of social meaning based on the usage of a linguistic variable. A well-known example of this kind of perception study is Cambell-Kibler's (2007) study of the perceptions of the social meaning of (ING) variants. In her study, participants listened to recorded speech and were interviewed about how they perceived the identity of the speaker based on the realization of the (ING) variant as /ɪŋ/ or /ɪn/. A similar methodology was used in this study; I used sentences taken from student academic writing containing adjective intensifier variants and asked participants to answer questions about their perceptions of these usages.

Writing center tutors are obvious participants in a research study examining perceptions of student writing. Writing center tutors are trained in giving feedback on the academic writing encountered in undergraduate studies at American universities (Lerner & Gillespie, 2024). For example, undergraduate writing center tutors at MU are hired through successfully completing a required honors writing intensive course taught by the writing center directors where they spend a whole semester learning how to provide effective feedback for peer writers. Writing center tutors are trained to be more aware of the rhetorical tools specific to the culture of language usage of the community of practice of university students in the United States (Connor, 2002; Kubota & Lehner, 2004; Reiff et al., 2015). Their training includes providing this feedback to the

tutees in both spoken in-person and written online formats depending upon the format of the appointment (Lerner & Gillespie, 2024).

Most students working in writing centers and in rhetoric and composition programs have not had training in providing explicit grammar feedback to student writing (Matsuda, 2006a, 2012). I did not expect writing tutors to be familiar with adjective intensifiers or have any familiarity with variationist sociolinguistics. However, as fluent speakers of English and members of the language community of university academic writers, I assumed they would possess an innate awareness of how adjective intensifiers are used in conversation and in academic writing.

Using this awareness combined with the training that they have received in providing feedback on academic writing for writing center work, I assumed writing center student tutors should have the ability to provide valuable peer feedback on adjective intensifier usage in university student writing. Since adjective intensifiers are lexical items in English, I assumed writing center tutors should be accustomed to verbalizing how particular word choices affect them as readers. I also assumed writing center tutors should be able to provide feedback on the appropriateness of certain adjective intensifiers for academic writing and provide alternative structures that could be employed for more effective academic writing. This combination of experiences makes writing center tutors excellent participants for a variationist sociolinguistic study on the perceptions of adjective intensifier usage in undergraduate student academic writing.

5.5 CORPUS ANALYSIS

I conducted an analysis of the ICLE corpus to discover the frequency of usage of adjective intensifiers in the undergraduate academic writing in the corpus. I paid to use the ICLE

online access to the corpus where I was able to create concordances and search the corpus online. The search functions enabled me to search for adjective intensifiers in the corpus and provided metadata on the authors of each text. After creating a search, the concordance data can be downloaded in Excel.

The 5,766,522 words in the ICLE corpus have each been tagged with their part of speech (Granger et al., 2020). I was able to use the ICLE online to conduct concordances that searched for the instances of specific adjective intensifier forms occurring immediately before an adjective. For example, I created a concordance searching for the occurrences of the form *very* before a word that has the part of speech tagged as adjective. That search resulted in 8,727 hits that were all presented in pairs of the intensifier collocated with the adjective with the surrounding sentence level text presented before and after each bigram. I was able to use this data to discover the number of usages of each intensifier and the number of usages of each intensifier paired with each adjective. In this way, I could also discover which adjectives each intensifier is paired with most frequently in the corpus. I calculated the frequency of the adjectives collocated with each adjective intensifier, so I was able to discover what adjectives are most frequently collocated with each adjective intensifier in the ICLE corpus. For example, the most frequent collocation with *very* in the ICLE corpus is *important*; *very important* occurred 1,025 times out of the 8,727 usages of very in the corpus with a frequency of 11.75 percent.

The ICLE corpus contains metadata with information about the author on each of the texts included in the corpus (Granger et al., 2020). This information can be used when searching the corpus to select the writing of writers from different countries and L1 backgrounds as well as their age and gender. When searching the corpus for a specific linguistic variable, each concordance search for an intensifier plus an adjective is presented with the writer's metadata. I

was able to use this metadata to examine intensifier usage based on the gender, age, nationality, and L1 of the writers.

5.6 PILOT SURVEY

A pilot survey was developed to explore writing center tutor participants' perceptions about social meaning and the writers' identities based on the usage of adjective intensifiers in academic writing. The survey was created on Qualtrics so the data could be collected anonymously and remotely from two distant geographic locations in Missouri and Georgia. In order to maximize the participation of writing center tutor participants who are also full time students with busy schedules, the survey had to be limited to response times of ten minutes or less. In order to further maximize responses, it was also necessary to design the survey so that participants could access it easily on their mobile devices, such as a smart phone or tablet. Qualtrics had guidelines for formatting the survey so that it was mobile friendly which helped make the survey more easily accessible from a variety of mobile formats. In order to keep the pilot survey short and mobile friendly and follow the guidelines from Qualtrics, the pilot survey was limited to five short sentences with adjective intensifiers and five questions about social meaning.

The five sentences used in the pilot survey were selected from the ICLE corpus. As part of my analysis of the ICLE corpus, I collected data on the usage of adjective intensifiers in the corpus. Based on this data and on the existing research on adjective intensifiers reviewed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, I first selected the five adjective intensifiers to include in the survey.

5.6.1 PILOT SURVEY ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIER SELECTION

As the adjective intensifier used most frequently in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999) and in the ICLE corpus with 8,727 usages, *very* was included in the survey. Due to Beltrama and Staum Casasanto's (2017) article that explores the perceptions of its social meaning, *totally*, with 401 usages in the ICLE corpus, was also chosen to be included in the survey. With 306 usages in the ICLE corpus, *absolutely* was chosen to be included in the survey due to its appearance only in research on conversational (Biber et al., 1999) and British English (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010). With 98 usages in the ICLE corpus, *pretty* was included in the survey due to its usage as an intensifier beginning in predominantly North American contexts (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008) and extending to growing international usage (D'Arcy, 2015, Wagner, 2017). Finally, with only four usages in the ICLE corpus, *way* was chosen to be included in the survey as an outlier to examine the perceptions of an uncommonly used intensifier in the ICLE that was only briefly mentioned in one example on page 285 in Tagliamonte and Roberts' (2005) article on Friends.

5.6.2 PILOT SURVEY SENTENCES

After selecting the five adjective intensifiers, I used the ICLE metadata to select sentences for each of the intensifiers to be used in the pilot survey. I wanted to include sentences including both genders and a range of ages from different areas in the world with different language backgrounds. The adjective intensifiers are presented together with the metadata from the sentences in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Metadata Associated with Each Pilot Survey Sentence

Intensifier	Gender	Age	Native language	Country
very	Female	19	Chinese-Cantonese	China-Hong Kong
totally	Male	42	Portuguese	Brazil
absolutely	Male	22	German	Germany
pretty	Female	27	Persian	Iran
way	Female	23	Macedonian	Macedonia

To include a range of binary genders, I selected sentences from three females and two males. While 8,277 of the 9,529 writers in the ICLE corpus are between the ages of 18 and 25 typical of undergraduate students, I selected two sentences produced by people outside of this age range. I wanted to include these non-traditional undergraduate student ages to see if there was any effect on the perception of age in the survey. In order to include a range of first language backgrounds, I chose one Chinese language speaker, one Germanic language speaker, one Romance language speaker, one Indo-Iranian language speaker, and one Slavic language speaker.

While the sentences were predominantly selected based on the metadata, shorter sentences were prioritized so that they would fit the format of a mobile friendly Qualtrics survey. The sentences with the adjective intensifier bigrams in bold and italics appear in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2: Pilot Survey Sentences with Adjective Intensifier Bigrams

Pilot Survey Sentences
Smoking and drinking is ***very common*** for those who always go to bars.
George Orwell was ***totally right***!
Her nose is of an ideal size and shape and her skin is ***absolutely spotless***.
They would also make a ***pretty boring*** conversationalist.
Being in a classroom is ***way better*** for paying attention to your classes.

There were some issues related to bias and clarity in the pilot survey sentences that would need to be addressed in the interview protocol. The sentence for *very* has potential bias in its subject matter about "smoking and drinking". The subject of the sentence could affect the perception of the social meaning of the adjective intensifier. Even though this sentence was produced by a 19-year-old female from China, the topic might skew the perception of the adjective intensifier usage to an older age range. There is also the possibility that some participants might consider this a male subject which could skew it towards being perceived as male. Even though George Orwell's novel 1984 is a rather common essay topic in undergraduate English literature classes, the sentence for *totally* contains a reference to the author George Orwell out of context. There seems to be a rather minor chance for bias from this sentence though. The sentence for *absolutely* is about a topic that has a clear bias towards femininity even though it was written by a person who identified as male. Additionally, there is no clear antecedent for the pronoun *her* in this sentence taken out of context. The sentence for *pretty* also contains a pronoun with no antecedent. The intensifier is paired with an adjective with negative connotations in the bigram *pretty boring*, which could also detract from the perceptions of the usage of *pretty* itself and bias answers. Finally, the sentence with *way* has an unclear meaning out of the context of the essay which was about comparing and contrasting in-person and online class instruction. These issues needed to be addressed in the creation of the interview protocol.

5.6.3 PILOT SURVEY QUESTIONS

Survey questions were created to be used with each sentence in the survey. In order to maximize participation and fit the mobile friendly Qualtrics formatting, five questions were used that asked the participants to make judgements about the usage of the adjective intensifier in

each sentence. The questions used in this pilot survey were adopted from Vaughn et al.'s (2018) article on a class activity that they use in their American Speech class.

Survey Questions

1. Does the writer feel strongly about what they are writing about?

Strongly agree   Somewhat agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Somewhat disagree   Strongly disagree

2. Does this usage make the writer sound intelligent?

Strongly agree   Somewhat agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Somewhat disagree   Strongly disagree

3. How casual vs formal does this usage sound?

Very formal Somewhat formal Neither formal nor casual Somewhat casual Very casual

4. How old does this writer sound?

Teenager   Twenty-something   Middle-aged   Elderly   Could be any age

5. Which of the following describe the writer? (Choose all that apply.)

| Hip / Trendy | Annoying | Masculine | Immature | Feminine |
| Friendly | Articulate | Youthful | Cool | Old-Fashioned |

(Adapted from Vaughn et al., 2018)

The first four questions are Likert scale questions where the participant is asked to report their perceptions about the usage on a scale of 1 to 5. These questions ask the reader to report their perceptions about the writer including how strongly the writer feels about what they are talking about, the writer's perceived level of intelligence, their level of formality, and their age. The fifth question asks the participants to select adjectives from a list of adjectives that reflect

how they perceive the identity of the writer based on that usage. The adjectives in this list were adopted directly from Vaughn et al. (2018).

5.6.4 PILOT SURVEY FORMAT

The pilot survey was designed to fit on a mobile phone screen according to the guidelines provided by Qualtrics for a mobile friendly experience. Snapshots of each page included in the pilot survey are in the Appendix. The first page of the survey is a welcome page that thanks the participant for agreeing to participate, provides a brief description of the target variable with instructions for completing the survey, and asks at which institution the participant is a writing tutor.

The following five pages each featured one sentence followed by the five survey questions. All of the questions on each page needed to be answered in order to move on to the next page with the next sentence and questions. Qualtrics kept a record of all completed answers on each page even if the survey was abandoned by the participant before completing the whole survey. Each page of this survey included a sentence with a usage of an adjective intensifier bigram that was in bold italics to set it apart from the rest of the sentence. Participants were directed to answer the following questions based on the words in bold italics. The answers for the Likert scale questions were limited to only one answer for each. For question five, the participants were asked to select the adjectives from a multiple-choice list that reflected how they perceived the writer's identity based upon each adjective intensifier usage in bold and italics.

5.6.5 PILOT SURVEY PROCEDURE

First, approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Georgia (UGA) was requested to conduct this research at the UGA writing center and the writing center at the University of Missouri – Columbia (MU). The UGA IRB determined that this research was

Exempt 2 and allowed the research activity to commence. Next, after getting an approval letter from the MU Writing Center Director, approval from the MU IRB was requested to conduct this research. Since previous approval for this research had been granted by UGA, the MU IRB only required a Collaborative Exempt Notification Form.

A combined invitation letter and consent letter with the survey link was sent out via email listserv to writing center tutors at both the UGA Writing Center and the MU Writing Center. The survey link was emailed to the 64 writing tutors on the list serve working at the MU Writing Center at the time of this research. Of them, 26 responded to the survey and answered 100 percent of the question items. The survey link was also emailed to the 34 writing tutors at the UGA Writing Center. Of them, seven completed 100 percent of the survey and one completed 63 percent of the survey. There were three responses that did not indicate their university affiliation. Two of these survey responses completed 23 percent, or one page, of the survey and one completed 42 percent, or two pages, of the survey. Since Qualtrics recorded the answers for each completed page, the partial responses were kept for the items for which participants provided responses. There were several cases where someone clicked on the survey link and did not answer any questions. The non-responses were discarded and not included in the data.

5.6.6 PILOT SURVEY DATA ANALYSIS

Each Likert scale item rated by the participants within a five-point scale and each adjective selected in the fifth question were analyzed for statistical relevance related to the categories of social meaning for age, gender, and register. The results of the survey data will be discussed in Chapter 7.

5.6.7 PILOT SURVEY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INTERVIEW

The pilot survey was severely limited in its length and depth. Due to its format as an online Qualtrics survey that could be completed on a mobile phone, there was not much data that could be collected due to it only consisting of five adjective intensifiers in five sentences paired with five questions about perceptions of social meaning for each sentence. With the limitation of a short online survey, only one instance of each adjective intensifier was used. Using only Likert scale and multiple-choice question items, I could not get in depth data on the participants' perception of the social meaning of an intensifier or discover what kind of feedback they might provide in a tutoring session. Much more detailed information could be collected using open-ended interview questions and including more intensifiers in more sentences paired with different adjectives.

I also discovered some problematic issues with the sentences used in the pilot survey. I was originally focused more on the metadata and sentence length when selecting the sentences to be included in the pilot survey; as a result, I may have included sentences that have potential bias in their subject matter that could skew the perceptions of the social meaning of the adjective intensifiers. There were also some unclear pronoun antecedents that could cause confusion. Moreover, the selection of the adjectives that were paired with the intensifiers was not considered when selecting the sentences, so these are random pairings that did not take the frequency of collocation into account.

Some of the questions that were adapted from the Vaughn et al. (2018) class activity were also problematic. The second question asked about how the reader perceived the writer's intelligence; however, the word *intelligence* could be more clearly defined to avoid insulting the writer of the sentence. This was reinterpreted and changed to asking the participant how

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academic the usage seemed in the following interviews. In addition, there was no question that directly asked about gender. Gender was only included in the list of multiple-choice adjectives, so participants were not required to answer any questions about gender.

The sentences and questions in the pilot survey need to be improved for the interview. There was no methodology behind the choice of adjective intensifier bigram collocations employed in the pilot survey. The length of the pilot survey also severely limited the data that was generated which made it impossible to answer my research questions about perceptions of adjective intensifiers in student academic writing and the feedback that might be provided. I took these issues into consideration while selecting the sentences to be included in a more in-depth qualitative interview protocol.

5.7 INTERVIEW

After completing the pilot survey, a qualitative interview was developed to collect more in-depth data that could be used to provide more complete answers to the second and third research questions in this dissertation. The interviews were designed to be qualitative interviews in a similar vein to the pilot survey, but with more adjective intensifiers, sentences, and questions. Even a longer interview still had a time limit, however, and interviews had to be kept to 45 minutes or less out of consideration for the participants and their busy schedules. Therefore, the adjective intensifiers, sentences, and questions were more carefully chosen to provide more useful data for answering the research questions within a reasonable time limit of 45 minutes.

5.7.1 INTERVIEW ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIER SELECTION

Due to the limitations encountered by only using five adjective intensifiers in the pilot survey, more adjective intensifiers were added to the interview. The interview protocol was

expanded to include eight adjective intensifiers. The adjective intensifiers included in the interviews are *very*, *totally*, *absolutely*, *pretty*, *so*, *quite*, *really*, and *extremely*. These include adjective intensifiers that are more central to the literature and are used frequently in the ICLE corpus.

Some adjective intensifiers were kept from the list for the pilot survey. As the adjective intensifier featured in the literature dating from the earliest research to the present (e.g. Stoffel, 1901; Mustanoja, 1960; Biber et al., 1999; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008; Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; D'Arcy, 2015; Wagner, 2017) and taught in English language textbooks (Fuchs et al., 2012; Ediger et al., 2014; English First, n.d.), *very* was kept as an intensifier in the interviews. *Totally* and *absolutely* were also kept due to their frequency of usage in the ICLE and relevance in the literature as being included in the top five intensifiers in several papers (e.g. Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010). *Pretty* was also kept for frequency of usage and relevance in the literature (e.g. Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008; D'Arcy, 2015). *Pretty* is also of interest because, in educational texts for teaching English as a second or other language (TESOL), it is taught as both an intensifier (Fuchs et al., 2012; Ediger et al., 2014) and a down-towner (English First, n.d.).

Some additional adjective intensifiers were added to the list for the interview based on their frequency in the ICLE corpus and relevance in the literature. The adjective intensifier *so* was added to the interview because of its 2,443 usages in the ICLE corpus and its relevance in the literature (e.g. Stoffel, 1901; Mustanoja, 1960; Biber et al., 1999; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008; Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; D'Arcy, 2015; Wagner, 2017). *Quite* was added with 1,160 usages in the ICLE corpus and relevance in

the literature (Biber, 1999; D'Arcy, 2015). *Really* was added with 1,070 usages in the ICLE corpus and high relevance in the literature (e.g. Labov, 1984; Biber et al., 1999; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008; Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; D'Arcy, 2015; Wagner, 2017). And *extremely* was added to the interviews with 564 usages in the ICLE, relevance as an intensifier primarily used in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999), and inclusion in TESOL texts as an intensifier of the highest degree (Fuchs et al., 2012; Ediger et al., 2014; English First, n.d.).

This increased the number of adjective intensifiers from five included in the pilot survey to eight included in the interview. The final interview protocol included more of the adjective intensifiers that have been featured in the literature and more of the adjective intensifiers that occur with higher frequency in the ICLE corpus. Including the adjective intensifiers should increase the relevance of the data generated in the interviews in relation to the discussions about these adjective intensifiers in the literature.

5.7.2 INTERVIEW SENTENCE SELECTION

The limitations of the sentences in the pilot survey were addressed in the interview protocol. First, with only five sentences used in the pilot survey, there were too few sentences to gather much data about the usage of each adjective intensifier. Therefore, two sentences from the ICLE corpus for each of the eight adjective intensifiers were included in the interview protocol. Using two sentences instead of one provides participants with twice the number of sentence examples for each adjective intensifier so their perceptions were not guided by just one example to consider. Using two examples sentences for each of the eight adjective intensifiers increased the number of sentences used in the interview to sixteen; any more would have made the interviews too long to be completed in even a 45-minute time limit.

Another issue discovered in the pilot survey was that there were some possible sources of bias related to the subject matter of the sentences. The sentences used in the interview were all selected for having subject matter that is academic in nature and not loaded with extreme opinion on any controversial topics. Additionally, lack of clarity due to unclear pronoun antecedents was an issue with the sentences in the pilot survey. Sentences that would have unclear pronoun antecedents when taken out of the context of the essay were also excluded.

Finally, sentences were selected where adjective intensifiers are paired with adjectives with high collexeme status (Wagner, 2017). High collexeme status means that a word is used with higher frequency in a particular grammatical application. The rationale is that intensifier and adjective pairings with higher colexeme status would be more commonly used together and be perceived as more natural. Each adjective intensifier was analyzed in ICLE corpus to discover the adjective that it is most frequently collocated with. One of the selected sentences for each adjective intensifier included a collocation with this adjective. For example, *very* is collocated most frequently with *important*, so one example sentence included this collocation on the interview protocol (question no. 2). The other example sentence was also chosen from among other with high frequency collocations with the intensifier.

Interview Sentences with Intensifier Bigrams Underlined

1. The Macintosh was a <u>very popular</u> computer in American schools.

2. Freedom of the press is <u>very important</u> for the people in our country and all over the world.

3. Some dreams are <u>totally unrealistic</u>, and the dreamers know that they will never come true.

4. Interestingly, the same study found a <u>totally different</u> view from working class women.

5. The producers of a movie adaptation of a book have a <u>really difficult</u> job because of its complexity.

6. Punishing cruel convicts is <u>really important</u> to keep our society safe.

7. The degree requires a list of <u>pretty good</u> scores.

8. The membership in a sports club can be <u>pretty expensive</u>.

9. Imagination and dreaming are <u>so necessary</u>; however, they are constantly shrinking with the development of industrialization.

10. Although college is <u>so important</u> to many professions, it's not for everyone or every career.

11. In online shopping, trying on clothing before making a purchase is <u>quite impossible</u>.

12. Schindler's List is <u>quite different</u> from Spielberg 's other movies like Jurassic Park or The Flintstones.

13. I think that American feminists would condemn this as very humiliating and <u>absolutely inadmissible</u>.

14. In the past, cosmetic surgery was confined only to surgery which was <u>absolutely necessary</u> to the health and wellbeing of the patient.

15. This computer was only able to receive 5in floppy disks and had an <u>extremely small</u> hard drive.

16. The initiative group claims that private funding is <u>extremely important</u> because it would immediately encourage competition among universities and increase student motivation.

Increasing the number of sentences used in the interview protocol, excluding those with extreme stances on controversial subject matter or unclear pronoun reference, and selecting sentences where the intensifier is paired with adjectives of high collexeme status should all contribute to an improved interview protocol.

5.7.3 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The interview questions were completely redesigned to fit a qualitative interview format. Questions about the participants' experience and background in writing center tutoring were added to the beginning of the interview and the questions about the usages of adjective intensifiers in the sample sentences were expanded to gather more data relevant to the research questions.

