

Intensifying adverbs in the English language

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The article provides an analysis of various aspects of intensification in the English language (colloquial and newspaper), intensifying adverbs in particular. The processes of grammaticalisation and delexicalisation observed in the evolution of intensifying adverbs are described. The author also looks into the renewal and boundedness of intensifying adverbs, provides an overview of modern classifications of intensifying adverbs, and offers statistics on the frequency of occurrence of intensifying adverbs to illustrate their usage in spoken discourse and newspaper language. The findings assume that less intensification is used in written discourse whereas more intensification is employed in spoken discourse, which suggests that the decline in intensification is higher as the formality of the register increases, and vice versa.

KEYWORDS: *intensification, intensifying adverb, grammaticalisation, delexicalisation, spoken discourse, newspaper language*



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1. INTRODUCTION

The article aims to look into various aspects of intensification in colloquial and newspaper English, focusing on intensifying adverbs in particular, and describe the processes of grammaticalisation and delexicalisation observed in the evolution of intensifying adverbs. The study also considers the issues of the renewal and boundedness of intensifying adverbs, provides an overview of modern classifications of intensifying adverbs, and offers statistics on the frequency of occurrence of intensifying adverbs to illustrate their usage in spoken discourse and newspaper language. The findings assume that less intensification is used in written discourse whereas

more intensification is employed in spoken discourse, which suggests that the decline in intensification is higher as the formality of the register increases, and vice versa.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Various aspects of intensification and means of its expression in written language and speech has recently drawn the attention of a great number of linguists. The status of intensification remains one of the most discussed issues in modern linguistics. From the 20th century onwards, numerous studies have been conducted to study the use of intensifying adverbs (Tagliamonte, 2008; Fries, 1940; Bolinger, 2013; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003;

Quirk et al., 1985). These studies have greatly contributed to the structural description and semantic categorisation of intensifying adverbs. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) argue that intensifying adverbs are not to be viewed as a primarily grammatical or lexical category: they possess grammatical properties, although are insufficiently defined unless we describe their functional significance. Some of these early studies already referred to the processes of grammaticalisation and delexicalisation, which underlie the development of lexical intensifying means. According to Beltrama and Bochnak (2015), intensification helps highlight what is being said and is related to the basic human need to make an impact on the interlocutor. Wierzbicka (1972) connects intensification both with objective features of an object and the speaker who distorts the worldview in their mind.

Intensification is closely linked with the concept of the Intensity Scale (sometimes referred to as Intensity Range) which is described as a continuum of quantitative characteristics existing in our minds (Lebedeva & Pavlova, 2016). Key to this continuum is the starting point where the quantitative characteristics are either amplified or toned down; the starting point can be the word which is an object of intensification. The number of the markings on the scale is subjective and depends on the interlocutors' language competence.

Recent studies predominantly focused on the constant change (renewal) of intensifying adverbs in the course of the last decades. Renewal takes place when '*existing meanings take on new forms*' (Hopper & Traugott, 2003, p. 122). This process is usually characterised by the appearance of new ways of intensification. For instance, the meaning *to a high degree* can be expressed by older, completely grammaticalised forms, such as *very* and *newer*, as well as more expressive forms, such as *extremely* and *tremendously*. The more a linguistic item is grammaticalised, the more it collocates with a variety of adjectives and verbs, which increases its frequency. The development of intensifiers is a good example of renewal as this process demonstrates how older and newer layers can coexist and display different meanings (Hopper & Traugott, 2003, p. 121). A large inventory of intensifiers allows to avoid repetition and increase expressivity. Méndez-Naya (2003) notes that since the main function of intensifying adverbs is expressive, they are inclined to undergo renewal, as their function of boosting decreases over time, due to, for instance, overuse. Hopper and Traugott (2003) state that over the past centuries *very* has alternated with e.g. *terribly*, *really*, *pretty*, *surprisingly*, *extremely* and *highly*, depending on which word was in vogue at the time. The renewal of intensifying adverbs can be explained by the speaker's urge to 'achieve expressivity' (Lorenz, 2002, p. 143). The more unexpected and unusual an intensifying adverb is

in a given context, the more expressivity it produces.

The fact that numerous intensifying adverbs have been added to the intensification system at different times allows grammarians to describe this system as having many 'layers' of intensifiers. Thus, according to Ito and Tagliamonte (2003), the use of the intensifying adverb *so* goes back to Old English, while the intensifier *right* was one of the most popular in Middle English. Other intensifying adverbs have been added to the system in recent years, as, for instance, adverbs built from adjectives through *-ly* suffixation. Hopper (1991) foregrounds that in spite of the fact that new layers keep emerging, it is not necessarily that the old ones disappear: they may remain to coexist with the new ones. Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) highlight that despite the coexistence of the older and relatively new items, intensifiers are subjected to the influence of sociolinguistic factors.

The meaning of intensifying adverbs depends on the context in which they occur. Their individual connotation depends on the quality and type of the linguistic item that is modified, primarily adjectives. Recent intensifying adverbs have ambiguous meanings. For instance, intensifying adverbs such as *terribly* and *awfully* still retain their meaning of 'terror', although they have gradually acquired a more grammatical meaning of intensification (Paradis, 2008, p. 338).

