

Effects of semantic prosody on intensifier variation

Allison Wachter (*University of Georgia*)

The study of English intensifiers has been of great interest to linguists in recent years, exploring historical patterns, social predictors, and semantic effects. Semantic prosody, or a speaker's attitude toward his or her speech is also a common interest, especially in regard to discourse (Sinclair 1991). However, there has been little work on the effects of semantic prosody on intensifier/adjective collocation in the variationist field. Previous work finds that intensifiers *very* and *really* are among the most frequent used to amplify the meaning of a modified adjective. Ito and Tagliamonte (2003), Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005), and Barbieri (2008) use corpora to find that social factors predict the favoring of one intensifier over the other. For example, findings suggested that younger speakers favor *really* while older speakers favor *very*. Focusing on the use of *very* and *really*, the current study extends these findings to an academic setting, focusing on semantic prosody as a predictor of intensifier use.

Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) also include a study of intensifier collocation with emotional and neutral adjectives. Focusing on the intensifier *so*, they find that the emotional state ("emotion" or "neutral") of an adjective could be a significant factor in whether a speaker used *so* in place of a different intensifier. Taking this a step further, the current study examines not only the emotional factor, but incorporates semantic prosody to find if a positive or negative semantic prosody of a modified adjective might also predict the intensifier collocate. Using the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), 4,287 tokens of *very* and *really* acting as intensifiers were analyzed using a multivariate analysis. Similar to other findings, *very* was the more common of the two (71.6%, N=4,287). Four factors were tested as predictors: academic discipline, academic setting, gender, and semantic prosody, operationalized as a distinction between negative, positive, and neutral adjectives. Though semantic prosody was the focus of the analysis, other social factors were included to find if prosodic effect was consistent across registers. The multivariate analysis revealed that all the predictive factors were significant predictors of intensifier use ($p < .001$) with academic setting (i.e. lectures, discussion, office hours) and semantic prosody displaying the highest ranges, 32 and 28 respectively.

An analysis of all tokens show that an adjective with negative semantic prosody (i.e. *bad*, *terrible*) highly favors the use of *really* while an adjective with positive semantic prosody (i.e. *good*, *great*) slightly favors *really*. Similar to Tagliamonte and Roberts' findings, a neutral adjective (i.e. *big*, *small*) favors the use of *very*. This finding is consistent when data is separated between gender and across academic settings. These findings support the claim that a non-neutral adjective is more likely to collocate with *really* over *very*. Findings also extend current research by offering evidence that adjectives with negative semantic prosody are favored with *really* more than adjectives with positive semantic prosody. These findings suggest that *really* and *very* seem to be specialized in terms of the types of adjectives with which they collocate. This effect holds not only for the type of data analyzed by Tagliamonte and others, but in other registers as well.