Questions about the writing tutor's background and experience were added to the interview protocol in order to get a better idea about the tutor's length of time working as a writing tutor, experience tutoring multilingual writers, and experience with providing feedback on grammar issues in writing. Most writing tutors come from English department backgrounds where they receive training in the writing process and rhetoric focusing on higher order concerns (HOCs) such as organization and argument development (Reiff et al., 2015; Lerner & Gillespie, 2024). Matsuda (2006a, 2012) points out that this training does not provide training on working with multilingual writers and lower order concerns (LOCs) such as sentence level grammar issues. These questions were designed to ask the writing tutor participants themselves what experience that they have had with multilingual writers and explicit grammar feedback in writing tutoring sessions.

The questions about usage were designed to be used with each intensifier presented in a pair of sentences at the same time.

Interview Questions

1. Based on this usage, how strongly does the writer feel about this? What about this usage tells you this?

2. Does this usage sound academic? Why or why not? What about this usage tells you this?

3. How casual or formal does this usage sound? Is this register appropriate for an academic writing assignment? Explain.

4. What age does this writer sound? What about this usage tells you this?

5. What does this usage tell you about the gender of this writer? What about this usage tells you this?

6. Does this usage sound more American or British? Or either?

7. In a WC tutoring session, what kind of feedback would you provide to the writer about this usage?

8. Are there any alternative ways of expressing this idea that you might suggest to the tutee?

9. In a course where you are an instructor, how might the use of any of these intensifiers affect the grade on a graded written assignment? Which ones? Why or why not?

The first three questions focus on degree of meaning and usage appropriateness based on register. The first question was adapted from Vaughn et al. (2018) and was intended to illicit the degree of intensification that the participant perceives in using the intensifier. The second question was created to understand if the participant perceives this intensifier as being appropriate for academic writing. This distinction is based on Biber et al.'s (1999) corpus analysis that showed that some intensifiers are appropriate for academic writing while others are not. The third question is about register and was also adapted from Vaughn et al. (2018); it adds

the distinction of formal versus casual which should align with a written versus conversational distinction. The next three questions were designed to explore perceptions about social meaning that each adjective intensifier might portray to the reader. The fourth question asks for any information about age that the usage might convey. The fifth question asks for information about gender, and the sixth question asks for information about nationality of language variety. The last three questions were about feedback and grading related to adjective intensifier usage that participants might provide in tutoring sessions and in courses where they are instructors.

5.7.4 INTERVIEW PROCEDURE

IRB approval was previously obtained from both UGA and MU for this research as Exempt 2, and permission from the Director of the MU Writing Center was given to recruit participants for the interviews at the MU Writing Center. Invitation letters were sent out by the Director to graduate student writing tutors at the MU Writing Center who have had experience as an instructor of a course that involved graded writing assignments (Invitation letter is in the Appendix.).

Writing center tutors who agreed to participate contacted me directly via email and we set up Zoom interviews in my MU email SSO Zoom room. The Zoom interviews were recorded and transcribed through Zoom. Only the transcriptions without identifiers were retained for data analysis, all other recordings and transcription versions were permanently deleted.

Each Zoom interview began with my reading of the opener from the interview protocol. This included a brief introduction to the researcher and the research and information about the interview duration, participant involvement, and removal of identifiers from the data. The next step in the interview were the questions about the participant's experience with writing tutoring, working with multilingual students, and providing explicit grammar feedback.

The next step briefly introduced the target variable in this research, the adjective intensifier, and provided examples and space for the participant to ask questions. Then the sentences associated with each adjective intensifier were presented in pairs on the shared Zoom screen while the interviewer verbally asked the questions for each intensifier. This was repeated for all eight intensifiers presented in eight pairs of sentences. The ninth question was asked at the end as an overall question about how intensifier usage might affect grading. The interview was completed with the follow up questions about changing any answers and the closing statement which repeated the removal of identifiers from the data.

5.7.5 DATA ANALYSIS

The transcripts were coded by the researcher to collect the answers for each question and discover any unpredicted elements discovered in the interviews. These findings are presented in Chapter 7.

5.8 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The following research questions are examined in this dissertation. They are presented with hypotheses that would likely be true based on the literature.

Research question 1

1. What adjective intensifiers are frequently used in multilingual university student academic writing in the ICLE corpus of written learner English?

Hypothesis 1a. The most frequently used adjective intensifiers in ICLE will be the ones that are used in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999; Swales & Burke, 2003; Méndez-Naya & Pahta, 2010) and presented in EFL textbooks (Fuchs et al., 2012; Ediger et al., 2014; English First, n.d.).

Hypothesis 1b. There may be over usage of conversational adjective intensifiers due to wanting to sound more like a native speaker based on dialogue from television and movies (Berman, 1987; Holly, 2001; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Stuart-Smith, 2007; Lívio & Howe, 2024).

Research question 2

2. What are the readers' perceptions of social meaning and the writer's identity based on their usage of adjective intensifiers in academic writing?

Hypothesis 2a. Less academic and more novel adjective intensifiers used in conversation could carry social meaning of femininity (Stoffel, 1901; Zwicky, 2006; Tagliamonte, 2008), youth (Stoffel, 1901; Macauley, 2002, 2006; Tagliamonte, 2008), and nationality (Biber, 1999; Tagliamonte, 2008).

Hypothesis 2b. More academic and more grammaticalized adjective intensifiers frequently used in academic writing will carry much less social meaning (Stoffel, 1901; Sinclair, 1992; Partington, 1993; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003).

Research question 3

3. What adjective intensifiers are considered appropriate for academic writing and what kinds of feedback might writing tutors give about this?

Hypothesis 3a. The appropriate adjective intensifiers are those used in academic writing (ex. Biber et al., 1999).

Hypothesis 3b. Tutors would suggest replacing non-academic adjective intensifiers with more academic ones.

CHAPTER 6

CORPUS RESULTS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

I used the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) to examine the usage of

adjective intensifiers in the academic writing of multilingual undergraduate university students

from around the globe. The ICLE is a corpus of writing by higher intermediate to advanced

learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) compiled by the Centre for English Corpus

Linguistics at the University of Louvain starting in 2002 (Granger et al., 2020). The third version

of the ICLE corpus (ICLEv3) includes 9,529 texts of undergraduate university academic writing

texts totaling 5,766,522 words produced by writers from a variety of countries and language

backgrounds (Granger et al., 2020).

6.1.1 METADATA ON WRITERS

The corpus contains metadata associated with each of the texts included in the corpus.

The metadata was collected directly from the learners themselves (Granger et al., 2020). This

metadata can be filtered to select texts based on learner variables and task variables. The learner

variables and contextual factors include native language, country, self-reported gender, age, 1st

through 3rd other foreign language, 1st through 3rd other language spoken at home, years of

English at school, years of English at university, months in an English-speaking country, and

institution (university where the writer was a student at the time). Writing task variables include

file name, title, length in words, type (genre of writing assignment), and writing conditions such

as whether the writing examination was timed and students were allowed to use reference tools.

6.2 ICLE TEXTS

There are 9,529 texts in the ICLE database. These each have metadata about the authors including age, gender, and nationality. Since there is no metadata on whether the authors in the ICLE prefer British English or American English, I am focusing on gender and age in the analysis of the ICLE metadata. The gender category was self-reported as a binary choice between male or female. The age range of the ICLE data includes writers between the ages of 17 and 71. However, the majority of the texts, 8,494 or 89.1%, were written by people between 17 and 26 years of age.

6.2.1 GENDER

Of the 9,529 texts in the ICLE, 7,356 texts, or 77.2%, were written by people who self-reported as female and 2,133 texts, or 22.4%, were written by people who self-reported as male. In total, 40 texts, or 0.4%, were written by people who did not respond for gender. Figure 6.1 is a pie chart showing the relative number of texts on the ICLE written by people who identified as female, male, or did not respond.
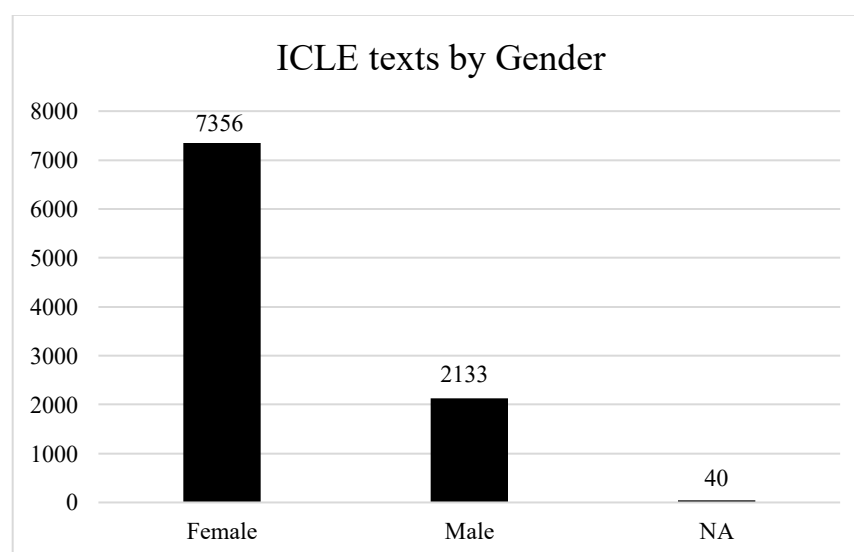
Figure 6.1: Number of ICLE Texts by Gender

6.2.2 AGE

The ICLE is made up of 9,529 academic texts written by undergraduate students at universities in various countries. A majority of the texts, 5,930 or 62.2% were written by people between the ages of 20 and 23 years old. The next highest number of texts was 1,289 written by people between the ages of 24 and 26; this age group represented just under 14% of the total number of texts. This was followed by 1,275 texts written by people between the ages of 17 and 19 years old representing just over 13.4% of the total texts in the corpus. Of the remainder, 317 texts were written by people between the ages of 27 and 29 at 3.3% of the total, 261 texts were written by people between the ages of 30 and 39 at 2.7% of the total, and 91 texts were written by people over the age of 40 at 1% of the total. 366, or 4%, of writers did not provide their age. Figure 6.2 is a bar graph showing the number of texts in the ICLE written by people in different age groups.

Figure 6.2: Number of Texts by Age in ICLE
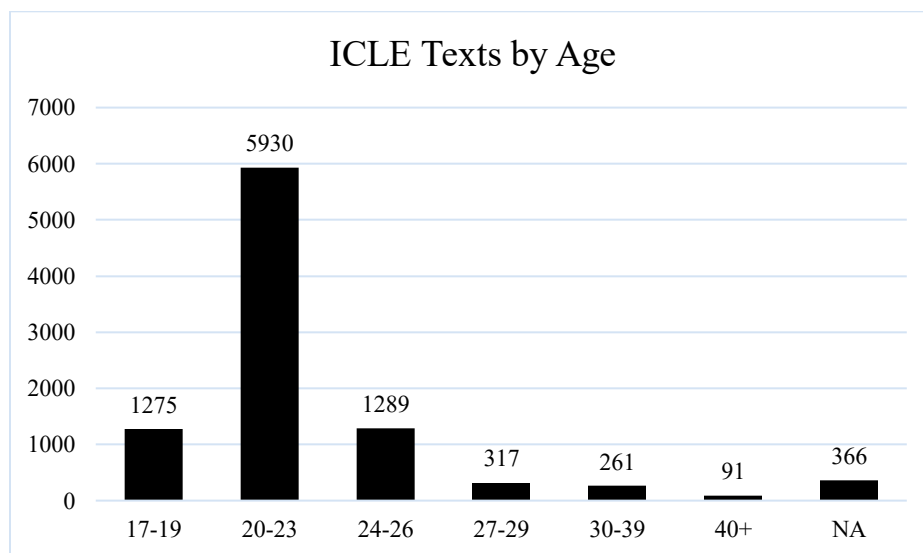
6.3 ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIERS IN THE ICLE

I chose to search for the adjective intensifiers *very*, *so*, *extremely*, *quite*, *really*, *pretty*, *absolutely*, and *totally*. These intensifiers are found in the research on intensifiers in variationist sociolinguistics (e.g. Stoffel, 1901; Mustanoja, 1960; Biber et al., 1999; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008; Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; D'Arcy, 2015; Wagner, 2017) and presented in EFL language textbooks (Fuchs et al., 2012; Ediger et al., 2014; English First, n.d.).

Intensifiers were also chosen to represent both a more formal academic writing register and a more informal conversational register. Biber et al.'s (1999) research using English language corpora for spoken and written English in British and American varieties showed that people use a wider range of intensifiers in conversation that are more informal than those used in academic writing. For this research, I chose four that are frequently used in academic writing and four that are used in conversation. *Very*, *so*, *extremely*, and *quite* are listed as adjective intensifiers that are frequently used in academic writing while *really*, *pretty*, *absolutely*, and *totally* are frequently used in conversation (Biber et al., 1999).

There are some other intensifiers that I chose to omit for the purposes of this dissertation. Some were omitted due to low numbers that wouldn't render any useable data. There were only four tokens of *way*, three tokens of *dead* and no tokens of *bloody* used as adjective intensifiers, so these not included. There were 161 tokens of *real* before and adjective, but they were all used as adjectives to modify a noun and did not intensify the adjectives they preceded, so real was also omitted.

There were 1,655 tokens of *too* used before an adjective, but while *too* is included in Wagner's (2017) analysis of the GloWbE corpus, I chose to omit *too* because its meaning

indicates that something is excessive and therefore has a negative connotation (Biber et al., 1999, p. 566). While there is a possibility that *too* could be used as an intensifier without negative connotations, it would be open to interpretation. For example, if we look at the sentence, "That movie was too good", too could be interpreted as an amplifier, meaning they liked the movie a lot, or it could be interpreted as excessive, meaning that the movie was overdone and they did not like the movie. Intonation of voice would clarify what a speaker meant when saying this, but writing does not have intonation. Therefore, *too* was omitted in this research.

The texts in the ICLE are lemmatized and tagged for part of speech (Granger et al., 2020) using the TOSCA-ICLE tagger/lemmatizer (Aarts et al., 1997). I was able to search the texts on the ICLE for instances of a particular form of adjective intensifier followed by an adjective. For example, I searched for *very* followed by a word tagged for the part of speech *adjective* and found 8,727 hits. Each concordance, or list of adjective intensifier bigrams presented with their immediate context to the left and right, can be downloaded as an Excel file and used as a data set. The metadata about each author is also listed on the concordances, so I was able to analyze the data based on the age and gender of the author for each usage.

I used the search tool on the ICLE online website to create and download concordances for each of these adjective intensifiers: *very*, *so*, *extremely, quite*, *really*, *pretty*, *absolutely*, and *totally*. There were 14,769 total usages of these eight adjective intensifiers in the ICLE corpus. Figure 6.3 shows the total number of cases for each adjective intensifier + adjective that were found in the ICLE search.

Total for Each Adjective Intensifier
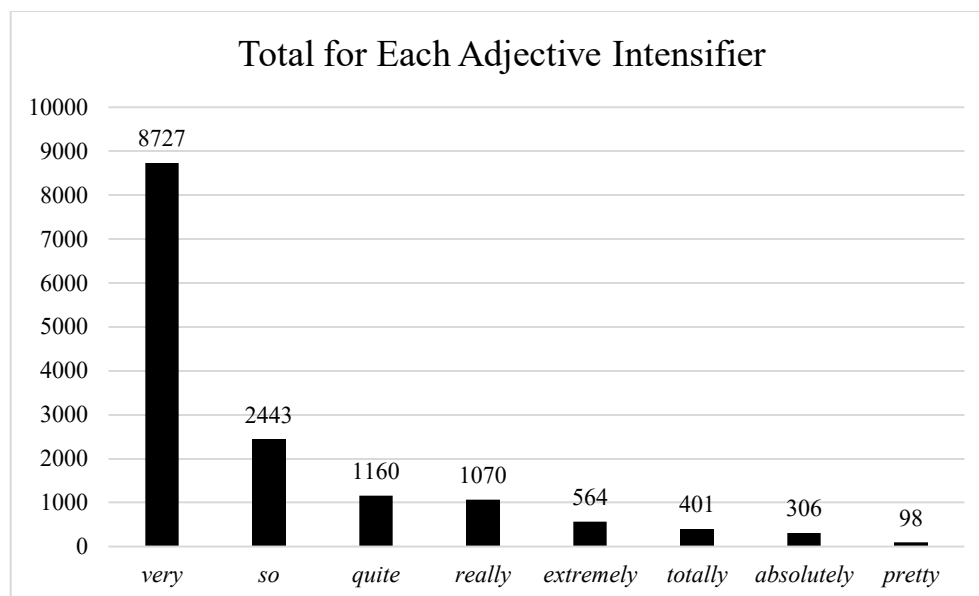
Figure 6.3: The Total Number of Occurrences for Each Adjective Intensifier in the ICLE

Figure 6.3 shows that the most used adjective intensifier by far was *very* with 8,727 cases of *very* + ADJ in the ICLE. At 8,727 cases out of a total of 14,769 cases of these adjective intensifiers on the ICLE, *very* accounted for 59.1% of the total cases. This was expected because *very* is the most frequently used adjective intensifier in the English language in academic writing in both British English and American English (Biber et al., 1999). It is also the most used adjective intensifier and British conversation while in American conversation it is a close second after *so* (Biber et al., 1999). *Very* has been an adjective intensifier in the English language for hundreds of years (Mustanoja, 1960). *Very* is also taught as the model intensifier in EFL textbooks with other intensifier forms, such as *extremely*, being added as equivalents of *very* at higher levels (Fuchs et al., 2012; Ediger et al., 2014; English First, n.d.). With its dominant place in academic writing and English language textbooks and as the most frequently used adjective intensifier in the ICLE, *very* appears to be the default adjective intensifier used by language learners in English language academic writing.

The next highest was *so* with 2,443 cases of *so* + ADJ with 16.5% of the total cases of adjective intensifiers examined in this research. *So* is used more frequently than *very* in American conversation (Biber et al., 1999). Since *so* is also used as a conjunction, I had to manually remove instances from the concordance where *so* was a conjunction at the beginning of a clause followed by an adjective that modified the subject of the sentence. For example, in "*So unemployed* people do these things to have money", so comes before an adjective but is not an adjective intensifier. *So* was the only intensifier in this research that had this issue.

The data in Figure 6.3 shows that *very*, *so*, and *quite* appear in high numbers in the ICLE as would be expected for academic writing. There is a lower usage of *extremely* than anticipated for an adjective intensifier frequently used in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999). Also unexpectedly, there was a higher occurrence of *really*, an adjective intensifier that is not frequently used in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999). However, *totally* is frequently used in American conversation (Biber et al., 1999). This increased use of *really* in academic writing could possibly be due to American conversational usage being disseminated through television and movies (Berman, 1987; Holly, 2001; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Stuart-Smith, 2007; Lívio & Howe, 2024).

6.3.1 ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIERS USED IN ACADEMIC WRITING

The adjective intensifiers used in the ICLE texts included those of a register appropriate for academic writing, *very*, *so*, *quite*, and *extremely*, and those that are used more often in conversation, *really*, *totally*, *absolutely*, and *pretty* (Biber et al., 1999). Figure 6.4 compares the number of usages found in the ICLE of intensifiers used in academic writing and conversation.
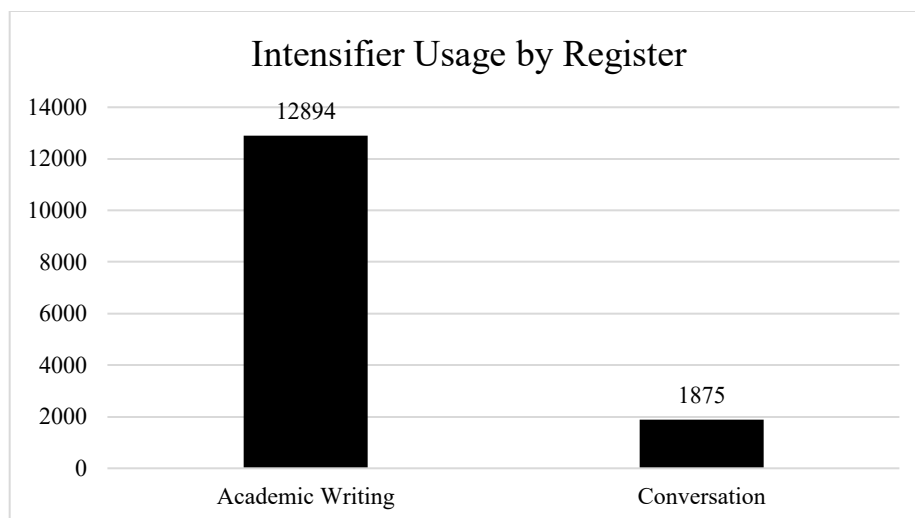
Figure 6.4: Total Number of Usages of Intensifiers of the Type Found in Academic Writing vs

Conversation

Of the 14,769 adjective intensifiers used in the ICLE, the majority were appropriate to academic writing. 12,894 or 87.3% of the cases in the ICLE were *very*, *so*, *extremely*, and *quite*, the adjective intensifiers used most frequently in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999). 1,875 or 12.7% of the cases in the ICLE were the adjective intensifiers used more frequently in conversation: *really*, *pretty*, *absolutely*, and *totally*.

6.3.2 TOTAL RATES OF EACH ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIER IN THE ICLE

Measuring the rate that each intensifier is used per text in the ICLE shows how frequently adjective intensification was used in the corpus. Table 6.1 shows the rates of each adjective intensifier in the corpus.