According to Stoffel (1901), at the beginning of the 20th century the intensifying adverb *awfully* was not yet considered part of normal conversations. Partington (1993) claims that *terribly* and *awfully* used to have a negative connotation while now they have completely disposed of this meaning and are fully delexicalised, functioning only as intensifiers of propositional content. Nevertheless, the study of the adjectival collocations of *terribly* in the British National Corpus (BNC) and The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) proves that the similar collocations still retain a negative quality. The most popular adjectives collocated with *terribly* in the COCA are *wrong*, *important*, *sorry*, *difficult* and *sad*; the BNC – *sorry*, *important*, *difficult*, *wrong* and *hard*.

Tagliamonte (2008) states that intensifying adverbs are an ideal choice for a scholar because of their versatility and capacity for rapid change. Although intensifying adverbs are unable to change the semantics of the utterance, they can considerably modify its meaning. Incorrect usage of intensification could have an unexpected pragmatic outcome. For example, Long and Christensen (2008) state that overuse of intensifying adverbs (*very*, *clearly*, *obviously* and the like) negatively affects the credibility of a legal argument. The authors measure intensifier use against outcomes and prove that excessive intensification in appellate briefs is directly related to adverse outcomes.

‘The fact that numerous intensifying adverbs have been added to the intensification system at different times allows grammarians to describe this system as having many ‘layers’ of intensifiers’

Intensifying adverbs differ by their degrees of intensification on the intensity scale (Biber et al., 1999, p. 20). They indicate a point on the intensity scale which may be high or low. Lebedeva and Pavlova (2016) note that according to the degree of intensification intensifying adverbs are divided into emphasisers, boosters, and maximisers.

Emphasisers indicate a high degree of the modified proposition, as in: I was never *really* fat, but I always struggled with just being kind of on the verge. She *actually* called these hearings a charade and a farce when she wrote. She’s following this procession, *clearly* encouraged. Well, I think Dole is *frankly* in the better position right now. I *honestly* think that we do need some type of change.

Boosters denote a higher degree of the modified proposition, as in: Both groups *strongly* supported making English the nation’s official language. A *badly* beaten Stefan claims he was attacked by a creditor. A State Department spokesman last week

called Teng’s case ‘*deeply* disturbing’. Reports of Tony Hart’s second death are *greatly* exaggerated. Immediately, though everything else remained as before, dim and dark, the shapes became *terribly* clear. People are saying it’s going to be *bitterly* cold tomorrow tonight. Simpson is *intensely* depressed.

Maximisers denote the upper extreme on the intensity scale, as in: It’s an old-fashioned, down-to-earth club that operates *entirely* contrary to the grotesque excesses of the 1990s. It’s polarising and creates the illusion that the clash of *utterly* biased accounts produces the truth. Many analysts and policymakers focus *most* closely on the so-called core CPI. I believe that he is *fully* aware of it. I was *extremely* ashamed of my situation.

The problem with intensifying adverbs and their classification lies in their ability to be used for both purposes – amplifying and toning down the pragmatic influence depending on the speaker’s intention (Quirk et al., 1985). Such difficulties often arise with the intensifying adverb *quite*, which can be used to indicate both functions, depending on the context. *Quite* usually means *fairly* if used as an amplifier, as in *The film is quite good*. British speakers also use the intensifying adverb *quite* in the meaning of *absolutely* before adjectives which express an extreme degree of quality. In similar cases, *quite* is stressed, as in *His contribution to the science is quite remarkable*.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

To see what tendencies can be observed in the use of intensifying adverbs in the world Englishes and if they correspond to what scholars suggest, two corpora were used in the present study: The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC). The analysis was conducted on spoken discourse and newspaper texts. The study presented in the present article was restricted to the analysis of the combination *intensifier + adjective* which is conditioned by its frequency. Bäcklund (1973) came to the conclusion that 72% of intensifying adverbs were used with adjectival heads. In addition, recent research on amplifiers by Barnfield and Buchstaller (2010), Reichelt and Durham (2017) also focuses on the study of intensifying adverbs modifying adjectives. A similar approach can be observed in most investigations of intensification. On the basis of previous research conducted by Biber et al. (1999), Ito and Tagliamonte (2003), Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005), Tagliamonte (2008), and Barnfield and Buchstaller (2010), nine most common intensifying adverbs modifying adjectives were chosen for this study, namely: *absolutely, so, totally, entirely, pretty, very, extremely, completely, and really*. The part-of-speech feature available in the COCA and BNC helped make the search more precise. The present study takes into consideration the combination *intensifier + adjective* as a base for searching the most frequent

‘Intensifying adverbs differ by their degrees of intensification on the intensity scale’

intensifying adverbs modifying adjectives. For instance, the intensifying adverb *so* was searched for as *so_j** to obtain results covering its frequency with adjectival heads, and this procedure was repeated for each intensifying adverb.