Table 6.1: Total Rate of Each Adjective Intensifier in the ICLE

Intensifier	Rate
very	0.9158
so	0.2563
quite	0.1352
really	0.1122
extremely	0.0591
totally	0.0420
absolutely	0.0321
pretty	0.0102
TOTAL	**1.5499**

Table 6.1 shows the rate that each intensifier is used per text in the ICLE. The rate was measured by dividing the number of tokens of each intensifier by the total number of texts in the ICLE. The rate gives a better idea about the frequency of usage of each intensifier on average in the corpus. An average of 1.5499 intensifiers were used in each of the texts in the ICLE. The most frequently used intensifier is *very* with a rate of 0.9158 usages per text. The next highest is *so* with a rate of 0.2563 per text. The third highest is *quite* with a rate of 0.1352. All three of the intensifiers with the highest rates are used in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999). The intensifier used in academic writing with the lowest rate is *extremely* with a rate of 0.0591. This is still higher than the rate of the informal conversational intensifiers except *really*, which has a rate of 0.1122. The intensifier with the lowest rate in the ICLE is *pretty* with a rate of 0.0102.

6.4 ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIER USAGE BY GENDER

Of the 14,769 cases of adjective intensifiers used in the ICLE, most were used by female authors. 11,805 or 79.9% of the total cases of adjective intensifiers in the ICLE were produced by females while 2,925 or 19.8% of the total cases of adjective intensifiers in the ICLE were produced by males. Figure 5 shows the total number of intensifiers produced by gender.
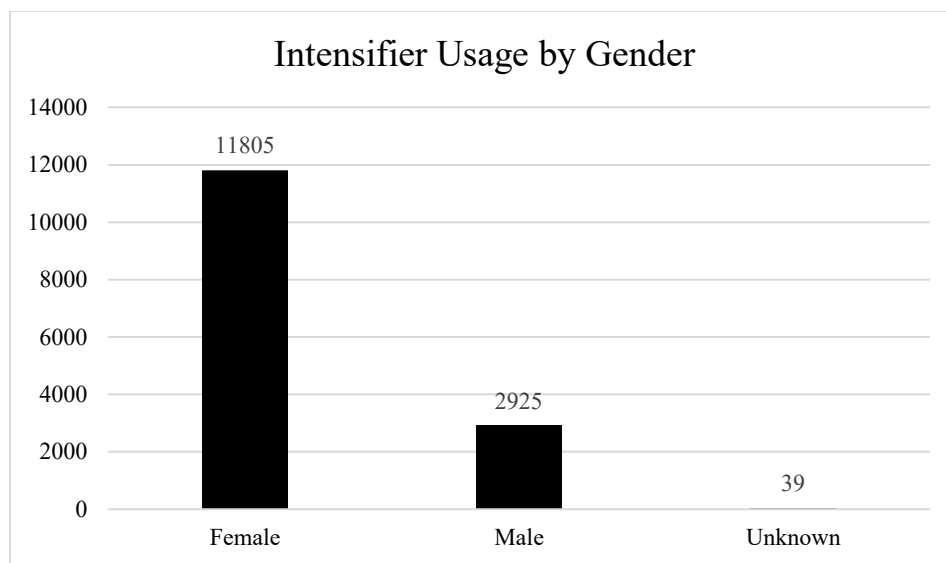
Figure 6.5: Intensifier Usage by Gender

The literature covered in Chapter 4 has shown that women and feminine people use adjective intensifiers more frequently (Stoffel, 1901; Zwicky, 2006; Tagliamonte, 2008). Comparing Figure 1 with Figure 5, 77.2% of the texts in the ICLE were written by people who self-reported as female while 79.9% of the total usages of adjective intensifiers were produced by females. Conversely, while 22.4% of the texts were written by males, only 19.8% of the adjective intensifier cases were produced by males. This pattern is very similar for each intensifier in this study. Figure 6 is a bar graph for each of the intensifiers: *very*, *so*, *extremely, quite*, *really*, *pretty*, *absolutely*, and *totally*.
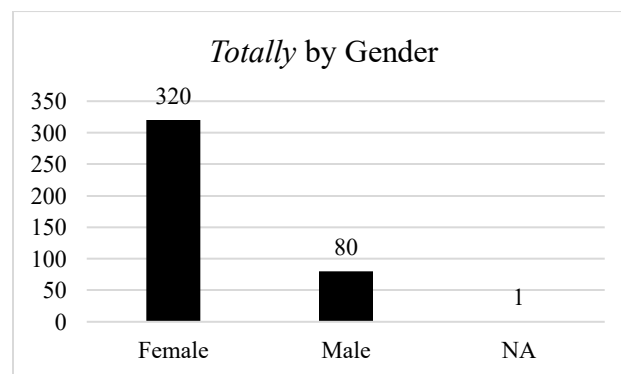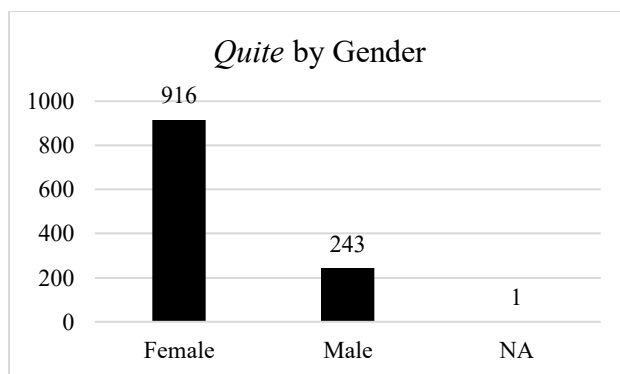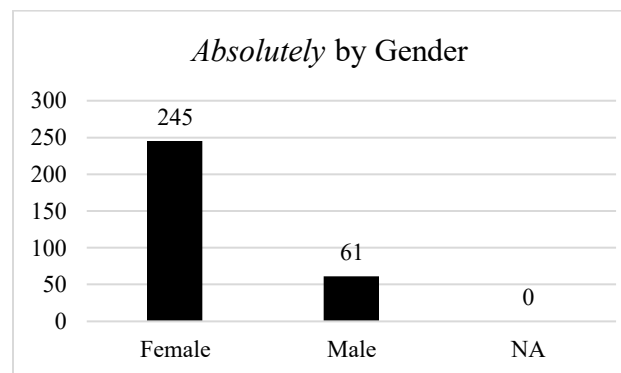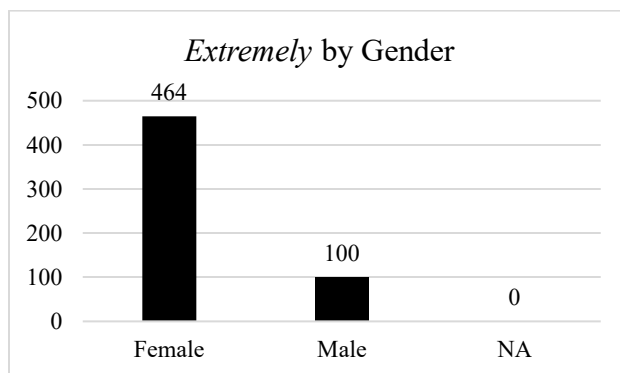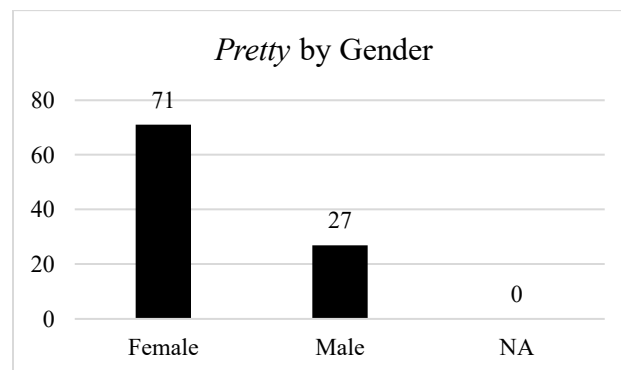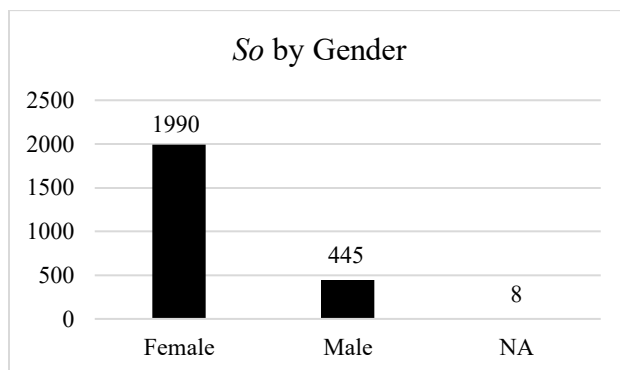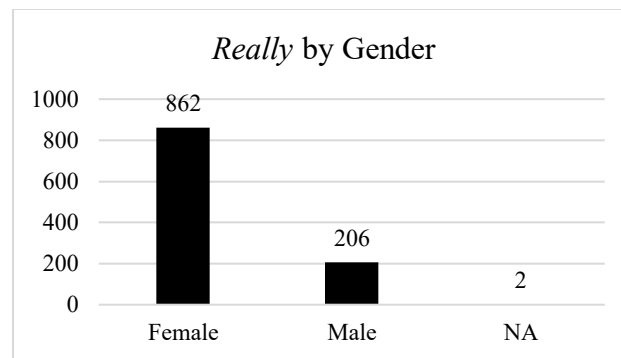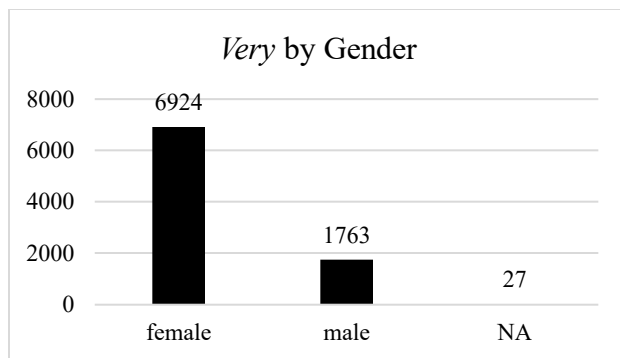
Figure 6.6: Bar Graphs for Each Intensifier by Gender

The bar graphs follow the same general trend as the bar graph on total usage by gender in Figure 5. This trend of females using more adjective intensifiers followed the same pattern for most of the intensifiers in this study. Table 6.2 shows the percentage of tokens produced by females and males or each intensifier.

Table 6.2: Percent of Female and Male Tokens of Each Intensifier in the ICLE

Intensifier	% Female	% Male
very	79.5%	20.2%
so	81.5%	18.2%
extremely	82.3%	17.7%
quite	79.0%	20.9%
really	80.6%	19.3%
pretty	72.4%	27.6%
absolutely	80.0%	19.9%
totally	79.8%	20.0%
Total	**79.90%**	**19.80%**

Females consistently produced around 80% of the instances for each intensifier while males produced around 20% for each intensifier. Looking at the percentages shows that *pretty* exhibits a different trend than the others. This can be investigated further by calculating the rate of usage for each gender.

To check if females did use intensifiers more frequently than their male peers overall, the rate of usage for each sex can be calculated by dividing the total number of intensifiers used by each sex by the total number of texts written by each sex. The rate gives us an idea of how many intensifiers are used on average per text for each gender, so it is a better way to see which group uses more adjective intensification in their writing. Table 6.3 compares the rate of intensifier usage per text for females and males in the ICLE.

Table 6.3: Rate of Intensifiers per Text for Females and Males

Gender	Rate
Female	1.61
Male	1.37

Females used 11,805 intensifiers in 7,356 texts for a rate of 1.61 intensifiers per text. Males used 2,925 intensifiers in 2,133 texts for a rate of 1.37 intensifiers per text. Females (1.61) use intensifiers at a higher rate than males (1.37) in the ICLE corpus as a whole.

The rate for each intensifier needs to be calculated to discover if *pretty* is indeed used at a different rate than the other intensifiers. To calculate the rate for each intensifier, I divided the number of tokens of each intensifier produced by each sex by the total number of texts produced by each sex to calculate the rate that each intensifier was produced by each sex. The rate of each intensifier is presented in Table 6.4.

Table 6.4: Rate by Females and Males for Each Intensifier

Intensifier	Rate Female	Rate Male
very	0.9430	0.8265
so	0.2705	0.2086
extremely	0.0630	0.0468
quite	0.1245	0.1139
really	0.1171	0.0965
pretty	0.0096	0.0127
absolutely	0.0333	0.0285
totally	0.0435	0.0375
Total	**1.6048**	**1.3713**

The rate of usage for females is higher for every intensifier except *pretty*. *Pretty* was used at a higher rate by males (0.0127) than females (0.0096). This matches the findings in Tagliamonte's (2008) study on Toronto where she found that young men use *pretty* more

frequently than young women. If the EFL writers in the ICLE are using *pretty* like North

Americans, this could be an indication that English language learners around the globe might be

learning this usage of *pretty* from North American television and movies (Berman, 1987; Holly,

2001; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Stuart-Smith, 2007; Lívio & Howe, 2024).

6.5 ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIER USAGE BY AGE

Of the 14,769 cases of adjective intensifiers used in the ICLE, most were produced by

younger authors. 9,589 or 64.9% of the adjective intensifier cases were used by 20- to 23-year-

old writers. 2,001 or 13.5% were used by 17- to 19-year-old writers. Writers between the ages of

24 and 26 produced 1,843 or 12.5% of the cases in the ICLE. Writers between the ages of 27 and

29 used 434 or 2.9% of the cases of adjective intensifiers. Writers between the ages of 30 and 39

produced 338 or 2.3% of the cases, and writers over the age of 40 produced 129 or 0.9% of the

cases. 434 or 2.9% of the cases were produced by writers who did not disclose their age. The

total intensifier usage by age is presented in Figure 6.7.
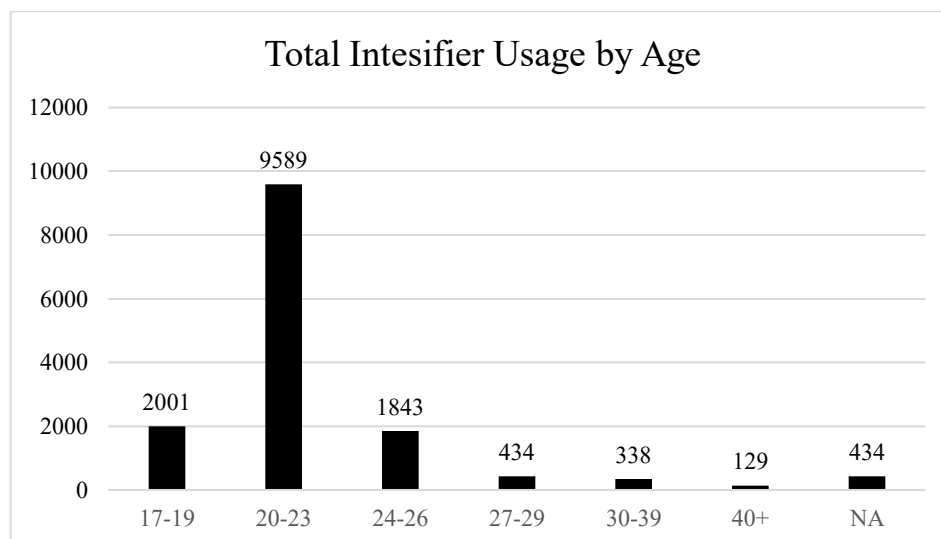
Figure 6.7: Total Intensifier Usage by Age

The literature covered in Chapter 4 states that younger people use adjective intensifiers more frequently (Stoffel, 1901; Macauley, 2002, 2006; Tagliamonte, 2008). Comparing Figure 6.7 with Figure 6.2, while the number of cases of adjective intensifiers produced by each age group closely mirrors the number of texts produced by each age group, the younger writers do use slightly more adjective intensifiers. While 62.2% of the ICLE texts were written by people between the ages of 20 and 23, that same age group produced 64.9% of the total adjective intensifier cases found in the ICLE. The age group of 17 to 26 wrote 89.1% of the texts and these texts contained 91% of the total usage of adjective intensifiers.

The bar graphs showing intensifier usage by age for each intensifier resemble the total intensifier usage by age in Figure 6.7. They all show a greater number of usages for the 20- to 24-year-old group. Figure 6.8 shows the bar graphs by age for each intensifier in this study.
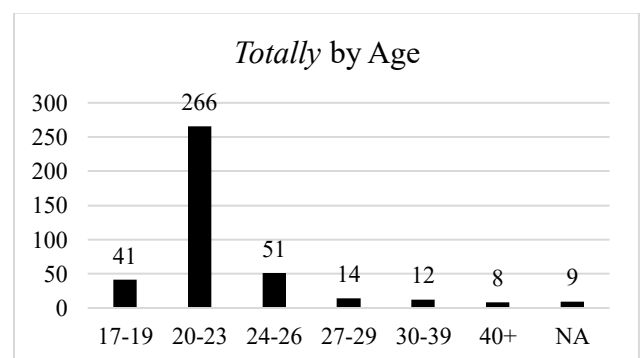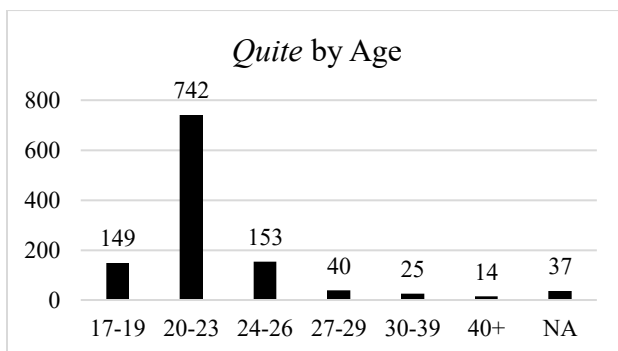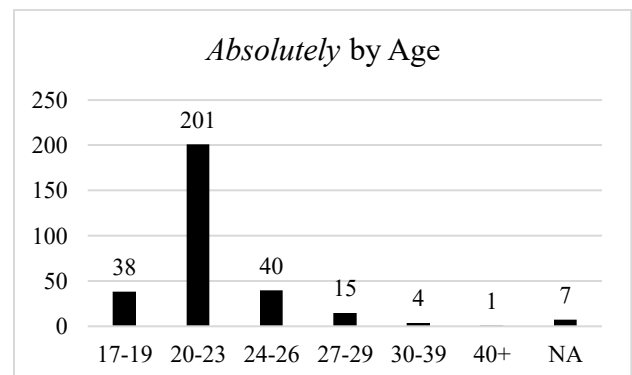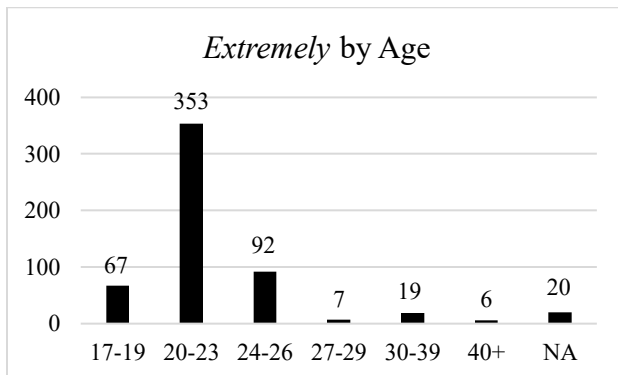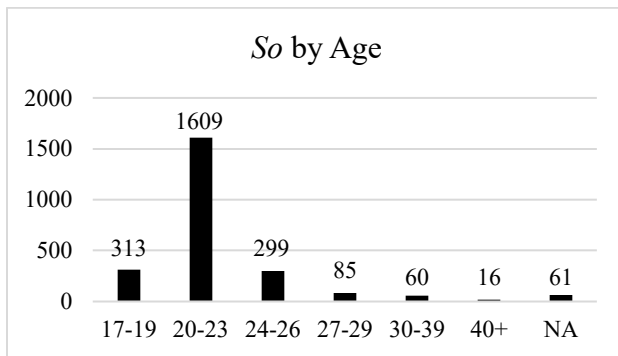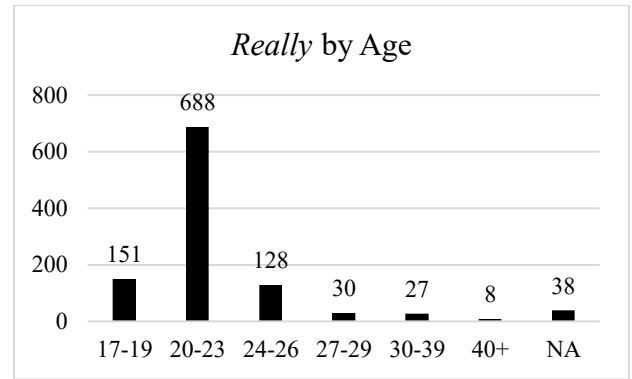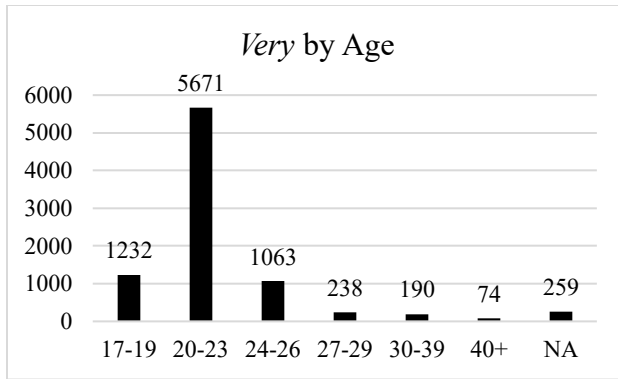
Figure 6.8: Bar Graphs by Age for Each Intensifier

Each bar graph shows that the group that used the most intensifiers were the 20- to 23-year-old group. However, that is also the largest age group represented in the ICLE with the largest number of papers in the ICLE corpus, so this is just a reflection of their larger number in general.