4. STUDY AND RESULTS

After the initial search of intensifying adverbs in question was completed, all the occurrences of intensifying adverbs were listed. To restrict the list of intensifying adverbs that would meet the aim of the research and to increase precision, the collocates section of COCA and BNC with an improved search string (*intensifier + adjective*) was used allowing to see what words occurred near other words, which helped find only those intensifiers that were in the adjectival pre-modifying position. Thus, other cases which do not respond to the aim of the study were excluded, e.g. verbal intensification (examples 1, 2), as well as examples where the search word did not serve as an intensifying adverb (example 3).

(1) I *totally* support the administration with respect to that (2017, SPOK: CNN: Anderson Cooper).

(2) And I agree *entirely* with my esteemed colleague Joe that we should focus on the people

who plunged this country into recession (2011, SPOK: NBC_Matthews).

(3) So what are the options, then? (2017, SPOK: Morning Edition 11:00 AM EST).

During the study of intensifying adverbs in the combination *intensifier + adjective* 211,335 tokens retrieved from COCA were analysed. Examples of the chosen intensifying adverbs are given below in the order of their frequency in COCA:

(1) 'The Turner Diaries' is a horrible novel, racist novel that became a – it's almost a talisman to this movement, a *very* important motivating force (2017, SPOK: PBS NEWSHOUR 6:00 PM EST).

(2) Give it a try for dinner. These – these things are *so* easy (2017, SPOK: NBC).

(3) And, you know, it brings back *really* wonderful memories to me (2014, SPOK: Fresh Air 12:00 AM EST).

(4) It's a *pretty* cool story, actually, Terry (2017, SPOK: NPR).

(5) One of the *absolutely* beautiful songs ever written (2016, SPOK: 20/20 10:01 PM EST).

(6) These are all three *extremely* good judges (2017, SPOK: EDITORIAL REPORT 2:00 PM EST).

'Emphasisers indicate a high degree of the modified proposition. Boosters denote a higher degree of the modified proposition'

(7) I keep going back to that first – to the first 'Pirates' movie because this guy comes along, and he's not what people envisioned, and he created this *completely* crazy pirate (2007, SPOK: CBS_Early).

(8) And for this to happen and put our workers potentially at risk is *totally* unacceptable (2014, SPOK: PBS NEWSHOUR 6:00 PM EST).

(9) It's going to have an agreement where nobody is *entirely* happy with the result, but everybody is obviously happier with the result than with the alternative (2011, SPOK: PBS NEWSHOUR 6:00 PM EST).

The calculations for each of the intensifying adverbs clearly illustrate the proportion of the items under study (Figure 1). Table 1 gives an insight into the comparative frequencies of intensifying adverbs per 100,000 words. Since the corpora used in the present research contain unequal numbers of words, a normalisation of word frequency per 100,000 words is required to obtain comparable results.

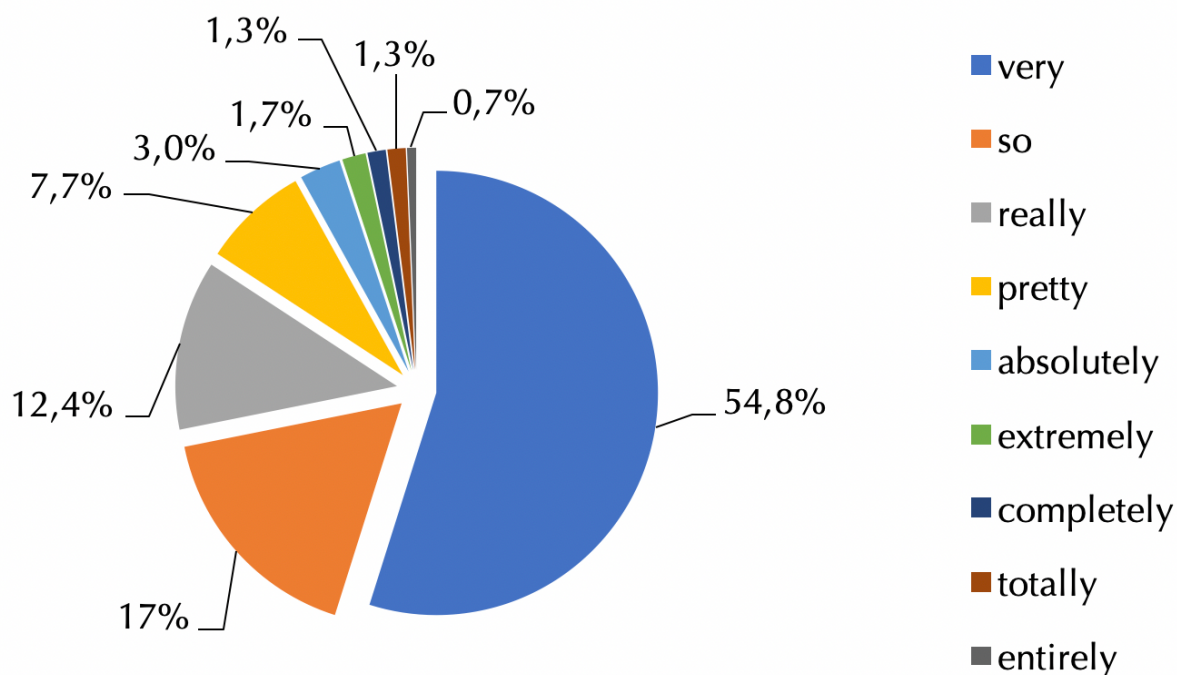


Figure 1. Frequency of intensifying adverbs in American English (spoken data)

Table 1

Comparative frequency of intensifying adverbs per 100,000 words in American English (spoken data)

INTENSIFYING ADVERB	COMPARATIVE FREQUENCY PER 100,000 WORDS
very	98.14
so	30.36
really	22.09
pretty	13.84
absolutely	5.38
extremely	3.09
completely	2.39
totally	2.37
entirely	1.18

The results seem to partially conform to previously conducted research. Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) found that the three most common intensifying adverbs in the adjectival pre-modifying position were *very* (38.3%), *really* (30.2%) and *so* (10.1%). However, these findings do not fully correspond to our COCA findings in terms of the order of the intensifying adverbs and their frequency.

According to Fries (1940), in American English of the 1940s the intensifying adverb *very* was the most frequently used function word of degree, though in the 1980s this opinion was contested by Labov (1984) who proved that the intensifying adverb *really* was one of the most frequent markers of intensity in colloquial conversation. In his opinion, the focus shifted from *very* to *really* over that time period, but COCA does not support this tendency. For instance, according to our findings, *so* comes after *very* and constitutes 16.9% of the sample, and only then comes *really* with the percentage of 12.4%, which places this intensifying adverb in the third place. Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) suggest that *so* has become the 20th century favourite for Americans, which was also confirmed by the present research. In contrast, according to Rickford et al.'s (2007) study on the Stanford Tape Recorded Corpus, *really* is the most popular intensifying adverb in American English.

In Tagliamonte's (2008) data, the most frequent intensifying adverbs are *very*, *really*, *so* and *pretty*,

which is the most frequent among them.

The frequency of the intensifying adverb *very* outnumbers all the *ly-* intensifying adverbs *absolutely*, *extremely*, *completely*, *totally* and *entirely*. This could be because these intensifying adverbs are relatively new forms. First, they were used as intensifying adverbs with verbs and participial heads, but later they came to intensify adjectival heads as well (Nevalainen, 1994, p. 24).

In newspaper language 68,823 occurrences of the combination *intensifier + adjective* were analysed in COCA. Examples of the chosen intensifying adverbs are presented below in the order of their frequency in COCA:

- (1) Overnight Tuesday, Israel took the *very* unusual step of imposing a curfew in Jerusalem itself, in the Arab neighborhood of Issawiyah (2011, NEWS: New York Times).
- (2) Their belief in the product is *so* strong, they could almost boost its market outlook themselves (2015, NEWS: USA Today).
- (3) Financing projects is *really* tough (2009, NEWS: Denver Post).
- (4) His pre-work ritual is *pretty* typical of any suburban Houston dad (2009, NEWS: Houston Chronicle).

(5) The project started in 2010 when Chow Tai Fook, a Hong Kong jewelry company, acquired an *extremely* rare, unpolished 507-carat diamond found in the Cullinan mine in South Africa, reported by Associated Press (2016, NEWS: Columbus Dispatch).

(6) Car drivers are *completely* unaware of vehicle safety issues or of their own ability to drive on a highway, as the recent survey suggests (2005, NEWS: Denver Post).

(7) The position that these individuals take jobs that Americans will not perform is politically

correct, but *totally* ridiculous, which is why the question remains open (2006, NEWS: Atlanta Journal Constitution).

(8) The comedown was sobering, if not *entirely* unexpected given the expectations foisted upon them (2017, NEWS: USA TODAY).

(9) One of the greatest accomplishments of American democracy is that, throughout our history, the nation’s leaders have usually risen to the occasion when it was *absolutely* necessary, and this is what unites all our parties (2017, NEWS: Omaha World-Herald).