Investigating the rate of adjective intensification for each age group based upon the number of texts produced by each age group will produce a true rate of adjective intensification for each age group. This rate will give a better idea about how frequently each age group uses adjective intensification in their writing. The rate of intensification for each age group is presented in Table 6.5.

Table 6.5: Total Rate of Intensification for Each Age Group

Age	Rate
17-19	1.5694
20-23	1.6170
24-26	1.4297
27-29	1.3690
30-39	1.2950
40+	1.4175
NA	1.1857
Total	1.5497

The 20- to 23-year-old age group does have the highest rate of adjective intensification at 1.6170 intensifiers per text. The second highest rate is the 17- to 19-year-old age group at 1.5694 intensifiers per text. The rate decreases steadily with age to 1.4297 for the 24- to 26-year-old age group, 1.3690 for the 27- to 29-year-old age group, and 1.2950 for the 30- to 39-year-old age group. The rate increases to 1.4175 for the over 40 age group. This could be because the number of members of this age group is much lower than the other groups and therefore less statistically

reliable. It is also possible that the undergraduate students over 40 are very aware of their age difference and are unconsciously trying to socially fit in by using more youthful speech patterns such as using more adjective intensification.

Exploring the production rate by age for each intensifier form gives us a better understanding of how each is used by different age groups. I will begin with examining the rates of the four adjective intensifiers in this study that are the most appropriate for academic writing before looking at the rates of the more informal conversational intensifiers. Table 6.6 shows the rates by age group for *very*.

Table 6.6: Rate of *Very* by Age

Age	Rate
17-19	0.9662
20-23	0.9563
24-26	0.8246
27-29	0.7507
30-39	0.7279
40+	0.8131
NA	0.7076
Total	0.9158

The rate of *very* shows a similar pattern to the total rate of intensification on the ICLE. However, the highest rate for *very* is the 17- to 19-year-old age group. Very may be more frequently used by the teenage group because more than half (54%) of students enrolled in English language courses are 18 years old or younger (English UK, n.d.). They are more likely to have had more recent exposure to EFL texts and course work that use *very* as the model adverb of degree, aka intensifier (Fuchs et al., 2012; Ediger et al., 2014; English First, n.d.).

The over 40 age group has a higher rate of production of *very* than the 27- to 29- and the 30- to 39-year-old age groups. Tagliamonte (2008) also noticed a preference for *very* in middle aged and older people in Toronto. Perhaps this preference for *very* is what increased the total rate of this age group.

Table 6.7: Rate of *So* by Age

Age	Rate
17-19	0.2454
20-23	0.2713
24-26	0.2319
27-29	0.2681
30-39	0.2298
40+	0.1758
NA	0.1666
Total	0.2563

The rates of *so* by age presented in Table 6.7 follows the same general trend of the total rates by age with a higher rate of usage in the younger age groups. The highest rates with so are the 20- to 23-year-old age group and the 27- to 29-year-old age group. The 24- to 26-year-old age group has a lower rate than the teenagers. Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) research found that *so* was the most frequently used intensifier on the television show Friends; watching this show may have influenced the two highest group rates in the early and late 20s, but it does not explain why the rate for the mid 20s group would be so low.

The age group with the lowest rate of usage of *so* is the over 40 age group. This is what would be expected according to research that has found *so* to be an intensifier used mostly by young people while older people prefer *very* (Tagliamonte, 2008).

Table 6.8: Rate of *Extremely* by Age

Age	Rate
17-19	0.0525
20-23	0.0595
24-26	0.0713
27-29	0.0220
30-39	0.0727
40+	0.0659
NA	0.0546
Total	0.0591

Table 6.8 shows the rates by age for *extremely*. The age group with the highest usage of extremely is the 30- to 39-year-old age group. The 24- to 26-year-old age group is the second highest with the over 40 group not far behind. What is different about the rates for *extremely* is that the group with the lowest rate by far is the 27- to 29-year-old age group with a rate of only .0220 usages of *extremely* per text.

Table 6.9: Rate of *Quite* by Age

Age	Rate
17-19	0.1168
20-23	0.1251
24-26	0.1186
27-29	0.1261
30-39	0.0957
40+	0.1538
NA	0.101
Total	0.1352

Table 6.9 shows the rates by age for *quite*. The over 40 age group had the highest rate of using *quite* in their texts. This shows that this older age group prefers to use *quite* in their academic writing more than the other age groups. In the literature, *quite* is shown to be popular

in New Zealand (D'Arcy, 2015), so perhaps the older generation of EFL writers were influenced by New Zealanders. Or perhaps the New Zealanders and the older EFL writers were influenced by an earlier generation of British speakers who preferred *quite* (Biber et al., 1999).

Table 6.10: Rate of *Really* by Age

Age	Rate
17-19	0.1184
20-23	0.1160
24-26	0.0993
27-29	0.0946
30-39	0.1034
40+	0.0879
NA	0.1038
Total	0.1122

Table 6.10 shows the rates of usage of the intensifier *really* by age group. The teenage group uses *really* at a higher rate than any other age group while the over 40 age group has the lowest rate. Tagliamonte (2008) found that *really* was the most used intensifier in conversation in Toronto with young teens and 20 somethings. This data shows that teenagers have the highest rate of usage of *really* and that rate steadily drops with each older age group. This data indicates that *really* may have a strong social meaning for youth.

Table 6.11: Rate of *Pretty* by Age

Age	Rate
17-19	0.0078
20-23	0.0101
24-26	0.0131
27-29	0.0157
30-39	0.0038
40+	0.0219
NA	0.0081
Total	0.0102

Table 6.11 shows the rate of the use of *pretty* in ICLE texts by age group. The trend here looks like the rate is rising for each age group with the over 40 age group having the highest rate of usage at 0.0219. However, the 30- to 39-year-old group has the lowest rate at 0.0038. This dip in the 30 something age group may be due to the low number of tokens of *pretty* in the ICLE (98) producing unreliable data.

Table 6.12: Rate of *Absolutely* by Age

Age	Rate
17-19	0.0298
20-23	0.0338
24-26	0.0310
27-29	0.0473
30-39	0.0153
40+	0.0109
NA	0.0191
Total	0.0321

Table 6.12 shows the rates of usage of *absolutely* for each age group. The highest rate for *absolutely* is the 27- to 29-year-old age group at 0.0473. The 17- to 19-year-old group, the 20- to 23-year-old group, and the 24- to 26-year-old group all have rates that are 0.03 while the 30- to

39-year-old group and the over 40 group have the lowest rates around 0.01. The writers under 30 years old used absolutely at a higher rate.

Table 6.13: Rate of *Totally* by Age

Age	Rate
17-19	0.0321
20-23	0.0448
24-26	0.0395
27-29	0.0441
30-39	0.0459
40+	0.0879
NA	0.0245
Total	0.0420

Table 6.13 shows the rate of totally per text by age group. The highest rate of totally is the over 40 group with a rate of 0.0879, a rate which is around twice the rate of the other age groups. This does not seem to match with Beltrama and Staum Casasanto's (2017) findings that totally carries social meaning for youth. However, if this intensifier is also connected to the Valley Girl identity of the 80s (Bucholtz et al., 2007). These older speakers might be using this form to try to sound younger, like when they were young in the 1980s, to fit into an undergraduate environment surrounded by much younger people.

6.6 ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIER BIGRAMS

Adjective intensifiers are always collocated with an adjective in a pair called a bigram. Wagner (2017) examined adjective intensifier bigrams in the GloWbE corpus and found that *new*, *good*, *great*, *long*, *different*, *sure*, *important*, and *high* are the adjectives that are most frequently intensified in the GloWbE corpus. Table 6.14 shows the most frequently intensified adjectives in the ICLE corpus.

Table 6.14: Top 20 Intensified Adjectives in the ICLE

Adjective	Count
important	1325
difficult	602
good	480
different	455
useful	317
hard	299
easy	275
high	253
popular	236
bad	216
common	199
dangerous	188
expensive	155
interesting	151
strong	149
serious	149
simple	144
big	126
necessary	125
poor	114

The top eight adjectives that are intensified the most in the ICLE corpus are *important*, *difficult*, *good*, *different*, *useful*, *hard*, *easy*, and *high*. The adjectives *important*, *good*, and *different* are the only ones that match the top eight adjectives found in GloWbE by Wagner (2017). Since each intensifier is collocated with certain adjectives more frequently, it is important to see which adjectives each intensifier is collocated with more frequently in the ICLE. Table 15 shows the top five collocated adjectives for each of the intensifiers included in this research from the ICLE corpus.

Table 6.15: Top Five Bigrams for Each Adjective Intensifier in the ICLE

Very

Bigram	Count
very important	**1025**
very difficult	405
very good	317
very useful	261
very hard	182

Really

Bigram	Count
really important	**81**
really good	56
really hard	38
really necessary	36
really true	32

So

Bigram	Count
so important	**142**
so easy	110
so difficult	61
so bad	57
so good	56

Pretty

Bigram	Count
pretty good	**16**
pretty sure	7
pretty obvious	6
pretty clear	4
pretty big	3

Extremely

Bigram	Count
extremely important	**64**
extremely difficult	55
extremely high	26
extremely dangerous	24
extremely popular	14

Absolutely

Bigram	Count
absolutely necessary	**43**
absolutely right	17
absolutely sure	16
absolutely different	16
absolutely convinced	9

Quite

Bigram	Count
quite different	**83**
quite difficult	48
quite obvious	41
quite clear	35
quite sure	28

Totally

Bigram	Count
totally different	**118**
totally wrong	22
totally dependent	18
totally new	14
totally free	7

The intensifiers *very*, *so*, *extremely*, and *really* all collocate with *important* the most. *Very*, *so*, and *extremely* are all intensifiers used in academic writing while *really* is the most used conversational intensifier in the ICLE.

Table 6.16 shows the total number of different adjectives that each intensifier was collocated with in the ICLE.

Table 6.16: The Number of Different Adjectives Collocated with Each Intensifier

Intensifier	# of Adjectives
very	1041
so	659
quite	401
really	329
extremely	224
totally	155
absolutely	125
pretty	56

The data shows that *very* was collocated with the most different adjectives in the ICLE. *Very* was also the most frequently occurring adjective intensifier in the corpus.

6.7 RESULTS

This research examined the usage of the adjective intensifiers *very*, *so*, *extremely*, *quite*, *really*, *pretty*, *absolutely*, and *totally* in the ICLE corpus in order to answer research question 1) What adjective intensifiers are frequently used in university student academic writing in the ICLE corpus of written learner English? *Very* is by far the most frequently used intensifier in the corpus with 59.1% of the total cases and a rate of 0.9158 uses of *very* per text in the ICLE. *So* is a distant second with 16.5% of the total cases and a rate of 0.2563 uses of *so* per text in the

ICLE. Most of the usages were register appropriate for academic writing. 87.3% of the cases in the ICLE were *very*, *so*, *extremely*, and *quite*, the adjective intensifiers used most frequently in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999). Only 12.7% of the cases of adjective intensification in the ICLE were of intensifiers used in conversation.

The results of this research also shed some light on the possible social meaning of adjective intensifiers related to gender and age in research question 2. Females used more intensifiers than males in the ICLE. Females produced 79.90% of the intensifiers in the ICLE at a rate of 1.61 intensifiers per text while the males produced 19.80% of the intensifiers in the ICLE at a rate of 1.37 intensifiers per text. *Pretty* is the only intensifier of those examined that had a higher rate of usage for males, and this correlates with Tagliamonte's (2008) results in Toronto. It is possible that this usage of pretty has been influenced by American television and movies, but there is no way of testing this hypothesis without conducting more research. Research could be developed involving interviews of the writers about their media usage to test this hypothesis.

The 20- to 23-year-old age group produced the most intensifiers in the ICLE. Individuals between the ages of 20 and 23 produced 64.9% of the total adjective intensifier cases found in the ICLE at a rate of 1.6170 intensifiers per text. Younger people under the age of 27 used more intensifiers than those over the age of 27. The age group of 17 to 26 wrote 89.1% of the texts and these texts contained 91% of the total usage of adjective intensifiers. Over the age of 23, the rate of intensifier usage steadily declined with increasing age. There was an unexpected rate increase for the over 40 age group; however, this was statistical inaccuracy due to the small numbers of individuals over the age of 40 included in this corpus of undergraduate EFL writing. There was some age variation particular to individual intensifiers. Writers under the age of 30 used *very*, *really*, and *absolutely* at a higher rate than the older writers while writers over the age of 30 used

extremely, *quite*, *pretty*, and *totally* at a higher rate than the younger writers. The usage of *so* was rather uniform across all age groups.

CHAPTER 7

INTERVIEW RESULTS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This research employed qualitative interviews to gather data about how writing center tutors think about the use of the adjective intensifiers *very*, *so*, *extremely*, *quite*, *really*, *pretty*, *absolutely*, and *totally* in undergraduate academic writing. This chapter presents the results of the pilot survey and the interviews. The pilot survey was used to explore how to present adjective intensifier bigrams to research participants to generate quantitative data about their usage in academic writing. The lessons learned in the pilot were used to improve the interviews with the goal of generating better data. The goal of the interviews was to generate qualitative data about the social meaning in the use of adjective intensifiers and learn what kind of feedback experienced tutors would provide about using adjective intensifiers in academic writing.

7.2 PILOT SURVEY

A pilot survey was used to gather data from a larger number of writing center tutors to aid in the design of the interview protocol. The pilot survey was distributed to participants via writing center email listservs with an invitation letter, consent letter, and link to the Qualtrics survey in the email. It was distributed to the University of Missouri -Columbia (MU) Writing Center email listserv on November 4, 2024, and the University of Georgia (UGA) email listserv on November 11, 2024. There were 36 total responses that contained answers to the items. Of those, 25 were MU Writing Center tutors, eight were UGA Writing Center tutors, and three did

not answer (NA) that question. The percentage of participants in the pilot survey from each institution is presented in Figure 7.1.
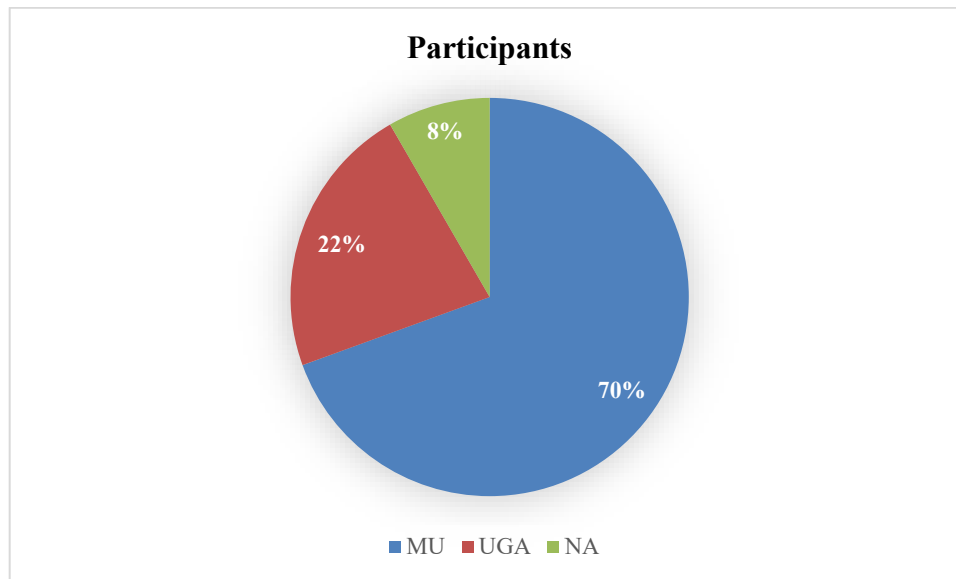
Figure 7.1: Percentage of Participants in the Pilot Survey at Each Institution

This pilot survey included five usages of adjective intensifiers presented in sentences followed by the five questions. The questions consisted of four Likert scale items and one multiple-choice item. The first page in the survey explained the survey, asked the participant to voluntarily disclose their institutional affiliation, and requested consent. Each sentence containing an adjective intensifier bigram was presented with the adjective intensifier bigram in bold and italics followed by the five question items. Recall that the first four question items were Likert scale items where participants could choose only one answer, and the last question item was a list of adjectives where the participants could choose multiple answers.

Survey Questions

1. Does the writer feel strongly about what they are writing about?

Strongly agree   Somewhat agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Somewhat disagree   Strongly disagree

2. Does this usage make the writer sound intelligent?

Strongly agree   Somewhat agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Somewhat disagree   Strongly disagree

3. How casual vs formal does this usage sound?

Very formal   Somewhat formal   Neither formal nor casual   Somewhat casual   Very casual

4. How old does this writer sound?

Teenager   Twenty-something   Middle-aged   Elderly   Could be any age

5. Which of the following describe the writer? (Choose all that apply.)

| Hip / Trendy | Annoying | Masculine | Immature | Feminine |
| Friendly | Articulate | Youthful | Cool | Old-Fashioned |

(Adapted from Vaughn et al., 2018)

The questions were designed to examine the social meaning that may be associated with each adjective intensifier. The first question was designed to get at the degree of intensification of this intensifier. An answer of *strongly agree* would indicate that the participant thinks that this usage amplifies the adjective to a high degree as a maximizer while an answer of *somewhat agree* would indicate that the participant feels that this usage still boosts the meaning of the adjective but to a lesser degree. The remaining three answers (in order) indicate that there is either no intensification or that the usage is a down-toner.

The second question was taken from the Vaughn et al. (2018) class project and is designed to illicit how *intelligent* someone sounds when they use this intensifier. This was likely originally designed to illicit whether there is any stigma attached to the form variant. Johnson and VanBrackle (2012) examined how stigmatized varieties of American English such as African American English (AAE) led to discrimination that negatively affected the rating of written essays for Georgia state-mandated college-level writing exam. Showing disagreement for this item indicates that the participants felt that this usage reflects negatively on the writer's intelligence and is therefore a stigmatized usage. For the purposes of the interview, I decided to change this to *academic* to see if it was considered appropriate for academic writing.

The third question item is designed to illicit a response about the register of the usage on a scale of formal to casual. The combination of this item with the answer from the second question may provide an answer as to how appropriate each intensifier form is for academic writing. I would expect the forms appropriate for academic writing to be rated as both more intelligent and more formal.

The fourth question was designed to illicit if there was any perception about the age of the writer based on this usage. There were options for indicating the age group of the writer or selecting that it could be used by any age. Since research suggests that some forms of adjective intensifiers can be correlated with youth (Stoffel, 1901; Macauley, 2002, 2006; Tagliamonte, 2008), some forms may be associated with teenagers while others could be used by any age.

The fifth question presented a list of adjectives from which each participant could choose any that they feel might describe the writer. The adjectives in the list can be associated with one or more categories of social meaning: age (youthful, immature, old-fashioned), novelty

(hip/trendy, cool, old-fashioned), gender (feminine, masculine), positive attributes (friendly, articulate, hip/trendy, cool), and negative attributes (annoying, immature).

7.2.1 SURVEY RESULTS

The pilot survey included the intensifiers *very*, *pretty*, *absolutely*, *totally*, and *way*. The selection of these intensifiers was covered in Chapter 5. This section focuses on the survey results for each adjective intensifier.

Very. *Very* was presented as an adjective intensifier bigram with *common* in the sentence "Smoking and drinking is *very common* for those who always go to bars." 33 participants answered the question items on this page. Table 7.1 shows the top answers for the Likert scale questions for *very*.

Table 7.1: Top Likert Answers for *Very*

Likert Item	Top Answer	Count	Percentage
1. Strength	Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat agree	12 / 10	66%
2. Intelligence	Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat agree	15 / 9	72%
3. Register	Neither formal nor casual / Somewhat formal	16 / 9	75%
4. Age	Could be any age	18	55%

The answers to Likert item 1 indicate that *very* adds only a slight boost to the meaning of the adjective. Adjective intensifier forms that have been in standard usage for a long period of time no longer have the maximizing meaning (Stoffel, 1901), so this indicates that *very* has been

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in standard usage for a long period of time. The answers to Likert item 2 indicate that *very* is not stigmatized and does not reflect negatively on the intelligence of the writer, and the answers to Likert item 3 show its formality level is not considered to be casual by the participants. These results reflect that *very* is acceptable to be used in academic writing. In number 4, the participants indicated that *very* could be used by any age group. This is also an indicator that it would be acceptable for academic writing over an informal conversational form that would be associated with youth.

The fifth question item was a list of adjectives that each participant was to select from to describe the writer of the sentence with each adjective intensifier. Figure 7.2 shows the adjectives that were chosen by the participants for *very*.
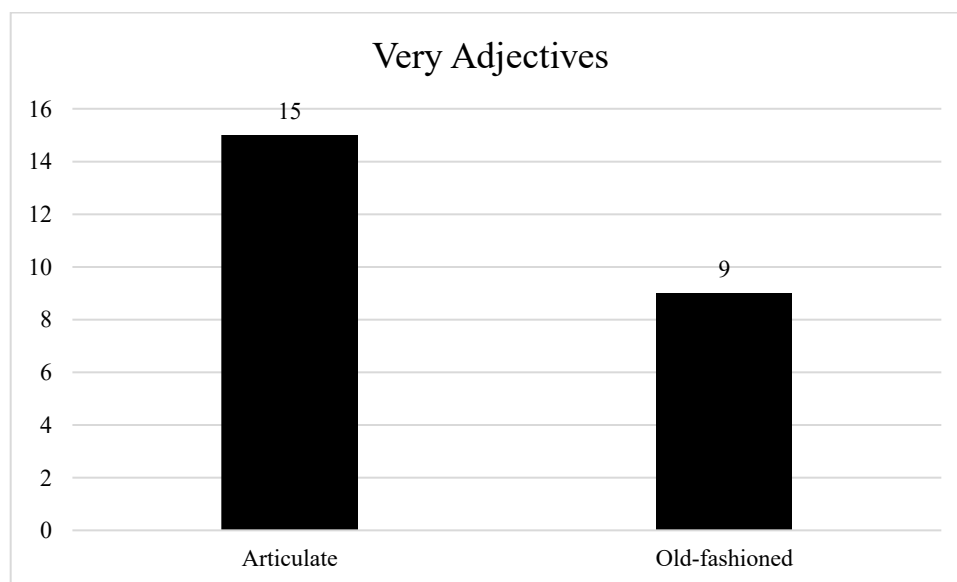
Figure 7.2: Adjectives that Participants Associated with *Very*

Articulate was the most chosen adjective to describe the writer, and *old-fashioned* was the second most chosen adjective to describe this usage of *very*. 45% percent of participants

chose *articulate* while 27% of them chose *old-fashioned*. The choice of *articulate* indicates that *very* carries a positive social meaning for the writer. The use of *old-fashioned* indicates that this is not a novel intensifier that is associated with the young (Tagliamonte, 2008). The participants' answers show that very is an adjective intensifier that is suitable for academic writing.