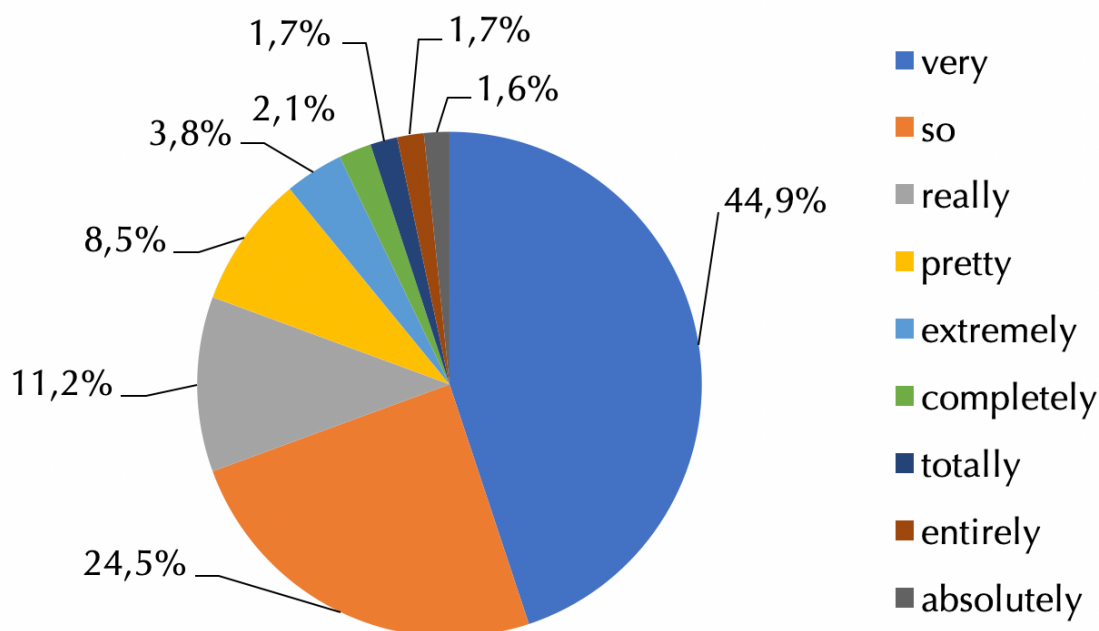


Figure 2. Frequency of occurrence of intensifying adverbs in American English (newspaper data)

Table 2

Comparative frequency of intensifying adverbs per 100,000 words in American English (newspaper data)

INTENSIFYING ADVERB	COMPARATIVE FREQUENCY PER 100,000 WORDS
very	20.028
so	14.745
really	6.745
pretty	5.101
extremely	2.26
completely	1.258
totally	1.045
entirely	1.029
absolutely	0.979

The present research shows that the four most frequent intensifying adverbs employed in newspaper discourse are the same as in speech: *very*, *so*, *really* and *pretty*. These four intensifying adverbs dominate in newspaper discourse as they account for 89.1% of the sample. As is seen from the data, intensifying adverbs are three times as frequent in spoken discourse as in newspaper language (178.844 and 53.19 instances per 100,000 words respectively). For this reason, we can assume that the decline in intensification is greater as the formality of the register increases, and vice versa. The study of intensifying adverbs in newspaper language and speech in British English gives results that differ from American

English. The number of occurrences obtained in the course of the research is 17,048. Examples of intensifying adverbs are ordered according to the frequency of occurrence in BNC:

- (1) Hundreds of millions of business can be *very* expensive indeed (The Money Programme: television broadcast. Rec. on 10 Oct 1993).
- (2) He did a wonderful job on it! And he was *so* nice to her when he was doing it (4 convs rec. by 'Enid' (PS08Y) on 27 Feb 1992).
- (3) I was in a *really* bad mood at school (3 convs rec. by 'Brenda' (PS04U) on 4 Dec 1991).

(4) But my middle son in law is *absolutely* marvellous (46 convs rec. by 'Ginny' (PS0CG) between 28 Nov and 6 Dec 1991).

(5) I hate to tell you this but the er (pause) the forecast for the weather is *pretty* awful this year (4convs rec. by 'Kitty' (PS563) on 19 Oct 1993).

(6) Erm, the report is extremely valuable, the work of the archive service is *extremely* valuable (Wiltshire County Council: committee meeting).

(7) I feel that the density, thirty-six in there, is *totally* unacceptable (Town council planning meeting. Rec. on 20 Feb 1993).

(8) Er, generally and for the most part and for the most part at the end of the day they'll come up with *completely* irrelevant er things (unclear) (King's College London: philosophy discussion class (Edu/inf). Rec. on 9 Dec 1993).

(9) Now, my view is (pause) it's *entirely* wrong (pause) it's cheating, it's doing everything wrong! (Mental health: television discussion (Leisure)).

The number of each of the selected items is listed in Figure 3 below, that clearly illustrates the proportion of the intensifying adverbs. Table 3 gives an insight into the data (in %) on every intensifying adverb under the analysis.

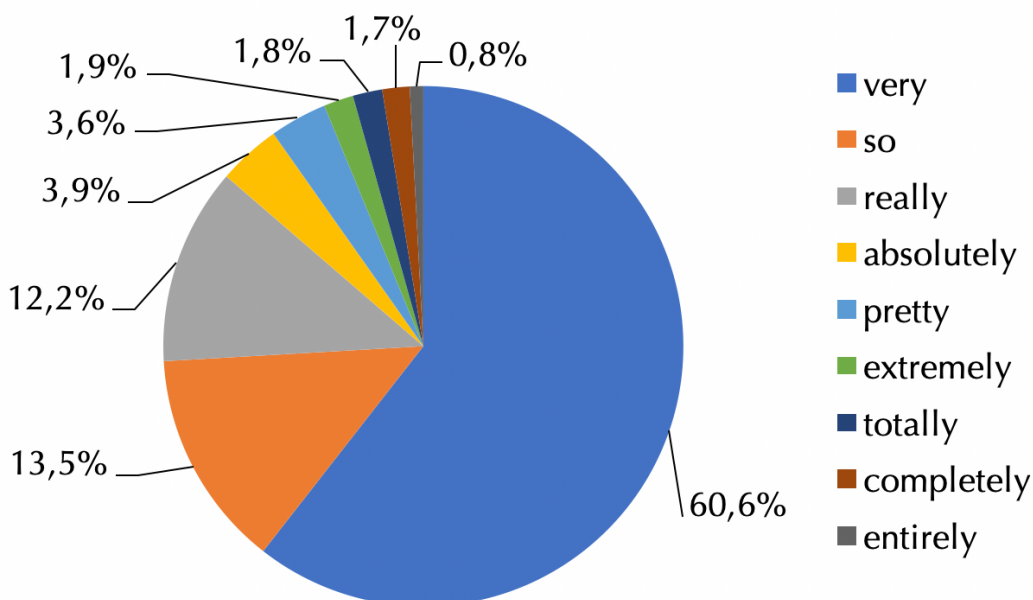


Figure 3. Frequency of occurrence of intensifying adverbs in British English (spoken data)

Table 3

Comparative frequencies of intensifying adverbs per 100,000 words in British English (spoken data)

INTENSIFYING ADVERB	COMPARATIVE FREQUENCY PER 100,000 WORDS
very	105.57
so	23.58
really	21.34
absolutely	6.79
pretty	6.2
extremely	3.23
totally	3.19
completely	2.97
entirely	1.46

Judging by the distribution of nine intensifying adverbs in British English studied in the present research, the most frequent of them are *very* (60.6 %), *so* (13.5 %) and *really* (12.2 %). These findings do not fully coincide with the results obtained by Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) in terms of frequency and the number of tokens. On the one hand, *very* appears to be the most common intensifying adverb, but its proportion proved to be one and a half times higher than in Ito and Tagliamonte's (2003) research – 60.6% and 38.3% respectively. In contrast, the proportion of *very* in British English is almost the same as in American English – 60.6% and 54.8 % respectively. This leads us to suggest that *very* is not becoming redundant: even though

the system of intensifying adverbs is continually undergoing renewal, it still occupies the dominant position, which is also proved by Fries (1940), Bäcklund (1973), Biber et al. (1999) and Ito and Tagliamonte (2003). In addition, the frequency of *very* is more than five times as great as the frequency of *so* (13.5%) and *really* (12.2%). Thus, its frequency is notable.

The difference between the proportions for *so* and *really* is insignificant and it is likely that *so* as well as *really* are gaining popularity in both British and American English. Barnfield and Buchstaller's (2010) study on intensifying adverbs shows that *so* has gained popularity relatively recently as in the

1960s the most frequent intensifying adverbs were *very*, *really* and *rather*.

The next most frequent intensifying adverb in the present research is *absolutely* (3.9 %), which makes it stand out from other *-ly* intensifiers in this research (*extremely*, *completely*, *totally*, *entirely*). This result contradicts Ito and Tagliamonte's (2003) research where *pretty* (3.2 %) was the fourth most popular intensifying adverb. This leads to the conclusion that nowadays *absolutely* is also becoming more popular in spoken British English discourse. Besides, these findings differ from those obtained during the present frequency research in American English with *pretty* (7.7 %) as the fourth popular intensifier. Thus, *absolutely* is more common in British English, which is proved by Biber et al. (1999) who compared the British and American varieties of English using the Longman Corpus and found that *absolutely* had a higher frequency in British English.

The intensifying adverbs *very*, *so*, *really* preponderate in the present research as the total number of the three of them constitutes 89.3%. Thus, they outnumber the rest of the intensifying adverbs subjected to analysis – *absolutely* (3.9%), *pretty* (3.6%), *extremely* (1.9%), *totally* (1.8%), *completely* (1.7%), *entirely* (0.8%).

For the analysis of intensifying adverbs in newspaper language in British English 7,169

tokens were obtained from newspaper texts in BNC. Examples of the chosen intensifying adverbs are presented below in the order of their frequency in BNC:

- (1) There's a move to slow them down, but the hauliers say it could lead to a *very* dangerous situation (Central News autocue data).
- (2) The Rambler's National President is *so* angry, he'll be leading a mass protest here in two weeks' time (Central television news scripts).
- (3) There's enough explosive power in a *really* big display to make the twenty kegs of powder Guy Fawkes planted below the Houses of Parliament look like a damp roman candle (Central television news scripts).
- (4) Interviewed by The Scotsman about the planned local government changes, Mr Lang acknowledged that costs were an *extremely* important element of the reforms (The Scotsman, Leisure material).
- (5) They each need other but some are *absolutely* vital to a successful production (Central television news scripts).
- (6) President George Bush yesterday angrily denounced followers of Gen Aoun and said a partition of Lebanon would be *totally*

unacceptable to the world community (The Guardian).