Pretty. *Pretty* was presented as an adjective intensifier bigram with *boring* in the sentence "They would also make a *pretty boring* conversationalist." 32 participants answered the question items on this page. Table 7.2 shows the answers to the Likert scale questions with the highest percentages for *pretty*.

Table 7.2: Top Likert Answers for *Pretty*

Likert Item	Top Answer	Count	Percentage
1. Strength	Somewhat agree	19	59%
2. Intelligence	Neither agree nor disagree	19	59%
3. Register	Very casual / somewhat casual	15 / 13	88%
4. Age	Teenager / Twenty something	8 / 8	50%

Pretty was rated by the participants as having a somewhat strong degree of amplification. It boosts the meaning but is not a maximizer. Most participants agreed that *pretty* has a neutral social meaning for intelligence, so its usage does not reflect negatively on the writer. However, it was rated with a very casual register which indicates that it would not be considered appropriate for more formal academic writing. Participants agreed that younger people under the age of 30 are more likely to use pretty, which matches with the results from Tagliamonte's (2008) study on adjective intensifier usage in Toronto.
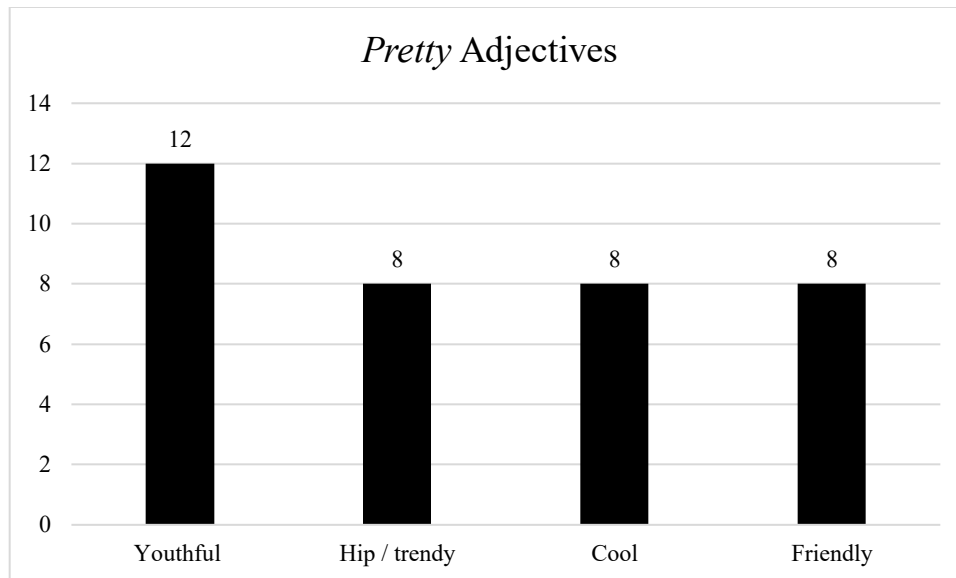
Figure 7.3: Adjectives that Participants Associated with *Pretty*

Figure 7.3 shows the adjectives that participants associated with *pretty*.Participants strongly associated *pretty* with being young. 38% of the participants chose *youthful* as an adjective to describe this writer. *Cool* and *hip / trendy* were also chosen at 25% each showing that pretty is also considered a novel usage. The choice of *friendly* shows that there is a positive association with using this word. *Pretty* may be too casual and youth oriented to be used in more formal academic writing genres, but could be used in a creative writing context to portray a television show character as being young, cool, and friendly.

Absolutely. *Absolutely* was presented in an adjective intensifier bigram with *spotless* in the sentence "Her nose is of an ideal size and shape and her skin is *absolutely spotless*." 34 participants answered the questions on this page. Table 7.3 shows the Likert scale answers for *absolutely*.

Table 7.3: Top Likert Answers for *Absolutely*

Likert Item	Top Answer	Count	Percentage
1. Strength	Somewhat agree / Strongly agree	16 / 13	85%
2. Intelligence	Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat agree	16 / 11	79%
3. Register	Somewhat formal / Neither formal nor casual / Somewhat casual	12 / 11 / 10	96%
4. Age	Could be any age / Twenty-something	16 / 11	47% / 32%

Absolutely was scored as having a higher degree of intensification with most of the participants somewhat or strongly agreeing. The rating for intelligence for *absolutely* was neutral or leaning towards the positive side, so it does not appear to be stigmatized. The register rating is right in the middle with it only being considered slightly towards the formal side of neutral by the participants. The age rating for *absolutely* leaned more heavily towards being used by any age group. Figure 7.4 shows the adjectives that participants associated with the writer who used *absolutely*.

Figure 7.4: Adjectives that Participants Associated with *Absolutely*

Most participants associated this usage of *absolutely* with being *articulate* and *feminine* where 65% of participants chose *articulate* and 56% of participants chose *feminine*. Absolutely is also associated with novelty and youth in a positive way. Based on these ratings, *absolutely* could be acceptable in academic writing due to its neutral to positive ratings for intelligence and formality, its association with all ages, and its association of the writer being articulate. However, its higher degree of amplification and strong association with femininity, novelty, and youth may limit its selection in more formal academic writing.

Totally. *Totally* was presented in an adjective intensifier bigram with *right* in the sentence "George Orwell was *totally right*!". 36 participants answered the questions on this page. Table 16 presents the Likert scale answers from the pilot survey. Table 7.4 shows the Likert scale ratings by the participants for *totally*.

Table 7.4: Top Likert Answers for *Totally*

Likert Item	Top Answer	Count	Percentage
1. Strength	Strongly agree / Somewhat agree	22 / 10	89%
2. Intelligence	Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree	20 / 7	75%
3. Register	Very casual / Somewhat casual	29 / 6	98%
4. Age	Teenager / Twenty-something	21 / 12	91%

61% of the participants responded that they strongly agreed that *totally* shows that the author feels strongly and another 28% responded that they somewhat agree. This would indicate that *totally* is a maximizer. 75% of the participants answered that they somewhat disagree and strongly disagree that *totally* makes the writer sound intelligent indicates that there is some degree of stigma against using *totally* in academic writing. *Totally* is also rated as overwhelmingly casual which makes it inappropriate for all but the most informal academic writing. The participants strongly associated its usage with teenagers and twenty-somethings. Figure 7.5 shows the adjectives that participants associated with *totally*.
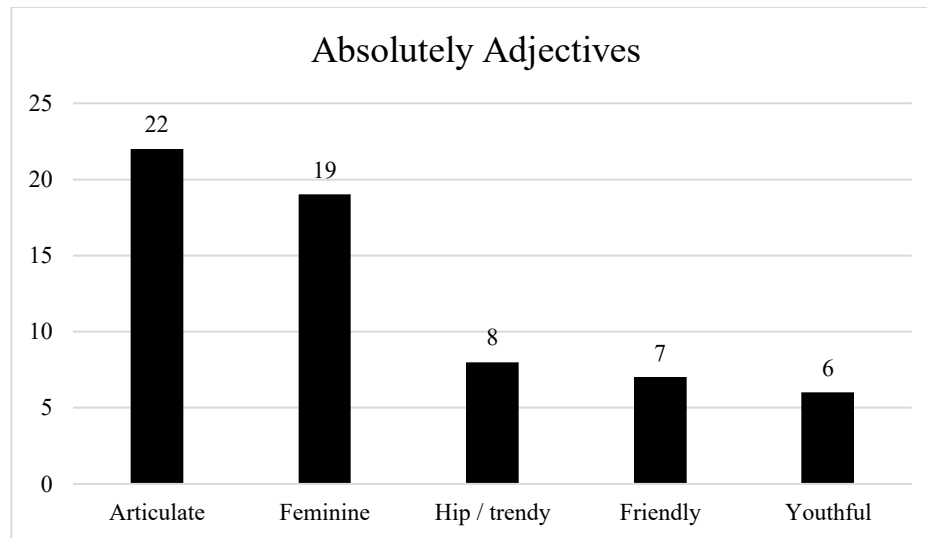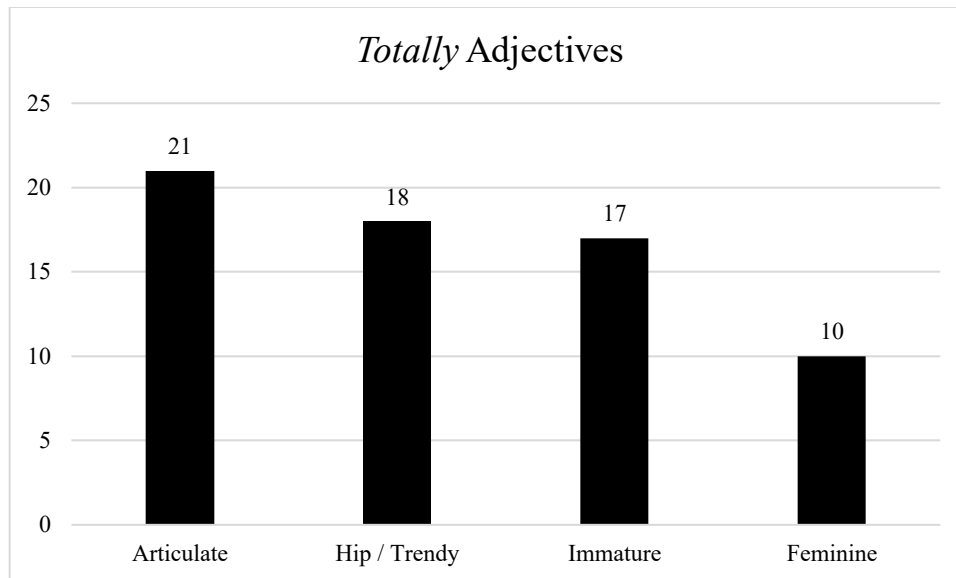
Figure 7.5: Adjectives that Participants Associated with *Totally*

Most participants associated the usage of *totally* with being *articulate* which suggests that it could be used in academic writing. However, it is also associated with being *hip/trendy* and *immature* which shows that it is considered novel language used by the young. *Totally* is also associated with feminine users. While *totally* does have a strong degree of intensification, it is not a good choice for more formal academic writing as it indicates low intelligence, extreme informality, and immaturity.

Way. *Way* was presented as an adjective intensifier bigram with *better* in the sentence "Being in a classroom is *way better* for paying attention to your classes." 32 participants answered the question items on this page. Table 7.5 shows the top Likert scale ratings for *way*.

Table 7.5: Top Likert Answers for *Way*

Likert Item	Top Answer	Count	Percentage
1. Strength	Somewhat agree / Strongly agree	15 / 13	88%
2. Intelligence	Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree	17 / 6	72%
3. Register	Very casual / somewhat casual	22 / 10	100%
4. Age	Teenager	19 / 7	81%

Way behaves very similarly with *totally*. It shows strong intensification like a maximizer, it reflects negatively on the user's intelligence, it is overwhelmingly casual, and it is mostly used by people under 30. Figure 7.6 shows the adjectives that participants associated with *way*.
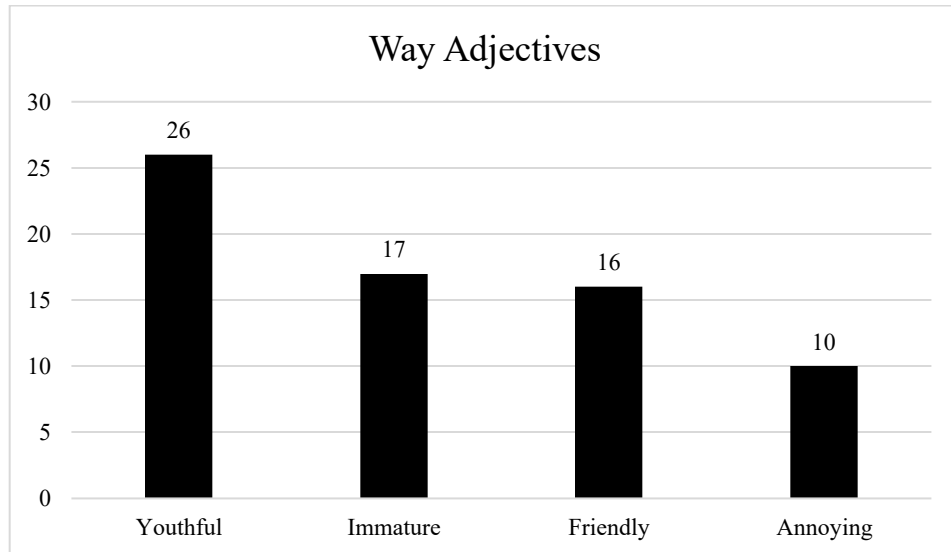
Figure 7.6: Adjectives that Participants Associated with *Way*

Participants overly associated this usage of *way* with being young and immature. 81% of the participants chose *youthful* as an adjective to describe this writer while 53% chose *immature*. 50% of the participants also felt that this writer was *friendly*, but 31% of them also found this to be *annoying*. For all of these reasons, the adjective intensifier *way* can be used in casual conversation with friends but should not be used in academic writing. This is assuredly why there were only four cases of *way* as an adjective intensifier in the ICLE as noted in Chapter 5.

7.3 QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

A qualitative interview protocol was developed to explore the use of adjective intensifiers in university student academic writing. Five writing center tutors from the MU Writing Center were recruited as participants. The interviews were conducted on Zoom in April of 2025. The interview protocol included two distinct sections. The first section of the interview involved questions about each tutor's experience in writing tutoring. This included questions about their experience tutoring multilingual international students and providing sentence level feedback on academic writing. The second section of the interview focused on adjective intensifiers in university student academic writing. The nine questions in this second section were further subdivided into questions that were designed to illicit the meaning associated with each adjective intensifier and questions about the feedback that the participants would provide to tutees about using adjective intensifiers in academic writing. Interview transcripts were generated on Zoom. They were anonymized using pseudonyms and coded thematically.

7.4 PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE IN WRITING TUTORING

The interview protocol includes an introduction that was read to the participants at the beginning of the interview followed by five questions about the participants writing center

experience, experience with tutoring international students, and experiences with providing feedback for sentence level grammar issues. These questions are presented below.

Interview Protocol Intro and Background Questions

1. How long have you been a writing center tutor? Have you worked as a class instructor with graded writing assignments?

2. Do you have experience tutoring international students in the writing center? Elsewhere?

3. Do you often give feedback about sentence level grammar issues when tutoring? What kinds of issues?

4. Do you feel comfortable giving feedback on grammar issues in student writing? Why or why not?

5. How would you define an adverb to a tutee? How would you define an adjective to a tutee? Or is this not something that you would prefer to do? (Why?)

    I was not looking for a dictionary definition here. I just wanted to get an idea about how the tutor would explicitly explain these two parts of speech in a tutoring session or find out why they might prefer not to.

The five participants in the interviews were one post-graduate and four graduate tutors with experience working in the MU Writing Center and teaching classes that involved grading student writing. Table 7.6 presents the participant backgrounds showing their pseudonyms, the level that they were at the time of the interviews in April of 2025, the number of semesters that they had been working at the MU Writing Center, and whether they had had experience as an instructor grading writing papers.

Table 7.6: Interview Participant Backgrounds

Tutor	Level	Semesters in MU WC	Instructor
Anne	Graduate	5	Yes
Bert	Graduate	2	Yes
Clara	Graduate	11	Yes
Dani	Graduate	5	Yes
Emma	Post Grad	9	Yes

The participants in this research had had at least two semesters of tutoring experience before participating in this research. Anne and Dani had each had over five semesters of experience working in the writing center post training. Clara had worked at the writing center for 11 semesters at time of the interviews. Emma had worked at the writing center for seven semesters as a graduate student before graduating last year. She was working at a college out of state and continuing to work for the MU Writing Center online for the 2024/2025 school year.

The gender identity of the participants can influence the data generated in research involving perceptions of gender identity in language. Four of the participants identify as female. The participant given the pseudonym Bert does not identify within binary male or female genders and prefers the pronouns *any* / *they*. The usage of *any* as a pronoun indicates that this individual is open to the usage of any pronoun, *he*, *she*, or *they*, as long as it is used with respect (Street, 2025). While conducting the interviews, I discovered that Bert had a lot more insights into the subtleties of gender meanings associated with the different forms of adjective intensifiers. Their insights made a significant contribution to this research.

The participants were all working at the MU Writing Center at the time of the interviews and had participated in the writing center onboarding training. For tutors who start to work in the writing center as an undergraduate like Dani, Anne, and Clara, this is a semester-long graded three-credit course available to honors students that includes training in peer writing tutoring

including appointment observations. Some of the undergraduate tutors continue working at the writing center when they become graduate students like Anne and Clara. Tutors who start as graduate students, like Bert and Emma, are given a one-week training at the beginning of the semester followed by a week of observations before beginning work as writing tutors. This training does cover a section on multilingual learners that includes cultural differences in organizational structure and a worksheet on sentence level grammar errors; however, there is no explicit training English language grammar awareness for the tutors or in providing grammar feedback for language learners.

Instead of training tutors to provide explicit grammar explanations, tutors are instructed to use their native speaker intuition to offer alternative ways of phrasing sentence level issues. The tutors stated that they were generally comfortable with providing feedback and talking about sentence level issues with tutees, and they were able to provide definitions of adjectives and adverbs in the interviews in everyday language that anyone could understand. However, they did state that they felt that they lacked the language to make explicit explanations about grammar rules. Emma said,

> The only time that I'm not comfortable is when like there are certain grammar rules that are just ingrained as a native speaker that I don't necessarily know how to articulate. I know this is wrong [grammatically], but I'm not exactly sure what is happening.

Many tutors will also google grammatical errors to find the words to explain the error explicitly. Emma goes on to state, "And then I don't know if many other people do this, but I will often look up [on the internet] the thing that I'm like, I know there's something about this and then I'll come up with what it actually is".

When students ask direct grammar questions, Dani looks up grammar issues online and teaches tutees how to google grammar issues on their own as a writing tool.

I've done lots of my own studying of grammar rules and things in my own time. … one of my favorite parts is helping students realize they can … do their own google search and stuff and … it's allowed. You're allowed to like look up the answers. And so sometimes if I don't know the answers to the [grammar] questions. I will help them find the answers and we'll do it together.

The tutors stated that international students make the most requests about help with grammar in their writing. There were 1,635 international students registered at MU in the 2024/2025 school year (Institute of International Education, 2024b). The MU Writing Center has had a total of 884 contacts with international students as of June 1 in the 2024-2025 school year out of a total of 11,464 total contacts (MU Writing Center, 2025). Each of the participants said that they had worked with multilingual international student writing while employed in the writing center. Those who had taught writing classes had also had multilingual international students in their classes. For example, in the interview, Bert reported,

I've worked [in the writing center] with international students at all levels, and the faculty member I'm currently working with is an EFL individual. I also previously was a TA at my undergraduate institution where we had a… probably around 20 to 30 percent of students in the class were international students.

The tutors commented that the writing feedback that they provide to multilingual writers focuses on clarity in the argument. Anne said, "In general, if something is phrased in a way that could make it seem like they're saying something that they're not, then I comment on it because that in particular is something that can impact argument". The tutors generally comment on a

grammar or lexical choice issue if it interferes with the reader's understanding of the argument. Anne continued, "I think it's really when it impacts my understanding that I make a sentence level comment".

All of the tutors mentioned lexical choice as a sentence level issue that affects clarity in writing. The tutors commented that they make comments on lexical choices in student writing because these choices impact tone, style, and voice academic writing. Bert said,

I always bring up lexical level choices. I think English is one of those things where it really matters in the verbiage that you use because there are so many specific connotations around that word choice that we use that's much more reflective of like tone and style, especially in like academic level writing, for example.

Lexical choice is of particular interest for this research because, in the English language, adjective intensifiers are lexical items, and their variation lies in the different words that available to choose from when intensifying an adjective. The next set of questions in this research focuses specifically on what the participants think about eight different lexical items that are used to amplify the meaning of adjectives in university level academic writing.

7.5 ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIERS

The next section of the protocol was introduced with a brief description of adjective intensifiers so the participants would have a clearer idea of the linguistic variable before continuing with the interview. Two sentences with adjective intensifiers were included in the explanation to provide concrete examples of how they operate grammatically in a sentence.

The eight adjective intensifiers that were included in this interview are *very*, *so*, *extremely*, *quite*, *really*, *pretty*, *absolutely*, and *totally*. Each intensifier was presented in a pair of sentences that were selected from the ICLE corpus (see Chapter 5) for a total of sixteen example

sentences in the interview. The pair of sentences for each intensifier was presented visually to the participants by screen sharing on Zoom during the interviews. After reading each pair of sentences, the interviewer asked nine questions about the intensifier usage. This process was repeated for each intensifier included in the interview. The nine interview questions are presented below.