(7) The boats are designed with weights in the keel so they can't capsize. The disabled sailor can be *completely* confident (Central television news scripts).

(8) Even they could consider themselves lucky compared with the shackled Italians torpedoed on the Arandora Star on their way to Canada, or other internees beaten and robbed on their way to Australia by British officers and NCOs on the

Dunera who gave a *pretty* good imitation of Hitler's Stormtroopers (The Guardian).

(9) His reluctant agreement to append an *entirely* unconvincing happy ending to the show is a coup de theatre that still seems strikingly modern more than 250 years after the premiere of this bracing comedy (The Daily Telegraph).

The frequency for each item is given in Figure 4 below. Table 4 gives an insight into the average frequencies of intensifying adverbs per 100,000 words.

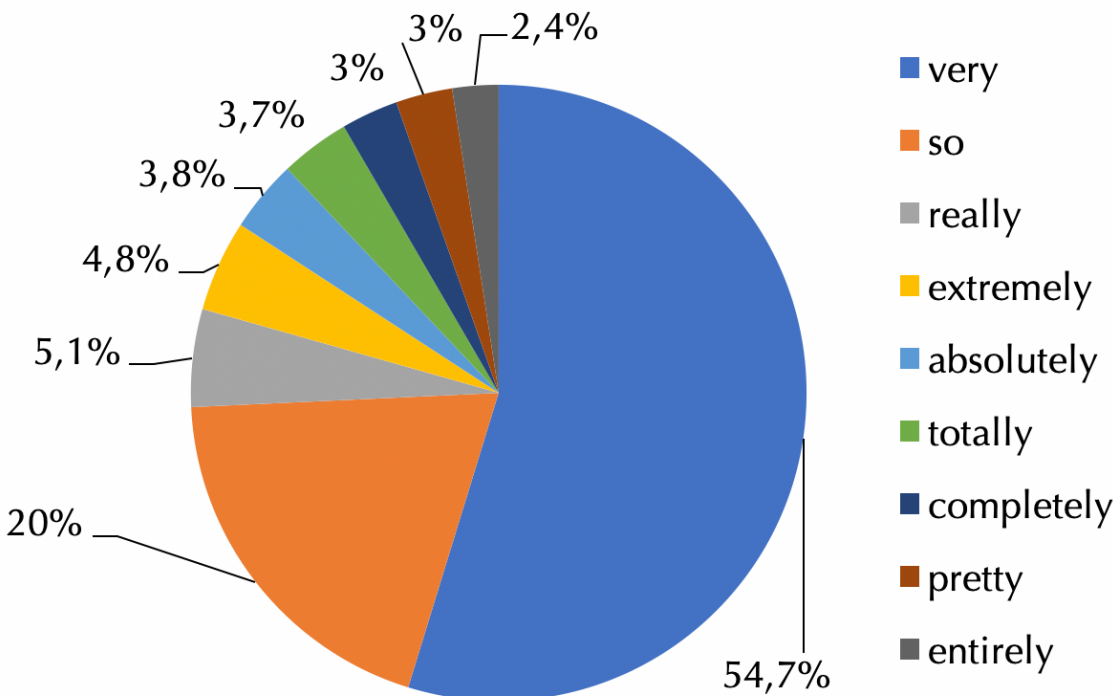


Figure 4. Frequency of occurrence of intensifying adverbs in British English (newspaper data)

Table 4

Comparative frequency of intensifying adverbs per 100,000 words in British English (newspaper data)

INTENSIFYING ADVERB	COMPARATIVE FREQUENCY PER 100,000 WORDS
very	38.66
so	13.77
really	3.63
extremely	3.38
absolutely	2.67
totally	2.58
completely	2.11
pretty	2.101
entirely	1.71

The present research proves that in British newspaper texts the most frequent intensifying adverbs are *very* (54.7%) and *so* (20%), which is different from the spoken discourse in British English where the three intensifying adverbs *very*, *so* and *really* dominate.

On the whole, as is seen from the data, intensifying adverbs are two and a half times as frequent in spoken discourse as in newspaper language (174.33 and 70.61 instances per 100,000 words respectively), which proves the assumption made in the present article – the degree of intensification declines as the formality of language increases, and vice versa.

5. CONCLUSION

The results of the research are presented in Table 5 illustrating what intensifying adverbs are common both in British and American English. Notably, in spoken discourse the intensifying adverb *very* is the most frequently used out of nine selected intensifying adverbs (*very*, *really*, *pretty*, *so*, *absolutely*, *extremely*, *totally*, *completely*, *entirely*) in the two varieties of English, since approximately half of its usage is found there (COCA – 54.8%, BNC – 64.6%). The most popular intensifying adverbs in American English are *very*, *so*, *really* and *pretty*. The British variety presents a little difference concerning the most frequent intensifying adverbs: it was found that the

Table 5

The most frequent intensifying adverbs in American and British English (spoken data)

INTENSIFYING ADVERB	AMERICAN ENGLISH	BRITISH ENGLISH
very	54.8%	60.6%
so	17.7%	13.5%
really	12.4%	12.2%
pretty	7.7%	3.6%

intensifying adverb *pretty* is not one of the top four popular intensifying adverbs as it constitutes only 3.6% of the data, which is not enough to be considered one of the most frequently used. On the contrary, the intensifying adverb *absolutely* is becoming more common in British English occupying the fourth position in the frequency distribution, whereas in American English it is only the fifth popular intensifying adverb.

The present study has revealed that for the time being *very* is still the most popular intensifying adverb and its frequency is over five times as great as the frequency of *so* and *really*. On the whole, in British English *very*, *so* and *really* predominate, and in American English *very*, *so*, *really* and *pretty* outnumber all the *ly*-intensifying adverbs discussed – *absolutely*, *extremely*, *totally*, *completely*, and *entirely*.

Table 6

The most frequent intensifying adverbs in American and British English (newspaper data)

INTENSIFYING ADVERB	AMERICAN ENGLISH	BRITISH ENGLISH
very	44.9%	54.7%
so	24.5%	20%
really	11.2%	
pretty	8.5%	

Table 6 illustrates that in American English the four most frequent intensifying adverbs used in newspapers – *very*, *so*, *really* and *pretty* which dominate among the selected intensifying adverbs – coincide with those employed in spoken discourse. Their total frequency of occurrence accounts for 89.1% of the sample. However, the British variant differs in the number of the most popular intensifying adverbs as it was observed that *very* and *so* are the only intensifying adverbs which dominate in British newspapers and account for 74.7% of the sample. The third and

the fourth intensifying adverbs in the frequency distribution are *really* and *extremely*; however, their frequencies (5.1% and 4.8% respectively) are not high enough to be considered the most common. It is assumed that genres can affect the choice and frequency of intensifying adverbs. To test the validity of this statement, two types of discourse were compared: spoken discourse and newspaper language. It was observed that there is a tendency towards lesser intensification when the style becomes more informational and formal (see Figure 5).

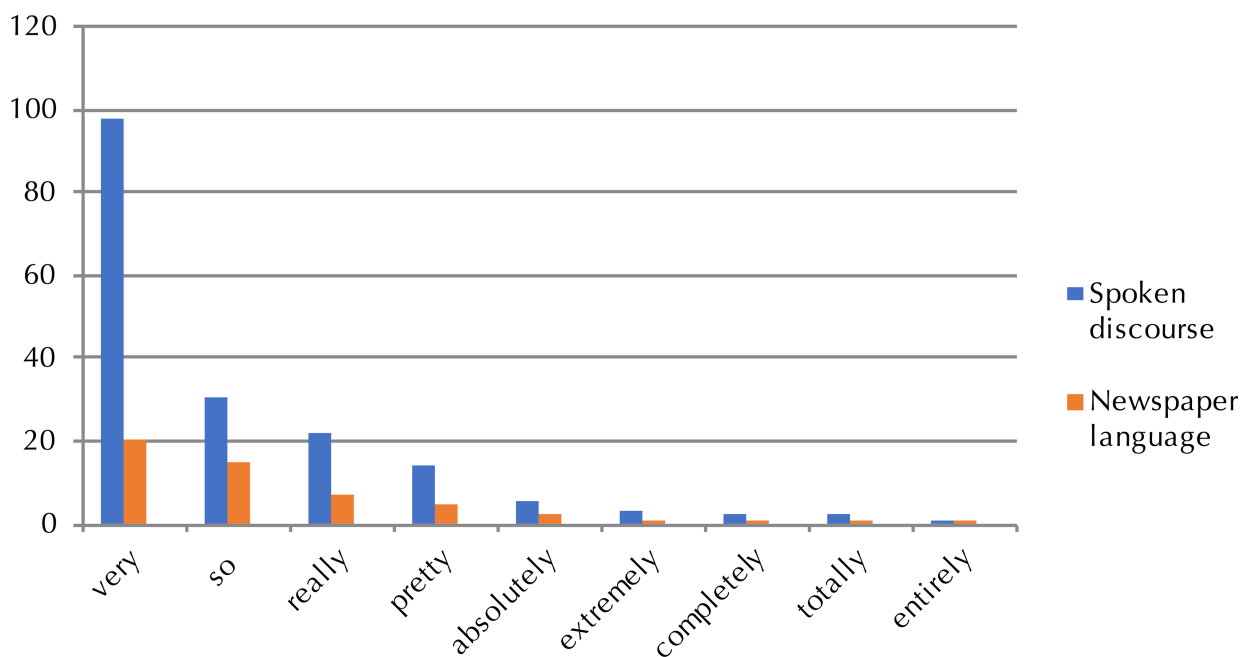


Figure 5. Comparative frequencies of intensifying adverbs in spoken discourse and newspaper language in American English

Thus, intensifying adverbs are from 5 to 1.5 times as frequent in spoken discourse as in the newspaper language. The present findings suggest that less intensification is used in written discourse

whereas more intensification is employed in spoken discourse, which leads to the conclusion that the decline in intensification is higher as the formality of the register increases, and vice versa.

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