Interview Questions for Each Adjective Intensifier

1. Based on this usage, how strongly does the writer feel about this? What about this usage tells you this?

2. Does this usage sound academic? Why or why not? What about this usage tells you this?

3. How casual or formal does this usage sound? Is this register appropriate for an academic writing assignment? Explain.

4. What age does this writer sound? What about this usage tells you this?

5. What does this usage tell you about the gender of this writer? What about this usage tells you this?

6. Does this usage sound more American or British? Or either?

7. In a WC tutoring session, what kind of feedback would you provide to the writer about this usage?

8. Are there any alternative ways of expressing this idea that you might suggest to the tutee?

9. In a course where you are an instructor, how might the use of any of these intensifiers affect the grade on a graded written assignment? Which ones? Why or why not?

The first six interview questions were designed to explore the meaning conveyed by each adjective intensifier. The first question focuses on the degree that the adjective intensifier amplifies the adjective that follows it. The second question asks the participant to judge whether the intensifier sounds appropriate for academic writing. The third question is about whether the register of the intensifier is considered to be more casual or formal. The fourth question asks about whether the intensifier might be associated with a person's age. The fifth question asks whether the intensifier might be associated with a person's gender. The sixth question asks if the intensifier is associated with a national variety of English.

The next three questions ask about the type of feedback that the participants might provide to tutees and students about adjective intensifiers as writing tutors and course instructors. Questions seven and eight ask about the kinds of feedback that they might provide to tutees about using adjective intensifiers in academic writing. Question nine focused on how using adjective intensifiers in academic writing might influence grading.

The interview results related to meaning of the adjective intensifiers are presented here in the order in which they appeared in the interview. Keeping the same order as the interview better preserves the natural flow of ideas and insights that were shared by the participants about each adjective intensifier. They are presented in this order: *very*, *totally*, *really*, *pretty*, *so*, *quite*, *absolutely*, and *extremely*. The presentation of the interview results for individual adjective intensifiers is followed by the presentation of the results related to feedback and grading for all of the adjective intensifiers.

7.5.1 VERY

Degree. The participants rated *very* as a booster of a middle high degree. Bert said, "[*Very*] is stronger than average, making it a marked difference to comment on. So, I'd say like

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probably middle high level of importance." *Very* was rated as being "relatively strong" by Clara. The overall idea about the degree of very was that it is boosted but does not have a meaning of completeness and is not a maximizer.

Participants did comment from the start of the interview that using *very* as an intensifier was not the most effective way to show degree in academic writing. Bert commented, "*Very* is like nondescript, as in like it's sort of imprecise like it's saying there is some strength there, but it's not quantifying that strength very much whatsoever." Emma even commented that, "If we're considering that this was written by an international student, then I think that they actually do think pretty strongly about this but maybe don't have the words that they're looking for." These participants thought that using *very* to intensify an adjective was too imprecise or vague for academic writing. The feedback that participants said they would provide to tutees about this will be covered more in the section on feedback below.

Academic. The participants did not rate *very* as an academic sounding intensifier. Clara, "I don't think it feels extremely stringent or too academic. So, right in the middle." Anne, "This one feels neutral to me because I have seen *very* used in formal settings, but it's not one that I see frequently in formal writing." Participants rated very in the middle as not sounding academic or non-academic; but they did mention that they see it used in all types of writing. Bert commented,

> I wouldn't say that I have a specific connotation for [academic] level of writing for [*very*] between like undergrad to professional. *Very* is typically a word that I've seen in all manners of writing … even in dissertations you may see people use it talking about a *very* strong correlation. *Very* as a descriptor, it's very common.

Bert also pointed out that this judgement is context dependent, "I think that it is an academic context currently, and I think as long as the content within the sentence is academic, then [*very*]

itself would be academic." According to the participants, *very* has a neutral academic meaning; it can be used in a variety of contexts from non-academic to academic.

Register. Participants rated the usage of *very* as being middle to casual. Some participants felt it to be more middle or neutral in register. Clara said, "I would say this is middle ground. It doesn't feel too casual", and Anne reported, "It feels neutral." Other participants interpreted it as being more casual. Dani said, "It sounds more casual." Bert and Emma agreed that the impreciseness of it made it sound more casual. Bert said, "I think it's more casual. So, in terms of writing, I'd say it's less formal because it's it has such, it has a wider berth because it's leaving room there to say, how much is *very*? Is it *very* a lot or *very* a little?" Emma thought this made it sound more appropriate for conversation, "Conversational probably. Like what is *very* is what I would ask. What is *very* you know? Yeah, yeah, it's more informal."

Age. Participants agreed that *very* can be used by writers of any age, but two participants commented that using it in academic writing made them sound younger. Dani pointed out,

> It could be any age, but I think it makes them feel a little bit younger. It's something I feel like I would see more towards like a high school student or somebody coming in and like starting to write their college papers for the first time."

Bert mentioned that all ages use it but points out that its imprecision makes it sound less professional and, therefore, younger, "I've seen it in writing at any age. So, to me, I wouldn't necessarily give it a specific age range, but I imagine it's probably more popular with young adults because more precise language would be used professionally."

Gender. The participants all agreed that *very* did not indicate the gender of the writer. Clara said that very can be used by "any gender". Emma said, "Some words definitely feel

feminine and masculine, but I don't think this is one of them." This form came across as gender neutral to the participants in this study.

Nationality. Participants did not report *very* as having any ties to a particular geographic or regional variation. Being American, Emma reported that, "It sounds American to me", meaning that it is commonly used here and does not sound like it is from anywhere else.

7.5.2 TOTALLY

Degree. There were mixed responses about the degree of meaning of *totally*. Anne and Clara both rated *totally* as being a maximizer with a very strong degree of amplification, while Dani and Bert felt that using *totally* in writing lessened the impact of the adjective and behaved like a downtowner. Dani said, "I would say it's a lower." Bert explained it in more detail,

> If someone said *some dreams are unrealistic*, that to me would be a stronger statement than *some dreams are totally unrealistic* because they're very direct with it. They're getting to that point much more quickly, and *totally* here to me, I feel like is so informal, so casual, that it's not as powerful as it could be by just being more direct.

Bert pointed out felt that the informality and indirectness of *totally* lowered the degree of amplification of the intensifier in the academic writing context.

Academic. The participants responded that *totally* is not a word that fits in the context of academic writing. Bert said, "For sure. I would say [*totally*] sounds less academic." Anne explained,

> The word *totally* is a word that I don't see written a lot. It feels more like slang or a word that's spoken in casual conversation with friends and such. I don't think I would even say *totally* in an academic setting or a work setting.

Totally is seen as so inappropriate for an academic context that participants recommended not using it in academic writing and not even using it conversationally in an academic context.

Register. The participants rated *totally* as being more casual. Clara said, "I think it sounds less formal" and Dani stated, "This feels more casual."

Age. The non-academic and casual register of *totally* caused participants to rate it as being used by a younger age group in writing. Emma said, "This to me makes them pretty young. I mean, they might even be a high schooler." Bert added, "I think non-academic is sort of like harder to quantify because people are at varying ages, but I would expect to see [*totally*] more from high school students, for example, than I would to see from other [age] groups." Anne added that people of all ages use *totally* in conversation while using it in academic writing makes the writer sound much younger.

> [My parents] are in their late 50s, but my mom says *totally* in conversation, but she wouldn't write it down. Whereas I work with high schoolers and I've gotten emails from high schoolers in which they use really casual language like this. So, I think how casual it is makes me think younger.

Dani, on the other hand, does not think of *totally* as an amplifier. "It feels like a filler word that kind of gets inserted when somebody's unsure like what they're unsure what writing about or wants to make the sentences feel bigger." Dani sees *totally* used as a discourse marker or filler word similar to *like* that is commonly used in conversation by younger people.

Gender. The participants found *totally* to carry a feminine social meaning overall. Emma said, "This feels feminine to me." Dani points out that *totally* can be used by both sexes in certain conversational contexts.

I think… there's a bit of an assumption that girls would use it more, but I can also picture a surfer dude using *totally*. So maybe [*totally* is] slightly more feminine but used by both. leaning a bit towards more towards feminine, I would say.

Anne gave an anecdote about the feminine usage of totally and how this plays out in. the family dynamic. "I realized that I clocked this writer [using *totally*]as a woman as well. I think my mom says *totally* a lot. And when she says *totally*, my stepdad kind of mocks her. He goes, *totally*." Her mother's usage of *totally* even in conversation attracts teasing from her male partner. This indicates that there is a conception in addition to the meaning of feminine that attracts derision. This mocking joke could be related to the Valley Girl usage of *totally* that is associated with airheaded valley girls (Bucholtz et al., 2007).

Bert explained a non-binary perspective on social meaning related to gender in language that sees gender meaning on a continuum between femininity and masculinity.

I'm more likely to be inclined to say someone who [uses *totally*] is more feminine. So, I may not necessarily say they're a man or a woman, but someone who's more feminine because [using *totally*] is something that I experience and see more commonly with women and also gay men, for example. So, I really think it more boils down to femininity and the level of exaggeration that I see typically like in an American context.

Totally is used to signal feminine identity by genetically female and male individuals.

Nationality. The participants rated *totally* as being very American. Dani said, "It sounds more American." Emma stated, "It's American to me."

7.5.3 REALLY

Degree. Clara felt that *really* is a "relatively strong" intensifier, but the other participants were less convinced of *really* being a significant booster. Anne said of *really*, "I think the writer feels strongly but less strongly than a writer who said *totally* or *very*." Dani agreed that "*very* does a better job of emphasizing the importance of something". Bert makes the same observation about *really*. "[*Really*] is also something where it's weaker than *very* if I were to make a comparison because *really* is, I think, a little softer overall in terms of impact."

Academic. The participants did not feel that *really* is academic. Some participants felt that it was no longer an amplifier in an academic context. Emma made a point about how she thinks of adjective intensification in general in academic writing.

> I don't think they feel very strong about it. I mean, *really* is obviously an intensifier and it kind of falls in the same bucket to me as *very*. It's a dead word in academic writing. Try to avoid it as much as you can. But, I feel like even *really* is not as strong as *very*, even though I consider both of them to be dead in academic writing, so I guess there's some variance there as far as which one is stronger. But, *really* I think is just a filler word. It's something like, we know this is difficult, but do I need to say that it's harder than just difficult?

She believes that the adjective already carries the meaning in academic writing, and that the adjective intensifier that emphasizes the adjective in conversational contexts has the opposite effect in an academic written context. Bert worded it more directly, "This to me is very similar to *totally* where removing it would strengthen this argument within a more academic context"

Dani admitted to having used *really* in her own academic writing. "This is one that I end up spotting more. I think it's potentially because I do it myself as a writer." And she continues, "I

had professors tell me not to use it or not to use it frequently if you use it." She has experienced feedback from her professors in university classes who advise against using *really* in academic writing.

Register. *Really* was rated as being more casual by the participants. Anne said, "*Really* also feels informal to me. I think the word *really* kind of again strikes me as a word that's spoken in casual conversation but rarely written down, especially in academics." Bert rated *really* as "Still more casual, like *totally*." Dani added an insight into why *really* might show up in student academic writing, "*really* feels like something that we use a lot in spoken language and that just accidentally follows over into written language."

Age. Participants rated *really* as being young. Anne rated users of *really* as being "late high school or early undergrad". Bert said, "I would also expect this to be more present for younger high school early college individuals who have less writing experience overall. Because to me, again, this is imprecise casual language." Emma felt that *really* is similar to *totally*, "Again, they feel pretty young to me. So maybe somewhere between high school and that freshman or sophomore year of the undergrad."

Gender. *Really* was rated as being more feminine. Bert added to their previous insights about how gay men can use more feminine language to sound gay and express a more feminine identity,

> I think [*really* is used in] more feminine presentations or feminine experiences where exaggeration may be more common, which includes like more effeminate gay men or other things of that nature where the exaggeration element is more pronounced within their language choices.

This perception of exaggeration being feminine is reminiscent of the view of feminine intensifiers and hyperbole from Stoffel (1901).

Emma was the only participant who rated *really* as being gender neutral. "This one, again, to me, feels pretty gender neutral."

Nationality. The participants rated *really* as sounding more American. Dani "I would say more American." Emma "Yeah, this feels American to me."

7.5.4 PRETTY

Degree. The participants rated *pretty* as being a relatively weak booster. Anne thought it was not much of a booster at all. "Pretty to me feels like *kind of*." Bert thought there was not much amplification associated with *pretty* when collocated with the adjective *good*. "I'd say this is probably the most neutral because *pretty good* to me is saying to me is saying *average*." Clara agreed that pretty means "probably *average*."

Academic / Register. The participants answered questions about academics and register together for *pretty* and considered it to be both casual and non-academic. Bert answered the question about using pretty in academic writing negatively. "No. For the same reasons as earlier. To me, this is very imprecise casual language that we be more likely to talk about and say as opposed to write. I wouldn't expect to see it in writing."

Age. Anne and Clara saw *pretty* being used by younger writers. Emma thought that pretty was used by a slightly older demographic.

> I think they're probably going to be a little bit older. Just because I think the use of *pretty* has sort of died out. I don't really know. Yeah, I think... I think this person might be like in their mid-20s or older.

Dani explained the usage of pretty in relation to conversational and academic contexts. "In spoken language, it could be anybody, but in written language, I would say more towards like high school age."

Gender. The impressions about gender for *pretty* were mixed. Emma said, "I think it also feels feminine." However, Bert stated, "Nothing that I am thinking of on an immediate impression either direction [for *pretty*]." Clara also had no impression of gender for *pretty*. Dani felt that *pretty* seemed a little more masculine. "I'm tempted to say [*pretty*] leans a little bit more towards like a masculine usage, but not much. It's pretty neutral as well."

Nationality. Participants rated *pretty* as being American. Emma, "It definitely sounds American to me." Dani, "I would say American."

7.5.5 SO

Degree. *So* was seen as boosting but was not seen as a maximizer. Participants rated *so* as being strong to about the same degree as *very*. Clara said *so* is, "Probably about the same as *very*." Emma agreed, "I think they feel pretty strongly about it."

Academic. Participants unanimously rated *so* as being less academic sounding and recommended against using it in more formal academic writing. Anne said, "If it was academic writing, I would recommend against using it. But, if it was like an email or a discussion board or something low stakes, I might not comment on it." Dani commented saying that *so* is "not quite like the college level writing you're trying to work towards."

Register. Participants rated usage of *so* as being casual to very casual. Anne commented, "I view this as more casual, but not entirely casual" while the other participants rated it as more casual. Bert said, "It's very casual language." The consensus was that it was more appropriate for conversation and writing that is not academic in nature.

Age. Some participants thought that *so* was used by younger people. Bert, Clara, and Dani agreed that this usage indicated a younger age group. Bert said, "Yes, yes, the *so* in this sentence to me makes it sound much younger." Clara stated, "I think a younger demographic." Dani thought it sounded "like high school"

Anne and Emma both thought that *so* could be used by any age. Anne said, "This could be an adult. I could see this being late high school to like 30s, 40s Parents. 50s even." Emma, in her 30s, admitted to using this herself in casual situations, "If I had to guess, they're probably my age. I know that I use this descriptor in my own casual writing."

Gender. The participants rated *so* as carrying a more feminine association. Anne said, "I would imagine this as a woman." Bert added, "I think there's a level of exaggeration that I would associate with more feminine aspects." Dani thought that *so* is more neutral but still more feminine. "It's also pretty neutral, maybe leaning a little bit feminine." Emma used statistical evidence from her own experience to deduce that *so* is a female usage. "I might be biased, but they could be feminine. I can't think of any of my male friends that are saying *so*."

Nationality. There were no strong ideas about nationality attached to *so*. The American participants felt it sounded American in usage. Dani said, "Probably, I would say American. Yeah." Emma stated, "Oh, it feels American to me."

Television. Dani mentioned that her opinions about adjective intensifier usage may have been influenced by the television show *Friends*, particularly in relation to *so*. "Friends might be where I'm getting my own personal opinions. I've watched that whole show."

7.5.6 QUITE

Degree. Participants rated *quite* as a weak booster and even a down-toner. Bert said, "This is weaker than *very* to me. Like it's *quite* different. It's not *very* different." Dani sees *quite*

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as a down-toner. "I would say in the use of *quite impossible*, it lessens the word *impossible*." Emma compared the degree of amplification of *quite* to *pretty*. "I think that *quite* and *pretty* are kind of in the same lane."

Academic. The participants rated quite as being more academic than the others they had looked at so far. Anne said, "*Quite* feels pretty neutral to me, but I think it's closer to academic than *pretty*." Emma said, "It feels like [*quite*] could be more academic than the other ones." Clara stated, "I think it can be used in an academic setting."

Dani saw *quite* as being less appropriate for academic writing due its vagueness. "It might be equally written and spoken, but it's one that gets inserted when somebody's less sure about what they're saying in a written sense."

Register. Some participants thought *quite* sounded more formal while others thought it was more casual. Anne said, "I would say it's a little more formal." Clara added, "I think it can be used in a formal way." And Emma agreed, "This feels a little bit more formal." On the other hand, Dani responded that quite "feels casual" And Bert thought that it involved some humor, "I feel like this to me is also casual language because it's sort of like I want to say cheeky." Bert explained his insights into *quite* in the nationality section below.

Age. Participants saw *quite* as being used by any age group, possibly even just older people. Clara said, "This one's a little harder to distinguish. I think it could be younger or someone a little older as well." Dani thought *quite* could "be any age even." Emma thought that *quite* was more frequently used by older people. "I think they're probably a little bit older. I don't even know if young kids even know how to spell *quite*."

Gender. The gender observations for *quite* were neutral to masculine. Dani summed up the responses nicely when she said, "I would say it's pretty neutral, but part of me wants to say it leans towards masculine."

Nationality. *Quite* was the one intensifier included in the interview that all participants agreed sounded British. Dani said, "This one might be the only one that I say feels a little bit British to me." Emma felt that all of the intensifiers sounded American except this one, "This does not feel American to me. This feels a little bit more British. Yep. It's a little bit more elevated." Perhaps it was this elevation that made *quite* sound more formal as well.

Bert said that all of his perceptions of meaning about *quite* are based on its being British.

> I feel like this isn't a word coming from an American. I would expect to see [*quite*] more from British individuals or individuals who learned more about writing from the UK because *quite* isn't very common in our vernacular. At least from my experience and perspective, anecdotally, it's really something I would associate more with a different continent. I would say it's less casual for an American context because it's just, it's very uncommon language that we would use. To me, it's very British. I wouldn't expect to hear an American say *that's quite impossible*. I'd be like, oh, that person has some context or relationship to learning English within a British or British adjacent context. I would say no to both [age and gender] because to me, it's so predominantly British.

For Bert, the Britishness of quite outweighed the social meanings involved with age, gender, and even register. The inherent cheekiness of sounding British made it sound informal to Bert.

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7.5.7 ABSOLUTELY

Degree. The participants unanimously thought of *absolutely* as a maximizer. Bert said, "Very strongly. *Absolutely* to me is similar to *necessary*. It's extremely strong." Emma found *absolutely* to be the intensifier in this interview that has the most completeness. "Yeah, this is strong. Without doubt *absolutely*, I think, is maybe stronger than *extremely* because it has, this finite quality to it."

Academic. The participants had different points of view about the academic appropriateness of *absolutely*. Clara said "[absolutely] is academic." Dani didn't think that it was entirely appropriate for academic writing. "I can see how it could get used in a first draft of writing, but one that should get removed in revisions because it doesn't sound quite academic." Anne did not think that *absolutely* sounds academic because it carries connotations that it is expressing opinion.

> So, it doesn't sound academic to me. Not because it's casual, but more so because, if a
> student is using the word *absolutely* in a paper, I'm thinking about if they're infusing their
> own opinion into the writing, and I'm thinking about if that's okay for what they're
> writing."

In a more formal argument, opinion may not be very convincing to a reader unless it is supported with something more concrete.

Register. Some participants found *absolutely* to be neutral to formal in register while others found it more casual. Anne and Bert found *absolutely* to be "very neutral." Clara said, "I think this could be used formally." On the other hand, Dani said, "It sounds casual." And Emma stated, "I guess it's somewhere in the middle for me. I mean, I guess it leans more casual. And again, for academic writing, I would just be asking for some more concrete details."

Age. The participants were mixed about the age for *absolutely*. Clara and Dani said that *absolutely* is used by all ages while Emma said, "They're a college undergraduate. Like, you know, 19 or 18 to 22, I think."

Like *quite*, Bert felt that there was another meaning that influenced *absolutely* more than other social factors.

I think I'm neutral on both [age and gender]. I think I'm more likely to see this again from a younger individual, but not particularly between genders or anything of that nature just because *absolutely* to me is a much more modern or a much more recent word choice. I don't typically see older writers using *absolutely* as much from my perspective, and this feels like more of something I would see from a younger writer.

Gender. Participants rated *absolutely* from neutral to feminine. Anne said, "I didn't think about gender with this one" Dani observed, "I think this one is like most of them, pretty neutral, but leans a little bit feminine." And Emma shared, "This feels more feminine too."

Nationality. The participants rated *absolutely* as sounding American. Dani said, "I think American."

7.5.8 EXTREMELY

Degree. The participants responded that *extremely* is a maximizer with a very strong degree of amplification. Bert stated,

To me, this is very strong. So *extremely* is like the closest thing we can get to *absolutely* and *necessary*. So, it's really, really, really strong. It's showing that there is overwhelming evidence or support for whatever point they're making. They're making this very intentionally, very strongly.

Academic. Four of the participants felt that *extremely* is an academic sounding adjective intensifier. Anne shared, "Yes. *Extremely important* I got on stuff" indicating that she uses this intensifier in her own writing. Bert said, "*Extremely* is neutral for academic tone" meaning that it is appropriate for academic writing. Clara stated, "It sounds academic." And Dani said that *extremely* was "more [academic] than the rest." However, Emma still thinks that *extremely* is not appropriate for academic writing saying, "Not quite there."

Register. There were mixed feelings about the register of *extremely*. Anne said, "I view *extremely* as more formal." Clara also said, "I'd say that's formal." However, both Dani and Emma said that it was on the more casual side. Emma said, "Yeah, I think, again, it's on that casual side."

Age. The participants rated *extremely* as being used by any age. Anne said, "I feel like this could be my age, like starting late in high school maybe and over 30." Bert stated that this intensifier is frequently used by people in their professional lives.

> I think this one to me is all age ranges. I see everyone using this. Especially I think this is a lot more popular once people start reaching professional ages because [it is used in] a lot of business type language to try and strengthen the argument or whatever point they're trying to make.

Dani saw *extremely* being used by people of any age, but with a lean towards more inexperienced writers. "I would say it could be any age, but leaning more towards like late teens, early 20s. Yeah, I feel like the use of any of them in a further along draft feels younger." Emma thinks that *extremely* is favored by older writers. "I think they might be a little bit older, like 30s plus. I think our younger writers are sticking to *so*, pretty, *absolutely*, or *totally*."

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Gender. The participants rated *extremely* as being neutral to masculine. Emma stated, "This one feels neutral to me, but neutral masculine, I think." Bert said "all genders" use extremely. Dani considered *extremely* to "be the more masculine counterpart to *absolutely.*"

Nationality. *Extremely* was not rated as having a nationality associated with it. Dani and Emma both agreed that *extremely* could be used by both British and American speakers.

7.6 WRITING FEEDBACK

The writing tutor participants recommended against using adjective intensification in academic writing or just using it sparingly. The reasons for avoiding adjective intensification in academic writing were mostly centered around how adjective intensifiers are considered to be casual and non-academic. Anne stated,

> I would probably make a comment about formal language and say something along the lines of 'sometimes your phrasing felt casual to me'. And since this is an academic paper, I might like say something about the assignment requirements or what it's asking for especially if their instructor says something about using formal language. I might let them know that it doesn't sound very academic. And I might make a joke about how it sounds like something we would just like say in conversation to each other.

Dani also stressed that the casual conversational connotations of most adjective intensifiers make them inappropriate for academic writing.

> I would acknowledge that this is a word that we use a lot when we're like talking with our friends and that it may not be as good for formal written form like papers or whatever it is that they're writing and either recommend that they take the [intensifier] out or find a word that accomplishes more.

Omitting the intensifier was the most common recommendation presented by participants. Bert said, "I think that if we removed [the adjective intensifier], the statement would be stronger." Clara recommended that tutees "omit [the intensifier] altogether." Dani also recommended omitting the adjective intensifier because the adjective is stronger without it.

I think that [the adjective] could stand on its own as a strong describer. [The adjective intensifier] isn't necessary to the sentence. I think, where they are trying to emphasize something. The [adjective] should be able to exist on its own.

Anne suggests using a stronger adjective instead of amplifying an adjective with an intensifier.

I think different words could emphasize how important something is and make it feel more important. I might offer some more formal examples that could be more appropriate. I might suggest using words that I view as less casual to replace [the adjective intensifier]. Like just one word [can be used] instead of *very important*. I might throw out some suggestions like *critical* or *necessary*.

Dani suggested,

If I were advising them on this and they were concerned about the uses of the intensifier pair, I would recommend providing an example instead of adding [an intensifier]. But a stronger way to do that would be to pick a good [adjective] that you feel like encapsulates the sentence. So, like let [the adjective] stand on its own and then provide evidence to further support [the adjective].

Bert's feedback focused on improving the precision of the descriptive language and making it less vague.

I would love for them to be more precise. I guess that really doesn't have to do with the

specific word choice they're using, but just saying how are we defining [the degree of

intensification] and making sure that there's a clear level of operationalization behind

the strength of that overall. So, that [could] be statistics like 'It was the highest selling

whatever' and quantifying it more based on an ordinal scale. So, if I'm hearing *very*

popular, I'm going to change *very* to *most* and then have something more concrete like

the most popular. Is there a specific number that we could draw in to say like, oh, *it was*

the blank most popular And if it was *the second most popular*, that again would be more

precise.

Emma referred to adjective intensifiers as "dead words" that did not carry any specific

meaning.

[An adjective intensifier] is a word that I would call a dead word in academic writing. So,

I would probably advise the student to choose a different word or to put in a fact [or

statistic] that states this.

Emma explained that these words come from vernacular usage and are not appropriate for

academic writing. "I think *very*, like I said, *very* is like a dead word in academic writing because

it's really part of our vernacular more than anything, I think."

Clara did state that there is a place for adjective intensifiers in academic writing as long

as they do not get overused. "I think using [adjective intensification] sparingly can still be

effective."

Some distinct feedback was provided for adjective intensifiers that were deemed to be

more academic. There was some feedback that was specifically for *absolutely*. Anne said,

I think I would tell them that they're coming across as very passionate if they were writing [*academic*]. For a persuasive speech or something, then that might be okay. If they're writing a research paper, then I might recommend against this word because I feel like it implies opinion.

Bert, however, thought *absolutely* fits academic writing in the context of social justice and would not recommend changing anything to a tutee. "If we're talking about social justice, to me, that would work within the academic context. I think this is fine." Clara thought that the academic qualities of absolutely make it necessary in academic writing. "I think that [*absolutely*] works here. And I think, in this case, having the modifier is actually important." On the other hand, Emma still thought *absolutely* is not academic and should not be used in academic writing. "I would ask them to get rid of *absolutely*. I mean, [the adjective] holds the weight of *absolutely* anyway."

Individual feedback was also provided for the other intensifier that was considered academic, *extremely*. Clara said, "I don't think that [using *extremely*] would have signaled to me anything that needs to change." However, Emma felt that *extremely* is not academic and should be replaced. "And *extremely important*. I mean, maybe I would say like *crucial* or *essential* instead of *extremely important*."

7.6.1 GRADING

The participants stressed that using adjective intensifiers would probably not affect the grade on a paper. Bert shared,

I would never grade someone's assignment worse or better off of one word. If someone used *so*, *totally*, *really*, or whatever, I wouldn't take points off on it, but I may comment

and say, hey, this isn't something that I would typically expect to see. This is something

that I find to be more informal or imprecise.

Clara said,

I think some [adjective intensifiers] would be viewed as less formal writing, for instance

like *totally*, *so*, *pretty*, or *really*. I think those could be seen more as casual. That might

impact the writer, but just their voice. So, no points off even for informal ones.

Dani explained what she would do in a first-year writing class. "If [adjective intensifiers] are

used frequently, it might make things feel a little less Academic overall as a whole. Yeah, it

would be something I gave feedback on if it appeared frequently." She would ask them to

address these issues during revisions before the paper was submitted for a final grade.

There was evidence of professors giving prescriptive advice associated with adjective

intensifier usage in academic writing. One participant recalled a professor said not to use *really*

in academic writing.

7.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented the results for the pilot survey and qualitative interviews. The next

chapter will discuss these results together with the results of the corpus research from Chapter 6

based on the themes that have emerged related to the discussions about adjective intensifiers in

the literature.

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I synthesize the results of the corpus research, the survey, and the interview about adjective intensifiers in academic writing and relate them to the discussions from the academic literature. The discussion is organized based on the themes that came out of the results of all three of these research projects.

8.2 ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIERS

The findings showed that there is a great deal of interaction among degree, register, age, gender, and nationality in an academic context that can completely change the way a variant is perceived in writing. These interactions also affect whether an adjective intensifier is considered to be suitable for usage in an academic writing context in ways that were unexpected.

8.2.1 DEGREE

Some adjective intensifiers were found to boost to a higher degree than others. However, the results from the interviews about the degree of amplification of certain adjective intensifiers did not always align with the existing literature or the pilot survey. This was because the interview was clearly focusing on the usages of adjective intensifiers in the context of academic writing while the pilot survey was asking about the usages in general and much of the literature has focused on an informal conversational context. For example, in the pilot survey, *totally* was rated as the strongest amplifier, and its use as a maximizer is agreed upon in the literature (Kennedy & McNally, 2005; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Beltrama & Staum Casasanto,

2017). In contrast, in the interviews some participants responded that *totally* weakened the meaning of the adjective in academic writing because of its informality. The mismatch of using a casual maximizer in the formal context of academic writing caused *totally* to be perceived as a down-toner. This perception does not only apply to *totally*. The adjective intensifiers *really* and *so* were also rated as having a lower degree of intensification due to their being too casual for use in academic writing.

The adverbs *pretty* and *quite* were both considered to be weak boosters or even down-toners by the participants in the interviews. From the examples included in the interview protocol, *pretty good* and *pretty expensive* were rated as meaning *kind of* or *average*, and in both of the examples with *quite*, *quite different* and *quite impossible*, participants mentioned that the meanings of the adjectives were lessened by the addition of *quite*. This agrees with Biber et al.'s (1999) assessment that *pretty* and *quite* are non-amplifier degree adverbs (p. 567); however, Biber et al. (1999) gives some examples where *pretty* and *quite* are amplifying the meaning in conversation. This perceived weakening may again be due to the use of low register intensifiers in the academic writing context.

The adjective intensifiers rated to the highest degree were *absolutely* and *extremely*. These maximizers carried the most meaning of completeness.

8.2.2 REGISTER

Adjective intensifiers were considered a more casual way of modifying the degree of an adjective. Every intensifier included in this research, *very*, *totally*, *really*, *pretty*, *so*, *quite*, *absolutely*, and *extremely*, was considered casual by at least one participant in the interviews due to their vague and imprecise meaning. Many participants in the interviews stated that adjective intensifiers are a vague and imprecise way of amplifying an adjective that does not work in an

academic context due to their not having a quantifiable meaning. Therefore, they are all casual usages. However, there was more agreement in the casual register of some forms and greater variation in the assessment of others.

All of the participants agreed that *totally*, *really*, *pretty*, and *so* were more casual usages that were not appropriate for more formal academic writing. This matches Biber et al.'s (1999) corpus research findings that showed that *totally*, *really*, and *pretty* are only used in a conversational context and not used in academic writing. However, this perception did not match their findings for *so*, which was found to be used in an academic writing context (p. 565). *So* was also the second most common adjective intensifier used in the ICLE corpus of EFL academic writing after *very*. *Very* itself was rated as neutral to more casual in register by interview participants while it was the most commonly used adjective intensifier in the ICLE and the most used adjective intensifier in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999). According to Biber et al. (1999), both *so* and *very* are also commonly used in conversation. The fact that they are commonly used in language of all registers may have made them seem less specialized for academic writing.

If using *very* and *so* in language of all registers makes them seem less specialized for academic writing and therefore more casual overall, then an intensifier that is almost exclusively used in academic writing should seem more formal overall. *Extremely* is used in academic writing and not so much in conversation (Biber et al., 1999, p. 565). It was rated as being more formal by some participants and appropriate for academic and even professional language. However, some participants still thought that even *extremely* was more informal due to the vague and imprecise nature of adjective intensifiers.

Extremely, *quite* and *absolutely* were the only intensifiers included in this study that were rated as being more formal by some participants. *Quite* is like *so* and *very* in that it is used in both conversational and academic writing contexts (Biber et al., 1999). *Quite* is also used more by the British (Biber at al., 1999) and this British element made it sound more formal to the American participants in the interview (Bert). On the other hand, *absolutely* is an adjective intensifier used in conversation that is not frequently used in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999) that interview participants rated as being formal, neutral, and casual. Its formality was attributed to its degree of completeness, while its informality was attributed to its connotations of opinion, which may not be appropriate for forming arguments in a more formal genre.

8.2.3 AGE

Younger writers use adjective intensifiers more often in writing than older writers. 91% of the total usage of adjective intensifiers in the ICLE was produced by writers under the age of 27. Younger writers between the ages of 17 and 26 also used adjective intensification at a higher rate per text than any other age group in the ICLE. The data from the survey and interviews also showed that adjective intensification is perceived as being used by younger people in writing in general. The data from the interviews and the survey showed that adjective intensifiers are put into two groups based on the perceived age of the writer. The intensifiers *totally*, *really*, and *pretty* were rated as being strong indicators that a writer was a teenager or in their early 20s. This rating was almost unanimous; one participant rated *pretty* as an intensifier that was preferred by slightly older people and no longer used by people in their mid-twenties or younger.

The intensifiers *very*, *so*, *quite*, *absolutely*, and *extremely* were rated as being used by people of any age. The intensifiers *very*, *so*, *quite*, and *extremely* are listed as adjective intensifiers that are commonly used in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999). It seems reasonable

that the intensifiers used more frequently in academic writing would be perceived as being used by all ages, but, when used in academic writing, some participants stated that they make the writer seem younger and inexperienced as a writer. The fact that some participants perceived even the more academic intensifiers as being produced by younger more inexperienced writers indicates that adjective intensification in general is perceived as inappropriate for more formal academic and professional writing.

While *absolutely* has predominantly been found in conversational contexts (Biber et al., 1999), it has been rated to behave like the intensifiers used in academic writing: *very*, *so*, *quite*, and *extremely*. The participants in both the interviews and the survey indicated that *absolutely* can be used by writers of any age indicating that it may be changing to become an intensifier that is more commonly used in academic writing, at least by undergraduates.

8.2.4 GENDER

Some adjective intensifiers can have a wide range of gender associations, but the overall impression is that adjective intensification is more feminine (Stoffel, 1901; Zwicky, 2006; Tagliamonte, 2008). Females produced 79.9% of the total cases of adjective intensification found in the ICLE and produced them at a higher rate per text than the males. The ICLE corpus results and interview results indicate that most intensifiers are considered more feminine. While some intensifiers have a more neutral gender association, few intensifiers have been associated with more masculine usage.

The intensifiers *totally*, *really*, *so*, and *absolutely* were all perceived as being more feminine by the participants. The interview participants described gender on a continuum between more feminine and more masculine. The more feminine side of the continuum included females and gay men who identify as more feminine. This is expressed in their language usage

through "exaggeration" (Bert) that is associated with the usage of these intensifiers. This idea is very similar the idea that females have a "fondness … for hyperbole" (Jespersen,1922, p. 250). Stoffel (1901) mentions that this is shared by both females and more feminine men. These conclusions still seem relevant over 100 years later.

The findings from this research indicate that *so* and *pretty* align with the literature on gender. Research in North America (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008) has shown that *so* is used more frequently by females. This research has also shown that *pretty* is used more frequently by males. The ICLE corpus results support this observation with *so* being used by females at a higher rate and *pretty* being used by males at a higher rate in the corpus. In fact, *pretty* was the only adjective intensifier in the corpus that was used at a higher rate by males. In the interviews, *pretty* had more mixed perceptions. It was one of the only intensifiers, along with *quite* and *extremely*, that to was rated as being a little more masculine by some participants.

Pretty, *quite*, *extremely*, and *very* were all rated as being more gender neutral overall in the interviews. *Quite*, *extremely*, and *very* were used at a higher rate by females in the ICLE. The perceptions of gender in adjective intensification seems to range from being overtly feminine like *totally*, *really*, *so*, and *absolutely*, to being more gender neutral like *very*, *pretty*, *quite*, and *extremely*. Apart from *pretty*, the more gender-neutral intensifiers only seem to be associated with masculinity by default because they were more frequently used by females. *Pretty* is the only intensifier that seems to have a more masculine usage.

8.2.5 NATIONALITY

The North American interview participants considered all of the intensifiers except *quite* to be American. The British use *quite* in conversation much more frequently than Americans

(Biber et al., 1999). The participants in the interviews all agreed that *quite* sounded British. This perception of being British also affected their perceptions of *quite* in relation to other themes. The participants stated that the Britishness of *quite* made it seem more formal in register, older in age, and more neutral to masculine in gender for some participants. The Britishness also made some participants evaluate *quite* as more appropriate for use in academic writing.

8.3 ACADEMIC WRITING

Adjective intensification is generally considered inappropriate in academic writing with a few exceptions. Adjective intensification is used infrequently overall in the ICLE corpus. The total rate of adjective intensification in the ICLE corpus is only 1.5 adjective intensifiers per text with some writers using it far more frequently than others. The intensifiers *totally*, *really*, *pretty*, and *so* were rated to be inappropriate for an academic context. *Very*, the most frequently used intensifier in the ICLE by far, was rated as academically neutral by interview participants. Participants did state that *very* is used in the broadest range of contexts; however, they said that it only became academic when used in an academic context. Even the intensifiers that were rated as being more academic by some participants, *quite*, *absolutely*, and *extremely*, were also rated as non-academic by other participants. While *totally*, *really*, *pretty*, and *so* were rated as being unanimously non-academic, no single intensifier was unanimously rated as being academic.

8.4 WRITING FEEDBACK

The writing tutor participants agreed that adjective intensification is often too casual, imprecise, and vague for use in academic writing. *Totally*, *really*, *pretty*, and *so* were only considered appropriate for more casual conversational language, possibly to show solidarity between speakers (Beltrama & Staum Casasanto, 2017) and identify as being LGBTQ+ (Bert). *Very* was only considered academic within an academic context, and even then, writing tutors

suggested replacing it with more precise language like statistics to make it more academic. *Quite* only sounded appropriate in academic writing to some participants because of its Britishness. *Absolutely* and *extremely* were considered appropriate for academic writing by some participants because their maximizing degree indicates completeness. Feedback recommends using adjective intensification less in academic writing. Writing tutors recommend deleting the adjective intensifier and using the adjective on its own or using statistics to persuade the reader to see your position in an argument.

While writing center tutors may have little formal training in explicit sentence level grammar explanations (Matsuda, 2006a, 2006b, 20212), the writing tutor's role is in helping writers understand and prioritize academic writing conventions (Rafoth, 2014). Writing center tutors use intuitive language knowledge to make recommendations to tutees about grammatical and lexical issues at the sentence level. Since adjective intensifiers in English are lexical items, this includes knowledge about the appropriateness of certain adjective intensifiers in academic writing and ways that it can be improved for clarity. Writing feedback generally includes detailed explanations of the issue in the writing with several possible ways of recasting what the writer was trying to say more clearly (Rafoth, 2014).

8.4.1 INSTRUCTOR FEEDBACK

The interview participants all stated that they would not lower their students' grades due to adjective intensifier usage in writing unless the student did not address these issues in drafting. They mentioned that any issues with using adjective intensification too frequently for academic writing would be addressed after a first draft accompanied by feedback on how to make the language more academic.

Several participants mentioned that they often see graded writing assignments from professors that ask for appropriate academic writing, but the professors do not define what appropriate academic writing is. Rafoth (2014) touches on the need for feedback and support for instructors about creating and assessing writing assignments that will result in work that actually meets the instructor's expectations. The writing tutor participants unanimously agreed that it would be unfair for a class instructor to take off points on a writing assignment for using adjective intensifiers when that is not something that was covered in the course or in feedback on a previous draft.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

9.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter includes a section covering the answers to the research questions based on the research. Each research question is answered based on the findings in the three research projects included in this dissertation: the ICLE corpus analysis, the pilot survey, and the qualitative interviews. This is followed by a summary of the research, recommendations for writing tutoring, limitations of this research, and possible extensions of this research.

9.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The answers to the research questions are provided below with the actual findings as they relate to the hypotheses.

9.2.1 RESEARCH QUESTION ONE

The first research question focused on the corpus analysis: 1) What adjective intensifiers are frequently used in multilingual university student academic writing in the ICLE corpus of written learner English? The most frequently used adjective intensifier in the ICLE corpus is *very* with a frequency of usage of 0.9158 times per text in the corpus. *Very* is also the most frequently used adjective intensifier in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999; Swales & Burke, 2003; Méndez-Naya & Pahta, 2010) and it is presented as the model adverb of degree in EFL textbooks (Fuchs et al., 2012; Ediger et al., 2014; English First, n.d.). *So* was the second most used adjective intensifier in the ICLE with a frequency of 0.2563 times per text in the corpus. *So* is also an adjective intensifier that is frequently used in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999). Of

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the intensifiers that are not considered academic (Biber et al., 1999), *Really* and *totally* are used with the highest frequencies, 0.1122 and 0.0420 respectively. The EFL writers in the ICLE could be using these forms to display a native-like fluency in English and this could be influenced by television and movies (Berman, 1987; Holly, 2001; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Stuart-Smith, 2007; Lívio & Howe, 2024). However, a separate study would have to be conducted that interviewed the writers to discover if this is true.

9.2.2 RESEARCH QUESTION TWO

The second research question focused on the social meaning from the qualitative interviews and the pilot survey. This question utilizes Bell's (1984, 2001) Referee Design as a theoretical framework in the context of writing where an author uses rhetorical tools at their disposal, including the lexical choice of adjective intensifiers, to create social meaning and portray an identity to the audience. 2) What are the readers' perceptions of social meaning and the writer's identity based on their usage of adjective intensifiers in academic writing? The more casual and conversational intensifiers *totally*, *really*, *so*, and *absolutely* were all perceived as being more feminine while *pretty* was the adjective intensifier that was considered more masculine. The adjective intensifiers used in more academic writing (Biber et al., 1999), *very*, *quite*, and *extremely* are considered more gender neutral and are only considered to hint at masculinity to some people because they are not overtly feminine like most of the others. The intensifiers *totally*, *really*, and *pretty* have a marked meaning for being young while *very*, *so*, *quite*, *absolutely*, and *extremely* were rated as being used by people of any age. The only intensifier that carried meaning not associated with being American was *quite*, which was considered very British.

9.2.3 RESEARCH QUESTION THREE

The third research question focuses on the writing tutor's feedback about using adjective intensification in academic writing. 3) What adjective intensifiers do writing tutors consider appropriate for academic writing and what kinds of feedback might writing tutors give about this? The intensifiers that were rated more casual and conversational, *totally*, *really*, *pretty*, and *so*, were considered inappropriate for academic writing. *Very* is considered to an intensifier that can be used in an academic context, but it makes the writer seem young and inexperienced, so it is not recommended for more formal academic writing. *Quite* can be used in more formal writing but it makes the writing sound like they are British or pretending to be British so it may not be appropriate for all writer identities and rhetorical moves. The only two forms that are generally acceptable in academic writing are the maximizers *extremely* and *absolutely*. Even the acceptable forms of adjective intensifiers should be used sparingly. Excessive usage of adjective intensification should be omitted or replaced with statistical evidence.

9.3 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

The adjective intensifiers that were considered more academic (Biber et al., 1999; Swales & Burke, 2003; Méndez-Naya & Pahta, 2010) and less casual were rated more neutral in social meaning while the adjective intensifiers that were rated more conversational and more casual carried more marked social meanings. Each of these elements of social meaning interacted with each other in unexpected ways. For example, maximizers have a very high degree of completeness which resulted in raising the perceptions of their formality and academic appropriateness while neutralizing their connotations of age and gender. Conversely, very

informal and conversational adjective intensifiers that carried rich social meaning for age and gender were rated as acting as down-toners in the formal context of academic writing.

Participant ratings are not always uniform. Some are contrastive. Idiolect seems to play a large role in perceptions of the social meaning of adjective intensifiers and their appropriateness in academic writing. Choices involving lexical selection of adjective intensifier forms used in academic writing may play a role in an individual writer's voice.

9.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Writing center tutors recommend using adjective intensification sparingly in academic writing. It is important to not overuse adjective intensification in academic writing. It should be used in moderation like many other rhetorical tools, or it could lose its effectiveness. Since using adjective intensification may be a rhetorical tool used by a writer to create a voice in their writing, it is important to not be over-prescriptive in dictating what forms may be appropriate for any given situation in writing. In cases where adjective intensification is overused or inappropriate, alternatives to using adjective intensification should be suggested. Alternatives to intensification include using more precise descriptive adjectives on their own or using statistics to modify the degree of something.

I would like to acknowledge that the ICLE is a corpus of learner English collected from multilingual writers who may still be acquiring the vocabulary necessary to effectively replace adjective intensification with stronger adjectives. This is evidenced by the data in Table 6.14 where the adjectives that are used with adjective intensification are high frequency adjectives. The writers in the ICLE are also undergraduate students who are still learning how to write in an academic context from professors, instructors, and writing tutors on the path towards earning a degree.

9.5 LIMITATIONS

This research method is only useful for gathering information on the perceptions of readers. Understanding the rhetorical intentions of the writers when they were writing the essays in the ICLE is impossible without interviewing the writers themselves. These interviews would have to be conducted within a reasonable amount of time after writing the essays so they can remember why they wrote what they wrote in the essay. Any ideas about why the writers used certain adjective intensifiers in their writing or where they learned these usages from is purely speculative.

Not much information could be gathered about the adjective intensifier bigram collocations in the interview section of this research because only two bigrams of each intensifier bigram were used in the interviews. Corpus research lends itself more to examining large numbers of adjective intensifier bigrams and providing useful data like in Wagner (2017).

9.6 POSSIBLE EXTENTIONS OF THIS STUDY

This research had a rather large focus that could be narrowed down in future research. A study could focus on the interaction of the social meanings of one intensifier in different contexts. Researchers could examine how the social meaning of the more marked adjective intensifiers work in different genres of writing. Researchers could also examine the relationship between adjective intensifier usage in English and first language (L1) background for multilingual writers. While English employs lexical variants for adjective intensification, other languages have morphological adjective intensification or both lexical and morphological adjective intensification. It would be useful to explore how these different typologies of L1 adjective intensification might influence the types of adjective intensification used by multilingual English language writers.

Further variationist linguistic research into writing in different genres could contribute to research that focuses on teaching writing at universities. Study of the variation in lexical and syntactic forms and structures used in different writing genres can inform educators and writers about using this awareness as a rhetorical tool that makes writing more genre appropriate. This research could help in extending writing instruction from a focus on academic genres in the classroom where a professor is the audience to include more genres and audiences that will be valuable in student's future professional lives, possibly as part of a writing in the professions (WIP) curriculum (Hallman Martini, 2022).

Further research into the acquisition of second language writing for undergraduate students at the university level is needed. This research could inform the teaching practices of English language writing classes and first-year writing classes for international students entering university as undergraduates in the United States (US). This research could also inform the remediation reform policy makers who set university first-year writing course prerequisites and steer their ideology away from seeing English language monolingualism as the norm (Harklau & Batson, 2023).

Research should examine how adjective intensification in used in LGBTQ+ communities. The one LGBTQ+ participant in this study proved to have the most information about gender meaning and social meanings carried by adjective intensifiers. Lexical choice related to intensifier usage may have a lot in common with lexical choice related to pronoun usage. These kinds of lexical choices are considered more by LGBTQ+ individuals on a daily basis when shifting between social contexts.

As an individual who is getting a degree in linguistics, has over 30 years in language teaching experience, and is currently working in English language rhetoric and composition in a

writing center, I would like to see more work that bridges the disciplines of linguistics, TESOL/applied linguistics, English department rhetoric and composition, and writing center studies. Rafoth (2014) imagines a writing center where criteria for employment might include knowing a second language or minoring in linguistics, and Matsuda (2006b) envisions second language writing as a "symbiotic field" (p. 28) that draws on research from all of these areas. However, with the current political situation in the United States (US) where university budgets are being slashed and international students are having their student visas revoked for no reason, this future research in second language writing may not likely happen here in the US.

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APPENDIX A

UGA IRB APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Human Research Protection Program

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

October 31, 2024

Dear Lewis Howe:

On 10/31/2024, the Human Subjects Office reviewed the following submission:

Title of Study:	Writing Center Tutor's Perspectives on Adjective Intensifier Usage in EFL Student Writing
Investigator:	Lewis Howe
Co-Investigator:	Nathaniel Fackler
IRB ID:	PROJECT00010743
Funding:	None
Review Category:	Exempt 2ii

We have determined that the proposed research is Exempt. The research activities may begin 10/31/2024.

Since this study was determined to be exempt, please be aware that not all future modifications will require review by the IRB. For more information please see Appendix C of the Exempt Research Policy (https://research.uga.edu/docs/policies/compliance/hso/HRP-033-ExemptResearch.pdf). As noted in Section C.2., you can simply notify us of modifications that will not require review via the "Add Public Comment" activity.

Before beginning the work of the project, it is your responsibility as the PI to ensure that all activities and materials are compliant with the HRPP, including without limitation the following policies and other requirements: Exempt Research Policy (this includes that the consent process must comply with the elements in Appendix B of the Exempt Research Policy), Investigator Training, Students as Research Participants, Participant Incentive and Compensation, Participant Selection and Recruitment, Deception or Incomplete Disclosure, Research with Vulnerable Populations, Internet Research, HIPPA, FERPA, Use of External Sites, Transnational Research, EITS sensitive data policy, GDPR.

APPENDIX B

MU IRB COLLABORATIVE EXEMPT NOTIFICATION FORM

MU eCompliance

IRB Acknowledgement: Project #2122807 Review #444233

Project #2122807
Review #444233
Form: Collaborative Exempt Notification Form
Project Title: Writing Center Tutor's Perspectives on Adjective Intensifier Usage in EFL Student Writing
Principal Investigator: Nathaniel Fackler
Primary Contact: Nathaniel Fackler

The MU IRB accepts and agrees with the exempt determination made by the reviewing IRB. You can move forward with this study under the oversight of the reviewing IRB. No further MU IRB submission is required for this study as long as it continues to be overseen by the reviewing IRB. MU IRB does not require a formal reliance agreement for exempt studies.

Exempt Categories (Revised Common Rule)

  • 45 CFR 46.104d(2)(ii)

Thank you,
MU Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX C

INVITATION LETTER AND CONSENT LETTER WITH QUALTRICS LINK

Dear Writing Center tutor,

      I am Nate Fackler, a doctoral candidate at The University of Georgia in linguistics under the supervision of my advisor, Dr Chad Howe. I was employed at the UGA Writing Center for three years before my family moved to the University of Missouri. I am currently a staff member in the MU Writing Center running GradsWrite writing groups and tutoring graduate students. I really enjoy working as a writing tutor.

      I am inviting you to participate in a research study about how word choice in writing may affect the reader's perceptions of the writer. Your participation will involve taking an online survey and should only take about ten minutes to complete. This is not a test of your abilities in any way; I am simply asking for your opinion as a writing tutor and a speaker of English. Specifically, I am investigating how the word choice of an adverb that intensifies an adjective is a rhetorical move that may be used by the writer to portray their identity. The survey contains five sentences that contain a usage of an adjective intensifier. Each sentence is followed by five questions. The findings from this survey may provide information about how readers perceive writers based on their choice of adjective intensifiers.

      Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time. Your decision to participate will have no impact in your participation in Writing Center programs. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. If there are questions that may make you uncomfortable, you can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.

      No identifiers will be attached to the data collected in the survey. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used.

      If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to e-mail me at nfackler@uga.edu or nfackler@missouri.edu. If you have any questions or complaints about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the UGA IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

      By completing this online survey, you are agreeing to participate in the above described research project.

      Here is the link to the ten minute Qualtrics survey:
https://ugeorgia.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ey9BVDTy7CVhadw

      Thank you for your consideration! Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,
Nate Fackler

APPENDIX D

QUALTRICS SURVEY

Thank you for agreeing to take this survey!

There are five sentences below that have been selected from a corpus of undergraduate student writing. Each sentence has an adjective intensifier and adjective pair in ***bold italics***. An adjective intensifier is an adverb that modifies an adjective; in this case it strengthens the meaning of the adjective. There is a lot of variety in adjective intensifier usage in English, and the writer's choice of adjective intensifiers is a rhetorical tool that can be used to project an identity to the reader.

Answer each question based on the impression that you get of the writer based on their usage of the adjective intensifier in *bold italics* in each sentence. There are no right or wrong answers; just answer honestly based on the impression that you get from each usage.

What institution are you a writing tutor at?

○ MIZZOU

○ UGA

→

UNIVERSITY OF
GEORGIA

*"George Orwell was **totally right**!"*

1. Does the writer feel strongly about what they are writing about?

○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

*"George Orwell was **totally right**!"*

2. Does this usage make the writer sound intelligent?

○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

*"George Orwell was **totally right**!"*

3. How casual vs formal does this usage sound?

○ Very formal

○ Somewhat formal

○ Neither formal nor casual

○ Somewhat casual

○ Very casual

*"George Orwell was **totally right**!"*

4. How old does this writer sound?

○ Teenager

○ Twenty-Something

○ Middle-Aged

○ Elderly

○ Could be any age

*"George Orwell was **totally right**!"*

5. Which of the following describe the writer? (Choose all that apply.)

☐ Hip / Trendy   ☐ Friendly

☐ Annoying   ☐ Articulate

☐ Masculine   ☐ Youthful

☐ Immature   ☐ Cool

☐ Feminine   ☐ Old-Fashioned

→

"Her nose is of an ideal size and shape and her skin is *absolutely spotless*."

1. Does the writer feel strongly about what they are writing about?

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

"Her nose is of an ideal size and shape and her skin is *absolutely spotless*."

2. Does this usage make the writer sound intelligent?

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

"Her nose is of an ideal size and shape and her skin is *absolutely spotless*."

3. How casual vs formal does this usage sound?

- ○ Very formal
- ○ Somewhat formal
- ○ Neither formal nor casual
- ○ Somewhat casual
- ○ Very casual

"Her nose is of an ideal size and shape and her skin is *absolutely spotless*."

4. How old does this writer sound?

- ○ Teenager
- ○ Twenty-Something
- ○ Middle-Aged
- ○ Elderly
- ○ Could be any age

"Her nose is of an ideal size and shape and her skin is *absolutely spotless*."

5. Which of the following describe the writer? (Choose all that apply.)

- ☐ Hip / Trendy
- ☐ Annoying
- ☐ Masculine
- ☐ Youthful
- ☐ Immature
- ☐ Feminine
- ☐ Friendly
- ☐ Articulate
- ☐ Cool
- ☐ Old-Fashioned

→

"Smoking and drinking is **very common** for those who always go to bars."

1. Does the writer feel strongly about what they are writing about?

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

"Smoking and drinking is **very common** for those who always go to bars."

2. Does this usage make the writer sound intelligent?

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

"Smoking and drinking is **very common** for those who always go to bars."

3. How casual vs formal does this usage sound?

- ○ Very formal
- ○ Somewhat formal
- ○ Neither formal nor casual
- ○ Somewhat casual
- ○ Very casual

"Smoking and drinking is **very common** for those who always go to bars."

4. How old does this writer sound?

- ○ Teenager
- ○ Twenty-Something
- ○ Middle-Aged
- ○ Elderly
- ○ Could be any age

"Smoking and drinking is **very common** for those who always go to bars."

5. Which of the following describe the writer? (Choose all that apply.)

- ☐ Hip / Trendy
- ☐ Feminine
- ☐ Annoying
- ☐ Friendly
- ☐ Masculine
- ☐ Articulate
- ☐ Youthful
- ☐ Cool
- ☐ Immature
- ☐ Old-Fashioned

→

"Being in a classroom is *way better* for paying attention to your classes."

1. Does the writer feel strongly about what they are writing about?

○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

"Being in a classroom is *way better* for paying attention to your classes."

2. Does this usage make the writer sound intelligent?

○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

"Being in a classroom is *way better* for paying attention to your classes."

3. How casual vs formal does this usage sound?

○ Very formal

○ Somewhat formal

○ Neither formal nor casual

○ Somewhat casual

○ Very casual

"Being in a classroom is *way better* for paying attention to your classes."

4. How old does this writer sound?

○ Teenager

○ Twenty-Something

○ Middle-Aged

○ Elderly

○ Could be any age

"Being in a classroom is *way better* for paying attention to your classes."

5. Which of the following describe the writer? (Choose all that apply.)

☐ Hip / Trendy   ☐ Friendly

☐ Annoying   ☐ Articulate

☐ Masculine   ☐ Youthful

☐ Immature   ☐ Cool

☐ Feminine   ☐ Old-Fashioned

→

"They would also make a *pretty boring* conversationalist."

1. Does the writer feel strongly about what they are writing about?

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

"They would also make a *pretty boring* conversationalist."

2. Does this usage make the writer sound intelligent?

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

"They would also make a *pretty boring* conversationalist."

3. How casual vs formal does this usage sound?

- ○ Very formal
- ○ Somewhat formal
- ○ Neither formal nor casual
- ○ Somewhat casual
- ○ Very casual

"They would also make a *pretty boring* conversationalist."

4. How old does this writer sound?

- ○ Teenager
- ○ Twenty-Something
- ○ Middle-Aged
- ○ Elderly
- ○ Could be any age

"They would also make a *pretty boring* conversationalist."

5. Which of the following describe the writer? (Choose all that apply.)

- ☐ Hip / Trendy
- ☐ Annoying
- ☐ Masculine
- ☐ Immature
- ☐ Feminine
- ☐ Friendly
- ☐ Articulate
- ☐ Youthful
- ☐ Cool
- ☐ Old-Fashioned

→

INVITATION LETTER FOR INTERVIEW

Dear graduate writing center tutor,

      I am Nate Fackler, a doctoral candidate at The University of Georgia (UGA) in linguistics under the supervision of my advisor, Dr Chad Howe. I was employed at the UGA Writing Center for three years before my family moved to the University of Missouri (MU) in 2023. I am currently a staff member in the MU Writing Center running GradsWrite writing groups and tutoring graduate students. I really enjoy working as a writing tutor.

      I am inviting you to participate in a research study about how word choice in writing may affect the reader's perceptions of the writer. Your participation will involve a Zoom interview that should take about 40 minutes. This is not a test of your abilities in any way; I am simply asking for your opinion as a speaker of English and a writing tutor. Specifically, I am investigating how you perceive the usages of some adverbs that modify adjectives in student writing samples. The findings from this interview may provide information about how to teach the usage of these adverbs to students learning to write academic papers in English.

      Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time. Your decision to participate will have no impact in your participation in Writing Center programs. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. If there are questions that may make you uncomfortable, you can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.

      No identifiers will be attached to the data collected in the interviews. The Zoom interviews will be transcribed, and all visual and text identifiers will be removed from the transcript. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used.

      If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to e-mail me at nfackler@missouri.edu or nfackler@uga.edu. If you have any questions or complaints about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the UGA IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

      If you agree to participate in the above described research project, please respond to me at nfackler@missouri.edu schedule a suitable time for an online Zoom interview.

      Thank you for your consideration! Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,
Nate Fackler

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Opener

I am Nate Fackler, a doctoral candidate at The University of Georgia (UGA) in linguistics and I am happy that you have volunteered to participate in this research study about how word choice in writing may affect the reader's perceptions of the writer. Specifically, I am investigating how you perceive the usages of some adverbs that boost or intensify the meanings of adjectives in student writing samples. The findings from this interview may provide information about how to teach the usage of these adverbs to students learning to write academic papers in English.

Your participation involves this Zoom interview that should only take about 30 minutes. This is not a test of your abilities in any way; I am simply asking for your opinion as a writing tutor and a speaker of English.

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time. If there are questions that may make you uncomfortable, you can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.

No identifiers will be attached to the data collected in the interviews. The Zoom interviews will be transcribed, and then all visual and text identifiers will be removed from the transcript. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used.

Intro and background

1. How long have you been a writing center tutor? What levels of students have you tutored?

2. Do you have experience tutoring international students in the writing center? Elsewhere?

3. Do you often give feedback about sentence level grammar issues when tutoring? What kinds of issues?

4. Do you feel comfortable giving feedback on grammar issues in student writing? Why or why not?

5. How would you define an adverb to a tutee? How would you define an adjective to a tutee? Or is this not something that you would prefer to do? (Why?)

   (I am not looking for a dictionary definition here. I just want to get an idea about how the tutor would explicitly explain these two parts of speech in a tutoring session or find out why they might prefer not to.)

Information on the target variable

Adjective intensifiers are adverbs that boost or maximize the meaning of an adjective. In English we use a variety of them. They always appear in pairs of an adverb followed by an adjective. For example, "That movie was *so interesting*." and "This meeting is *very important*."

We are going to look at some adjective intensifier pairs used in student writing from an international corpus of undergraduate student writing, and I am going to ask you some questions about the impressions you get as a writing center tutor and speaker of English. The adjective intensifiers and the adjectives that they are paired with have been highlighted in each sentence. We are going to focus our feedback on the highlighted adjective intensifier pairs. Share what you think about each intensifier. You may suggest alternative ways of writing the sentences; for example, you may not think that the adjective intensifier pair used is the best choice and suggest a different one, or you could suggest a completely different sentence structure that does not employ an adjective intensifier.

This is *not* a test of you or your abilities in any way. As you know, there is no *one* correct way to write a sentence. I am asking you to use your skills, knowledge, and intuition as an experienced writing tutor to provide what you believe to be helpful feedback for the student writer in each example.

The adjective intensifier pairs have been highlighted in each sentence.

1. The Macintosh was a ==very popular== computer in American schools.

2. Freedom of the press is ==very important== for the people in our country and all over the world.

3. Some dreams are ==totally unrealistic==, and the dreamers know that they will never come true.

4. Interestingly, the same study found a ==totally different== view from working class women.

5. The producers of a movie adaptation of a book have a ==really difficult== job because of its complexity.

6. Punishing cruel convicts is ==really important== to keep our society safe.

7. The degree requires a list of ==pretty good== scores.

8. The membership in a sports club can be ==pretty expensive==.

9. Imagination and dreaming are ==so necessary==; however, they are constantly shrinking with the development of industrialization.

10. Although college is ==so important== to many professions, it's not for everyone or every career.

11. In online shopping, trying on clothing before making a purchase is ==quite impossible==.

12. Schindler's List is ==quite different== from Spielberg 's other movies like Jurassic Park or The Flintstones.

13. I think that American feminists would condemn this as very humiliating and <mark>absolutely inadmissible</mark>.

14. In the past, cosmetic surgery was confined only to surgery which was <mark>absolutely necessary</mark> to the health and wellbeing of the patient.

15. This computer was only able to receive 5in floppy disks and had an <mark>extremely small</mark> hard drive.

16. The initiative group claims that private funding is <mark>extremely important</mark> because it would immediately encourage competition among universities and increase student motivation.

Interview Questions (for each item)

1. Based on this usage, how strongly does the writer feel about this? What about this usage tells you this?

2. Does this usage sound academic? Why or why not? What about this usage tells you this?

3. How casual or formal does this usage sound? Is this register appropriate for an academic writing assignment? Explain.

4. What age does this writer sound? What about this usage tells you this?

5. What does this usage tell you about the gender of this writer? What about this usage tells you this?

6. Does this usage sound more American or British? Or either?

7. In a WC tutoring session, what kind of feedback would you provide to the writer about this usage?

8. Are there any alternative ways of expressing this idea that you might suggest to the tutee?

9. In a course where you are an instructor, how might the use of any of these intensifiers affect the grade on a graded written assignment? Which ones? Why or why not?

(Some of these questions have been adapted from Vaughn et al., 2018)

Final questions

After reading these usages and answering questions about them, are there any that you would like to look at again? Are there any answers that you would like to rethink or change for any reason?

Closing

As a reminder, no identifiers will be attached to the data collected in the interviews. The Zoom interviews will be transcribed, and then all visual and text identifiers will be removed from the transcript. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used.

Thank you for taking your time to participate in my dissertation research today!